

# **An Ethnographic Study of Literacy Practices in a Village Community in Malawi: Exploring Figured Worlds**

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## ABSTRACT

My study seeks to explore how the theory of self and identity, especially the concept of ‘figured world’ (Holland *et al*, 1998) can enhance the understanding of literacy as social practice in Malawi. Combining ethnographic and discourse analysis approaches, I investigate the everyday literacy experiences and understandings of adult literacy learners, literacy officers and other villagers in different activities such as government and donor-assisted relief and cash transfer programmes, community-initiated income-generating activities and an adult literacy class. My study uses data collected over ten months in a village community in Zomba, Malawi through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, informal conversations, documentation and photography.

Employing conceptual tools such as literacy practices, figuring, authoring, positionality and artefact, I explore community members’ literacy meanings and discourses in their everyday life. I examine how the literacy practices privileged in some figured worlds shape community members’ literacy identities and power relationships in those worlds.

My findings show that the concept of figured world has the potential of enhancing literacy studies based on the concept of literacy as a social practice in Malawi. Through the concepts of improvisation, agency and resistance, my study reveals that adult literacy learners’ literacy identities and power relationships were not only fluid and unstable but also situated. I illustrate that community members encountered many literacy practices employing different literacy artefacts, but gave more significance to the symbolic value than to the reading and understanding of those artefacts. Besides, the study shows that community members’ lived literacy experiences shaped their understanding of what counts as literacy. It reveals the tension between the official and the adult literacy learners’ figuring of assessment, which revolves around independent and collaborative efforts respectively.

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# USE OF TERMS, NAMES, QUOTATIONS AND EMPHASIS

## 1. Terms

- ❖ When talking about my research site,
  - *Community* refers to Sawabu village
  - *Community members* refers to all individuals living in my research site including any person from other villages who took part in literacy lessons at Sawabu literacy class.
  - *Literacy officers* includes officials at the District Community Development Office, literacy instructors and the supervisor at Sawabu literacy class

## 2. Names

For reasons of anonymity, I have changed all names of people and places directly involved in the study.

## 3. Quotations and Emphasis

In this thesis, I show quotations in the following ways:

- ❖ *Italics*: For extracts from my field notes
- ❖ ‘Single quotation marks’: For quotation within another quotation and contested words
- ❖ “Double quotation marks”: For short direct quotes from literature
- ❖ Indenting: For long direct quotations from literature as well as from my field notes
- ❖ Three dots ... indicate that some words are omitted

## 4. Other Conventions

- ❖ Borrowed and vernacular words, except proper nouns are *italicised*
- ❖ Arial font is used in captions for all figures

## 5. Translation and Transcription

- ❖ In field notes that are in dialogue form, ‘*me*’ refers to the researcher and writer of this thesis

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CASAS	Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
CDA	Community Development Assistant
CLS	Centre for Language Studies
COMSIP	Community Savings and Investment Promotion
CSSC	Community Social Support Committee
DCDO	District Community Development Officer
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
ICEIDA	Icelandic International Development Agency
LBP	Lake Basin Project
MA	Master of Arts
MGDS	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
MP	Member of Parliament
MPRS	Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy
MUSCCO	Malawi Union of Savings and Credit Cooperatives
NACLAE	National Advisory Council for Literacy and Adult Education
NALP	National Adult Literacy Programme
NASFAM	National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi
NCLAE	National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLS	New Literacy Studies
OSISA	Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa
OXFAM	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
PAP	Poverty Alleviation Programme
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PRRO	Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation

REFLECT	Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques
STAR	Societies Tackling Aids through Rights
SCC	Swedish Corporation Centre
UEA	University of East Anglia
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WCEFA	World Conference on Education For All
WFP	World Food Programme
WUA	Water Users Association

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis investigates some community members' literacy practices in their lived worlds. My purpose is to contribute to the New Literacy Studies (NLS) by exploring the value of the concept of figured world in studying literacy as a social practice in a Malawian context. The study is motivated by two factors. First, it stems from my desire to investigate community members' literacy practices through the lens of the social theory of literacy in a Malawian adult literacy context. As I shall explain in chapter 2, conducting a study of this nature is important to me because whilst scholars are gaining valuable knowledge by studying literacy as a social practice elsewhere, not much is happening in Malawi. The bulk of literacy studies in the country revolve around evaluating the National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) focusing primarily on assessing its effectiveness. Such studies seldom problematise literacy as I do in this thesis thereby ignore what I consider to be key questions underlying literacy practices, particularly those concerning literacy discourses, meanings, identities, and power relationships.

Second, the study is inspired by my aspiration to examine the value of other sociocultural concepts, especially that of figured world in enhancing the study of literacy as a social practice in Malawi. In chapter 3, I shall demonstrate that some scholars question the adequacy of the social theory of literacy, particularly in providing conceptual tools to account for questions relating to identities and power relationships in literacy practices. I contend that literacy studies aimed at improving the effectiveness of the National Adult Literacy Programme at local level in Malawi, could be enriched if attention was given to not only assessing the programme but also to understanding community members' diverse literacy practices including questions of power and literacy identities.

I begin my account by providing a background of who I am and how I ventured into literacy studies. I do this because I am mindful of the fact that the shadow of who I am may inevitably be cast on the choices, interpretations and conclusions I make in this thesis. Thus, I use these accounts not only as launch pads for this study but also as bases for understanding some of the decisions and analyses I make in the chapters that follow.

## 1.1 My Trajectory into Literacy Research

Looking back and reflecting on my research journey, I am fascinated by not only the multiple and diverse identities I performed but also the shifts and turns that characterised the research processes leading to this thesis.

My journey into literacy studies began when I joined the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) at Chancellor College in the University of Malawi as a Ciyawo<sup>1</sup> Language Specialist in 2004. As a language specialist, my major role is to conduct research in language and language related issues. However, due to my expertise and the shortage of staff in the Department of African Languages and Linguistics, I am sometimes expected to help in lecturing some linguistics courses in the Department. At the time I was joining CLS, I had just a Bachelor's degree in education majoring in linguistics. My new roles at CLS required me to strengthen my academic qualifications. I therefore, enrolled for a part time Master's Degree in Applied Linguistics at the same College. As I studied for this degree, I was also taking part in developing a national language in education policy for the country which the Ministry of Education asked CLS to formulate.

Most of the arguments we raised during our discussions regarding language of instruction in lower primary revolved around a speedy acquisition of initial literacy and meaningful understanding of lessons. At that time, mother tongue instruction was deemed to be the best way forward. My participation in these discussions coupled with some exposure to literature on adult literacy I had as I studied for my Master's Degree, propelled me to do a dissertation on the choice and use of minority languages, especially Ciyawo, in adult literacy. With this dissertation, members of my faculty began to see me as someone who had some knowledge in the field of adult literacy. They gave me a chance to oversee a pilot adult literacy support initiative which was organised by the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies (CASAS). CASAS is an institution whose interest is in studying issues concerning culture in relation to development as well as the structure of African society. The Centre was established in 1997 and it is in Rondebosch, Cape Town, South Africa (see <http://www.casas.co.za/>).

The Malawi initiative involved supplying to the literacy learners some supplementary readers written in local languages with a view of helping them to consolidate their reading abilities.

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<sup>1</sup>I am Yawo by tribe and the language of the Yawo is called Ciyawo.

After the pilot work, I assessed the initiative. What struck me most during the assessment was that the adult literacy learners wanted materials that covered topics that were apparently not included in their official primers. This gave me the impression that there was a certain degree of disjuncture between what the programme offered and what the learners desired to learn.

Meanwhile, when in 2010, the Malawi Government gave me an opportunity to study for another Master's degree, I decided to do a full-time course in adult literacy at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Somehow, my decision to venture into literacy appeared to raise some questions from some of my superiors. They queried the links between literacy and my jobs as a language specialist and lecturer in linguistics. At that time, I struggled to craft a response. Yet, to attest the value of local languages, my Centre was using literacy as a benchmark albeit in a narrow sense. Arguments were being made that "initial literacy in one's most familiar language aids the acquisition of literacy in a second or foreign language" (Ministry of Education, 2007: 7). Moreover, CLS was involved in a Malawi Institute of Education GTZ<sup>2</sup> funded Literacy Across the Curriculum study to establish the benefits of learning in one's familiar language and to me, such involvement suggested that literacy was one of the key issues CLS staff needed to understand and be conversant with.

Notwithstanding the queries, I went ahead and enrolled for my MA in adult literacy and lifelong learning. Whilst studying for this degree, I was firmly exposed to the New Literacy Studies (NLS) as well as to contemporary literacy orientations and literacy research paradigms such as ethnography. I came to understand that literacy and language are strongly intertwined. I realised how futile and partial it is to talk about literacy without paying attention to language. Writing my dissertation for this degree through the lens of literacy as a social practice, I got a sense that there were many aspects of literacy in general, and Malawi's National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) in particular, that I needed to understand further. Thus, when I got a chance to study for my PhD at UEA, I decided to frame my study within the context of the NALP in Malawi. Having gone through available literature on literacy studies in Malawi, I noted that much emphasis was placed on teaching literacy to non-literate adults but very little attention was being given to what the literacy learners did with their newly acquired skills. The overall aim of my proposed study was therefore to investigate the extent to which the acquisition of literacy abilities contributed to the improvement of learners' lives in line with

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<sup>2</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for Technical Cooperation)

the specific objectives of the NALP in Malawi. However, as I explain in the next section, my focus changed slightly.

## **1.2 Many Dissenting Voices: Reshaping My Research Focus**

As I read literature on the social theory of literacy as well as literacy studies grounded on this concept, I encountered debates and critiques that appeared to question its adequacy particularly in theorising power and identity in relation to literacy (I discuss these debates in chapter 3). Being someone who shares the view that literacy is a social practice, I was rather intrigued by these critiques. The debates not only appeared to question the core element of the study I was proposing to undertake but also made me realise that there were some aspects of the social theory of literacy I took for granted.

Thus, the critiques inspired me to set out in search of theoretical perspectives that would provide me with some conceptual tools to enhance the social theory of literacy in exploring questions relating to power and identity in community members' literacy mediated social activities. As my search continued, I stumbled across Holland *et al's* (1998) theory of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world which to me appeared to have the potential in dealing with the issues I sought to address. According to Holland *et al* (ibid), a figured world is "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (ibid: 52). In short, a figured world is a context of meaning making (I discuss this notion in detail in chapter 3). Noting that not many scholars had used the concept of figured world in non-formal education, especially in relation to the contemporary understanding of literacy as a social practice, I was curious about its value and potential in adult literacy studies. My curiosity was heightened by the fact that figured world is not a theory of literacy, rather it is part of Holland *et al's* (1998) broader framework aimed at primarily understanding identity formation. Thus, the key question I sought to unravel was: *How can the concept of figured world help us investigate and understand better the social and situated nature of literacy?*

To address this question fully, especially regarding the social and situated nature of literacy and the subsidiary research questions which I provide in chapter 3, I realised that I needed not only multiple data collection techniques but also an approach that would allow me to interact with my participants in an extended and sustained manner. I therefore chose to do an



ethnographic study of one Malawian village that had an adult literacy centre which was functional. With the help of the District Community Development Officer (DCDO) in liaison with a literacy cluster supervisor, the village I selected is called Sawabu (more details about the selection process and the hierarchies of NALP officers are provided in chapters 4 and 2 respectively).

## **1.3 Sawabu Village**

### **1.3.1 My Journey into Sawabu Village: Dilemmas and Opportunities**

On 24<sup>th</sup> October, the literacy cluster supervisor (also in short referred to as supervisor in this thesis) took me around Sawabu village. As we started the walk, I was oozing with confidence and enthusiasm because I considered the walk as my opportunity to see and appreciate how and where the activities I had planned to observe were taking place. That is, whilst at UEA, as part of my research process, I identified several activities I was going to participate in and observe within my research site such as Chichewa and English literacy classes, social, public, and traditional events, cooperative and business groups, sanitation and nutrition activities, home and other work-related activities. As the supervisor took me around, showing me the village boundaries, I had these in mind. However, our preliminary informal conversations during this tour revealed that many of the activities I had outlined in my plan were non-existent in this village. By the end of the tour, I was somehow, deflated. I was not sure that this was the *ideal* community for my research. In my view, the village lacked most of things I thought were crucial for both my study as well as my day-to-day wellbeing.

For instance, the village had no established playground, shop or market. Instead, some community members had benches on which they sold items such as tomatoes, dried fish, onions and charcoal. Others sold salt, matches and some small confectionaries either from their benches or through the windows of their homes. The nearest recognisable shops and a market were at Malekano about some 400 metres away from the village centre. These shops stocked just basic items one would require otherwise if one wanted to buy any essential items of good quality, one had to go to Zomba city. To play or watch some games such as football, one had to go to Tupoce trading centre about 1½ kilometres away. What this meant was that socialising with some of the community members who were not taking part in any group-organised activities was going to be rather very difficult.



Figure 1: Malekano Trading Centre

The village did not have electricity. Only one house had a solar panel on the roof. Phone charging and other activities that required electricity were done at Malekano. The phones were charged either in shops or video show rooms but one had to pay. I should state however, that most of the messages the instructors sent were delivered through the word of mouth.

The village had no mosque or a church. As such, one had to look for these services elsewhere. Community members from this village went to Mpulula, Malekano and Cikoja to pray if they were Muslims. The only nearby church I saw belonged to the Baptist and it was located in Namyaka village.

Moreover, the village had no primary or secondary school. The children who were doing their primary school went to Naula, Akapela, Cipago and Alukosyo. But these schools were difficult to reach. The children had to cross the main road daily to go to Akapela and Alukosyo primary schools. To go to Cipago primary school, they had to cross Kasupe River using an unsafe temporary wooden bridge as shown in the picture that follows. In both cases, it was dangerous for young children.





Figure 2: Wooden Bridge across Kasupe River to Cipago

Although literacy statistics for the village were not available it appeared that many children were withdrawing from school before completing primary level. The village headperson lamented about this during a general meeting with his subjects at his compound. Besides, sitting outside my rented house, I saw some children of school going age just loitering around during school hours. I encountered some of them at video showrooms at Malekano.



Figure 3: Video Showroom at Malekano

As far as the activities I had planned to observe were concerned, I realised that there was only one which I could comfortably identify. This was the adult literacy class. This state of affairs brought so much anxiety to me. I panicked and thought that everything was falling apart. I seriously thought of identifying an additional site to complement this village. I contacted the Community Development Assistant who oversaw the literacy classes in this area, to consider this possibility. It was not until I got some feedback from my supervisors on what I had written and sent to them that I became confident that despite these perceived shortfalls, there were still other things I could learn from this community.

Slowly, I began to understand the lives of the people of Sawabu village. I then realised that communities are not autonomous entities. Rather they are interdependent. As I continued with my fieldwork, I noted that village settings were more complex than I thought. I saw cases where houses were physically located in one village but the occupants who were bona fide members of the village gave allegiances to another village. I was told that such allegiances were instigated by what the community members considered to be their village headpersons' favouritism when choosing beneficiaries of various government and NGO aid programmes. Feeling side-lined by their leaders, they therefore, switched their allegiances to and registered



their names with the village headpersons they thought would consider them in such programmes. Despite making such changes, their houses remained within the village of the headperson they had broken ties with. I also witnessed instances where plots of land were physically located within the borders of one village but it was claimed that they belonged to another village. What this meant was that drawing physical maps for such villages could be a very complex task. These complexities made me rethink my conceptualisation of ‘community’ as I explain in chapter 3. I then began to understand that my participants were brought together not just by the commonalities of the places they lived in, but also by some other underlying currents. Notwithstanding these complexities, I tried as much as possible not to cross physical boundaries during my data collection process because I wanted to focus on Sawabu village only. The rationale behind making this decision was that I wanted to have an in-depth understanding of the community members’ daily lives. In my view, having multiple sites would have provided me breadth instead of the depth I desired. Therefore, as far as members of other communities were concerned, I interacted with only those who were attending the literacy lessons (I discuss more on this later).

Generally, the bulk of my research participants were adult literacy learners some of whom were considered old whilst others were young. The study also included individuals of different sexes both young and old who were not taking part in adult literacy classes. It also covered the literacy officers, i.e. those at the district office and in the village (instructors and the cluster supervisor).

In the end, I realised that although the absence of many things limited me in terms of socialising with some community members in the village, there were some activities I never mentioned in my plan which were taking place in this community. Such activities included community savings groups, cash transfer and emergency food aid programmes. Being literacy mediated social activities that defined part of my participants’ daily lives, these activities could equally help me deal with the questions my study sought to address.

What is significant about this account however is that the availability of a limited number of group-organised activities allowed me to spend more time participating in and observing literacy lessons than I had anticipated. This had some implications on the overall scope of my study in terms of variety and number of activities I was able to explore and discuss in this thesis.

Interestingly, whilst I was bothered about the absence of some facilities and activities within the confines of this village, community members appeared to have been used to the situation. To them, ownership of facilities or activities cut across village boundaries. Moreover, as I later found out, Sawabu village had strong traditional and historical linkages with the surrounding communities.

### **1.3.2 Sawabu Village: Historical Perspectives**

The actual dates regarding when Sawabu village was established were difficult to ascertain. The village headperson claimed that the village came into being in 1964 whereas some accounts put it in the early 1990s. The latter accounts said that the village was formed in order to have a bigger share of beneficiaries from cash transfer, food relief and other related government and donor programmes. The village headperson also gave this as a reason for the establishment of the village. The thinking was that, splitting large villages into several smaller ones helped in increasing the overall number of beneficiaries from government and donor agency programmes. This was the case because each village was considered and guaranteed a certain number of beneficiaries in its own right and community members discovered that when the allocations given to each of the smaller villages were added up, the total number of beneficiaries surpassed the allocation they would have received had the village not been divided up. In recent years, many villages have been formed in Malawi in this manner. The number of residents in a village vary but “typical villages usually have 100 to 2000 people,” (Chinsinga, 2006: 258).

It is worth noting that in Malawi, there are about six hierarchies of traditional leaders. The higher the hierarchy, the larger the area and power they have. At the top of the hierarchy are paramount chiefs followed by senior chiefs. Below the senior chiefs come chiefs, sub chiefs, and group village headpersons, in that order. At the bottom of the ladder lie the village headpersons. Most traditional leaders in Malawi assume their position based on lineage and they receive monthly honoraria from the government commensurate with their rank.

Traditional leadership is much stronger in rural areas than it is in towns and cities mostly because in rural areas, the leaders’ areas of influence are “occupied by a largely homogenous people sharing more or less a common culture, social values and aspirations,” (ibid). Whilst the jurisdiction of traditional leaders from the rank of village headperson to senior chief is marked by both tribal and spatial boundaries, that of paramount chief is largely based on tribes.

For instance, all the Yawos regardless of where they are found in Malawi, are under one paramount chief. Similarly, all the Chewas who are predominantly found in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia have one paramount chief whose headquarters is in Zambia.

Traditional leaders have a significant role in the delivery of the NALP in Malawi. They act as gatekeepers to any development programme to be carried out in their areas. This is why they, especially village headpersons, sometimes have a say in the establishment of literacy classes in their areas.

### **1.3.3 The People of Sawabu Village**

Sawabu village is mostly populated by Yawos<sup>3</sup> and most of them speak Ciyawo, although the village headperson claimed that they were Mang'anjas. On several occasions, the women I observed in the literacy class told the instructors that they were experiencing some difficulties in pronouncing some words in Chichewa because they were Yawos. Besides, when the village headperson introduced me to the people during one of the community meetings I attended, he told them that I was a Yawo just like them. Also, the customs and traditions the people of this village conducted such as the initiation of both boys and girls were in keeping with those of the Yawos I knew. In fact, a week before my departure, the women asked for the suspension of the literacy classes to allow them to deal with the initiations of their children. It was unfortunate that I was not able to observe these cultural ceremonies because my fieldwork had come to an end.

The Yawos are mostly matrilineal (see Berge, Kambewa, Munthali & Wiig, 2014). In terms of religion, most of the residents of Sawabu village were Muslims. These factors made it easy for me to work in this village because I am both a Yawo and a Muslim. I should add that it was not just the religious and cultural similarities that helped me settle down easily among these people, rather it was the community members' hospitality that played a major part. In fact, although the majority of the community members identified themselves as Yawos and Muslims, the village had members of other tribes and denominations as well. There were some, such as the supervisor for the literacy centre, who were both Mang'anjas and Christians.

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<sup>3</sup> Malawi has several tribal groups and Yawo and Mang'anja are the names of two of them. The language spoken by the Yawos is called Ciyawo and the one spoken by the Mang'anja is known as Cimang'anja.

Regardless of tribe or religion, whenever I had an opportunity to visit some community members' homes, I rarely left without the host offering me food or something to take home.

## **1.4 Conclusion and Thesis Outline**

To sum up, in this chapter, my primary aim was to provide an account of my journey into literacy studies as well as spell out the purpose and aims of this thesis. My story into literacy studies reveals that the more I tried to understand certain aspects of the NALP in Malawi, the more questions I found unanswered. To some extent, these questions suggest the dearth of literacy studies in Malawi which I discuss in chapter 2. The story also shows that the purpose and aims of this study evolved. But as it shall be noted in chapter 11, this evolution was not just about what this study sought to achieve, but also my own stance towards both my methodological and the theoretical perspectives employed in this thesis.

My first impression of Sawabu village shows how unpredictable ethnographic studies can sometimes be, and how as a researcher, one ought to be ready for the unexpected. This suggests that an ethnographic study is somehow very much about what the research site offers the researcher to explore and much less about what they planned to do. In my case, my decision to carry on with my fieldwork in this community despite not having some of the activities I had planned to examine somehow, had some implications on the overall focus of my study. The absence of such activities provided me a space to interact with adult literacy learners more than I had expected. As it shall be seen in chapters 5 to 9, such sustained interactions gave me an opportunity to have an in depth understanding of how the literacy practices privileged at their literacy class related with their lived experiences.

In the next chapter, I provide the background and the context within which this study was conducted. In chapter 3, I discuss the theoretical perspectives on which this study shall be grounded by providing critical accounts of a few selected theories and concepts that are relevant to this study. In chapter 4, methodology, I discuss the approach and the methods I employed in this study. By adopting the view that literacy is a social practice and that it is situated, I believed that I needed a methodological approach that would allow me "to examine what people do with literacy, when and where this happens and to what ends they use written texts," (Papen, 2005: 62). As I shall demonstrate in that chapter, the most suitable means to achieve this is the ethnographic approach.



In chapters 5 to 9, I analyse and discuss community members' literacy practices, discourses, meanings, identities as well as the power relationships enacted in some of their lived worlds. Generally, the sequencing of my analysis chapters follows the order of my subsidiary research questions (see chapter 3). Thus, chapter 5 deals with some community members' literacy practices in some of their lived worlds, such as community savings groups, emergency food programme and social cash transfer initiative. In chapter 6, I examine NALP officers' and community members' literacy discourses and meanings. Chapter 7 extends the discussions on literacy meanings and discourses to literacy identities. The chapter discusses how the adult literacy learners were discursively positioned or position themselves in literacy mediated activities. In chapter 8, I explore the relationships that played out at the literacy class. I specifically assess how the adult literacy learners and their instructors exercised power to promote their interests. In chapter 9, I look at the perceptions of the value and purposes of literacy assessment held by both NALP officers and community members. In chapter 10, I discuss some of the key themes drawn from chapters 5 to 9 and relate them to my conceptual perspectives. I conclude the thesis by drawing on some implications for theory and practice as well as for my methodological and theoretical approaches in chapter 11.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

#### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides the policy, geographical as well as the cultural context underlying this study. It presents the background against which some of the interpretations, discussions and conclusions emerging in this thesis should be understood. Crucially, the chapter seeks to identify where and how my study contributes to literacy studies in Malawi.

My discussions in this chapter focus largely on documentary and discourse analysis. I begin the chapter by providing a brief discussion on literacy policy discourses and the shifting approaches to and conceptualisation of literacy before looking at the literacy situation in the country. Thereafter, I provide a short historical background and the organisation of the National Adult Literacy Programme in Malawi. I conclude the chapter by looking at literacy studies in the country.

#### 2.1 A Synopsis of Malawi Government's Literacy Policy Discourses

It is worth pointing out from the start that Chichewa, the national language of Malawi, does not have a single word to refer to literacy. Instead, a descriptive phrase *kulemba ndi kuwerenga*<sup>4</sup> (writing and reading<sup>4</sup>) is used. As such, the literate and 'illiterate' persons are referred to as *odziwa kulemba ndi kuwerenga* (the able to write and read) and *osadziwa kulemba ndi kuwerenga* (the not able to write and read) respectively.

As it is generally the case elsewhere, in Malawi too, literacy has been discursively tied to development over the years. The goals and objectives of both past and present government literacy programmes are aligned primarily to the country's approaches to development. For instance, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2008:3) says that one of the early literacy programmes, the Mponela literacy project, which the government launched in 1947, was aimed at finding out "how to raise the standards of living and the betterment of the way of life of African communities." By framing literacy within the framework of "standards of living," the project was aligned to UNDP's human development perspectives.

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<sup>4</sup> The Chichewa phrase usually begins with writing followed by reading

As far as human development is concerned, UNDP (1990) perceives it as “a process of enlarging people’s choices,” (p. 10). Some of the choices it considers as being critical include, “a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living,” (ibid). However, what counts as ‘a decent standard of living’ is not only “the most difficult to measure” (ibid: 12) but also contentious. This is the case because apart from the technical problems which UNDP acknowledges, one wonders from whose perspective the standard of living is perceived to be ‘decent’ and why.

Similar orientations seem to be echoed in The Government of the Republic of Malawi (2007) draft literacy policy which claims that “literacy is ... the core engine of human development to the extent that a literate society is hoisted as a strategic means for achieving increased productivity, better income distribution and generally improved standards of living,” (ibid: 1).

In this quote, apart from linking literacy to the promotion of people’s standards of living, the policy also evokes attributes of human resource development or human capital formation in which human beings are perceived as “capital goods for commodity production,” (UNDP, 1990: 11). The policy reifies literacy as ‘the core engine.’ It is a ‘tool’ and presumably, without it, development would be “limping on one leg!” (Bhola and Gómez, 2008: 7). It links the achievement of increased productivity as well as income distribution to a ‘literate society.’ The literacy policy is informed by the development discourse of poverty alleviation which the Malawi Government adopted “as its central operative development philosophy guiding all its development activities in the short, medium and long-term,” (The Government of the Republic of Malawi, 2007: 3). One of the approaches advocated by the Poverty Reduction Strategy is “an emphasis on smallholder agriculture, to raise the productivity and income of the rural poor,” (Government of Malawi, 2000:10). And the Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare, and Community Services (2004: v) claims that “the poverty alleviation programme that government has embarked upon in the MPRS cannot be successfully implemented without addressing the illiteracy problem.” In fact, in the MPRS which is the country’s economic and development blueprint, the Malawi Government (2002) links poverty with literacy although it makes no distinction between literacy and education. It states that “adults who complete at least standard 8 are likely *not* to be poor,” (p. 7; Original emphasis). It singles out the reduction of the ‘illiteracy’ rate as one of the major targets in the Malawi Government’s medium term goal for poverty reduction. Similar links between literacy and development are also made by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (2008) which states that “literate people

understand and easily follow instructions for performing various development activities,” (p. 7). On its part, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II is critical about the high ‘illiteracy’ rate saying it is one of the major challenges in almost all key socio-economic sectors of the country (Malawi Government, 2012).

The instrumental views of literacy running through these official documents, parallel those expressed in some international declarations to which Malawi assented. For instance, the World Conference on Education For All (WCEFA) Inter-Agency Commission (1990: 36) states that “literacy programmes are indispensable because literacy is a necessary skill in itself and the foundation of other life skills,” (see also Dakar Framework of Action in UNESCO, 2000). The Commission notes further that “*literacy is a life skill and the primary learning tool for personal and community development and self-sufficiency in a rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent world,*” (p. 63; original emphasis).

Apart from discursively framing literacy within the notion of human development, the Malawi government also associates literacy with modernity. For example, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Community Services (n.d.) says one of the objectives of the current National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) is “to improve the status, general knowledge and technical skills of rural people especially smallholder farmers by making them receptive to innovations and modernisation,” (p. 3). The Ministry associates literacy not only with increased knowledge and technical skills but also to making people amenable to development understood in terms of change. The Ministry seems to imply that the cause of the supposed inadequacies in terms of status, knowledge and skills as well as resistance to change is ‘illiteracy.’ Hence, by offering literacy lessons to non-literate adults, the Malawi government assumes, just as Oxenham (1980: 51) does elsewhere, that “the more literate people are, the more willing they are to accept and work for improvements in their societies.”

However, the impression I get from the Government’s claim of modernity is that it treats this concept as if it were neutral and therefore, uncontested. But as Willis (2005: 2) postulates, modernity has both spatial and temporal dimensions such that “what is ‘modern’ in one place may be ‘old-fashioned’ elsewhere.” I may also add that what was considered old fashioned years ago, may gain some significance and become modern now. Perhaps, this is why some scholars such as Escobar (1995) construe development as a discourse. Escobar (ibid) argues that looking at development from a discursive point of view “makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination ...” (p. 5-6). Such a focus is crucial because “in different ways,

discursively, some people are empowered to know and decide, others to implement the decisions, yet others not to speak, or not to be heard if they do” (Hobart, 1993: 16). In other words, like literacy, “the field of activity known as ‘development’” (Rogers, 2004: 13) is also imbued with power relations. As Escobar (1995) claims, development started with the creation of the deviants (such as the ‘illiterate,’ the ‘underdeveloped,’ the ‘malnourished,’ ‘small farmers,’ or ‘landless peasants’), which it would later seek to amend. He asserts that these labels “are by no means neutral; they embody concrete relationships of power and influence the categories with which we think and act,” (p. 109). Hence, a critical examination is required to understand who has the power to name and define (Escobar, 1995) what counts as development because as Street (2010: 580) observes elsewhere, such authority is a “crucial component of inequality.” Besides, such an examination is also vital because “development discourse promotes and justifies very real interventions and practices with very real...consequences” (Crush, 1995: 6). The analysis is also required because as Storey (2009) notes, lack of Western forms of knowledge is perceived as a sign of underdevelopment and not just a matter of difference.

However, as I adopt Escobar’s stance of perceiving development as a discourse, I am aware of the fact that proponents of this approach are sometimes faulted for portraying development “in terms of a monolithic hegemony” (Kiely, 1999: 38). Hence the approach I take in this thesis is similar to that taken by Robinson-Pant (2001) focusing more on how “local discourses of development overlap and draw on internationally produced discourses” (p. 318).

To sum up, what these discourses reveal is that development generally signals change. The challenge however is who decides what changes to promote and why. My decision to examine literacy discourses in this thesis is informed by my belief that such discourses embody the Malawi governments’ assumptions about both literacy and adult literacy learners. In my view, unpacking such assumptions is crucial because it may help in understanding why the Malawi National Adult Literacy Programme privileges and promotes certain ‘knowledges’ over others. I would therefore, argue that to deepen the understanding of what literacy means in Malawi, one needs a broader focus beyond what happens in the literacy classroom.

## **2.2 Conceptualisation of Literacy in Malawi**

Although literacy as a concept has been employed by many countries for a very long time, its conceptualisation continues to be both slippery and fluid. In view of this, the official

understandings of literacy in Malawi have been shifting relative to the prevailing literacy approaches. For instance, during the early years of literacy learning provision, i.e. the period before the launch of the current functional literacy programme, the approach to literacy was referred to as traditional focusing only on the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic (see Rokadiya, 1986). Consequently, literacy was conceptualised solely as a skill. However, this approach was understood to be inadequate as it failed to “attract adults adequately nor convinced the social and economic planners of the value of literacy,” (sic) (Rokadiya, 1986: 1). Part of the reason for this presumed unpopularity of the programme was that it lacked relevance since there was no link between the programme’s content and the needs of both the learners and the country (Rokadiya, *ibid*). As such, the Malawi Government saw the need for a paradigm shift hence, the adoption of the functional approach to literacy. In this new approach, the emphasis was “not on literacy *per se* but to make literacy work for development” (Rokadiya, *ibid*: 1). This shift in the approach to literacy necessitated a change in the way literacy was to be defined in the country. Thus, a person was then considered “literate when he (sic) has acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his community,” (Mipando & Higgs, 1982: n.p.).

Malawi appeared to have simply adapted a 1970 UNESCO description of literacy which had some currency at that time (see UNESCO, 2004). What we see in this description is the substitution of the 3Rs with a rather vague phrase ‘necessary knowledge and skills.’ In this phrase, the value word ‘necessary’ is not only vague but also evokes power relations in terms of who makes that judgement. Crucially, the description has two key verbs that directly relate to the actions expected from the individuals assumed to be literate, i.e. ‘acquire’ and ‘engage.’ Whereas acquire connotes what the person gets from whatever process they are involved in, such as literacy learning, ‘engage’ signals use. Interestingly, literacy is not directly mentioned in the acquisition process. It is conflated with “knowledge and skills” only to resurface at the application level. Thus, the general impression I have about this definition is that it broadens the understanding of not only what it means to be literate, but also what counts as literacy in Malawi. It makes the acquisition of reading and writing skills less visible and foregrounds the acquisition of knowledge and skills as the main aim of the literacy learning programme. As I shall illustrate in chapter 9, such changes in what literacy entails has some implications in determining the focus of adult literacy assessment in the country.

Over the years, the number of literacy learning providers has been growing in Malawi. These providers which include NGOs and faith based organisations such as Action Aid International Malawi, World Vision International, Swedish Corporation Centre (SCC), Lake Basin Project (LBP), OXFAM, Concern Universal, Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA), NASFAM, MUSCCO, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Nkhoma Synod, Lutheran Development Services, and Association of Sunni Madrassa mostly run their own programmes. Following this multiplicity of literacy learning providers, other understandings of literacy have emerged in the country. For instance, in 1996, an approach to literacy called REFLECT, was introduced in the country by Action Aid (UK) in conjunction with Action Aid (Malawi). REFLECT is an acronym for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques, and is basically “an approach to learning and social change,” (Jeke, 2006: 10). According to the Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare, and Community Development (2008),

this approach encourages and enables participants to critically assess their lives, take control of their futures, enhance their literacy skills, generate a written vocabulary which is relevant to their own community or situation, recognize and build upon their knowledge, and mobilize for individual and collective actions, (p. 21).

What this suggests is that in REFLECT, literacy is intertwined to social transformation along the same lines as Freire’s (1970) critical literacy. Since its introduction, REFLECT has been used by many NGOs in Malawi.

Apart from NGOs, the Malawi government too, with the support of UNDP, implemented a REFLECT based pilot programme under the Sustainable Social and Economic Empowerment Programme (SSEEP) for poverty reduction initiative from 2005 to 2007 (Kafakoma & Mageza, 2007). This programme focused on both enhancing livelihoods and improving literacy abilities (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2008). Other international agencies such as the Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA) have also used the REFLECT approach. ICEIDA employed this approach in its project in Monkey Bay, Mangochi, with a view of assisting “Government in poverty reduction by strengthening the national adult literacy programme...” (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2008: 45), (see also Rogers, 2008). The efforts of these agencies have succeeded in influencing the Malawi government to reconstitute both the approach to and the definition of literacy in the country. As far as approaches are concerned, the Draft National Adult Literacy Policy, recognises REFLECT as one of the favoured approaches to literacy teaching and learning alongside functional literacy. In terms of definition, the Policy views adult literacy as

a learning process designed to equip illiterate beneficiaries aged 15 and above with specialized knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques to independently engage in listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy, technical and critical thinking intended to promote the development of active citizenship (2007:6).

One important element I note from this definition is that just like the one I looked at earlier, this one too, invokes a deficit discourse (Rogers, 2004). Writing about development discourse paradigms, Rogers (2004) characterises a deficit framework as the one that emphasises on what the people do not have and therefore, programmes must be initiated to help them fill the gap. Similar orientations are markedly visible in the definition above. In my view, this representation of literacy projects non-literate individuals as lacking specialised knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques. Because of such deficits, they cannot engage in listening, speaking, reading and writing on their own. As such, the learning process should involve providing them with the things they lack. As I shall show in chapter 7, these implicit assumptions are not innocent. They help in constructing people's identities which, as this study shall demonstrate, are sometimes contentious.

Another key feature worth noting from the definition above is the appearance of the phrase "critical thinking." To some extent, this inclusion reflects the influence of the international agencies and NGOs in the provision of adult literacy learning in the country. The definition attempts to provide a common ground for literacy providers who prefer the functional approach on the one side, and those who favour the REFLECT one on the other. In fact, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2008) claims that this conceptualisation places literacy both within the principles of REFLECT and the spirit of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS), especially on basic education.

In addition to the functional and REFLECT approaches to literacy, some organisations such as Action Aid International have introduced other ways of dealing with literacy such as the STAR approach. The acronym STAR is interpreted differently but according to SARN (2010), it stands for Societies Tackling Aids through Rights. The approach combines REFLECT and some elements of Stepping-Stones, an approach for HIV/AIDS prevention that was initiated in Uganda. In STAR just like in functional literacy, emphasis is placed not only on literacy skills but also on HIV/AIDS knowledge and information. In addition, literacy learning through this approach aims at enabling the participants "to be aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities" so that they can start to "demand and access essential services," (Women and Child Development, 2008: 46).



What is clear from the foregoing discussions is that these evolving approaches and understandings reflect what the literacy providers intend their programmes to accomplish. What is not clear though, is how and whether such conceptualisations of literacy relate with the adult literacy learners' situated understandings of the same.

### **2.3 The Literacy Situation in Malawi**

Based on the 2008 census, Malawi has a total population of 13,077,160 with an annual average growth rate of 2.8 (National Statistical Office, 2010). In terms of literacy, it is noted that despite the steady increase in literacy rates (10% at independence in 1964; 22% in 1977; 58% in 1998; 62.8 in 2007 and currently at 64%; see Chimombo & Chiuye, 2002; Ministry of Women and Child Development 2007; National Statistical Office, 2010), "[illiteracy]' has been steadily worsening in absolute terms," (The Government of the Republic of Malawi, 2007: 2).

Interestingly, this purportedly 'worsening illiteracy' situation is being experienced despite the Malawi government introducing free primary education in 1994. The introduction of free primary education in the country was done in line with the policy framework that informed the government's Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). The policy framework identified "low enrolment due to lack of school fees and limited facilities, and poor quality due to inadequate resources and inappropriate curricula amongst the causes of poverty" (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003:502). By supposedly abolishing fees for primary school children, the Malawi government believed that many children would be attending school and this would in turn help in improving the literacy rate in the country. Thus, the underlying assumption was that just like the NALP, basic education was one of the catalysts for poverty alleviation, especially regarding "improved agricultural productivity and better prospects of employment, reduced infant and maternal mortality, lower incidence of diseases and fertility rate" (ibid; citing Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, (1995). However, despite primary school being labelled free, the withdrawal rates remain high and this has been cited as one the factors contributing to the country's 'low' literacy rate. For instance, citing the Ministry of Education database, the National Statistical Office (2010) states that in 2007 the 'dropout' rate was 14.2% whilst in 2008 it was 8.6% respectively. In terms of actual numbers, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (2013) reports that in the school year 2011/2012 a total of 186296 children 'dropped' out of school. Of these, 110,020 children left school before entering grade 4, a class that is used as yardstick for measuring literacy competencies in the country.

Paradoxically, one of the reasons the Ministry of Education cites for the high ‘dropout’ rate is school fees. What this suggest is that although the policy sets primary education free, parents still pay some forms of fees. In fact, my own experience in 2004 attests this. My daughter was enrolled at a government primary school and I was occasionally, asked to pay towards what the school called ‘development fund.’ Not everyone was able to pay such fees, especially poor families that had many children attending school.

Apart from school fees, the other reasons include, family responsibilities, pregnancy, marriage, employment, sickness, poor facilities, availability of teachers, long distances and violence (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2013). Some of the adult literacy learners who participated in this study gave similar reasons for withdrawing from school. However, there was one reason which others gave that caught my attention. Some literacy learners, especially the ones who considered themselves old, said they left school because of religious reasons. I was informed that their parents either stopped them from going to school or decided against enrolling them in school because they did not want them to be converted to Christianity. They said that they were threatened that if they went to school, they would be made to eat mice, a delicacy among other tribes, especially some Chewas most of whom are not Muslims. Many Yawos, especially those who embraced the Islamic faith do not eat mice.

The link between education and being converted to Christianity was understood because during the pre-independence period “western education remained heavily dominated by the Christian missions” and “many schools insisted on conversion to Christianity as a prerequisite for entry into the school” (Mumisa, 2002: 282). Mumisa contends that even in government and mission schools where no direct pressure was exerted upon individuals of other religions to join Christianity, “there were other features of school life that inhibited Muslim parents from allowing their children to attend” (p. 283). Citing Lamba (1984), Mumisa (2002: 283) claims that the Muslims “did not like the fact that Christian prayers and worship tended to be part of the daily school routine.” During that period, attempts by Muslim Associations to provide both secular and Islamic education were marred by numerous problems including shortage of teachers, lack of organisational expertise and corruption (ibid).

Lamba’s observation above evokes my own experiences in primary school in the early 1970s. Having transferred from Msalula Primary School in Salima where we sang the Malawi National Anthem during our daily assemblies, I was rather surprised that at Balaka Primary School in Balaka we were required to say the Lord’s Prayer which I had no knowledge of. As a young

Muslim, I did not understand why the teachers at a government primary school expected us to learn and recite this prayer. Fortunately, it did not take long before singing the National Anthem became the prelude of the activities performed during our routine assemblies.

What is coming out clearly for me is that some community members left school due to reasons beyond their control. As such, instead of blaming them for their supposed ‘illiteracy,’ what is required is to understand how the literacy programmes can help them master the literacies they may desire.

## **2.4 A Brief Historical Perspective on Malawi’s National Adult Literacy Programme**

Malawi’s National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) dates back to as early as the colonial period. But according to Mipando and Higgs (1982), a major shift in the history of Malawi’s adult literacy initiatives took place in 1947. In this year, the Mponela Mass Education Pilot Project was launched whose aim was to explore “how to raise the standards of living and the betterment of the way of life of African communities,” (Ministry of Women and Child Development: 2008: 3). However, due to various challenges, the project made little progress such that in 1949, it was discontinued (Mpheluka 1983). Meanwhile, another initiative called Community Development Scheme was started in the same year at Domasi. But by 1953, this initiative too, was terminated due to challenges similar to those that led to the closure of the Mponela project. Nevertheless, although these literacy programmes failed to make progress, the need for such programmes was not questioned. It was not surprising, therefore, that after independence, the Malawi Congress Party led government revived the efforts to provide literacy lessons to non-literate adults. Thus,

in 1962, His Excellency the Life President identified three perpetual enemies, namely ignorance, poverty and disease which had to be defeated. In view of this, His Excellency saw the role of literacy as vital in wiping out these three enemies, (Mipando and Higgs, 1982: n.p.).

Here, Mipando and Higgs appear to frame literacy within the context of socioeconomic development. What fascinates me more, is how the authors employ metaphors of war. The authors present ignorance, poverty and disease as if they were physical entities that should be fought and annihilated. At the same time, the authors seem to assume that literacy has an intrinsic capacity to conquer the professed enemies.

By making literacy a weapon to ‘wipe out’ ignorance, Mipando and Higgs implicitly suggest that non-literate people are to some extent, ignorant. Such assumptions are prevalent even in the names given to the adult literacy programmes since independence. According to Jeke (2006), the literacy initiatives that were delivered in the 1960s and 1970s ran under the *Ukani* Traditional Literacy Programme. These programmes employed a series of books whose title was *Ukani* (literally, you wake up; see Kalinde, 1967). The programme was then succeeded by the current one which in vernacular is called *sukulu za kwacha* (literally, schools of daybreak). To me, both *ukani* and *sukulu za kwacha* are pejorative names. In my view, both names frame non-literate people as being ignorant symbolised by their state of being asleep or being in the dark. In this context, literacy is projected as the light that would help the adult literacy learners to be aware of what is happening around them. This framing of literacy reflected the international policy and practice of the time. As Street and Lefstein, (2007) contend, during the period immediately after the second World War, countries in the North developed ways of bringing literacy to the South that “tended to be framed in a rather postcolonial way, and metaphors of ‘bringing light into darkness’ or of ‘curing ills’ were frequent” (p. 225). Indeed, such metaphors are evidently evoked by the self-proclaimed UNESCO Expert in Adult Literacy, Nasution (1969) who declares that

ILLITERACY has been regarded as an enemy and evil which keeps people in darkness, bound to their traditions and superstitions; makes people resistant to change and new ideas, and isolated from progress, thus unaware and incapable of meeting the demands of their changing environment and ever-progressing world (p. 6; original emphasis).

Although Nasution distances UNESCO from his proclamations, his stance seems to mirror the thinking that was pervasive at the time. For instance, whilst Mipando and Higgs (1982) report about ignorance, poverty and disease as the enemies identified by the Malawi government, Nasution (1969) links ‘illiteracy’ to the same enemies globally and claims that ‘illiteracy’ “acts as a brake to development” (p. 7).

Somehow, it appears that some literacy officers in Malawi are aware of the negative connotations emanating from the name given to the NALP in vernacular, and they are attempting to rename it as *sukulu za chitukuko* which could literally be translated as ‘schools of development’ (see on the picture that follows).

NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMME

SUKULU ZA CHITUKUKO (KWACHA)  
LIPOTI LA MWIZI NDI MWEZI LA MPHUNZITSI

(Mphunzitsi alembe njukumiza kwa omwag'anira wako pakutha kwa mwezi aliwonse)

1. Pakutha kwa mwezi wa JULY chaka ch. 2015

2. Dzina la mudi [REDACTED] Mfumu (TA) MALUMIA

3. Dzina la Mphunzitsi [REDACTED]

4. Dzina la kalasi [REDACTED]

5. Tsiku lophunzitsira: Chimba, Lachivini, Lachititu, Lachinayi, achisanu.

6. Nthawi yokumanirana 2 OKOLOLO MALIZULO MPAKA 4 PM

7. Phunzira lomaliza kumphunzitsamwezi uno 14

8. Kuchuluka kwa ophunzira mwez uro 392

a) Amuna — b) Alazi 39

9. Masiku omwe aphunzira pa mwezi 140 DAYS

10. Lembani avereji yakabweredve mwezi 10-50-9-3

11. Kuchuluka kwa ophunzira omwe sanabwere mwezi wonse

a) Amuna — b) Alazi 4

12. Chomwe munachita kuti ophunzira asaleke, ndikutinso omwe anasiya abwerenso  
TINAWA SANA NDI KULWAZA UBUNDE WA  
MUNYAMA ANENE ANAZIWA KULEMBA NDI  
KWENERENSA

13. Zipangizo zimene mukuzituna MABUKU, MA CARDS, BOARDS

14. Kuchuluka kwa masiku omwe oyung'anira anabwera —

15. Chiongola Dzanja ndinalandira cia mwezi wa —

16. Ndenanga yanu SUKULU LILY YENDA BANDA

17. Fotokozani zomwe kalasi ikuchita YSL

18. Saini ya Mphunzitsi MURRAY HANNA

19. Ndemanga ya wapampando Ndithu Sukulu Lanyumba Banda mli  
uphuzitsi wotimbikira Kizimoni

20. Saini ya wapampando [REDACTED] Tsiku 14th July 2015

Figure 4: Instructor's Monthly Report Form

In the second line on this form, an attempt is made to replace *kwacha* (daybreak) with *chitukuko* (development).

In a bid to enhance the NALP, the Malawi Government established a National Literacy Committee in 1966 with a mandate to manage matters concerning literacy but still not much progress was made. Following this state of affairs, the Malawi Government, with assistance from UNESCO, launched another adult literacy initiative in 1967, (see Mipando and Higgs, 1982). It was as a result of the evaluation of this initiative that the Malawi Government initiated and conducted a pilot functional literacy project with the assistance of UNESCO and UNDP

from 1981 to 1985 resulting in the launch, in 1986, of the current Malawi National Functional Adult Literacy Programme.

Broadly, the goal of the national adult literacy programme was “to make approximately two million illiterate adults functionally literate by 1995 out of an estimated 3.6 million adult illiterates (sic),” (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Community Services, n.d.: 3). According to the Ministry, the programme specifically, sought to accomplish the following objectives.

- To assist in achieving government development objectives by enabling rural populations to take advantage of modern and effective farming techniques to increase their overall productivity; attain improved health habits and practices; better family life and community living and foster national integration through education;
- To increase the attainment and use of literacy skills and sustain the process of learning and lifelong education for rural adults;
- To improve the status, general knowledge and technical skills of rural people especially smallholder farmers by making them receptive to innovations and modernisation.

The NALP in Malawi targets non-literate adults aged 15 and above. According to Rokadiya (1986:4), “priority is ... given to those youths and adults – men and women... who are residing in rural areas; who are engaged in agriculture and allied occupations; who are smallholder farmers, housewives, parents and responsible members of the country.” These men and women undergo a ten months' literacy learning process covering reading writing, numeracy and what is known as ‘functional’ content (ibid). Rokadiya notes further, that the focus of the new programme was not only on literacy skills but also on linking literacy and development. Thus, “the content of the literacy programme is to be based on the learning interests and needs of adults as well as development objectives,” (ibid: 3).

In terms of literacy attainment, the NALP recognises three levels. These levels are based on the assumed complexity of the reading and writing as well as the numeracy tasks involved. Rokadiya (ibid) outlines these levels as follows:

- (i) Level I: The literacy learner is initiated to recognise written symbols. The learner can read and write some difficult and simple words in Chichewa and also can recognise, read and write mathematical signs.
- (ii) Level II: The literacy learner is able to read, comprehend and write correctly some Chichewa words, short simple sentences and a simple short paragraph.

The learner can work out simple arithmetic problems.

- (iii) Level III: This is a stage at which the literacy learner demonstrates advanced skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. The learner can read and write comprehension questions of any simple passage and read and solve mathematical problems involving simple additions, subtractions, multiplications and divisions.

What is interesting to me about these guidelines is the fact that they single out what the adult literacy learners should be able to do and not how much they should score in an exam. In that respect, though prescriptive, these guidelines lean more towards a capabilities approach. (I discuss more on this in chapter 3). However, as I illustrate in chapter 7, the NALP assessment report form, provides percentage based benchmarks for ‘declaring’ adult literacy learners literate or ‘illiterate. In practice, reconciling such benchmarks and the literacy attainment guidelines is rather problematic.

In an attempt to avert demoralising the adult literacy learners who supposedly fail the literacy exams, the National Advisory Council for Literacy and Adult Education resolved to award two types of certificates to the literacy learners. Thus, those literacy learners whose assessment fell below level 2 were going to be given a certificate for attendance because “...there is no reason to make a categorical declaration on failure. That would be unjust and tends to go against the self-respecting adult learner,” (Rokadiya, 1986: 17). Those literacy learners whose assessment was within and above level 2 were going to be awarded a certificate of achievement like the one shown in the picture overleaf. However, the supervisor of the centre at which I conducted this study told me that he had never seen a certificate for literacy learners who had not been declared literate. In any case, even if such certificates were available, I suppose that the literacy learners would know that they were adjudged to have failed the exams due to the wording on the certificate. For example, the certificate in the picture overleaf, clearly says: ‘Certification/Confirmation of the ability to read, write and enumerate through adult literacy classes,’ and I presume that the certificates awarded to acknowledge attendance would be worded differently.

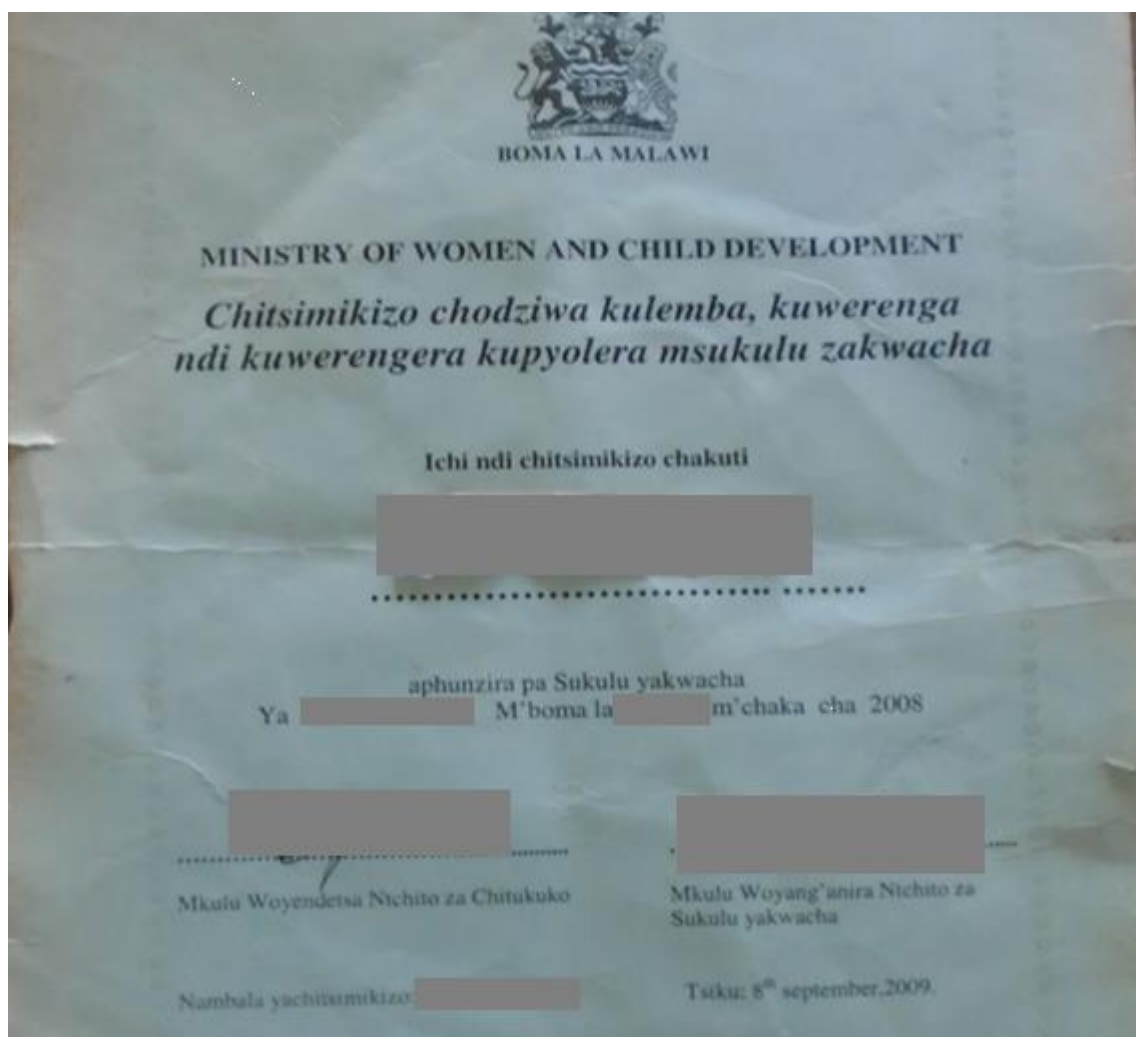


Figure 5: An Adult Literacy Certificate

Perhaps it is worth pointing out that the adult literacy lessons cover four core curriculum content areas namely reading, writing, numeracy and functional knowledge. However, the two assessment protocols discussed in this study generally focus of the first three core areas. As I illustrate in chapter 9, matching the test results with the benchmarks provided in the curriculum guide is rather problematic.

Notwithstanding these assessment complexities, *Chuma ndi Moyo*, the NALP primer in Malawi, covers all the four areas of the curriculum cited above. As I state in the next section, the National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education (NCLAE) is the institution which is mandated to develop the adult literacy curriculum including the production of the NALP literacy primers. However, over the years, these processes have been and continue to be centrally done by “literacy ‘experts’ at the National Centre for Adult Literacy, aided by other subject specialist experts from the ministries of agriculture and health (sic) (Chinsinga and



Dulani, 2006:29). As far as the current primer is concerned, its acknowledgement page shows that it was produced at a primer-writing workshop whose participants were mostly literacy officers in the Ministry of Community Services. These officers were joined by others drawn from the Ministry of Agriculture, Public Affairs Committee, Lilongwe City Council and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Blantyre Synod. However, a critical look at the topics covered in the primer (see appendix 1) suggests that to a large extent, the literacy writers relied heavily on what international experts such as Rokadiya recommends in his 1986 curriculum outline. As such, the primer covers the content which the ‘experts’ perceive as addressing “the learning interests and needs of adults as well as development objectives” (Rokadiya, 1986:3) of the country. In other words, the voices of other “key players such as learners, fieldworkers, and instructor are excluded” (Chinsinga & Dulani, 2006: 30). This exclusion leads to what Chinsinga and Dulani (ibid) consider as “a disjuncture between what is ‘taught’ from what the learners themselves need.”

## **2.5 Organisation and Management of NALP**

A close look at the operation and management of the NALP suggests that it is highly structured although it has been reconstituted since its launch in 1986. Prior to the inauguration of the functional national adult literacy programme, the Malawi government set up a National Advisory Council for Literacy and Adult Education (NACLAE) in 1983. The role of NACLAE was to formulate literacy and adult education policy and it was chaired by the Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Women, Children Affairs and Community Services. However, by early 1990s, NACLAE became non-functioning. Similarly, following Malawi’s adoption of the decentralisation policy in 1998, some positions in the NALP such as that of regional coordinator were abolished. Consequently, some of the functions that were undertaken at national and regional levels were devolved to the districts.

Notwithstanding these changes, NALP still has layers of bureaucratic positions. At the helm of the programme is the National Coordinator who is a Chief Community Development Officer and he or she heads the National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education (NCLAE) and reports to the Director of Community Development at the Ministry Headquarters. For its part NCLAE ‘provides technical and professional guidance for literacy implementation in terms of curriculum development, training and orientation of personnel, monitoring, evaluation and research, printing, documentation and information dissemination services and supervisory support,’ (Ministry of Women and Child Development: 2008: 4).

At district level, NALP is headed by the District Community Development Officers (DCDOs). The DCDOs oversee and coordinate the literacy activities facilitated by Community Development Assistants (CDAs). The CDAs are full time government employees. They are qualified and experienced community development workers. CDAs are assigned zones some of which are broken down into clusters of literacy centres in which they supervise the work of literacy cluster supervisors. Like literacy instructors, cluster supervisors are not full time government employees. They serve on more or less a voluntary basis and they are paid monthly honoraria of K1000 (about £1; Chichewa instructor) and K1500 (about £1.50; supervisor). The supervisors coordinate literacy activities in a number of literacy classes which together form a cluster. They are the ones who work directly with the literacy instructors.

Whilst cluster supervisors are principally identified by the CDAs, there are different accounts concerning the process of choosing instructors. Jeke (2006), and Phiri and Safaraoh (2003), put the responsibility of identifying and selecting literacy instructors in the hands of the village literacy committees whilst Chinsinga and Dulani (2006) claim that this task is done by community members at village meetings. Whatever the case, it is sometimes the situation on the ground that determines how this process is done. For instance, neither a village literacy committee nor a meeting of all community members elected the literacy instructor for the class where I conducted this study. The cluster supervisor identified her. This was not surprising considering the circumstances within which the literacy class was established which I explain in chapter 4. In addition, the minimum educational requirement for one to be considered for the position of literacy instructor is grade 8<sup>5</sup>. The village did not have many individuals who had gone up to that level who were also willing to take up the post. Hence, the supervisor had no other option than to appoint someone from a nearby village. The same procedure was followed when identifying the English literacy instructor whose minimum educational background is form 2 (second grade in secondary school). That instructor too, came from a nearby village and both instructors were female whilst the supervisor was male.

Somehow, the male-female representation in positions of power in this area appeared to favour men. Based on the list of instructors and supervisors I saw, men appeared to dominate the supervisory roles whilst women dominated the position of instructor. On that list, Zomba

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<sup>5</sup> Generally, the education system in Malawi has 8 years primary, 4 years secondary and 4 years university. The position of Chichewa instructor is given to someone who has done at least 8 years of primary education.

district had 20 cluster supervisors and of these, only 5 were women. The cluster in which the literacy centre I conducted my study was located had 18 literacy instructors and of these, 16 were women.

The instructors identified were required to go through a two week training course. But such courses were rarely done due to resource constraints. Perhaps, it was because of such constraints that the Chichewa literacy instructor had not attended any training course prior to taking up her job whilst the English literacy instructor attended a one and half day literacy instruction briefing conducted by the Community Development Assistants under the supervision of the District Community Development Officer.

During these briefings, the trainers introduce trainees to pedagogies for teaching adults. For example, they tell them to desist from telling the adult literacy learners that they were teaching them. Instead, they should say they were discussing whatever topic they were dealing with. They tell the trainees not to point fingers at the literacy learners. Furthermore, they advise them against calling out the names of literacy learners when marking the registers. The bottom line is that an adult literacy learner is a person who needs to be handled with some respect.

## **2.6 Literacy Studies in Malawi**

Although adult literacy programmes have been offered for decades in Malawi, relatively little research has been conducted on adult basic literacy education in the country (Chimombo and Chiuye, 2002; Kachiwanda, 2009). In fact, even the Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare, and Community Services (2004) acknowledges the dearth in literacy studies and therefore, emphasises “on the need to expand the research base so that policies on literacy and adult education can be based on empirical research” (p. iv). Owing to this state of affairs, many of the frequently cited literature on literacy studies in Malawi come from evaluation or similar reports, (Mpheluka, 1983; Kuthemba Mwale, 1990; Phiri & Safaraoh 2003; Dulani & Chinsinga, 2006; Center for Social Research, 2000; Benediktsson & Kamtengeni, 2004; Jeke, 2006; OSISA, 2007). However, in general terms, the impact of these studies has been minimal, especially when we consider the fact almost all of them raise the same key challenges such as training of instructors, high withdrawal rates, low participation of men, low funding, inefficient monitoring and evaluation of literacy classes and in the end, make similar recommendations. One notable effect though is that they have succeeded in influencing the Malawi government

to draft a policy on adult literacy in the country although it is scarcely available at district offices.

One of the key features that can easily be identified from many of these studies and which marks my point of departure, is that literacy and illiteracy are generally not problematised. That is, they seem to assume that literacy and illiteracy are entities that are taken for granted and apparently, the key issue is how best to offer literacy lessons to address the perceived problem of illiteracy. This practice mirrors what Street (1984) calls the autonomous model of literacy which I discuss in detail in chapter 3. In this respect, their underlying assumption is that a successful adult literacy programme is the one that attracts many adult literacy learners who eventually succeed in acquiring the privileged literacy skills. But as Rogers, Kachiwanda and McKay (2003) argue elsewhere, “the evaluation of success of any literacy learning programme needs to be based not on the competences achieved alone but on whether such skills are used in daily activities” (p. 9).

In recent years, a few studies have been conducted addressing some critical aspects of literacy, such as language use which many of the evaluation reports simply gloss over. One of such studies was done by Kachiwanda (2009) who looked at everyday literacy practices of Ciyawo language speakers as part of her doctoral studies. Her aim was “to investigate access to and reading of public information texts written in Ciyawo among Ciyawo speaking communities,” (ibid: 9). Among other things, Kachiwanda established that Ciyawo information texts were the least read and that very few people were able to read in this language. Apart from Kachiwanda, I conducted a study as part of my MA degree in applied linguistics at Chancellor College in 2010. In this study, I sought to understand the choice and use of minority languages in adult literacy. Overall, I established that many Ciyawo speaking adult literacy learners preferred to learn literacy in Chichewa. My participants argued that being literate in Chichewa would help them function in most official and other domains where this language was privileged as a medium of communication. Besides, I also conducted another study as part of my MA in adult literacy and lifelong learning at the University of East Anglia. In this study, I set out to unpack the discourses employed in national adult literacy documents in Malawi. In a nutshell, I established that the literacy discourses in many policy documents valued literacy and literate individuals while ‘illiteracy’ and non-literate people were denigrated. On her, part Kamtengeni (1999) conducted a study to establish the reasons why adults participate in literacy programmes.

But much as these studies have helped us to understand certain aspects of literacy in Malawi, such as language use and motivations of adult literacy learners for taking part in literacy lessons, we still have much more to unravel about literacy in general, and the NALP in particular. For instance, whilst literature on literacy as a social practice informs us that literacy is both social and situated, we have had limited in-depth exploration of adult literacy learners' literacy practices, meanings and discourses in their lived worlds. In addition, there has been hardly any in-depth study to examine the adult literacy learners' literacy practices in relation to power and identities. Yet, such studies are crucial in informing us about not only what literacy means to the adult literacy learners, but also what it allows or constrains them to do in different contexts. Such knowledge is fundamental in expanding both our understanding of literacy theoretically, as well as appreciating how literacy practically, impacts on people's lives in their lived worlds. This study therefore, seeks to explore such knowledge and hopes to expand and contribute in some way, to the literacy studies based on the social theory of literacy in Malawi.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to situate my study into literacy studies within the Malawian context. The chapter has highlighted how the literacy approaches and conceptualisations have evolved over the years in the country. Despite these changes, the underlying policy assumptions regarding individuals assumed to be non-literate continue to be framed within the deficit paradigm (Rogers, 2004) of development. Such assumptions do not recognise what such individuals bring to the literacy classes.

In terms of literacy studies, the same approaches and techniques informed by the same autonomous assumptions about literacy appear to thrive in Malawi. Elsewhere, literacy studies are gaining new insights through contemporary understandings and approaches to literacy thereby challenging some of the literacy perceptions and assumptions I have highlighted in this chapter. Thus, grounding their work within the social theory of literacy and employing ethnographic approaches to literacy studies, various scholars have established how limiting it is to view literacy as discrete universal skills that can be acquired in one context and be applied anywhere they are required. Instead, they view literacy as being ideological (Street, 1984). Hence, this study takes the latter stance and adopts the social theory of literacy to, in part, interrogate the literacy perceptions and assumptions highlighted in this chapter with a view of

understanding what it means to be literate or non-literate in Malawi. In the next chapter, I examine the social theory of literacy and other theoretical notions so as to provide the conceptual perspectives that shall underpin my study.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCHING LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE: CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### 3.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the conceptual perspectives that shall underpin this study. As I stated in chapter 1, my intention in this study is to contribute to the New Literacy Studies. However, as I shall briefly discuss in section 3.2, the social theory of literacy is faulted for under-developing questions of power and identity which are central in this study. Therefore, my conceptual perspectives integrate the social theory of literacy with concepts from other sociocultural theories, particularly Holland *et al's* (1998) theory of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world. As I navigate through the various theoretical perspectives, my focus is not to expose their limitations rather, I seek to explore how they can be dialogically employed in literacy studies. Consequently, my overarching question is: *How can the concept of figured world help us investigate and understand better the social and situated nature of literacy?*

#### 3.1 The Social Theory of Literacy

This study, in part, seeks to examine some community members' literacy practices, meanings and discourses in their lived worlds. To achieve this aim, I shall among others, employ concepts from the social theory of literacy. According to Papen (2005), scholars first developed the social theory of literacy in the 1980s. These scholars came from a range of disciplines such as anthropology (Street, 1984), history (Graff, 1979), psychology (Scribner & Cole, 1981), and sociolinguistics (Heath, 1983; Baynham, 1995; & Gee, 1987). They did not subscribe to the "traditional psychological approach to literacy" in which literacy was perceived as a "cognitive phenomenon" understood from the point of view of "mental states and mental processing," (Gee, n.d.: 2). Instead, their focus was on the role literacy played in people's everyday life, (Papen, 2005). The work of these researchers laid the foundation of what is now known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS). According to Street (2003:77)

what has come to be termed the "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (...) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice.

Following this paradigm shift, in contemporary literacy studies a distinction is generally made between what Street (1993) calls an autonomous model of literacy on the one hand, and the ideological one on the other. The autonomous model of literacy looks at literacy “as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character,” (ibid: 5). In this model, literacy is sought after because it is viewed as something valuable in itself for the wellbeing of both societies in general, and individuals in particular. Goody and Watt (1968) seem to view literacy in this sense when they discuss their “more significant historical and functional consequences of literacy,” (p. 68).

By contrast, the ideological model looks at “literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts” (Street, 1993: 7). From this description, three key issues stand out for me. First, literacy is tied to the activities people do. In fact, it is “something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998: 3). Second, literacy is never neutral but rather always influenced by our own points of view. Third, literacy is “always contextualised, situated within a particular socio-cultural setting,” (Rogers *et al*, 1999: 55). Key to Street’s perspectives of literacy, are issues of power. In view of this, I ask a subsidiary question: *How do literacy practices shape power relations among community members?*

At the heart of the social theory of literacy are two key concepts namely, literacy event and literacy practices. When we talk about a literacy event, we are essentially referring to “what people do with reading and writing: they are the uses of literacy, which can be observed and described” (Papen, 2005: 31; see also St. Clair, 2010). Viewed in this way, “the notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context” (Barton and Hamilton, 1998: 7). But as Street (2000) observes, the notion of literacy event is essentially descriptive compared to the concept of literacy practices which

moves us into the realm of analysis trying to understand the meanings of events observed, looking for patterns across events, similarities and differences between them and trying to understand their relationship with other elements of the world, (Papen, 2005: 31).

Thus, literacy practices as a concept, is not only broader but also more inclusive. Besides, as Papen notes above, it takes us further into analysis. To some extent, this is how I understand Street’s (2003) elaboration when he says



I have employed the phrase "literacy practices" (...) as a means of focusing upon "social practices and conceptions of reading and writing", although I later elaborated the term to take into account both "events" in Heath's sense and of the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (p. 78).

As I stated earlier, this thesis is primarily about understanding literacy as a social practice. As such, notions such as literacy event and literacy practices shall take centre stage. However, my reading of the work done by NLS scholars seems to suggest that they differ slightly not only in the way they articulate the two notions but also in the choices they make when employing them. Thus, a number of literacy scholarly work from the Lancaster research (Barton & Ivanič 1991; Barton & Hamilton 1998; Hamilton, Barton & Ivanič 1994; Ivanič 1997) have largely employed the notion of literacy event (Street, 2000). Meanwhile Street's work largely emphasises on literacy practices. Their differences in backgrounds, language and linguistics for the Lancaster group, and anthropology for Street, may explain these scholars' preferences in the choice and use of the two terms.

Despite these minor differences, the NLS scholars regardless of their orientation seem to be moving towards building a consensus on what literacy event and literacy practices are. For instance, Barton and Hamilton (1998) make a clear distinction between literacy events and literacy practices by suggesting that the former are tangible and therefore, observable whilst the latter are not. To some extent, Street (2000: 21) also appears to share this view when he says, "you can photograph literacy events but you cannot photograph literacy practices."

In my view, Street's (2003) characterisation of literacy practices cited earlier appears to subsume literacy event. In fact, he explains that

the concept of literacy practices does, I think attempt to handle the events and the patterns of activity around literacy but to *link* them to something broader of a cultural and social kind, (Street, 2000: 21, original emphasis).

Viewed in this way literacy practices become dual in nature i.e. they are both visible and invisible (Cheffy. 2008) and this is how I shall conceptualise it in this study. Conceptualising literacy practices in this dual model allows me to not only describe what the community members do with reading and writing but also explore their discourses and meanings of literacy. As Barton and Papen (2010) observe, "taken together, the terms event and practice are key units of analysis which link theory and methodology and which have proved useful in understanding reading and writing" (p.11).

Apart from the notions of literacy event and literacy practices, the social theory of literacy gives texts some prominence. Hence, any “study of literacy is partly a study of texts and how they are produced and used” (Barton & Hamilton 1998: 8). This is the case because social practices, of which literacy is a part, are mediated by texts (Barton, 2009). However, although I agree in principle regarding the centrality of texts in literacy studies, I believe employing this word in this study would limit my characterisation of literacy mediating tools. I am aware that in contemporary literacy studies, the word ‘text’ encompasses both “written texts” and “spoken texts” (Fairclough, 2001: 20) since as Barton and Hamilton (2005: 17) observe, “much spoken language is in the presence of texts and a large amount of spoken language makes reference to texts.” Notwithstanding this, as it shall be seen in my analysis chapters, some of the items I look at would not be covered by this word. Therefore, I have decided to employ a broader concept, artefact, “of which texts are a significant category” (Hamilton, 2016:8). (I discuss the notion of artefact in section 3.4.4).

As I mentioned in my introduction, although the social theory of literacy has been embraced by many researchers and scholars, it has at the same time, generated persistent debates, especially with regard to “the problems raised by it both in general theoretical terms and, more specifically, for practice in educational contexts” (Street, 2003: 79). In the section that follows, I briefly look at some of these debates.

## **3.2 Literacy as a Social Practice: A Brief Critique**

Street (2003: 79) points out that part of the evidence that the social theory of literacy is strong and significant comes from “a recent spate of critical accounts” that address some of its perceived limitations. In this section, I look at some of these concerns, especially the ones I consider relevant for this thesis. I have labelled these debates the local vs non-local, the conceptualisation of literacy events, and the assessment dilemmas respectively.

### **3.2.1 Local versus Non-local debate**

In my earlier discussion of the theory of literacy as a social practice, I stated that “literacies are situated” (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000: 1). However, as Kell (2009) observes, since the 1970s to the present, ideas about learning and communication as being embedded in the context have been widely discussed. For instance, whilst appreciating the indispensability of the whole theory of literacy as a social practice, Brandt and Clinton (2002:338) wonder, “if the new

paradigm sometimes veers too far in a reactive direction, exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes.” They contend that it is not necessarily the case that literacy practices are invented by their practitioners. They posit that “literacy in use more often than not serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out away from the immediate scene” (ibid).

Although Brandt and Clinton are talking about earlier periods when scholars whom they call ‘revisionists’ were very much interested in reversing the autonomous perceptions of literacy by putting much emphasis on the local context, questions concerning the local nature of literacy are still being raised in contemporary literature. In fact, currently there is a conflict between theories of ‘globalisation and information’ on the one hand, and those concerning the ‘particularization and the local’ on the other (Kell, (2009). Consequently, new models are being suggested such as Kell’s ‘transcontextual analysis’ to deal with movement of people, texts, objects, and information across boundaries.

As one would expect, some proponents of the social theory of literacy have responded to these concerns. For instance, Street and Lefstein (2007) contend that the debates regarding whether the early stance taken by the New Literacy Studies valued the ‘local’ more than the global simply indicate “different approaches to what counts as ‘literacy’ and to how programmes for the extension and enhancement of literacy may be conceptualised and designed” (p.44). The two scholars suggest that any literacy work whether it be for children or adults should state the kind of literacies involved. Street (2009) even goes further to clarify the claims made by some scholars with regard to communication made through the internet, which they say, extends literacy beyond the local context. He argues that even in such situations the local plays a part if we take into account the fact that the communicators still use their situated cultural and linguistic background. Therefore, what we get in the end is neither the ‘local’ nor the ‘global,’ but a mixture of the two. And “it is these hybrid literacy practices that NLS focuses upon rather than either romanticizing the local or conceding the dominant privileging of the supposed ‘global’” (Street, 2003: 80).

Street’s (2009) stance about the local seems to be echoed by Blommaert (2004). Using documents produced by Burundian asylum seekers, Blommaert (ibid) shows how the writing of the Burundians may have been acceptable in their country or among fellow Africans in Europe but was seen as “not good, useful, and functionally adequate literacy in the Belgian bureaucratic world” (p. 660). He argues that once documents are moved from one context to

another they are repositioned and they quickly lose their function. He asserts that “it is important to realize that when it comes to literacy, the world still consist of relatively separated or loosely connected environments” (p. 663). In my view, it is these loose connections that lead to Street’s (2003) idea of the hybridisation of literacies which I also share.

### **3.2.2 Debates on the Conceptualisation of Literacy Events**

Apart from the concerns regarding the local/non-local nature of literacy, we also have debates concerning the notion of literacy event. According to Baynham and Prinsloo (2009), the conceptualisation of literacy event poses some problems in that “the notion of event implies some distinct structured set of activities, which can easily be readily distinguishable, having a schematic structure” (ibid: 11). They question this type of characterisation saying it projects the view that literacy event is something that can be isolated from its context and be studied elsewhere arguing that “much literacy activity is not like this” (ibid). However, some scholars who subscribe to the social theory of literacy are already aware that literacy events are not discrete activities. For instance, Barton (2009) notes that it is not easy to demarcate literacy events because “events are nested within each other with micro and macro events; they are chained together in sequences and they are networked across contexts” (p. 40). Perhaps, this is why Street (2003) conceptualises literacy event within a broader notion of literacy practices. Characterised in this way, we can then think of literacy events as being “constituents of literacy practices” (Hamilton, 2000: 15). What is striking in this debate, is the fact that scholars from both sides seem to agree that literacy events “are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000: 8).

### **3.2.3 Literacy Assessment Debates**

One of the key challenges facing literacy studies based on the theory of literacy as a social practice is how such studies can inform policy and practice, especially in contexts where official literacy figures are thought to be the only acceptable way to mirror progress. The challenge arises from the fact that “literacy practices are so contextual and so variable that it would never be possible, *a priori*, to invent a measurement that would account for their diversity” (Bartlett, 2008b: 742).

Given these complexities, we are left wondering as to how the social and situated view of literacy can fit into the assessment processes of governments where, as Hamilton (2012: 41-42) notes, “[numbers] are useful to politicians and civil servants who are pushed to justify their

expenditures on policies: how much more or less and to what effect.” Furthermore, as I shall also discuss in chapter 9, sometimes it is the facilitators and the learners who demand assessment to gauge their progress as well as for purposes of getting certificates respectively (Rogers, 2008).

However, it is worth acknowledging that some scholars have already started looking at some ways of dealing with this challenge. For instance, St. Clair (2010) is proposing the assessment of literacy outcomes based on capabilities (see also Maddox, 2008). In this case, “a literacy capability is the ability to achieve a desired purpose by applying appropriate skills in a specific situation of engagement with texts” (St. Clair, 2010: 35). This measure puts the learner at the centre of the assessment process. That is, the evaluation of the learners’ achievements depends on the accomplishment of what they wanted to learn from the literacy programmes. One of the implications of this approach, however would be the decentralisation of the assessment processes so as to account for the multiplicity and variation of the adult literacy learners’ ‘desired purposes.’ This however, raises the question as to whether the approach would be appealing to both policy makers and adult literacy practitioners in the same way as it appears to be to some literacy theorists and researchers. Street (2010) seems to raise the same concern when he cautiously welcomes Maddox’s (2008) attempts to reconcile the capabilities approaches with ethnography saying

the policy accounts depend on literacy rates which are already pre-defined as a particular kind and ignore the very local and often minimal uses of literacy described by Maddox and Nabi, which would not pass the tests set by agencies assessing people’s literacy skills, (p. 585).

At the same time, one wonders as to how such an approach would avoid heightening the concerns that the NLS’ disapproval of the autonomous model of literacy leads to relativising and romanticising local literacies which have “potentially dangerous consequences” (Street, 2001: 12).

What these challenges suggest to me is that assessment in adult literacy learning is both complex and slippery and therefore needs further understanding. It is in line with this realisation that in chapter 9, I shall be looking at perceptions of the purposes and value of literacy assessment by examining some community members’ understandings of literacy assessment vis á vis government perspectives.

Despite the critiques above, I agree with Papen (2004) and St. Clair (2010) that the social theory of literacy has so much to offer both to our understanding of literacy as well as the designing and provision of literacy learning programmes. Perhaps, this is the reason why literacy studies based on this theory continue to grow, (see Street, 1984; Robinson-Pant, 2001; Bartlett, 2010; Kalman, 2005; Papen, 2002; Chopra, 2008; Nabi, Rogers & Street, 2009; Cheffy, 2008; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Openjuru, Baker, Rogers & Street 2016; Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009).

This thesis seeks to build on such studies. Initially, my desire was to ground the thesis primarily on the theory of literacy as a social practice. But in the course of designing and developing this study, I realised that although it is valuable in terms of characterising what literacy is all about, the theory seems not to go far enough in articulating how it conceptualises certain aspects of literacy practices particularly power and identity that come into play in people's literacy mediated social encounters. In fact, Papen (2005) observes that

some of the difficulties likely to be experienced when approaching literacy programmes from a social practices model could—at least to a certain extent—result from the NLS failure to sufficiently theorize issues of power with regards to literacy (p. 15).

St. Clair (2010), and Collins and Blot (2003) highlight similar observations. St. Clair acknowledges the fact that the New Literacy Studies recognise power only that “the implication of these issues for the theorisation of literacy seem to be quite underdeveloped” (p. 31). Also, although issues of power are subsumed in the ideological model, there is still lack of clarity with regard to “power-in-literacy which captures the intricate ways in which power, knowledge, and forms of subjectivity are interconnected with ‘uses of literacy’” in different contexts, (Collins & Blot, 2003: 66). Interestingly, Street (1993) admits that identifying different literacy practices through ethnographic studies is not enough and calls for the need to have “bold theoretical models that recognise the central role of power relations in literacy practices” (p. 2). This is why I decided to integrate the social theory of literacy with other sociocultural theories to help me understand power and identity in community members' literacy practices. Getting such conceptual tools was a process which I began with a review of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of community of practice.

### **3.3 Community of Practice**

Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) claim that the term ‘community of practice’ was coined by Lave and Wenger when they were “studying apprenticeship as a learning model” (p. 4). Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) see community of practice as “a set of relations among persons,

activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” Put simply, “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 1; see also Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). In these communities, ‘newcomers’ learn the practices by engaging themselves in the activities of each specific community of practice. In other words, the newcomers are inducted by ‘old timers’ to become full members through what Lave and Wenger (1991) theorise as “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 40). In communities of practice, learning is not just the acquisition of knowledge and skills to be employed in appropriate contexts sometime in future, but it is also a process of acquiring the same through doing. In other words, “...learning is not only a means to an end: it [is] the end product” (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 5). Learning through community of practice, “is an ontological transformation, not [just] an epistemological effect” (Hodges, 1998: 279). The hallmark of this social theory of learning is social participation. Viewed in this way, communities of practice exist everywhere and “learning can be the reason the community comes together or an incidental outcome of members’ interactions” (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 2). Thus, the theory recognises that learning takes place both formally and informally.

### **3.3.1 How Does Community of Practice Feed into My Study?**

The appeal of the notion of community of practice is evidenced by its application in a wide range of areas including “business, organizational design, government, education, professional associations, development projects, and civic life” (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015: 4). I too find this theory, especially the concepts of identification and negotiability, valuable. These notions would help me explore literacy identities and power relationships enacted in community members’ literacy mediated social activities.

By identification, Wenger means “the process through which modes of belonging become constitutive of our identities by creating bonds or distinctions in which we become invested” (Wenger 1998: 191). This process involves assigning each other or ourselves different labels. For that reason, identification is conceptualised as a process, which is simultaneously “relational and experiential, subjective and collective” (ibid).

Negotiability on the other hand, refers to “the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration” (ibid:

197). In this regard, Wenger sees the construction of meanings as being contextual. He says that “the meanings produced in the technical communities are not only different from those produced among claims processors, they also carry a very different status” (ibid: 198).

However, having read the theory critically, I got the impression that its underlying focus is on learning. Barton and Hamilton (2005) appear to have the same impression and assert that community of practice “presents a theory of learning which acknowledges networks and groups which are informal and not the same as formal structures” (p. 3). In fact, Wenger (1998) himself claims that community of practice is a “social theory of learning” (p. 4). In this way, community of practice parallels Bandura’s (1971) social learning theory. Bandura (ibid: 6) claims that his social learning theory “assumes that modeling influences produce learning principally through their informative functions and that observers acquire mainly symbolic representations of modeled activities rather than specific stimulus-response associations.” Thus, like this theory, Wenger’s community of practice is a theory about how learning takes place. Wenger assures the reader that “the kind of social theory of learning I propose is not a replacement for other theories of learning that address different aspects of the problem” (p. 4).

Contrary to the theory of community of practice, the focus of this thesis is not just about understanding as to whether or not the scripted teaching and training was the best model of learning compared to peer-to-peer approaches as advocated by the theory of community of practice. Rather, this thesis broadens its approach by attempting to understand the literacy practices of some community members in their lived worlds. Therefore, although I shall be looking at the teaching and learning of literacy at the literacy centre, the focus is not to examine and gauge the learning per se, but to explore the teaching and learning of literacy as a social practice where attention is also given to matters of power, identity and meanings of literacy. Besides, some of the social activities I shall be looking at in this thesis, such as the emergency food programme may fall short of being typical communities of practice, (see Wenger & Wenger-Trayner 2015). Overall, I sought to identify sociocultural perspectives that are not only robust in accounting for power relationships and identities, but also whose hallmark is either of these two aspects unlike community of practice. One of such theories is Holland *et al*’s (1998) socio-cultural theory of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world.



### 3.4 Figured World, or is it ‘As If Realms?’

Holland *et al* (1998) claim that “the conceptual importance of figured worlds has been emphasized in anthropology for some time” (p. 54). They cite the works of Hallowell (1955a), Shweder (1991), and Quinn and Holland (1987) to support their claim. According to Holland *et al*, (ibid) Hallowell contends that human beings live in culturally defined worlds and that they understand themselves relative to those worlds and he calls such worlds ‘behavioural environments.’ Similarly, they cite the psychological anthropologist Shweder who talks about such environments as ‘intentional worlds’. On their part, Quinn and Holland are quoted discussing the “taken for granted worlds that are culturally modelled” using a concept reminiscent of figured world which they call ‘simplified worlds’ (Holland *et al*, 1998: 55). What these citations suggest is that the underlying principle behind the conceptual framework of ‘figured world’ is not entirely new.

Figured world is one of what Holland *et al* (1998) call contexts for the production and reproduction of identity which, together with other contexts, constitute a broader sociocultural theory of self and identity. A figured world is “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (ibid: 52). This conceptualisation of figured world covers a number of key issues worth paying attention to. First, the description suggests that “social communities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and culture are key to in the creation of the context from where the participants, their actions and the results of such actions derive their significance. (I explain how I am using the terms, community and culture in section 3.5 in this chapter).

Second, not everyone is recognised in a figured world. So for one to be recognised in a given context, they need to meet the expected requirements. Third, based on such requirements, what people do including the outcomes of their acts are also valued differently. I find this characterisation of the concept of figured world compelling and it mirrors adult literacy learning. For example, as “socially and culturally [organised] realm[s] of interpretation” (Holland *et al*, 1998: 52) adult literacy classes in Malawi involve actors who are recognised as “illiterate adults aged 15 and above” (Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services, 2005). From the government point of view, significance is given to the acquisition of ‘functional knowledge’ and therefore, the outcome that is valued most is social change. I shall therefore, use the concept of figured world to understand the adult literacy learners’ literacy

practices as well as their participation in this context. My framing of adult literacy learning and other social activities as figured worlds is based on the fact that “figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced; *they are like activities in the usual, institutional sense*” (ibid: 41, emphasis mine). Likening a figured world to social activities parallels the conceptualisation of literacy as a social practice, especially when we view literacy as “something people do; [that is], an activity, located in the space between thought and text” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998: 3). Holland *et al* (1998) explain that

under the rubric of culturally figured worlds or figured worlds we include all those cultural realms peopled by characters from collective imaginings: academia, the factory, crime, romance, environmental activism... (p. 51)

We can therefore think of figured worlds as people’s imagined areas of ‘interests or activities,’ which are actualised in real life through various forms of engagement. We can talk about the figured worlds of factory, wedding, crime, romance and a figured world of adult literacy learning. In this regard, as a figured world, adult literacy learning is occupied by ‘figures,’ ‘characters,’ and ‘types’ who perform their requisite tasks and “who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it” (p. 51). Thus, a figured world of adult literacy learning may “include ‘functional illiterates,’ ‘good readers,’ and ‘illiterates’ who struggle to become literate or demonstrate their literacy in a variety of settings including the classroom, the marketplace, and home” (Bartlett, 2002: 12). As I was discussing the social theory of literacy earlier, I stated that this study shall be focusing on some community members’ literacy practices in their lived worlds. My desire to integrate the social theory of literacy and the concept of figured world propelled me into formulating my first sub question as follows: *how can community members’ literacy uses be explored using the concept of figured world?*

Central to the concept of figured world is the notion of cultural means. Each figured world is organised by “‘cultural means’ or narratives, storylines and other cultural genre...” (Urrieta Jr., 2007: 109). These narratives provide both the context for interpretation and “cultural resources that are durable and socially reproduced” (ibid). For instance, Holland *et al* (1998) demonstrate how in the ‘figured world of domestic relations,’ the meanings of characters, acts and events in everyday life of women in Naudada in Nepal, were constructed relative to a given storyline. In this case, to be a ‘good woman’ one was assumed to have a given life path. Though not prescriptive, the storyline provided a background against which women and men, their acts and incidences were interpreted in this figured world. It provided the cultural means by which the

‘figured world of domestic relations’ was organised. Holland *et al* (1998: 55) view cultural schemas or cultural models as “stereotypical distillates, generalizations from past experience that people make.” To some extent, cultural means are not necessarily truths in a scientific sense, but rather they are some regularities that become solidified over time to be taken as the norm (*ibid*).

Gee (1999, 2005, 2011) appears to conceptualise cultural means, which he prefers to call discourse models/figured worlds, in the same way. Gee (2005) defines discourse models as “simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted, theories about how the world works that we use to get on efficiently with our daily lives” (p. 71). Just like Holland *et al*, Gee too, claims that these discourse models are learnt from past experiences “...but, crucially, as these experiences are shaped and normed by the social and cultural groups to which we belong” (*ibid*). We use such experiences to deduce what we think is ‘normal’ “...and tend to act on these assumptions unless something clearly tells us that we are facing an exception” (*ibid*).

In this thesis, I reserve the use of the term ‘figured world’ to characterise the contexts of meaning making as postulated by Holland *et al* (1998) to minimise any confusion. In the same way, I restrict the use of the term cultural means/cultural schema/cultural models to refer to the “typical stories” (Gee, 2011: 70). During my fieldwork, I heard stories reminiscent of those narrated in the figured world of Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States of America as reported by Holland *et al*, (1998). Some community members told me their experiences with literacy prior and after enrolling for the literacy lessons to demonstrate to me the significance of their literacy lessons. Therefore, the notion of cultural means shall help me in interrogating such stories with a view of understanding community members’ literacy practices. In addition, I shall employ this notion to explore community members’ participation in some of their lived worlds.

### **3.4.1 Figured World and Domain**

The social theory of literacy which I discussed earlier, characterises people’s varied activities as domains. Barton and Hamilton (2000: 11) define domain as “structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned.” My understanding of the characterisation of both domains and figured worlds suggests that they somewhat differ in how they are distinguished as well as in scope. In terms of distinguishing, I have the impression that domain emphasises on demarcating “areas of social activity” (Papen, 2002; see Barton & Hamilton, 2000) whilst

figured world stresses meaning making. As far as scope is concerned, I note that domain tends to be broad and generally not as elastic as figured world. Figured worlds is about how people construct, shape and interact with such worlds. For instance, home, education (school), work place, and religion (church/mosque) are sometimes cited as examples of domains (see Barton & Hamilton, *ibid*). However, if we take the church as an example, we note that it has different activities that require acts and actors that are figured differently. A Christian Church wedding for example, would require a bride, a bridegroom, best man, bride's maids and other actors in many contexts. It would also require artefacts such as rings, veils and wedding dresses of particular colours. Particular acts such as the exchanging of rings and vows would be given significance and particular literacy practices would be recognised. Although the figuring of weddings may differ from one church to the other, some of the generic acts, actors, and artefacts cited here set weddings apart from funeral ceremonies and prayer sermons. In this case, wedding, funeral ceremonies and prayer sermons can be seen as different figured worlds evoked by particular artefacts and each of them may have underlying cultural models. What this suggests is that although church may equally be perceived as a figured world in the same way we do with domain, the concept of figured world allows us to see finer figured worlds within broader ones. Needless to say that just as we have "questions of the permeability of boundaries, of leakages and movement between boundaries, and of overlap between domains" (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 11) the same is the case with figured worlds. Holland *et al* (1998) acknowledge the "embedding of activities" as being "central to an understanding of figured worlds" citing how "the world of romance and attractiveness plays a prominent role in the production and reproduction of gender privilege in the United States" as an example (p. 57).

### **3.4.2 Agency, Objectification and Improvisation in Figured Worlds**

In characterising identities in figured worlds, Holland *et al* (1998) pay attention to the actors' agency in these worlds. The authors contend that even positional identities are disrupted through what they call objectification. They perceive objectification as "representations" or "visions" with a potential to "motivate (plans for) action, sometimes even life-changing action" (p. 142). The authors claim that

These objectifications become the organizing basis of resentment and often of more active resistance. When individuals learn about figured worlds and come, in some sense, to identify themselves in those worlds, their participation may include reactions to the treatment they have received as occupants of the positions figured by the worlds (p i43).

What this suggests is that in figured worlds, identities are not fixed and stable. They are prone to being negotiated whenever required. In fact, Holland *et al* (ibid) state that people use the same tools they had adopted to guide the behaviour that was required to “reproduce structures of privilege and the identities, dominant and subordinate, defined within them” to liberate themselves from “the social environment” (ibid). Viewed in this way, I would say that objectification provides individuals with some form of agency, especially when one visualises a representation they find undesirable. Citing Inden (1990), Holland *et al* (ibid) describe human agency as

the realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view. (p.42).

From this quote, it is clear to me that figured worlds are to some extent contexts of power struggle. With this agency, people can challenge decisions and actions as well as contest their social positioning in their lived worlds. What is even more interesting to me is Holland *et al*'s (ibid) characterisation that these disruptions happen not only at individual level but also “on the collective level as well” (p. 141).

As regards, improvisations, Holland *et al* (1998: 17-18) describe them as “the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response” (original emphasis). The authors claim that these improvisations provide the means for change in that once effected they become a new norm.

This thesis shall examine some community members' positioning in various social activities. I shall also look at how decisions concerning the running of the adult literacy classes were made. I shall therefore, draw on the notions of agency, objectification, improvisation and disruption to understand these issues.

### **3.4.3 Positionality**

Positionality is another context for the production and reproduction of identity postulated by Holland *et al* (1998). When we talk about positionality, we mean “the positions ‘offered’ to people in different figured worlds....” (Urrieta Jr., 2007: 111). It refers to “the fact that

personal activity (...) always occurs from a particular place in a social field of ordered and interrelated points or positions of possible activity” (Holland *et al*, 1998: 44). These positions are not necessarily physical spaces, rather they involve “entitlement to social and material resources and so to the higher deference, respect, and legitimacy accorded to those genders, races, ethnic groups, castes, and sexualities privileged by society” (ibid: 271). In view of this, whenever we take part in social life or activity we are assumed to take a particular perspective, (ibid). Viewed from the point of view of discursive practices, we can describe positioning as the “process whereby selves are located in conversation as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (Davies & Harré, 2007: n.p.). As such, each discursive practice has some constitutive force that lie “in its provision of subject position” (ibid). Therefore,

once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (ibid).

Davies and Harré, (2007) primarily focus on conversations in their discussion of the concept of positioning and they employ the term, positioning to understand personhood. They identify two forms of positioning namely, interactive and reflexive. By interactive positioning they mean, “what one person says positions the other” whereas in reflexive positioning “one positions oneself” (ibid). They posit that “among the products of discursive practices are the very persons who engage in them” (ibid). In chapter 7, I shall adapt Davies and Harré’s perspectives of discursive positionality to explore the subject positions that were available to community members not just in oral texts but also written documents as well. In part, this is what my second sub question attempts to address: *To what extent can the concept of figured world help us in understanding how community members construct their literacy meanings and discourses?*

Understanding such meanings and discourses is crucial bearing in mind that “persons look at the world from the positions into which they are persistently cast” (Holland *et al*, 1998: 44). Therefore, we need to find out, first, what subject positions are available to the adult literacy learners in some of the literacy mediated activities they participated? Second, to what extent, do these subject positions mediate community members’ learning and uses of literacy?

Related to the context of positionality is that of authoring. Holland *et al* (1998: 272) contend that people must provide a response to the world and therefore, they conceptualise authorship

as “a matter of orchestration: of arranging the identifiable social discourses/practices that are one’s resources ...in order to craft a response in a time and space defined by others’ standpoints in activity....” What this implies is that in any context, we bring with us multiple discourses and practices which we draw on and arrange in order to either accept, reject or negotiate our identity. In this regard, “authorship is not a choice” (ibid) because even “a non-response is also a type of response” (Urrieta, Jr., 2007: 111). In chapter 7, I shall use this lens to examine how some literacy learners drew on their social discourses and practices to redefine their literacy identities to enrol or to opt out from English literacy lessons.

### **3.4.4 Artefacts and Figured Worlds**

In my discussion on the social theory of literacy, I noted the significance the theory gives to texts. I stated my preference of the notion of artefact over text to designate the items some community members employed in some of their social activities where literacy had a role. As I discussed earlier, text encompasses both oral and the written word. Nevertheless, even in this slightly broader sense, there are some items I shall be looking at in this thesis that could hardly be perceived as texts. For instance, whilst the ration cards which some community members used to get relief food at the food distribution centres can be designated as both text and artefact, the inkpads which others employed to acknowledge receipt of the food items can only be characterised as artefacts. In this regard, the notion of artefact allows me to explore and take some community members’ literacy experiences beyond speech and written word.

Paying attention to such artefacts in a study of this nature is critical because “artifacts are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful” (Holland *et al*, 1998: 61). Therefore, for me to understand the figured world of adult literacy learning, I shall characterise various assessment documents, registers, the primer(s) as well as various official forms as the artefacts that evoke it. Likewise, I shall conceptualise some items and documents some community members employed in other lived worlds, such as pens and inkpads, as artefacts. I shall do this because I am aware that “artifacts are social constructions or products of human activity, and they in turn may become tools engaged in processes of cultural production” (Bartlett, 2002: 13). It is in this way that “artifacts such as pronouns and chips evoke the worlds to which they are relevant, and position individuals with respect to those worlds” (Holland *et al*, ibid: 63). Crucially, “people learn to ascribe meaning to artifacts such as objects, events, discourses, and to people as understood in relation to particular figured worlds” (Urrieta Jr., 2007: 110).

Holland *et al* (1998) inform us that in our lives, artefacts are very important because they are capable of changing our perception, cognition and affection. In view of this, in this thesis, I shall focus on understanding not only what the community members thought about the artefacts they came across in various social encounters, but also how they felt when they used them. Besides, I shall also explore whether or not such artefacts promoted or constrained their participation in some of their lived worlds.

In general, the concept of figured world has generated considerable interest such that it has been employed to understand a wide range of phenomena in different fields such as health and education (see Jurow, 2005; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Rush & Fecho, 2008; Dagenais, Day & Toohey 2006; Rubin, 2007; Vale & Weiss, 2009; Robinson, 2007; Hatt, 2007)

In non-formal education, Bartlett (2005) has used the notion of artefacts to make sense of a story narrated to her by an adult literacy student during her fieldwork. Based on her analysis Bartlett (*ibid*: 4) argues that “the lifelong process of literacy learning relies, in part, on symbolic self-making through the use of cultural artefacts.” (For similar studies, see also Bartlett, 2002; Chao & Kuntz, 2013). However, it is worth noting that despite its appeal, research conducted based on this concept in the field of adult literacy, is rather minimal.

What I find interesting about the concept of figured world is that just like the framework of literacy as a social practice which conceptualises literacy as what people do, i.e. an activity, (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), figured worlds too, are “... like activities in the usual, institutional sense” (Holland *et al*, 1998: 41). Besides, figured worlds entail power. They revolve around positions of status and influence. They are “social encounters in which participants’ positions matter” (*ibid*). Consequently, “some figured worlds we may never enter because of our social position or rank; some we may deny to others; some we may simply miss by contingency; some we may learn fully” (*ibid*: 41).

### **3.5 Towards Conceptualising Power and Identities**

In the theory of community of practice, power is seen as “a condition for the possibility of socially organized action” (Wenger, 1998: 180). Wenger claims that the issues of power his theory addresses are “inherent in social life” (*ibid*: 191). He appears not to view power as a ‘commodity’ which some people can or cannot possess. Instead, he characterises it “primarily as the ability to act in line with the enterprises we pursue...” (*ibid*). As such, it “becomes



apparent when it is exercised” (Townley, 1993: 520). However, it is Lukes’ (2005) perspectives of power which appeal to me most. Lukes theorises power as manifesting in “two distinct variants... ‘power to’ and ‘power over,’ where the latter is a subspecies of the former” (p. 69). ‘Power to’ “indicates a ‘capacity’, a ‘facility’, an ‘ability’” (ibid: 34). This perception of power resonates with Holland *et al*’s postulation of agency. It helps me to understand for instance, the resistance which the adult literacy learners sometimes displayed towards their instructors. Such resistance suggested that the literacy learners had the capacity to decide what they wanted to do. On its part, ‘power over’ is both “relational and asymmetrical” and, therefore “to have power is to have power over another or others” (ibid: 73). As I shall show in chapter 8, this view of power is also critical in this thesis. It helps me to understand the dilemmas which both the literacy learners and their instructors had in decision making at Sawabu literacy centre. Their failure to suspend literacy lessons without the approval of officers at the district office for example, shows that the district officers had power over the instructors and their literacy learners.

In the same chapter, I shall examine the decision-making processes that were taking place at the adult literacy centre. I shall integrate these ideas of power with Holland *et al*’s (1998) concepts of agency, resistance and improvisation which I looked at earlier in this chapter, to examine the voices that were privileged or muted in decision-making at this literacy class. This is the focus of my third sub question: *How do literacy practices shape power relations among community members; how can such relations be unpacked through the concept of figured world?*

As far as identities are concerned, I find Holland *et al*’s (1998) postulation of identity of being both ‘positional’ and ‘figurative’ useful. According to Holland *et al* (1998) positional (relational) identity is

a person’s apprehension of her social position in a lived world: that is depending on the others present, of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all, (ibid: 127-128).

Characterised in this way, positional identities can therefore, be viewed as ‘self-understandings’ evoked through participation in a social activity. Hence,

positional identities have to do with the day- to – day and on the ground relations of power, deference and entitlements, social affiliation and distance – with the social- interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world (ibid: 127).

On their part, figurative identities are about “the stories, acts and characters that make the world a cultural world” (ibid). Figurative identities “are about signs that evoke storylines or plots among generic characters; positional identities are about acts that constitute relations of hierarchy, distance or perhaps affiliation” (Holland *et al*: 1998: 128).

Holland *et al* (ibid: 3) view identities as “self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance.” They claim that it is through identity that we care for and care about whatever is taking place around us. In other words, identities are “very important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (ibid: 5). Holland *et al* (ibid) build their theory of identity from the proposition that “identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualised as they develop in social practice.” This premise parallels the current understandings of literacy as a social practice. In the social theory of literacy, it is understood that “literacies, like other uses of language, entail social identities” (Bartlett, 2005: 2). This is why in this thesis, I shall be focusing not only on literacy discourses and meanings but also on community members’ literacy identities. I shall do this because I am aware that “people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland *et al*, 1998: 3). This seems to suggest that identity is not only discursive and situated but that it also somewhat implicated in people’s behaviour.

Holland *et al* (1998) make it clear that their conceptualisation of identity is a blend of two perspectives. On the one hand, drawing on the work of Bakhtin, they frame identity as being dialogic and on the other, based on the work of Vygotsky, they characterise identity as being developmental. In this way Holland *et al* (ibid) aim “to build upon and move beyond two central approaches – the culturalist and the constructivist – to understand people’s actions and possibilities” (p. 8).

As I noted in chapters 1 and 2, one of the key issues this thesis shall be focusing on is community members’ literacy discourses. What this suggests is that I shall need some lenses to help me to not only tease out meanings from community members’ discourses but also how such discourses position them relative to one another. Hence, I shall further combine Holland *et al*’s (1998) account of identities with Gee’s (1999, 2005) characterisation of the same. Gee (1999) posits that when we speak or write we use language to enact an identity subject to the circumstances we are in. He conceptualises a link between the person acting and the activity

being done at that particular time and place in terms of “who” and “what.” Gee, (2005: 22) elaborates saying

what I mean by a “who” is a *socially situated identity*, the “kind of person” one is seeking to be and enact here-and-now. What I mean by a “what” is a socially situated *activity* that the utterance helps to constitute, (original emphasis).

What I find more useful from Gee’s conceptualisation of identity is his postulation that the “who” and the “what” are mutually constitutive. Hence “you are *who* you are partly through *what* you are doing and *what* you are doing is partly recognized for what it is by *who* is doing it” (ibid: 23, original emphasis). Most of my own identities discussed in chapter 2 could be understood in this way. I was a teacher, researcher, linguist, language policy developer and a student partly due to what I was doing. Gee’s conceptualisation of identity echoes Davies and Harré’s (2007) idea that, much as we are initiators and participants in discursive practices, we are also the products of the same. In chapter 7, I shall blend Gee’s and Holland *et al*’s conceptualisation of identity as tools to understand how some community members projected themselves or indeed were positioned by others in some literacy mediated social activities, especially at the adult literacy class.

### **3.6 Community and Culture in this Thesis**

In my discussions of the concept of figured world earlier, I made reference to two terms I shall extensively employ in this thesis namely, community and culture which need some brief discussions. When Anderson (1991: 6) asserts that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” it appears to make sense to me. When he goes further and contends that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (ibid), the case seems to be settled. However, my reading of literature on this term suggests that it is “highly elusive, with numerous competing interpretations” (Kepe, 1999: 418). According to Delanty (2003), scholars from a range of disciplines differ in the use of the term prompting others “to question its usefulness” (p. 2). Notwithstanding this, Delanty (ibid) provides a glimpse of what community may entail saying “the term *community* does in fact designate both an idea about belonging and a particular social phenomenon, such as expressions of longing for community, the search for meaning and solidarity, and collective identities” (original emphasis, p. 3). Plant (1974), cited in Gereluk (2006) also appears to acknowledge that the term, community, is linked not only “to identity of functional interests, to a sense of belonging, to shared cultural and ethnic idea and values, to a way of life” but also “to a locality” (p. 8). Without attempting

to exhaust all possible descriptions and usage of the term or seeking its universally accepted definition, my initial decision was to use the term to designate “a particular form of social organisation based on small groups, such as neighbourhoods, the small town, or a spatially bounded locality” (Delanty, 2003: 2). Thus, I used the term, ‘community’ to refer to “people who share a common locality” (Kepe, 1999: 419, citing Selznick, 1996). As I adopted this definition, I was aware that apart from the elements cited above, community could also be perceived in terms of other factors such as “concerted activity and shared belief” (Selznick, 1992: 359). My decision to frame community in this manner was informed by my belief that defining community in terms of locality “makes sense, as a practical matter, because residence is a congenial condition - perhaps the most congenial condition - for forming and sustaining community life” (Selznick, 1992: 359). However, just like Barton and Hamilton (1998) who realised that community as a term was far more complex than the geographical and social class boundaries they had designated, I faced similar dilemmas which I discuss in chapter 4.

Culture is another term whose definition is as elusive as community is. Street (2010) observes that one of the reasons why efforts to understand culture have faced some challenges is “the desire to define it, or to say clearly what it is” (p. 581). Street (*ibid*) therefore, advises against defining culture because “we tend to believe the categories and definitions we construct in an essentialist way, as though we had thereby found out what culture is.” He argues that instead of looking for a definition of culture, we should focus our attention on “what culture does” (*ibid*). He sees culture “as a verb”. It is “an active process of meaning making and contest over definition” (*ibid*). Nevertheless, Holliday (1999: 247) perceives culture as “the composite of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping...” Thus, the term is used in the sense of ‘small culture’ that focuses more on the “activities taking place within the group than with the nature of the group itself” (*ibid*: 250). In this thesis, I combine Street’s (2010) understanding of culture as a “verb” and Holliday’s (1999) perspectives of “small culture.” As Holliday (*ibid*) states, “ethnography uses small culture as a location for research, as an interpretive device for understanding emergent behaviour, rather than seeking to explain prescribed ethnic, national or international difference” (p. 237). I shall employ these perspectives of culture to understand community members’ interactions and experiences, especially at the literacy class. Such integration is consistent with Holland *et al*’s (1998) perspectives of identity I discussed earlier.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In chapter 1, I stated that the purpose of this study is to contribute to the NLS by investigating the significance of the concept of figured world in literacy studies in Malawi. To accomplish this purpose, I shall explore some Malawian community members' literacy practices, discourses, meanings, and identities as well as the power relationships they enact in some of their lived worlds.

My quest to find relevant lenses to accomplish this purpose took me to various theoretical perspectives ranging from the social theory of literacy, through community of practice to Holland *et al's* (1998) sociocultural theory of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world. My discussions on the social theory of literacy has focused on two key concepts namely literacy event and literacy practices. Regardless of varying preferences in the use of the two terms, a consensus appears to be emerging that literacy practices subsume events. It is in light of this that I shall employ the term literacy practices to understand some community members' literacy experiences in their lived worlds.

However, the critiques on the social theory of literacy made me understand that issues of power and identity are underdeveloped in this theory. Having gone through a few selected sociocultural theories that would help me explore questions relating to these two notions in community members' literacy practices, I decided to integrate the social theory of literacy with Holland *et al's* (1998) perspectives of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world. This decision led me to ask the overall question: *How can the concept of figured world help us investigate and understand better the social and situated nature of literacy?*

To understand the literacy practices community members encountered in some of their social activities, I shall combine the social theory of literacy with the concept of figured world to explore such activities. My aim in doing this shall be to find out *how community members' uses of literacy can be explored using the concept of figured world*. Thus, I shall conceive the adult literacy class, social cash transfer and emergency food aid programmes as well community savings groups as figured worlds. The advantage the concept of figured world has over that of domain is that it allows me to focus on and explore micro activities within what would otherwise be grouped together as work place, official, home or educational domain.

As far as exploring and understanding the community members' literacy identities is concerned, I shall combine ideas from Holland *et al* (1998), Gee (1999; 2011) and Davies and Harré (2007). Holland *et al* (1998) recognise two kinds of identities namely positional and figurative. However, although Holland *et al* (1998) include discursive identities in their characterisation of positional identities, I think that such identities are underemphasised. In this respect, I find Gee's (1999) "Whos," and "whats" useful. In terms of discursive positioning, I find Davies and Harré's (2007) notions of interactive and reflexive positioning valuable. Thus, by integrating Holland *et al*'s (1998) perspectives of identity with those of Davies and Harré (2007) and Gee (1999; 2011), I shall seek to establish the *extent to which the concept of figured world can help us in understanding how community members construct their literacy meanings and discourses*. By examining community members' literacy meanings and discourses, my thesis shall focus on teasing out sociocultural, situated and discursive elements of my participants' identities in some of their lived worlds.

To explore power relationships amongst the community members in their social encounters, I shall draw on Lukes' (2005) two pronged perspectives of "power to" and "power over." Besides, since in this study I conceptualise literacies, power and identities as being fluid and contextual, I shall also draw on notions of disruption, agency and objectification to understand how the community members position themselves or are positioned by others in their lived worlds. Specifically, both Lukes' (2005) perspectives of power and Holland *et al*'s (1998) ideas of disruption, objectification and agency shall help me understand the relationships which the instructors and the adult literacy learners cultivate at the adult literacy class. Thus, these notions shall help me in exploring *how literacy practices shape power relations among community members and how such relations can be unpacked through the concept of figured world*. Examining power relations is important because it allows me explore and understand who had "the power to name and define" (Escobar, 1995) what counts as literacy in the community members' lived worlds.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

#### 4.0 Introduction

I start this chapter by discussing my methodological and research orientations. I explain my research design and how the research site shaped the course of my study. I discuss the challenges and dilemmas I grappled with during my research process. I pay particular attention to the roles I played during my fieldwork and reflect on how such roles may have impacted on my study.

#### 4.1 My Methodological Stance and Research Orientations

In making my methodological considerations, I have taken into account both the ontological and epistemological assumptions that informed my overarching research question: *How can the concept of figured world help us investigate and understand better the social and situated nature of literacy?* Thus, ontologically, my study leans towards the constructivist perspective whereby I take the stance that “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Bryman, 2008: 19). At the same time, I agree with Becker (1982) (cited in Bryman, 2012: 34) that

the constructionist position [should not] be pushed to the extreme: it is necessary to appreciate that culture has a reality that ‘persists and antedates the participation of particular people’ and shapes their perspectives, but it is not an inert objective reality that possesses only a sense of constraint: it acts as a point of reference but is always in the process of being formed.

I find Becker’s position useful and it is consistent with the way Holland *et al* (1998) postulate the concept of figured world. From the culturalist perspective, Holland *et al* project figured worlds as having some form of stability saying they are “peopled by the figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it” (p. 51). Whilst from the sociological position, they contend that “figured worlds *happen*, as social process and in historical time” (p. 55, original emphasis). Crucially, Becker’s position also resonates with the perspectives of culture I adopt in thesis which I discussed in chapter 3.

Epistemologically, I take the interpretive stance. In this regard, I share the view that “the study of the social world... requires a different logic, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans

as against the natural order” (Bryman, 2008: 15). In other words, I agree that “people differ from natural objects in their ability to interpret their own actions and those of others; to act on their understandings and to endow their lives and actions with meaning” (Burns, 2000: 397). In this study, I focus on understanding some community members’ literacy discourses, meanings, identities and power relationships in their lived worlds and I therefore, find these epistemological perspectives to be both relevant and insightful.

## **4.2 Methodological Orientation**

My study aims at contributing theoretically, to the study of literacy as a social practice. I seek to do this by exploring some community members’ literacy practices, discourses, meanings, and identities as well as the power relationships enacted in some of their lived worlds in Malawi. Drawing on this aim, as well as the ontological and epistemological assumptions outlined above, this study employs ethnography as the overarching methodology.

### **4.2.1 Ethnography**

Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) observe that the “definition of ethnography has been subject to controversy. For some, it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate” (248). Given this state of affairs, I would not pretend to provide a perspective that would be reasonable to all. Nevertheless, Burns (2000: 393) notes that “ethnography encompasses any study of a group of people for the purpose of describing their socio-cultural activities and patterns.” As my research aim above suggests, this is in part, what I sought to accomplish in this study. The ethnographic approach afforded me the opportunity to access people’s situated literacy experiences in their lived worlds since “as a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings, of other people’s actions, and perhaps even of what we do ourselves” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 4). Through the experiences I got during my fieldwork and the analysis of data which I provide in subsequent chapters, I came to realise that indeed, ethnography is in part, “about the *practices of everyday life*, the way those practices are built out of shared knowledge, plus all the other things that are relevant to the moment” (Agar (1996: 9; original emphasis). As it shall be noted in the chapters that follow, this thesis is not about establishing “universal truth, but examining situations, collecting alternatives and trying to understand what the implications of these alternatives are for us” (Gebre, *et al*, 2009: 8).



### 4.2.2 Contextualising My Research Design

At the time I was applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue my PhD degree, my focus was very much directed towards adult literacy policy in Malawi. What I saw as a problem at that time was the apparent lack of efforts towards understanding how the ‘graduates’ from the National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) use their newly acquired literacy. My overall aim was to establish how the newly acquired literacy abilities helped to improve the lives of the literacy learners in line with the specific objectives of the NALP in Malawi. To achieve this aim, I proposed to employ the social theory of literacy. However, during the initial stages of my PhD journey, I came face to face with new questions concerning both the NALP in Malawi and the social theory of literacy as well. As far as the NALP is concerned, my background chapter has highlighted how literacy studies based on contemporary understandings of literacy are hardly conducted in Malawi. With regard to the social theory of literacy, my review of theoretical literature has underlined the critiques that suggest that studies that are undertaken based on this theory do not adequately account for power relationships and identities just because to some extent, the theory itself does not develop these elements in a comprehensive manner. Thus, at both micro and macro levels, my study seeks to contribute to the New Literacy Studies by integrating the social theory of literacy and the concept of figured world to explore community members’ literacy practices in Malawi. In this regard, the overarching question guiding my research is: *How can the concept of figured world help us investigate and understand better the social and situated nature of literacy?* Specifically, my study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How can community members’ uses of literacy be explored using the concept of figured world?
2. To what extent can the concept of figured world help in understanding how community members construct their literacy meanings, discourses and ideologies?
3. How do literacy practices shape power relations among community members; how can such relations be unpacked through the concept of figured world?
4. At local level, what implications for policy and practice can be drawn from literacy studies based on the concept of figured world?

Creswell (2014) notes that the decision on whether to frame one’s study as qualitative or quantitative is propelled by the research problem, questions and the literature reviewed. A critical look at the literature reviewed, the research problem and the research questions

highlighted above, as well as my methodological orientation discussed earlier, suggests that this study shall focus on “words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman, 2008: 366). This therefore, situates my study into the qualitative paradigm. That is, I adopt “qualitative research procedures for describing, analysing, and interpreting a culture-sharing group’s shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develops over time” (Creswell, 2014: 462). In this case, I did not just want to hear them tell me what they thought about literacy, but I also wanted to see how they ‘experienced’ it.

In chapter 1, I narrated my journey into literacy studies in which I cited my experiences during my MA degree in Applied Linguistics and my involvement in the CASAS literacy support initiative. These two activities introduced me to both the NALP in Malawi and some gatekeepers, especially literacy officers at Zomba district offices. It was these connections to the programme and the gatekeepers therefore that played a major role in influencing my decision to choose NALP as my programme of inquiry and Zomba as a district from which to select my research site. My plan was to select a village in this district where I would identify a house to stay in during my ten months of fieldwork. Whilst there, I wanted to participate and observe the villagers in some of their literacy mediated activities. As I discuss later in this chapter, my decision to focus on one village was based on my desire to have an in-depth account of community members’ everyday literacy experiences.

### **4.3 Identifying my Research Site**

When I arrived back in Malawi, I started by negotiating access to the literacy classes from the Zomba District Community Development Officer (DCDO). This was done on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2015. I explained to him the nature and purpose of my study. I also emphasised to him that besides having an adult literacy centre, I was looking for a community that was easily accessible from the main road. I emphasised this point because I wanted to be certain that in case I had any emergencies, I would easily get the assistance I would require. The DCDO orally granted me the permission to conduct my study and on 8<sup>th</sup> September he sent me a text message in English with one Chichewa word which read as follows:

*Bwana (Sir), I have identified the literacy class. The details are. Name of class: Sawabu Literacy Class. Village Headman Sawabu. Group Village Headman Mpale. Traditional Authority Kundwelo. Name of Instructor: Florence Tambuli. Name of Cluster Supervisor: Stewart Banda. Learning days: Monday to Friday. Thank you, good day. (SMS: 08/09/2015)*

He linked me up with the cluster supervisor who introduced me to the village headperson on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2015. The village headperson said that he was happy with my study and verbally granted me permission to do my research in his village.

In chapter 2, I explained the first impressions I had about Sawabu village. My focus was on how my assumptions and expectations about my research site were challenged by the reality on the ground. In the next subsections, I provide detailed accounts of Sawabu village to contextualise my study further.

#### **4.3.1 Locating Sawabu Village**

Sawabu is a small village. It had 83 households with a population of 306 residents. It is bounded by Namyaka village to the west, Makoloje to the north, Umali to the north east, Mpulula to the East, Cilanga to the south west and Cikoja village to south marked by a river called Kasupe.

The village is located about 10 km away from Zomba city and about 400 metres from Malekano trading centre. It lies on a plain land and during the dry season the land is almost bare. Vegetation cover is almost absent except for a few patches of mango, blue gum, acacias and some few shrubs of natural trees and bamboos around clusters of houses. A few natural trees are also found around the village headperson's house and in the graveyard. I was told that the dwindling numbers of the trees was caused primarily by gardening as well as the need for fuelwood used for burning bricks. I was informed that most of the young men in this village rely on brick making to earn their living.

Travelling by public transport, especially minibuses took one to a place called Makwale. However, bigger buses did not recognise this place as a bus stop. From this bus stop, one headed eastwards past a grass thatched shelter to the south where a bicycle repairer plied his trade. The shelter had just a grass-thatched roof suspended on nine wooden poles. The earth road dissects Cilanga village to the south and Namyaka village to the north. After about 35 metres away from the main road, a feeder earth road stretching from the north joins the eastbound earth road to the north. The northbound feeder road marks the boundary between Namyaka and Sawabu whilst the eastbound road forms the boundary between Cilanga and Sawabu villages respectively.

Most of the houses in the village are clustered based on family membership. For instance, a cluster of houses belonging to the Suwedi family is located along the eastbound road to the

north just about 5 metres away from the junction between this road and the northbound one. Then the eastbound road cuts through a stretch of fields before two clusters of houses belonging to the Weca and Asima families appear sprouting downslope towards Kasupe River to the south.



Figure 6: Cluster of Houses for the Weca Family

The eastbound road continues and goes past a graveyard to the north before splitting into two forming a ‘Y’ junction engulfing the village headperson’s compound. The literacy class stands about 4 metres away from this junction along the northern arm of the road. This arm shrinks into a footpath just after the literacy class grounds. The other arm to the south leads into a cluster of houses belonging to the Sawabu family. This arm proceeds and forms a ring road that runs through nearby villages namely Mpulula and Ndembe on one side and Cikoja across Kasupe River on the other. A cluster of houses belonging to the Socela family (where the supervisor was married), is located about 125 metres north of the literacy class.

The village has a nursery school but during the period of my fieldwork its operation was rather erratic. The cause of the problem was somehow difficult to establish, as caregivers put the blame on parents’ lack of interest whilst parents blamed it on the caregivers’ lack of dedication to their work. There are water taps at each cluster of houses belonging to major families. Members surrounding and using each tap are required to contribute K150.00 (less than a penny)

per month. This money is used to pay for the tap's bill which is a flat rate of K1500.00 (just over £1) per month. The bill is paid to the Water Users Association (WUA) who are responsible for the delivery of this service.

There is also a borehole. It is located within a cluster of houses belonging to the Sawabu family. The borehole was not functional at the time of my fieldwork. I was told that the community members were required to contribute some money to buy a spare part to fix it. Apart from the borehole, the village has a well which appeared to have been neglected and therefore, was left gaping in the bushes along the Sawabu and Mpulula boundary about 45 metres away from the cluster of houses belonging to the Sawabu family. At the time of this study, the well was mostly being utilised by brick makers.

In terms of health facilities, Sawabu and surrounding villages are served by a government clinic which is at group village headperson Mpale across Kasupe River (see picture below).



Figure 7: Tupoce Clinic

Apart from the nursery school, Sawabu village had a functional adult literacy centre. The presence of this literacy centre was one of the key features I considered when selecting the village as my research site.

#### **4.3.2 Introducing Sawabu Literacy Classroom**

The literacy classes were held in a building that was situated towards the north eastern part of the village close to the boundary with Ndembe village. The building stood alone and it was located about 15 metres northwest of the village headperson's house. A water tap stood beneath mango and pawpaw trees just midway between the two buildings.

The classroom was essentially built as a nursery school following a request from the village headperson to the then Member of Parliament (MP) for the area who was known for her charitable initiatives. The MP asked the community members to mobilise bricks and other locally available building materials. She provided cement, metal window frames, window panes, doors and metal door frames, roofing and other materials which the villagers could not afford including paying the builders and carpenters. At the time of this study, the nursery school occasionally operated in the morning from 8 o'clock to 11 a.m. and the literacy lessons were held on Mondays to Wednesdays from 2 o'clock to 4 p.m.

The class was an ordinary four-wall building which was built using burnt bricks. The block faced south and had one door and three big windows in front. It had a cement floor extending out on to the veranda. On the outside, parts of the walls were plastered with cement and whitewashed whilst other parts had bare red brick. Inside the class, all walls were plastered with cement and whitewashed. The building had a backroom on the left hand side of the entrance. The backroom had an entrance facing the main room but during the course of my fieldwork, I noted that its door had been removed. The roof of the building had corrugated iron sheets. But it did not have a ceiling and one could see clearly the damage termites were causing to the rafters.





Figure 8: Sawabu Literacy Class

When I first began participating in the literacy lessons, I found the class completely empty. There was no single chair or mat to sit on. The walls had nothing hanging for the adult literacy learners and the nursery school children to see or read. The literacy learners often complained about the floor being too dirty. The room appeared somehow neglected with some litter piling up in a couple of potholes. It was the village headperson who was keen in ensuring that the building was secure and well maintained. Occasionally, when the floor became too dusty to sit on, the literacy learners volunteered to sweep.

There were two pit latrines at the back. One had no roof. It was slanting backwards and its earth floor was dangerously curving in. All of us used this toilet. This was not unusual because even in the homes, toilets were rarely segregated based on gender. The other one was new and had a corrugated iron sheet roof. The mouth of its pit was sealed. At the time of my fieldwork, I saw some young men from the village headperson house use it as a bathroom.

Sawabu literacy class started in 2013 at the request of the village headperson. The village headperson told me that he asked the supervisor to *inform the officers at the district that I wanted an adult literacy centre in this village. I told him that we already had a structure to be used as a classroom and that the women were there who could attend such lessons. I wondered why he could not open a centre in this village.* These remarks somehow seemed to suggest that the village headperson presumed that it was the responsibility of the district officers to assess the need for a community to have an adult literacy class. The village headperson also appeared

to suggest that only women and not men who were required to learn literacy. The supervisor confirmed the village headperson's remarks during an informal conversation. He told me that there are three ways that are followed for a community to have an adult literacy class. First, the literacy learners demand for the introduction of the classes. Second, literacy officers like him, go and ask the village headpersons if they would like such classes in their village. Third, the village headpersons approached the literacy officers and asked for the establishment of such classes in their villages. He said: *village headperson Sawabu saw me when I was going to Kasupe carrying some primers and he asked me where I was going with those books. I told him that I was going to an adult literacy class and he said 'I also want such a class.'*

In the first three years, only Chichewa literacy lessons were being taught at the centre. English literacy classes officially began in March 2016. The English literacy lessons were being held in the backroom whereas the main room hosted Chichewa literacy classes. Two instructors facilitated the lessons. I noted that neither of the two facilitated the literacy lessons on behalf of the other when one was absent. Apart from the two literacy instructors, the cluster supervisor who resided in this village, almost always came to the literacy classes and in most cases stood in for the Chichewa literacy instructor whenever she was absent from work. He rarely facilitated English literacy lessons, arguing that he was never trained to handle such classes. Occasionally, a literacy instructor from a nearby non-functioning literacy centre also helped in facilitating Chichewa literacy lessons at this centre.

#### **4.3.3 Gaining Access to the Community: Ethical Dilemmas**

On 14<sup>th</sup> September, I began my visits to the literacy class and I was welcomed by the Chichewa literacy instructor for the centre. She told me that she was informed by the cluster supervisor about my coming. After explaining the nature and purpose of my research to both the instructor and the adult literacy learners, I informed them that I would be meeting each one of them separately to get their individual consent and sign the consent forms. Both the instructor and the adult literacy learners said that they did not see any need for signing such forms. They said that they were all happy to have me as their visitor in their literacy classes. They told me that they were used to having visitors like me. To avoid arousing unnecessary suspicion, I settled for oral consent. Kachiwanda (2009) explains similar ethical dilemmas in her study which she conducted in another part of Malawi. Shamim and Qureshi (2013) discuss the same ethical challenges. They argue that although informed consent as a “written document” is regarded as the norm, “in some cultures, like Pakistan, oral or informal consent is more binding on the



participants than formal written consent” (p.472). The two authors observe that in their context, “a written consent form is regarded with suspicion, especially in non-literate communities” (ibid).

Generally, getting written consent let alone informed consent proved to be very problematic in some contexts. For instance, sometimes I attended community meetings as well as funerals. On such occasions, whilst the village headman and his counsellors<sup>6</sup> knew who I was and what I was doing, some of the people present did not. In these circumstances, it was both practically impossible and culturally inappropriate to go around asking people to sign informed consent forms.

At the literacy class, I also faced some ethical dilemmas and in my reflections I wrote:

Although I told my participants about tape recording, I am facing a dilemma on this issue: Is the initial consent enough? Or do I have to always inform the participants that I am recording our conversations each time I talk to them within the classroom premises? Even in class, do I have to seek permission to record every day? (Reflect: Oct, 2015)

Sometimes new adult literacy learners joined the literacy classes whilst the lessons were in progress. In such circumstances, I could not tell the instructor to stop the lessons to allow me get informed consent from such literacy learners. The best I did was to ask for such consent retrospectively. What this means is that I used my own judgement as to when it was feasible and ideal for me to seek informed consent and in all such cases I got it orally.

Part of my data collection techniques involved photography. When I was applying for ethical clearance, I indicated that I was going to take pictures of artefacts only. However, due to the circumstances I discuss later, I ended up asking for additional ethical clearance from UEA to allow me take pictures of people as well. Accordingly, I sought consent from the community members I photographed to use some of their photos in my thesis. However, because of the “non-tangibility of oral consent and the difficulty of documenting it for the public gaze” (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013: 473), I cannot use those photos in this thesis. Somehow, I feel a sense of betrayal. I can imagine the disappointment my participants shall have once they got a chance of flipping through this thesis and saw that none of their pictures was included. Perhaps, this is an example of a situation in which “existing ethical codes and paradigms” tend “to be

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<sup>6</sup> These are members of the village who traditional leaders identify mostly from major families to act as their confidants, advisors and the jury during case hearings.

rather restrictive and insensitive to multiple and complex cultural and contextual differences” (Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013: 417).

#### **4.3.4 The Stranger as a Community Member**

I first arrived in Sawabu village on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2015. At that time, I was very enthusiastic and keen to rent a house and stay in the village. I was propelled very much by the idea that in order to know and understand the people’s lived experiences, I had to be part of the community itself. To me this was the heart of ethnographic research. I shared this desire with the cluster supervisor. I wanted him to help me hunt for a vacant house that was habitable. But the news I got was not encouraging. The cluster supervisor told me that there was a vacant house at one of the literacy learners’ place, Ms. Awali. However, he said that the place was not ideal for me because Ms. Awali brew and sold beer within her compound. The supervisor feared that Ms. Awali’s customers would be disturbing me. He further told me that the community was not safe, especially as the rain season approached. He said that most young men who depended on brick moulding would have no source of income during this period and they resort to stealing. They would easily monitor my movements and break into my rented house since they knew that I had a steady source of income.

As I took time to ponder over the cluster supervisor’s observations, the literacy learners had their own stories revolving around the security of the community. I made it a habit of going to the literacy class early. The literacy learners came in, one by one and found me already there sitting outside the classroom. As we waited for more literacy learners to come, those present usually talked about various issues. It was on such occasions when I heard them talk about the security of the area in general, and their community in particular.

On this day, the literacy learners recounted an incident in which a man was killed just about 20 metres away from the village headman’s house and about 40 metres from the literacy classroom. They said that the deceased was operating a bicycle taxi and was killed by a hired killer because the deceased was suspected to have been having an affair with wife of the man who hired the killer. They said that the killer asked the deceased to ferry him somewhere and turned against him just a couple of metres behind the village headman’s house. The literacy learners said that the deceased shouted for help but no one went to rescue him because community members thought that the person shouting was a drunkard. They said that the suspect was still at large and that they were scared of him.

Such stories scared me very much. However, I still wanted to stay in the village. I shared my plan with my family but they objected to it, citing the same concerns among others. In the end, I decided to put my safety first over the data collection procedures. However, this decision brought with it some problems. I soon realised that it was difficult for me to know when certain functions were being held in the community. This scenario made me become very worried since it became apparent that I was missing some opportunities that would help me understand the community better. As a compromise, I decided to rent a house where I could stay for some hours during the day before and after observing the literacy classes. Although the cluster supervisor had warned me about the disturbances at Ms. Awali's place, I thought that this was the ideal place for me. My plan was that if I stayed at this place, I could easily interact with Ms. Awali's customers regardless of whether they were drunk or not. But when I finally rented the house some challenges emerged.

First, Ms. Awali looked at my rented house as an office. Anytime her customers came close to me she told them to leave me alone. Her granddaughter even suggested that I should be working in doors. I tried to assure them that I was comfortable chatting with the customers but they still found it difficult to let the customers socialise with me. Despite her objections, I occasionally had a chance of chatting with some of the customers. It was during such informal conversations that I identified some of my potential interviewees. It was also during such informal interactions that I came to realise how I was being perceived by some community members. Some of Ms. Awali's customers came to ask me if I could buy land from them. Others came to ask if I could offer them employment at the place I was working. When I told them that I could not afford to pay for their land and that I did not have powers to employ anyone, they said that I was just pretending.

Even trying to offer some help sometimes proved difficult. On one occasion, I found one of Ms. Awali's customers, Tupasye, mending a roof of one of the pit latrines which I also used in the neighbourhood. Tupasye insisted that I should not bother myself helping him do the work. When he finally allowed me to help him, he said: *I am sorry, we have made you dirty*. Thus, to him I was not supposed to do dirty work.

Second, apart from Ms. Awali and her customers, no one except the cluster supervisor came to chat with me at my rented house. Whilst I somehow understood the cultural complications that would prevent the women from coming to my rented house, it was rather difficult to

comprehend why men behaved the same way. Slowly, it emerged to me that the men associated me more to the literacy class than the community at large. I suspect that this perception emanated from the fact that people saw me more often at the literacy classroom than anywhere else. But the problem I had was that the village did not have any recreation facilities where one could go and socialise. The only places men gathered were mostly the households where locally brewed beer was being sold.

These challenges aside, I think my decision to rent a house provided me more opportunities to understand the community. It provided me a chance to hear stories I would have otherwise missed. Furthermore, it gave me the opportunity to identify and arrange for in-depth discussions with some of the members of the community

## **4.4 Research Methods**

In keeping with many ethnographic studies of this nature, I chose and used several research methods including participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews, as well as focus group discussions (FGD). In addition, I also used documentation and photography as sources of information for this study. In the sections that follow, I discuss how I used each of these. I also reflect on my experiences in using these methods. Although I am discussing these methods sequentially, it does not suggest in any way that they were applied in any established order. The methods fed into each other, i.e. sometimes what I observed led me into arranging interviews and there were also situations when I heard something during interviews that made me pay attention to certain aspects as I did my participant observation.

### **4.4.1 Participant Observation**

Most of the data I present and discuss in this thesis were gathered through participant observation. I used this method in the literacy classroom, women's group activities as well as in some community members' homes.

I began my classroom observation on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Every day when I went into the class to observe a lesson, I was given a chair to sit on. The chair was borrowed from the village headman. Despite my initial protestations that I wanted to sit on the floor with the literacy learners, I became accustomed to the arrangements preferred by my hosts. Both the literacy learners and the instructors categorically said I should be sitting on the chair. The reason they

gave was that ‘soap was expensive.’ However, I found it rather odd that the literacy learners always went to the village headman to borrow chairs whenever classes were being held. The cluster supervisor and I agreed to source at least two benches for the class.

It was now a routine that each time I went to observe the lessons, I sat on a bench which was always positioned close to the southern wall next to the building’s entrance. The cluster supervisor and the instructors usually sat on the opposite side. The portable chalk board stood and leaned against the western wall near the backroom entrance. The literacy learners sat on the floor and they faced west.

Sitting on my bench, I made “scratch notes” which I later expanded and refined using “headnotes” to produce “field notes proper” (Sanjek, 1990). I also audio recorded the lessons and transcribed the recordings not later than two days from the day the recordings were made. Apart from tape recording, I also took photos of the work written on the board and sometimes with the consent of the literacy learners, I got pictures of them as well as their work.

But employing participant observation in the classroom was not as easy as I thought at the beginning. There were many things taking place in the classroom. What really was I supposed to observe? This was a very important question whose answer still eludes me. My focus wandered from the teaching and learning, to relationships as well as to what I would sum up as ‘school culture.’ This challenge was compounded further by my experience as a teacher. In addition, my evolving roles and identities in the classroom made my situation become even more complex.

As I continued with my fieldwork, my relationship with both the instructors and the adult literacy learners began to change. Although they both still saw me as a Malawi government employee and a university teacher, they slowly started opening up. The community at large was also doing the same. Young children began to call me their grandmothers’ friend. In the adult literacy class, my roles and identities became fluid. They oscillated from being a researcher to a resource person, a co-instructor as well as a benefactor.

#### ***4.4.1.1 The Participant Observer as a Resource Person***

The adult literacy primer does not just deal with matters of reading and writing. It also covers knowledge on a wide range of fields. Having knowledge in all these fields sometimes posed a challenge to the literacy instructors. Occasionally, they faced situations whereby they did not

have adequate knowledge concerning the issues their lesson was dealing with. When this happened, they often asked me to help. Although sometimes I protested and informed them that I did not have the expertise, I usually obliged and helped them with the little I knew. Being a teacher myself, I sympathised and understood the awkward positions they were in. I helped in explaining issues in areas such as health, natural resources, gender and sexuality, language, civic education and arithmetic. Thus, despite my limitations in other fields, I became an expert in almost everything. This state of affairs made me wonder as to how these instructors coped with such situations every year. On paper, the NALP expects officers from other Ministries and Non-governmental organisations to help the instructors explain the subject matter that require expert knowledge (see Ministry of Women and Child welfare and Community Services, n.d.; Rokadiya, 1986). However, during my entire fieldwork period, I saw none.

#### ***4.4.1.2 Participant Observer as a Literacy Co-instructor***

Apart from helping the literacy instructors in explaining certain issues during the lessons, I was sometimes involved in the actual facilitation. In the Chichewa literacy classroom, the instructors occasionally asked me to mark the literacy learners' work. In some cases, I found that the literacy learners had not understood properly what was taught. I often sat down with the literacy learners and explained to them what the lesson was all about. Also, when the English literacy classes began, I was occasionally given the class to facilitate. This happened mostly when the English literacy instructor was absent. Generally, the literacy learners who were in the English literacy class did not want to be combined with the Chichewa literacy learners and do Chichewa lessons. They wanted to learn English. At the same time, the cluster supervisor did not want to send the literacy learners home when their instructor was absent. He said that he was afraid that if he did so, they might lose interest and eventually decide to withdraw from the classes. In such circumstances, the cluster supervisor asked me to deal with the English literacy lesson arguing that he was not trained to handle such lessons.

Generally, I found this change in roles to be both rewarding and challenging. It was rewarding in the sense that I viewed it as a form of giving back to the community. In addition, it gave me the opportunity to experience and appreciate how it was to facilitate in an adult literacy class. Despite my teaching experience, I found it very difficult.

It was also challenging because I needed to balance between helping the literacy learners on the one hand, and collecting the data I needed for this thesis on the other. Besides, I had my

own assumptions and beliefs regarding literacy in general, and teaching adult learners in particular. Grounding my assumptions and beliefs and doing the work as it was required by the literacy programme was not an easy thing to do.

#### ***4.4.1.3 The Participant Observer as a Benefactor***

When I started getting involved in the classroom activities, I noticed that some literacy learners wrote their work on pieces of paper. I wondered whether they would be able to keep such papers for future reference. I asked the instructors why this was the case and they told me that those literacy learners did not have notebooks. I felt sorry for them and sourced some notebooks and pens which were distributed among all the literacy learners. But I soon realised that this gesture reinforced my identity as a Malawi government employee as well as a university teacher. The gesture elevated my status in the village. I was now seen as someone who did not lack financial resources. Before long, the literacy learners asked me to provide them with pieces of cloth which they said they wanted to put on as uniform for the school. Reluctantly, I granted them what they requested. I was reluctant because I did not want to turn the school into a charity. I was afraid that the community might associate the literacy classes with receiving handouts. I shared these fears with the cluster supervisor. Whilst he agreed with my observations, the cluster supervisor told me that the practice was not new since the government used to provide the literacy learners with such pieces of cloth, especially when there was an official function but that due to financial constraints things had changed.

Although the literacy learners were happy with the pieces of cloth I gave them, I still felt that the gesture projected me as affluent. It did not surprise me therefore, when a few weeks towards the end of my fieldwork they asked me to provide them with another set of cloth for the same purpose arguing that since I was leaving, I was supposed to give them something to remember me. This time, I jokingly reasoned with them that ‘culturally’ when someone is leaving it is the responsibility of those remaining behind to give something to the one leaving and not the other way round. I informed them that I was worried that buying them another set of pieces of cloth may send a wrong signal about the school. They all seemed to agree with me. They even noted that some individuals just came to receive the pieces of cloth I bought the previous year and never came back. We therefore decided to organise a good-bye and farewell function instead, whereby we had some drinks, plays, songs, poems and group photos. We also exchanged gifts. The literacy learners gave me some groundnuts whilst I gave them notebooks and pens. I used

the opportunity to both thank them for sharing with me their life experiences and encouraged them to continue with their literacy lessons.

Generally, employing participant observation in an adult literacy classroom made me believe that an adult literacy classroom is very complex and therefore needed far more than just being 'there' in order to understand it. It provided me a unique experience. I was amazed by how each day the classroom appeared to have different 'characters.' Adult literacy learners frequently changed their statuses. For instance, an adult literacy learner would say that they were not able to read now only to see them volunteer themselves to read a paragraph moments later. The converse was also true. In this regard, one needed to have a third eye so as to capture the nuances of the classroom interaction.

Apart from the classroom, I also used participant observation in other settings. I employed this technique to observe Ms. Awali in her home. Sitting outside my rented house, I observed Ms. Awali conduct her businesses.

Ms. Awali was a widow. She was one of the literacy learners who were considered to be very old. She had been attending the literacy lessons since the centre was established in 2013. Apart from farming, she conducted some small-scale businesses. She brewed and sold local beer. She also sold tobacco. Besides, she was a member of one of the community savings groups in which she was elected as a treasurer. In addition, she knitted various items on order. In this setting, I relied heavily on taking down notes which I used to informally ask Ms. Awali to clarify on some of the things I saw. Sometimes we sat on a mat together and I observed her knit scarfs whilst telling me stories about her knitting. Unlike the participant observations I had in the classroom, at home it was rather spontaneous. I just saw things as they came and noted what I thought was interesting to me or needed further understanding.

In addition to the classroom and the home, I also used participant observation in women's group activities. Apart from just asking them how they conducted these activities, I participated and observed them. In these activities, I was not just interested in appreciating how they conducted the activities, I was also interested in observing how the women who were taking part in the adult literacy class positioned themselves in such activities. Participating and observing in a community savings group for instance, allowed me to see the extent to which the literacy learners participated in this activity which required reading and writing. I bought



some 'shares' in the community savings group and distributed them among all the members. I explain more on these groups in the next chapter.

During my fieldwork, I was privileged to attend a training session for English literacy instructors. At this function, I also used participant observation to understand how such activities are carried out. Conducting participant observation during the actual training itself allowed me to have first-hand experience of the exercise. I had the opportunity to interact with both the trainers and the trainees and got their perceptions about the whole exercise. I took part in the activities and exercises the trainers had organised. However, I noted that initially the officers did not know how to treat me until I asked them to allow me to be among the trainees. I told them that I had not attended a training of that nature before. I also told them that I had gone there to learn. Notwithstanding this and the fact that all the officers knew the purpose of my participation, they still saw me as a university lecturer.

#### **4.4.2 Individual Interviews**

This is the other research technique I used extensively to collect my data. I conducted different types of individual interviews. I had informal and semi-structured individual interviews. Most of the data I got from the cluster supervisor, for instance were collected through informal interviews (conversations). These conversations just started as any other talk and whenever he said something that caught my attention, I followed it up by asking him more questions. I did not write anything immediately. When I went back to my rented house or my residence, I jotted down as much as I could remember. I also used the same technique with some of the literacy learners. In most cases, I was the first to arrive at the literacy class. Whichever literacy learner came first got involved in a conversation with me. I listened attentively to whatever they said and probed for more on any issues that seemed to be of interest to me. When we got into the classroom, my first task was to jot down key points that emerged during the conversation I had just had with the literacy learner outside whilst the instructors were getting prepared for the lessons to start.

Although informal interviews proved to be very useful to me, I found this method somehow difficult at the beginning. The difficulty arose from the fact that I had an assumption that as a researcher, I was supposed to take the lead in the data collection process. I felt that the informal interview technique did not give me a firm control over the proceedings. But the more I used the technique, the more conversant I became with it. I learnt to be a listener with a purpose.

Apart from informal interviews, I also conducted semi-structured individual interviews. Initially, I had planned to hold interviews with a few individuals who could be identified based on the issues I wanted to understand. However, once I began conducting the interviews all literacy learners wanted me to visit their homes and interview them. I obliged to this as a matter of courtesy.

To arrange for a semi-structured interview or focus group discussion (FGD, which shall be discussed later), I contacted my possible participants individually. When they agreed to take part, I asked them to suggest the day, time and place of the interviews. On the day of the interview I explained again the nature and purpose of my research and asked them if they were ready to take part. I informed them that I would be taking notes and audio recording the proceedings. I used an interview guide drawn from the issues emerging from the observational data to provide some direction “so that the content focuses on the crucial issues of the study” (Burns, 2000: 424).

What amazed me was that in most cases after the interviews some of them gave me gifts ranging from green maize, groundnuts, pumpkins, green pigeon peas, cassava, to sorghum among others. In view of this, I also developed a habit of occasionally carrying with me some sugar, bread, smoked fish and sometimes some small amounts of cash to give them in return.

In addition to the experiences above, the semi-structured individual interviews also provided me the opportunity to visit the literacy learners’ homes. For those women who were married these interviews sometimes gave me rare opportunities to meet and momentarily share greetings with their husbands. Although I got some interesting data from these interviews, I found them somehow limiting at the beginning. I usually had a start list of questions which were meant to guide me through the interviews although sometimes such lists distracted me from the interview process.

Besides, occasionally, I encountered a conflict of agendas during these interviews in that whilst I had issues I wanted to understand further, some of my interviewees had their own issues they wanted someone to listen to. This was evident from the responses they gave to some of the questions I asked. In such circumstances, I learnt to listen and appreciate their stories first before addressing my own agenda. In this regard, these encounters were not just about data collection but they were also spaces that allowed my participants to express their frustrations

and the pains they experienced in their day-to-day lives. What pained me most was that despite opening up and sharing their frustrations with me, I could do nothing to help them. This was the case because most of the issues they raised revolved around the politics of the community and I did not want to ruin my relationships with the local leaders. A poor relationship with the leaders would have put my research into jeopardy.

#### **4.4.3 Focus Group Interviews (FGD)**

Sometimes I heard or saw things which needed further understanding and I thought FGDs would help me gain more insights since as Knight (2002) observes, FGDs are usually used to “explore provisional findings either by summarizing them to a selection of participants or by bringing the findings to other groups of stakeholders in the enquiry” (p. 70). I had a total of eight (8) FGDs. The discussants for each FGD were unique. Krueger (1994) advises that “the rule for selecting focus group participants is commonality, not diversity” (14). Hence, I had an FGD with young men who were out of school. Our discussions covered many aspects including their life experiences in the village as well their future aspirations. I also had FGDs with some non-literate women who were not attending literacy classes. Here too we talked about various topics such as their perceptions of literacy in general, and adult literacy classes in particular. We also talked about their experiences with literacy in some of their lived worlds. Furthermore, I had an FGD with some young women who were attending literacy lessons. The topics we discussed included their experiences with literacy and the plans they had after finishing their literacy lessons. Finally, I had an FGD with some middle-aged women who were attending literacy lessons. With these we discussed their experiences and expectations from the literacy lessons, as well as their views regarding examinations. The number of participants in the FGDs varied from 2 to 4.

Although it may be true that the results of FGDs may “prove nothing, not least because the number of informants is usually small and group dynamics can mean that dominant individuals can obliterate alternative points of view” Knight (2002: 70), I found the FGDs useful. They helped me gain some insights into my participants’ attitudes, feelings, perceptions and opinions (Krueger, 1994) towards literacy in their lived worlds. The intent of my FGDs was not to build group consensus, rather it was “to promote self-disclosure among participants” (ibid: 11). I had many guiding questions prepared in advance. Thus, instead of going for depth as an FGD would normally do, I went for breadth. Notwithstanding this, by having a couple of participants responding to the same questions in one session I was able to get varied perspectives on the

topics my questions sought to address. My experience with FGD resonates with Linda's observation cited in Krueger (ibid) that "the technique is robust, hardy, and can be twisted a bit and still yield useful and significant results" (p. 21).

#### **4.4.4 Photography**

One of the central aspects underpinning the theoretical framework that informed this study was the notion of artefacts. In view of this, I tried to gather as many artefacts as I could. My aim was to appreciate the role these artefacts played in my participants' evolving figured worlds. Suffice to say that it was impossible for me to physically collect all the artefacts that were made available to me due to a number of reasons. First, some of the artefacts were treasured very much by their owners. Second, some artefacts were official documents that were supposed to be submitted to higher offices. Third, others were permanently fixed. Fourth, it would have been cumbersome for me to carry all those items to the UK. I, therefore decided to photograph some of them. In all cases except some public places, I first asked for informed consent before taking the photos. I took pictures of literacy learners' work, the written documents they had in their possession, official documents, posters, literacy certificates, and writings on walls as well as billboards. However, in some contexts, I felt that taking a photo of the artefacts excluding the people involved did not make sense at all. The pictures lacked the context and were therefore, difficult to understand. In some cases, when I asked people to have their items photographed they asked me to photograph them as well. This raised an ethical dilemma which I resolved by seeking further clearance from UEA (see section 4.3.2). I took pictures of people in the classroom, homes, group activities and work places among others. I processed some of the pictures and passed them back to the people who appeared in them.

#### **4.4.5 Documentation**

Whilst it was true that in some situations I was not able to physically collect the artefacts, in other contexts it was possible for me to do so. This was the case, especially with some official documents. These documents were easily obtained because the cluster supervisor lived in the village I was conducting my fieldwork. He became both my friend and a key informant. Whenever he got any official document he called me or brought it to the literacy class for me to see it. If he had multiple copies of the document, he voluntarily gave me one. In cases where he had limited copies, he either allowed me to make copies or just take photos of the document. This is how I got copies of Chichewa and English literacy primers, registers, Chichewa and

English literacy instructors' guides, Chichewa literacy instructors' training notes and others. I yearned to have such documents or artefacts because I believed that they were crucial in facilitating the understanding of my participants' figured worlds since as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 133) put it, "there is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, by representing ... a culture as if it were an essentially oral tradition."

#### **4.5 Transcription, Translation and Data Analysis**

Much of the data were collected in two local languages namely, Chichewa and Ciyawo. Initially, I transcribed the audio-recorded encounters in the language my participants used and translated the same into English later. I found these practices both daunting and time consuming. I therefore resorted to combine transcriptions and translations at the same time. Although my work experience at the Centre for Language Studies helped me to somehow do the translations easily, I do share Chopra's (2008: 58) concerns that my participants' words in local languages have "become English words...." One may not guarantee an exact rendering of the original text. During the process of writing up my thesis, I also realised how some words are culturally sensitive. Hence, instead of providing English equivalents of such words, I decided to write them as they are used in the source language and glosses are provided in English.

In this thesis, all analyses of my data were done by hand mostly because I wanted "to be close to the data and have a hands-on feel for it without the intrusion of a machine" (Creswell, 2014: 240). I started analysing my data early during my fieldwork because as Miles and Huberman (1994) advise, doing so allows you to "cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better, data" (p. 50).

In principle, I adopted Creswell's (2014) approach to qualitative data analysis. The first step I took was to code my data by employing what Braun and Clarke (2013) call a bottom up approach whereby the codes I used came from the data itself. Later I grouped the codes and developed my themes relative to the ideas my research questions raise such as literacy meanings, and discourses. My data analysis continued even as I wrote up the thesis since writing up is "not separate from thinking, from analysis. Rather, it is analysis" (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 299). In this regard, this thesis is a "description and analysis of the research process itself" (Burns, 2000: 420) whereby reflexivity is a key element. However, I do realise how challenging this process is since "some selection [is] inevitable in the presentation of the

data to reader...” (ibid). Such selection raises the question of power between me as the researcher on the one hand, and the participants on the other. I have a dilemma of ensuring that “the people who helped [me] out are in control of the final representation as much as [I am]” (Agar, 1996: 17). Thus, although I try as much as I can to help the reader assess the basis for my interpretations by including extracts from the data, the decision on what to include and to leave out is ultimately mine. Given these circumstances, I agree with Clifford (1986: 7) that my ethnographic ‘truths’ are, somehow, “*partial*” (original emphasis).

## 4.6 Conclusion

This thesis is about understanding some community members’ literacy practices, discourses, meanings, identities and power relationships in some of their lived worlds. Based on this aim as well as both my ontological and epistemological orientations, I chose ethnography as my overall methodology. My desire was to get “as close to the respondent(s) as possible” (Gebre *et al*, 2009: 11). But to some extent, I agree with Gebre *et al* (ibid) that “we must not underestimate how difficult” this task is. My experience suggests that the social status one ‘wears’ is even more conspicuous than the clothes they put on. During my entire fieldwork, I tried all I could to dress, eat and do the things the community members did. But as I have noted in this chapter, the community members knew who I was and accorded me the same position I was trying hard to downplay. I was amazed when Ms. Matiki one of the literacy learners said to me during an informal conversation *when you walk together with the instructors, even a child would know that you are more educated than them.*

The chapter has also highlighted how the research site shaped the way I conducted my ethnographic study. Just as I tried not to put the lives of my participants at risk, I also applied the same measures towards my safety and this had some implication on what I was able to personally experience in the community. Notwithstanding this, the ‘thick descriptions’ I provide in my analysis chapters show the depth of my engagement with the community members.

Realising that it would be “inhumane and deeply disrespectful” (Cohen *et al*, 2007: 60) to stay in a community for almost a year, developing friendships in the process, and then just leave without giving back to the people, I attempted to provide “some form of reciprocity as a small reward for [my] participants” (Creswell, 2014: 254). Such reciprocity in some cases meant that

I had to play different roles which might have reinforced the way the community members perceived me.

The dilemmas of implementing ethical principles grounded within the perspectives, norms and practices prevalent in the North perhaps, mirror “the need to reflect on ethics in the context of morality and to start from an acknowledgement of likely differences, rather than the assumption of universally shared ethical principles and practices” (Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013: 459).

In chapter 5, I begin my analysis by looking at some community members’ literacy practices in their lived worlds. My approach in the analysis chapters is to present and analyse the data with minimum discussion. A detailed discussion of the findings is provided in chapter 10.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LITERACY PRACTICES AND ARTEFACTS IN FIGURED WORLDS**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I employ the concepts of literacy practices and artefact to understand some community members' participation in different activities which I frame as figured worlds. My account focuses on several organised and identifiable literacy mediated social activities in which some community members were involved such as government and donor assisted initiatives which include the Joint Emergency Food Assistance Programme, the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme and the Farm Input Subsidy Programme. The chapter also examines community members' literacy practices and artefacts employed in locally organised activities such as committees and community initiated money lending groups. My aim in this chapter is to map out the literacy practices community members encountered in their lived worlds with a view of providing a context within which the literacy teaching and learning at Sawabu literacy centre was taking place. Besides, I seek to show the diverse literacy practices and artefacts some community members encountered in different contexts and how they navigated through them.

My initial plan which included an exploration of community members' religious literacy practices did not work because I did not find any religious activities to focus on except the weekly Sunday and Friday prayers. As a Muslim, accompanying the women to observe their literacy practices in church was problematic as that would show lack of respect. At the same time, joining the women in Friday prayers in a mosque would not allow me to observe and appreciate their literacy experiences in this context because men and women do not share the same space in a mosque. Men sit in the front room whilst women occupy the room at the back with just small openings allowing the women to see what is happening in the men's room. What this means is that what I observed was shaped by practical constraints.

#### **5.1 Literacy Practices and Artefacts in Government Programmes**

My fieldwork took place at a time when many parts of Malawi including my research site were experiencing acute food shortages. This situation had arisen because in part, the country had



received more rain than required in the previous growing season thereby affecting food crop production. Apart from affecting crop yields, the heavy rains also made some community members homeless. In view of this situation, there were some food relief programmes being carried out in many parts of Malawi including my research site.

### **5.1.1 The Emergency Food Assistance Programme**

Due to the situation described above, the Malawi government and the World Food Programme (WFP) jointly run a food relief programme in the country. This programme was part of what the WFP called Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO). According WFP (2016: n.p.), the aim of this initiative was “to contribute to restoring food security, rebuilding sustainable livelihoods and strengthening the resilience of the most vulnerable food insecure population” Thus, through PRRO, WFP provided relief assistance to people affected by disasters. In Malawi’s case, the initiative sought to provide “emergency food assistance to food-insecure people affected by shocks....” (ibid).

In the quotes above, WFP spells out the nature, purpose and possible beneficiaries of its initiative. It constructs a world populated by people who have been struck by natural disasters. WFP constructs the victims of such disasters as ‘food-insecure’ and therefore are legitimate actors in the figured world of emergency food assistance programme. What this suggest is that any member of the community whose food-insecurity did not arise from the effects of the officially recognised disaster was denied access to this figured world. In other words, the word ‘emergency’ relates more to the disaster than it does to food-insecurity. Such figuring had some implications in the way community members perceived the programme, especially considering the fact that despite their houses not collapsing, some of them had lost their livelihoods due to the same heavy rains.

According to a member of the committee that was responsible for identifying beneficiaries for this programme in this area, the programme initially targeted only those community members whose houses had collapsed as a result of the heavy rains. Hence, in vernacular, the programme was simply called *zogwa manyumba* (about/of collapsed houses). I was told that anyone whose house had collapsed and had immediately reconstructed it was ruled out as a potential beneficiary. As a result, one year after the said disaster, I saw houses of some of the beneficiaries still standing with one or two walls demolished to justify their continued participation in this figured world.

Once the beneficiaries were identified, they were briefed about how the programme worked including the use of ration cards shown below which each one received.

**WFP WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME**

**JOINT EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME**

**RATION CARD**

**FOR TARGETED FOOD DISTRIBUTIONS**

**MALAWI GOVERNMENT**

H/H NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

VILLAGE: \_\_\_\_\_

TA: \_\_\_\_\_

RATION CARD NO. \_\_\_\_\_

FDP: \_\_\_\_\_

CP: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE OF DISTRIBUTION	CEREALS (KG/L)	SIGNATURE / THUMB PRINT	DATE OF DISTRIBUTION	PULSES (KG/L)	SIGNATURE / THUMB PRINT	DATE OF DISTRIBUTION	YES OIL (L)	SIGNATURE / THUMB PRINT	DATE OF DISTRIBUTION	SUPER CEREAL (KG/L)	SIGNATURE / THUMB PRINT	DATE OF DISTRIBUTION	SUPER CEREAL (KG/L)	SIGNATURE / THUMB PRINT
23/11/15	50	[Signature]	23/11/15	6	[Signature]	23/11/15	2	[Signature]						
20/12/15	50	[Signature]	20/12/15	6	[Signature]	20/12/15	2	[Signature]						
			9/02/16	6	[Signature]	9/02/16	2	[Signature]						

Dziwani iki:  
chitupa ichi chiyenera kusungidwa bwino ndi mutu wa banja  
Sindikizni chala mukalandira chakudya

Figure 9: Ration Card

This artefact did not just provide its holder access to this world, but also ascribed them an identity of being a victim of ‘shocks’ and therefore, ‘food-insecure.’

A closer look at the ration card suggests that it was serving more than one purpose. For the community members, it identified them as legitimate beneficiaries of the programme. The card has the logos of the institutions responsible for the programme which gives it its authority and authenticity. The Malawi government and the World Food Programme on their part, used the card to promote their bureaucratic practices, i.e. office record keeping. The card is divided up into columns. Each item to be distributed has its own column, i.e. cereals, pulses and vegetable oil. The other columns are for dates and signatures or thumb printing.

All relevant parts of the card are written in English which apparently suggests that the intended audience are officers for the programme. The producers of this document somehow knew that the beneficiaries of the programme did not speak and understand English language. This

observation is supported by the fact that the note at the bottom of the card is written in Chichewa which I translate as follows: *Take note: This card must be kept by the head of the household. When you receive the food, print using your thumb.* Although not everyone speaks and understands Chichewa in Malawi, by addressing the beneficiaries directly, the document assumes that all beneficiaries are literate in this language. Also, by using a local language to provide the instructions on how to use and keep the card, the document exercises power in deciding which information should be relatively accessible to the community members.

Beneficiaries kept their cards. On the day of food distribution, they presented their cards to the officers who used them to record the food items each beneficiary had received and the latter had to acknowledge receipt by printing using their thumb. Ideally, the beneficiaries were supposed to verify that the items and amounts recorded on their cards were accurate. However, it appeared to me that some beneficiaries were not very much interested in reading what was written on their cards. For instance, on 9<sup>th</sup> February, no figures for the super cereals received were entered on the card, yet the beneficiary acknowledged receipt. What this shows is that some beneficiaries used their cards simply as identity documents that allowed them to participate in the programme.

In other programmes, such as the Malawi Social Cash Transfer programme, which I look at next, similar documents were used but an attempt was made to write them in Chichewa. Despite such efforts, the documents still demanded a great deal of reading and calculations.

### **5.1.2 The Social Cash Transfer Programme**

Apart from the joint emergency food assistance programme, some community members were benefiting from the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme which was locally known as *Mtukula Pakhomo* (which can literally be translated as ‘the household developer’). According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (2014: 5), the aim of the Malawi Social Cash Transfer was

to provide regular small amounts of cash to very poor households that were also deemed ‘labour-constrained’ – unable to generate sufficient income through labour – owing to reasons such as old age, disability, chronic illness or having a very high ratio of child and elderly dependants to working-age adults.

Unlike the emergency food assistance programme, the social cash transfer is constructed as the figured world of the ‘ultra-poor and labour constrained.’ It is populated by individuals who are

unable to work and get some income due to old age, disability, chronic illness and the assumed burden of having too many dependants. What this suggests is that although poverty is a necessary condition for one to become an actor in this figured world, it is not sufficient.

Just like the Joint Emergency Food Assistance Programme, this programme too, was executed at community level through a committee called Community Social Support Committee (CSSC). This Committee identified and assessed the potential actors to be recruited into this figured world. The beneficiary identification process took two stages involving different literacy practices. First, the CSSC members identified and assessed the potential beneficiary households. They asked the head of the identified households some questions from a form and their answers were recorded on the same. After this exercise, the head of the household was given a slip shown below.



Figure 10: Registration Slip

The significance of this slip to the community members was that it separated the holder from the other community members by projecting them as potential actors in the figured world of the 'ultra-poor and labour constrained.' The problem it created however was that it gave false hopes to households that were screened out in the process.

I was told that the information the CSSC gathered was relayed to the district office and it *was punched into the computer which selected the eligible persons based on the information given.* Community members who finally made it into the list of approved beneficiaries were given several documents including the leaflet shown overleaf. The purpose of this leaflet was to make the beneficiaries understand how the programme worked. The leaflet was written in Chichewa.



Figure 11: The Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme Leaflet (Outer pages)

The outer pages of the leaflet inform the recipients that they were now actors in the figured world of Social Cash Transfer Programme. It also informs them where to go in an event that they had any queries. It explains to the beneficiaries the process to be followed in case there are some changes concerning the beneficiaries. It states that the beneficiaries are supposed to inform the CSSC if there were changes in the household regarding the total number of people, number of children going to school, change of village and change of head of household. To put this information across, the leaflet employs both the written word and illustrations i.e. visual literacy. However, whilst the written word could be understood without the illustrations, the latter could not be understood without the former. Besides, the leaflet is folded which makes it difficult to know where to start when reading it.





Figure 12: The Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme Leaflet (Inner pages)

From right to left, the inner pages show the kind of queries the beneficiaries could launch such as receiving less money than stipulated, not receiving money at all or loss of money card. The middle part of the inner pages explain that the beneficiaries shall be receiving the money once every two months and that there shall be designated places where the money shall be disbursed upon showing their money card. The last page on the left shows the distribution and amount of money the beneficiaries are entitled to receive. It gives a breakdown of how the money is to be paid out. That is, if the beneficiary is the sole member of the household, then they were entitled to receive K1,700.00 and so on. And if there are four or more individuals in the household, then the beneficiary is entitled to receive K3,700.00. Besides, the beneficiaries are entitled to receive additional sums of money if they have children who are going to school. In that regard, they are entitled to receive K500.00 more for each child who was attending primary school and K1000.00 for every child attending secondary school education. However, to understand all this, the beneficiaries need to do a great deal of reading.

Fortunately, as Ms. Ulaya informed me, the programme officers went through this leaflet as they oriented the beneficiaries about the procedures of the programme. Ms. Ulaya, was a 33 years single mother of three who was the sole beneficiary of the programme in Sawabu village. She withdrew from her primary education in grade 7 due to marriage. To earn a living, she brewed local beer. She was considered ultra-poor and also labour constrained because she was presumed chronically ill.

Ms. Ulaya told me that she referred to the leaflet above to understand how much money she was entitled to receive when the next tranche was due since one of her children had withdrawn from school. That said, I was informed that other beneficiaries who could not read it got some explanations from the programme officers.

Community members who were eventually registered for the programme were given money cards shown below. Legitimate participation in this world required the production of this artefact. Each time the beneficiary went to receive the money they carried with them their card. The officers of the programme used the spaces at the back of this card to record the money that was due to the beneficiary and the latter either signed their name or printed using their thumb. Here too, the practice required the beneficiaries to reconcile the amounts written on their cards with the money they had received before appending their signatures.

Figure 13: Beneficiary Money Card (Inner pages)

Just like the food ration card, the money card is very official. It is too detailed in terms of personal information. It had a photograph of the beneficiary (deleted for reasons of anonymity). It also has what appears to be a barcode at the bottom. It provides some space on the left page where an officer is supposed to certify both the identity of the card holder as well as its use. The discourse employed in this part is legal which I translate as follows: *I certify that the owner of this card is the one whose photograph is affixed on it.* Perhaps, this is one way of assuring

the donors who were acknowledged on the leaflet discussed earlier, that there was transparency and accountability in the programme.

In terms of language, the card was mostly written in Chichewa with English words being used in a few places. Just like the ration card, this document too, appeared to serve more than one function. Most parts were for office use except the lower part of the page to the left which authoritatively addresses the beneficiary and I translate as follows: *Important message*.

1. Make sure that you have this card when receiving the money
2. You cannot receive money if you do not have this card or you have not brought it with you
3. The beneficiary or the head of the household is the one who is supposed to receive the money
4. Any time you receive the money make sure that you sign
5. If there are any changes make sure that they are reflected on this card.

Here the card adopts a different point of view i.e. the manner in which the information is given. It shifts from being rather neutral to interpersonal by directly addressing the beneficiaries. The message one would get from such a change is that what they are directly being told is what concerns them and not the rest. Ms. Ulaya told me that she kept this card together with the leaflet I looked at earlier in a secure place because *we were urged to take care of the document on which our photos appeared. 'If you lose this one it means that you shall not be able to receive money'* (Field notes: 11/02/2016). Thus, just like the ration card, the money card too, served mostly as an identity document.

What these artefacts suggest is that community members in this village encountered various literacy practices. However, just like in the figured world of emergency food assistance, the reading and understanding of these documents appeared not to be the primary concern of the beneficiaries. This was the case because they were not obliged to read them. Besides, the programme officers and some members of the Community Social Support Committee provided them the information they needed whenever possible. The significance of these documents, especially the money card was that it legitimised its holder's participation in the figured world of the 'ultra-poor and labour constrained,' the Social Cash Transfer. It identified the holder as a legitimate vulnerable member of the community. Overall, very few members were identified as legitimate actors of this figured world compared to that of 'Modern' Farming which I turn to next.



### 5.1.3 'Modern' Farming

In chapter 2, I stated that one of the objectives of the National Adult Literacy Programme is, in part “to assist in achieving government development objectives by enabling rural populations to take advantage of modern and effective farming techniques to increase their overall productivity” Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Community Services (n.d.: 3). Here, the Ministry of Women constructs a figured world of ‘modern’ farming to which it presumably wants to recruit the ‘rural populations.’ The Ministry assumes that the cause of the apparent low productivity among the rural populations is lack of knowledge of ‘modern and effective farming’ methods. Hence, to disseminate the purported ‘modern and effective farming techniques’ the Ministry of Agriculture had extension workers in the communities. These officers were busy helping the community members on what they considered to be best agricultural practices with a view of increasing productivity. As part of their work, the extension workers employed and distributed some leaflets such as the one shown below.



Figure 14: An Agricultural Leaflet

I found this agricultural leaflet with Ms. Awali. Several other members of the community said they also had it. I was told that the agricultural extension worker for the area gave them this

leaflet when he came to advise them on farming practices. However, unlike the other artefacts I looked at earlier, the purpose of this leaflet was to disseminate knowledge whose practical application would lead the individual to becoming an actor in the figured world of ‘modern’ farming.

The leaflet provides six steps farmers were supposed to follow in their farming activities. It privileges certain distances between ridges and planting stations; the depth of the planting stations, the number of seeds per station including tips on how to apply fertilizers.

The leaflet starts by instructing the farmers to have two sticks measuring 75 cm and 25 cm respectively. It therefore, assumes that the users have numeracy skills and that they know the metric system of measurements. The 75 cm stick is to be used to determine distances between ridges whilst the 25 cm one would measure distances between planting stations. One seed per planting station is recommended. To help the farmers measure the sticks accurately, the leaflet is calibrated in centimetres like a ruler on the right. Steps 1 to 3 concern these measurements. Steps 4 to 6 are about fertilizer application. It shows that the hole in which the fertilizer should be put should be made exactly midway between the planting stations and that it should be 10 cm deep although the leaflet does not explain how the depth would be measured. It also shows the amount of fertilizer to be applied in each hole, i.e. one bottle top.

Ms. Awali told me that they had a small experimental garden in which the extension worker helped them apply these techniques. However, transferring the practice to their own gardens proved problematic, especially concerning practically measuring the distances and the depths as required by the ‘modern techniques of farming. (See picture overleaf).



Figure 15: Spacing in a Maize Garden

This picture shows that the spacing of the crops varied and in many cases, each planting station had more than one seed.

One key feature of this leaflet is that it is multimodal in many respects. First, it calls for a combination of literacy and numeracy practices. In other parts, it requires visual and numeracy abilities. However, whilst the figures and the written words may make sense on their own, some of the visuals may not. In this regard, in addition to having some visual reading abilities, one also requires some literacy and numeracy skills to understand this leaflet.

The leaflet also frames some information as being very important. Using lines, the leaflets highlights some information at the bottom and encloses it in a rectangle. This information is captioned: *What must be remembered*. Even here, the information is given out using different modes. It employs school practices of using ticks and crosses. However, just like the other visuals, the ticks, crosses and the illustrations cannot convey the intended message fully in the absence of the written words. One is required to read the written text. Besides, one needs to know what ticks and crosses mean in this context. The leaflet privileges the use of hybrid seeds together with fertilizers but disapproves mixing NPK and UREA fertilizers.

Realising that many smallholder maize farmers cannot afford to buy the farm inputs cited above and participate in the figured world of ‘modern’ farming, the Malawi Government has been running a farm input subsidy programme since the 2005/2006 growing season. The programme is said to target

smallholder farmers who are resource-poor but own a piece of land. The targeting criteria also recognise special vulnerable groups, such as guardians looking after physically challenged persons; child-headed, female-headed and orphan headed households; and households affected by HIV and AIDS (Future Agricultures, 2013: n.p.).

The main aim of the Malawi Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) was to enhance productivity with a view of attaining food security for the country. As can be deduced from the quote above, FISP is a programme that targets some selected individuals in the communities. Once registered, the beneficiaries are given coupons towards the start of the rainy season. To receive the coupons, the registered community members are requested to convene together with members of other communities at a designated place. The responsible officers call out the names of registered beneficiaries village by village. The members who hear their names go forward and receive their coupons after signing their names or printing using their thumbs. The beneficiaries use such coupon as identity cards to enable them buy two bags of fertilizer, a pack of maize seed and a pack of pulses at very low prices. The government expected the beneficiaries of this programme to apply the knowledge contained in the leaflet I looked at earlier.

However, having stayed in the community for a full growing season I hardly saw community members follow the instructions on the leaflet discussed above. When I asked some community members such as Ms. Awali as to whether she read and followed the instructions on the leaflet she told me that she had read just the heading and could not read the rest due to font size. She said that she then just folded it and kept it in her suitcase and used it as a memento for her participation in the experimental garden. Other community members who also had this leaflet told me similar stories.

#### **5.1.4 Malaria Control Programme**

Being one of the countries where malaria is prevalent, Malawi with its partners has been involved in programmes aimed at reducing malaria cases. One way of achieving this is the distribution of free mosquito nets. Some of the mosquito nets distributed are not pre-treated and therefore, the community members are required to treat them on their own. They are given



packs containing some tablets of mosquito repellents and a brochure to help them treat the nets as shown below.



Figure 16: Brochure on a Step by Step Treatment of Mosquito Nets

This brochure provides information that would help community members to participate successfully in the figured world of malaria control programme. Thus, community members who receive free mosquito nets together with this brochure are expected to read and follow the instructions on it step by step as they treat their nets. They are expected to repeat this process a year after the initial treatment or after washing the nets twice.

The brochure is written in Chichewa and it is also multimodal in terms of formatting and presentation among others. The sequencing of the process is shown using numbers and therefore it is assumed that the reader shall recognise the figures and follow the process. The message is conveyed through written words and illustrations. The upper part (1-4) mostly shows preparation. It shows the items required such as a basin, a bottle for measuring the water, the chemical in tablet form, gloves for protecting oneself from contact with the chemical, and the mosquito net. The middle part (5-9) is the treating process itself ranging from dissolving the tablet to immersing the net into the dissolved chemical. The bottom part (10-14) shows what to do after treating the net including drying it away from direct sunlight, disposing of the gloves, washing hand hands and finally spreading the net over one's bed or mat.

The brochure employs colour and font size to highlight and frame the information deemed to be very important. The biggest font and very bright colour are used for the name of the process at the top. Below it the brochure provides instructions in a relatively large font but in black. The process itself is explained in black and in a small font. At the bottom, in a relatively big font and bright colour, the brochure reminds those concerned to remember treating the nets again after one year or if they wash them twice. Although the brochure instructs all those concerned to read the instructions carefully, the use of different font to frame different kinds of information makes some information to stand out and therefore appear to be more important than the other. By employing a small font size in the part that explains the process of treating the nets, the producers of this document seem to have assumed that the visuals would effectively convey the information on their own. What is critical though is that for one to understand the whole process, one needed to have the ability to not only decode letters but also to comprehend the subtle messages behind the other modes of communication displayed on this brochure. Again, Ms. Awali kept this brochure in her suitcase. She explained to me that she received it together with a mosquito net as part of the government's malaria control campaign. In this regard, she kept and valued it because in part, it had some historical significance.

## **5.2 Literacy Practices and Artefacts in Income Generating Groups**

When I arrived at Sawabu village, I noted that most of the community members, especially the women were engaged in small scale businesses. However, most of them said that their major problem was capital. To deal with this problem, they initiated and formed different groups in which they lent each other money. Within my research site, two types of groups were operational and the community member called them *Cisiki* and *Banki Yam'mudzi* respectively.

### **5.2.1 Cisiki**

The word *cisiki* appeared to have derived from the English word '*secret*.' The women appeared to call this activity as such due to the way they identified group members' turns during their initial meeting. They told me that at their initial meetings, they cut some pieces of paper whose number corresponded with the number of members in the group. They then wrote numbers on those pieces of paper, folded and mixed them up. Each member was then asked to pick one piece of paper and the number that appeared on it represented the position on which the member

was going to be on the recipients' list. That appeared to be where the *secret* lay because one's turn was hidden until they unfolded the numbered piece of paper they picked.

These groups had chairpersons, treasurers and secretaries who kept the records including those indicating each member's turn. The group members met every week. The members sat in a circle. Each member put any amount of money she wished to contribute at the centre of the circle and the group's secretary recorded the amount under the member's name. In this way, the groups promoted some form of transparency. All the money realised on that specific day was given to the member whose turn it was to receive the money. However, it was imperative that the recipient knew the amounts each member contributed because during the other members' turns each one expected to receive not less than the amount they had personally contributed. Thus, the record kept by the secretary was consulted by both the recipients and contributors of the money to establish the amount of money they expected to receive from other members or they owed each member. Group members who were not able to read, write or recognise written numbers got assistance from the secretary and other members who had such skills. Similar practices appeared to take place in *Banki Yam'mudzi*.

### **5.2.2 Banki Yam'mudzi**

The other community groups were called *Banki Yam'mudzi* (literally, village bank i.e. community savings groups). In community savings groups the arrangement was different. Members did not have turns. Each member had what the women called 'shares' whose value varied relative to what the group members agreed. However, their understanding of shares differed from that common in stock markets which refers to "any of the units into which the total wealth of a company is divided, ownership of which gives the right to a portion of the company's profits" (Higgleton, Sargeant, & Seaton, 1997: 834). To the women, a share was the minimum amount a member contributed towards a sum that was raised during a meeting and any member was free to borrow the money raised on the day at a fixed interest. For example, for the group whose meeting I attended, a minimum amount one would contribute was K100.00 (less than a penny) and there was no limit in terms of how much more one would contribute. However, in some cases, a member was not allowed to borrow more than the total contribution she had made to the group. The money borrowed was subjected to a 20% interest. At the end of their agreed period which was variable from time to time, the money was shared and each member got the total amount they contributed during the entire period and the interest they paid. Ideally, what each member got was a refund.

What was fascinating to me was how the women adapted and employed financial discourses which apparently they accessed from other groups. On the examinations day, the Community Development Assistant responsible for the zone in which the literacy centre is located came to the centre to brief the literacy learners about what he called Community Savings and Investment Promotion (COMSIP). COMSIP is an organisation whose aim is to encourage Malawians in both rural and urban areas to embrace a culture of saving and investing their resources. In his explanation, he mentioned shares, interest and dividends. The women were encouraged to form their own savings group and that the COMSIP secretariat was always ready to give them a grant if they showed some seriousness in their savings. I learnt that women in other areas had already established their groups. Apparently, the women's knowledge of financial terms might have come through interaction with those involved in such groups.

Unlike in *Cisiki*, in community savings groups, each member had a personal record book apart from the general one. In the general record book, the secretary wrote the date, name of the member, their contributions (*yosunga*), debt (*ngongole*), repayment (*yobweza*) and interest which was spelt in a sample of one member's account in the general record book as 'ENT' as shown in the picture below. The personal ones had the same details except the name which appeared on the book cover. These artefacts facilitated the operations of these groups.

Date	yosunga	ngongole	yobweza	ENT
5/12-15	200			
12/12-15	200			
26/12-15	500			
02-01-16	300	1,500	1,500	200
09-01-16	200			
16-01-16	200			
23-01-16	-	2,500	2,500	
30-01-16	300			
06-02-16	100			
20-02-16	300			
27-02-16	100	3,000	3,000	600
05-03-16	100			
12-03-16	100			
2-04-16	-	4,000	4,000	
30-04-16	200			
07-05-16	200			
21-05-16	200	5,000	+	1,000
28-05-16	200	1,000		
11-06-16	500			
18-06-16	200			
25-06-16	400			
02-07-16	500			

Figure 17: A General Record Book



Although all the record books were kept by the secretary, the women had some interest in what their accounts contained. This is what I saw when I attended a meeting of one of the community savings groups and I wrote:

*I see that the women are now asking for their personal record books. They are busy checking their accounts. I notice that Ms. Upile is checking from her record book on her own. She says that one figure is not written legibly and she asks the secretary to write it properly. The secretary complies. Ms. Tepani is also going through her record book alone. Ms. Awali is being assisted by Ms. Sumani whilst Ms. Faki is being assisted by Ms. Tepani (Field notes: 16/07/2016).*

Although reading the record books appeared to be difficult for some women, they all either directly or indirectly got involved in the literacy practices required in this figured world. Even those that seemed not to have the necessary skills were not left out. They participated through the help of their colleagues, i.e. there was some mediation which I look at in some detail later. All the members appeared to understand the literacy practices underpinning this figured world and the lack of reading, writing and numeracy skills did not significantly hamper the participation of any of them.

### **5.3 Literacy Practices and Artefacts in Committees and ‘Seminars’**

Sawabu village just like many other villages had some organised activities as well as facilities that required selected members to provide some leadership and oversight. Hence, some of the adult literacy learners were involved in committee activities. Others attended what they called ‘seminars.’ One of these community members was Ms. Maulidi.

Ms. Maulidi was a middle aged adult literacy learner. She withdrew from her primary school in grade 2. She was a niece of the village headperson of Cilanga village which was initially part of Sawabu village. In the absence of her uncle who was the village headperson for her community, Ms. Maulidi run the affairs of her village. In addition, she was the chairperson of her community’s water tap committee. As a chairperson of the tap committee, Ms. Maulidi presided over committee meetings where the production of an artefact called minutes was privileged as the legitimate record as she explained to me.

*Me: So you are saying that due to your being chairperson and other responsibilities you take part in activities that require writing.*

*Ms. Maulidi: Yes, I write.*

*Me: I see.*

*Ms. Maulidi: Even during meetings, we write minutes.*

Me: Is that so?

Ms. Maulidi: Yes, during meetings we write what people say as minutes.

Me: Yes

Ms. Maulidi: We record the time at which the meeting began

Me: Yes

Ms. Maulidi: Any good point made, we write down

Me: I see, so who actually writes down these minutes?

Ms. Maulidi: The secretary is the one who writes  
(Field notes: 28/11/2015).

Here Ms. Maulidi showed her knowledge of one of the artefacts that evoke the figured world of committee. However, my experience at Sawabu village made me believe that the practice of keeping minutes was rather unusual. I attended two community meetings and there was no one taking minutes. The resolutions made were kept by each one present through memory. The idea of minute taking appeared to have been introduced by some service providers who demanded the formation of committees and in this case it was the institution that supplied water in the area. Nonetheless, the value of the minutes to the community members appeared to be questionable because when I asked Ms. Maulidi to show me a copy of the minutes, she casually said she could not find the notebook. She said that she suspected that one of her school going children might have taken the notebook for use in school. Apart from taking part in committee meetings, some community members such as Ms. Suwedi told me that they attended seminars.

Ms. Suwedi was a middle-aged adult literacy learner from Sawabu village. She was married and had eleven children. She told me that she did not attend formal education because her parents could not afford paying school fees. Ms. Suwedi told me that some of the institutions that lent her money organised ‘seminars’ before lending out the money. She said:

*we were going for seminars where we were given notebooks and pens. We just kept them in our hands. The others were writing. Can you thumb print under these circumstances? They say you should copy what they have written,*  
(Field notes: 24/02/2016).

What this suggests is that in seminars, the participants were expected to produce notes. But from Ms. Suwedi’s remarks, I got a sense that non-literate persons who took part in such ‘seminars’ somehow felt out of place, *we just kept them in our hands. The others were writing.* When asked to show me copies of the notes they took in these seminars none of the community members’ who claimed to have attended such activities did so. Their answers were the same.

The notebooks were either misplaced or missing. I wondered therefore as to whether such notes had any value to these community members.

My analysis in this section reveals the literacy practices and artefact some literacy learners encountered in the figured worlds of committees and seminars. Whilst the seminars required all participants to listen and copy what the presenters wrote, minute taking required one person to listen and take down what the members agreed upon. However, what fascinated me was that like the other documents I have looked at earlier, it was not the minutes or notes per se that these community members valued. Rather, it was the literacy practices privileged in these figured worlds which were evoked by the discourses of notes and minutes that appeared to be significant. This explains why Ms. Maulidi talked about committee meetings and minutes and at the same time appeared not to be worried that her minutes were missing. This suggest that Ms. Maulidi recognised minutes as an artefact evoking the figured world of committees but her attitude towards the same implies that such a record was valueless.

#### **5.4 Literacy Practices in Communication Technology: Mobile Phones**

Although Sawabu village was located in a remote area, mobile phone network was readily accessible and I noted that some adult literacy learners had mobile phones. Some of those adult literacy learners who had mobile phones such as Ms. Suwedi, were the ones who projected themselves as non-literate at the literacy class. However, during an interview with me, Ms. Suwedi's mobile phone beeped signalling that a message had been received. I saw her reach out for her mobile phone, search for and apparently read the message before saying: *You are going to call. I do not have credit.* This act made me become curious thereby leading to the following exchange.

*Me:* *You were reading a message from your phone, am I right?*

*Ms. Suwedi:* *(Laughs). Yes, but when the phone was sent to me at that time I did not know how to read the message. I just looked at it.*

*Me:* *But this one you have read.*

*Ms. Suwedi:* *Yes, I have. I think these classes have helped a lot. This mobile phone was sent to me by my son who is in South Africa. But in those days when he sent me money I used to ask someone to accompany me to sign for me but these days I go there alone and sign for my money.*

*(Field notes: 24/02/2016).*

What this exchange suggests is that Ms. Suwedi was not only able to read the message on her mobile phone but also that she was able to operate it despite being perceived as non-literate at the literacy class. Interestingly, Ms. Suwedi attributed her literacy transformation to the literacy classes. When I asked her to explain her seemingly contradictory literacy identities, she said that she chose to project herself as such for reasons she did not want to reveal to me.

Although very few individuals had mobile phones in this community, this artefact appeared to be very useful. Many young women and men from this village went to South Africa in search of well-paying jobs. To communicate with their parents back home they relied on telephones since being illegal immigrants in South Africa, they did not have postal addresses. Thus, even community members who did not have their own mobile phones in this community relied on the ones owned by their relatives and friends to communicate with their sons and daughters abroad. What this suggests is that despite being a rural area, a mobile phone was a crucial communication artefact in this community and as I show later, those community members who could not operate this artefact on their own were helped by others.

## **5.5 Literacy Support Networks: Literacy Mediation**

In the previous section, Ms. Suwedi alluded to the fact that before she learnt how to read and write from the adult literacy classes, she used to ask someone to accompany her to sign for the money her son sent to her from South Africa. In subsection 5.2.2, I also gave my own experience regarding what I saw during a community savings group activity whereby some members were helping others to make sense of their accounts. It appeared to me that in this community there were many members who relied on such literacy and numeracy assistance and one of them was Ms. Duniya.

Ms. Duniya was an adult literacy learner who had not done any primary schooling due to problems of fees. She told me that her husband was keen in teaching her how to read and write but she did not have a primer. Ms. Duniya was a village headperson of Makoloje village which initially was part of Sawabu village. As a traditional leader, she told me that she was involved in many activities that required reading and writing. Since she was not able to read and write she told me that

*when settling cases, I rely on my councillors, my young sister and my niece. These people write the deliberations during the cases and sometimes they ask me to pass judgement. In terms of summons it is my young sister and my niece who help out in writing those and I stamp them.* (Field notes: 17/01/2016).

Ms. Duniya's remarks suggest that despite the literacy demands of her office and her being non-literate, she was able to carry out her duties with the help of others. That is, literacy mediation was central in supporting her leadership role in her community.

It was not just Ms. Duniya who participated in literacy mediated activities through the help of others, Ms. Suya too, did the same. Ms. Suya was the youngest of the three middle aged sisters I interacted with during a focus group discussion. She told me that her family had ten children, five boys and five girls. Ms. Suya as well as her siblings did not attend formal school because their parents could not afford to pay school fees. At the same time, Ms. Suya was not attending literacy lessons because she considered herself old. Ms. Suya told me that she occasionally participated in activities where literacy had a role. She said:

*sometimes we conducted elections to elect group leaders. During such elections they said that we should write down names of people we wanted to get positions. They said they did not want the show of hands or lining up behind a candidate. In such situations, I made sure that I sat close to someone who knew how to read and write. I gave my paper to that person and whispered into her ears the name of my preferred candidate. Once they write for me I cast my vote, (Field notes: 18/06/2016).*

In these remarks Ms. Suya showed that her inability to read and write did not stop her from participating in the elections that required such abilities and that she knew how to handle herself in such situations. Ms. Suya appeared to make a strong case for mediation when I asked her about non-literate persons boarding wrong buses saying

*they choose to board the wrong buses. Some of us when we travel we make sure we link up with passengers travelling on the same route. When we get tickets, we listen carefully and when you hear someone talking about boarding the bus which we are also waiting for we keep an eye on them. When we see them boarding the bus, we follow them. In fact, these days they always tell you where the bus is going and if one boards a wrong one they do so by choice. Why can't they ask? Even those people who can read and write do sometimes ask so what is the problem with that. Look, here in the village our roads do not have sign posts. So even those people who can read and write ask for directions here and there is no problem, (Field notes: 18/06/2016).*

Although one may question Ms. Suya's strategies and some of the examples she gave, she appeared to emphasise the fact that literacy mediation was not an activity reserved for individuals deemed to be non-literate. In her view, even those assumed to be literate sometimes do ask about which buses were going where. In this case, Ms. Suya seemed to challenge one of the reasons some adult literacy learners often cited for their involvement in literacy lessons. She said she saw no problems in asking other people for help. In fact, as I continued chatting with the group, she said that she used to get letters from her husband when he was still alive. She said: *when I got such letters, I found someone to read for me. I also found someone to write*

*letters for me to respond to my husband's letters. Everything went on smoothly. There was no problem.*

Ms. Suya said that she had a son who was in South Africa. When I asked her if he wrote her letters, she said he did not but called her instead. She further explained:

*when he calls, we are helped by the young ones here. They tell us which button to press. Everything goes on well without any problems. Even when he writes a message the young ones read the messages for us. In this regard although it is important for one to be able to read and write for us it is too late. We are old,* (Field notes: 18/06/2016).

Ms. Suya's stance showed that she was satisfied with the support she was getting from the young ones. With their help, she was not only able to operate the mobile phone but also to get the messages her son sent to her. On the basis of this and the fact that she considered herself old, she saw no reason for enrolling for adult literacy lessons.

Notwithstanding these seemingly positive attitudes towards literacy mediation, there was also a sense that some community members had some reservations about the same. For instance, Ms. Suwedi cited some practical challenges of mediation saying: *...the problem is sometimes such people are busy.* In other words, you may not always have your things done within the time you wanted. Apart from these practical concerns, some community members including some of those who benefited from mediation were bothered by something else, i.e. shame. For example, Ms. Duniya told me that she enrolled for the adult literacy lessons because she was subjected to shame. She said: *I went to Tupoce to receive money and they said that all traditional leaders should sign their names. I asked my niece to sign for me but I felt some shame.* Although Ms. Duniya relied heavily on mediation in discharging her duties as a village headperson in her community, she was not happy with the same support in other contexts. She told me that on such occasions, the act of hunting for someone to sign for her was humiliating. All these challenges aside, it remained true that there were many individuals in this community who relied mostly, on their family members to mediate in some literacy practices they participated in.

This section has briefly looked at how some members of the community were able to participate in some literacy practices through the help of others. That is, although ability to read and write was a key factor and somehow impacted on community members' participation in some activities that required literacy, mediation seemed to offer them an alternative access route. Though others had some reservations about it, mediation was one of the key aspects of literacy

practices in this community. Ms. Suya's observation about literacy mediation not being a practice for the non-literate persons alone, was particularly revealing to me. This observation, in part mirrors the stance I subscribe to in this thesis that literacy is not a single entity. Rather, there are multiple literacies and that they are context bound. As such, even those individuals assumed to be literate sometimes need help to function fully in some literacy mediated contexts. In the next section I look at some literacy mediating artefacts namely the pen and inkpad.

## **5.6 Literacy Mediating Artefacts: Pen and Inkpad**

In the first section of this chapter, I looked at some community members' literacy practices and artefacts in various aspects of their lives. I noted that some documents such as the ration card in emergency food assistance, and the money card in the Social Cash Transfer programmes facilitated the participation of beneficiaries in these initiatives. To some extent, these documents evoked these initiatives as the lived worlds of those community members who participated in them. For instance, the ration card appeared to evoke a world of community members who were believed to be victims of natural disasters, i.e. "people affected by shocks." In this world, only those community members rendered food insecure by natural disasters were recognised as beneficiaries; free food distribution was the only act valued and the ration card was the only acceptable mediating artefact. In this regard, the card was not just a piece of paper. It had some value. Besides, it made some community members stand out as the most food insecure in the area. The same could be said about the money card.

However, in this section, I have decided to focus on two mediating artefacts namely, the pen and the inkpad because of two reasons. First, the two artefacts appeared to serve across the lived worlds, especially in those contexts where one was required to put a mark of one type or the other as evidence of their participation. In this regard, the two artefacts provided alternative ways for community members to confirm their participation in activities that required literacy. Second, and more importantly, the two mediating artefacts appeared to evoke some polarised emotions from community members who used them and in that respect, I thought they needed some particular attention.

Listening to some community members talk about their experiences in certain literacy practices, I got a sense that pens and inkpads were not just tools one used to acknowledge receipt of either food aid or cash. The two tools appeared to symbolise different worlds to which some community members either claimed or denied membership. The pen evoked the

world of the literate. In this regard, holding a pen was not just a physical act but also a declaration that one was literate. This appeared to have been the case when members of *Banki Yam'mudzi* told me that the only criterion they use to elect a member as a secretary was that they should be able to hold a pen. At the same time, the pen afforded some community members some pride and respect. For instance, Ms. Awali told me that she was no longer interested in acquiring a certificate from her literacy class. Instead

*I just go there to make sure that I master my name so that when we are called for some other activities I should be able to sign using a pen. I have already started doing this even when we were receiving fertilizer coupons I signed my name. When we went to the Assemblies of God to receive money to buy fertilizer I got hold of the pen and they said 'grandma, are you going to sign?' I said, yes. They said, 'we respect you!'* (Field notes: 21/11/2015).

In this exchange, the officers responsible for the programme appeared to doubt Ms. Awali's decision to choose a pen over inkpad. The officers perceived Ms. Awali as someone who was not able to read and write and perhaps, this was why they were surprised to see her get *hold of the pen*, hence the question, *are you going to sign?* And by using the pen to sign her name Ms. Awali earned herself *respect*.

Whilst the pen symbolised literacy and somehow afforded pride and respect to those who could *get hold of it*, the inkpad symbolised 'illiteracy,' thereby making those who pressed their thumbs on it as a way of signing, feel shame and humiliation. This state of affairs was exacerbated by the fact that although the inkpad provided non-literate community members opportunities to participate in activities that required writing, some officers had negative attitudes towards it. For example, Ms. Afiki, one of the adult literacy learners once complained in class that community members who were not able to read and write were looked down upon during the distribution of free mosquito nets. And when the supervisor asked as to whether the officers had ink or not she said: *they had it but they looked at you contemptuously*. As for some of the women who actually used the inkpad during such occasions, their feeling of shame and humiliation was profound as I noted with Ms. Faki.

*Sometimes I print using my thumb but I feel ashamed. Others are using a pen to sign their names and I am using a thumb print, it is shameful. As you leave you feel like the earth is going to open up and swallow you up. Now I am slowly learning how to write my name,* (Field notes: 28/05/2016).



In this exchange, the contrast between the feelings emanating from the use of the two artefacts came out very clearly to me. Whilst one could walk with their head up after using a pen, the other felt like the world was crumbling under their feet after using the inkpad.

When I tried to find out from Ms. Suwedi why she thought some officers did not like thumb printing, she told me that the officers said that *when you print using your thumb you spoil their forms because the ink spills over on to the lines others were supposed to sign in.*

However, not all community members appeared to be ashamed of thumb printing, i.e. the inkpad. Some saw it as a norm. During an FGD, Ms. Suya said:

*this is what we have been doing all these years. When they call us, they know that we are old. So, they grab our hands and make us print using our thumbs. Sometimes those who attend literacy classes write things that are not legible and the officials say 'you have not written anything meaningful here. Just print using your thumb.' Which one is more shameful than the other, to just go and print using your thumb straight away or to be told to print using your thumb after being stopped from signing?*  
(Field notes: 18/06/2016).

In this extract, Ms. Suya appeared to suggest that the pen did not always afford respect to those who used it. Rather the respect was earned through competence. As Ms. Suya put it, an unsuccessful attempt at using the pen brought with it damaging consequences.

But although Ms. Suya said that she did not have any problems with the use of inkpad, it appeared that she was just being pragmatic because as the discussion continued she said:

*we can go and enrol for adult literacy classes. But for us to be able to write is something I do not believe that it is possible. Our hands are a bit feeble. I do not think that we can handle the pen* (Field notes: 18/06/2016).

Here Ms. Suya appeared to suggest that the pen was best suited for the relatively young community members as opposed to the individuals considered to be old whose hands were *feeble*. To some extent, Ms. Suya implied that she did not have any other option than using the inkpad due to her perceived old age.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to explore the literacy practices and the artefacts some community members encountered in various figured worlds. My emphasis was not on providing detailed accounts of the figured worlds such community members participated in, rather it was on how the community members navigated through the literacy practices and artefacts privileged in

those figured worlds. In this regard, my analysis has revealed that community members encountered varied and multiple literacy practices facilitated by different and sometimes complex literacy artefacts. The chapter has also demonstrated that the complexity of the literacy artefacts had little, if at all any effect on community members' participation in various figured worlds due to mainly two reasons. First, the tasks which required reading and writing in these figured worlds did not oblige them to read and understand the artefacts. Second, community members always received some literacy support from others. In fact, the cases of Ms. Duniya and Ms. Suya, show that intergenerational interaction and learning was taking place in this community.

But the chapter has also illustrated that literacy mediation was far more complex than just giving help to code or decode the written word. There were some practical, emotional and self-image matters that the community members had to grapple with. Thus, although mediation allowed some community members to participate in some literacy practices privileged in their lived worlds, it did so at a cost.

Related to the issue of mediation was the use of two literacy mediating artefacts namely the pen and the inkpad. The chapter has demonstrated that just like mediation, the use of these artefact aroused mixed feelings. Here too, I have demonstrated that literacy shaming was far more complex than one would imagine. Factors such as age, an individual's social status as well as the officers' attitudes towards one's literacy abilities or inabilities mattered. What was critical to me though was the fact that the two artefacts epitomised literacy and 'illiteracy' such that by employing either of the two one was making a claim of a literacy identity.

In this chapter, I have also illustrated, how some of the artefacts, especially in government and donor assisted programmes had more than one purpose. For example, whilst the government and the donor agencies employed money and ration cards for gatekeeping, record keeping and identification, some community members used the same artefacts primarily as identity cards. At the same time, whilst the government and donor agencies employed artefacts such as the agricultural leaflet and the mosquito net brochure as guides for the practices they were promoting, some community members used them as mementoes. This raises the question as to whether disseminating information through the written word was the best option for this community. In the next chapter, I look at community members' literacy discourses and meanings in some of their lived worlds.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCOURSES AND MEANINGS OF LITERACY

#### 6.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at how NALP officers and some community members framed literacy in general, and adult literacy learning in particular, through both what they said and did in various lived worlds. Essentially, I draw on my linguistics background, especially discourse analysis and the concept of figured world to analyse and make sense of community members' literacy discourses and meanings. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first part explores NALP officers' and community members' discourses and meanings of literacy in general, whilst the second one examines their discourses and meanings of adult literacy learning. I have made this distinction in order not to conflate my participants' understandings of literacy as 'the skills to be learnt' on the one hand, and their understandings of adult literacy learning as the process of 'mastering those skills' on the other. As it shall be seen, making such a distinction is crucial because among other things, it allows me to understand why some literacy learners who had already mastered the skills of reading and writing enrolled for literacy classes. Besides, it allows me to understand why, as I illustrated in chapter 5, some literacies were sought after by adult literacy learners who had not yet mastered the reading and writing skills. Based on this distinction, in the first part, I look at literacy as reading bus and road signs, literacy as signing one's name, literacy as knowing, and 'illiteracy' as visual impairment. In the second part, I deal with adult literacy learning as school, adult literacy learning as continuing with one's education and adult literacy learning as development.

#### 6.1 NALP Officers' and Community Members' Literacy Discourses

In chapter 2, I pointed out that Chichewa does not have a single word for the English term 'literacy.' Instead, when both NALP officers and community members talked about literacy they usually used a descriptive phrase *kulemba ndi kuwerenga* (writing and reading). The same was the case with Ciyawo in which literacy was rendered as *kulemba ni kuwalanga*. However, interacting and listening to them talk about their experiences with literacy in different figured worlds, I got the impression that their thoughts about literacy were fluid. In the subsections that follow, I look at each of their portrayals of literacy and adult literacy learning separately.

### **6.1.1 Literacy as Reading Bus and Road Signs**

Owing to the difference in terminology between English and the local languages which I have stated above, much of what I am dealing with in this subsection was deduced from the context of what both the adult literacy officers and some community members portrayed as the purpose of adult literacy. In almost all instances, both the NALP officers' and the community members' literacy meanings and discourses appear to be influenced largely by the dominant official discourses. For instance, during one of the literacy lessons the supervisor told the adult literacy learners that when people talk about someone being in school the key issue is reading. He said:

*For people to know you, you should be able to read and write. No one would ask you anything concerning maths along the street. But you may encounter road signs and you shall not see maths written on road signs. But the most important thing is for one to be able to read. Therefore, I should say for the time being we should focus on reading.*

Here the supervisor emphasised to the adult literacy learners that the only thing other community members would use to recognise them as participants in the figured world of adult literacy learning was their ability to read and write. He valued reading more than the other skills and downplayed numeracy altogether.

On their part, some adult literacy learners too, portrayed literacy in terms of reading. For example, during an FGD with me, Ms. Maulana, Ms. Tweya, Ms. Usi and Ms. Sanatu informed me that literacy was important because it would enable them to read road signs and avoid being lost in the figured world of travel. These adult literacy learners told me that they would not rely on other people's help because some of them could not be trusted.

Overall, the literacy learners who saw literacy as reading bus and road signs employed the general discourse model that is prevalent in Malawi. Stories are usually told about individuals who are bitten by dogs because of their failure to read warning signs. Some stories feature individuals who are shamed because they took wrong buses due to their failure to read the boards stating the routes the buses were taking. Such stories could explain the links between literacy and the reading of bus and road signs discussed in this section.

### **6.1.2 Literacy as Signing One's Name.**

Although signing one's name might as well be regarded as writing, I thought that it deserved a separate discussion because it seemed to take centre stage when I interacted with some community members in different social activities. Ability to sign one's name appeared to be

very important because as I understood it, the community was benefiting from a number of government and non-governmental relief and related programmes in which this skill featured highly (see chapter 5). In view of this, some adult literacy learners, such as Ms. Awali told me that their goal for attending the literacy classes was to either consolidate or master their ability to write their names. To Ms. Awali in particular, being able to write her name made her proud because it earned her some respect in some figured worlds. In fact, the village headman frequently cited her as one of the success stories of the adult literacy class. He said that she made him proud.

Similar stories were narrated by Ms. Suwedi. When I asked about her involvement in the adult literacy class she said:

*For me to be found in that literacy class I had problems. I had problems because I do not like borrowing money from women's groups. I go and borrow money from other groups and there they do not accept thumb printing. They insist that one should sign their names. I did borrow the money but in most cases it was after struggles. They wrote my name on a piece of paper from where I copied on to their forms. They said they did not want any thumb print on their forms. So when I heard that there was an adult literacy class at Sawabu I said that is good. I should be able to write just my name only.*

In this excerpt, Ms. Suwedi too, appeared to suggest that she saw the adult literacy class as an opportunity not just for learning how to read and write in general, but *to write just my name only*.

Although thumb printing also served the purpose, what the women did not like was that sometimes they were scorned for not being able to sign their names. This appeared to have been the case when the women went to receive free mosquito nets and some of the literacy learners complained about it in class as I illustrated in chapter 5.

Apart from being shamed, the literacy learners also cited other problems arising from their inability to sign their names in such figured worlds. Ms. Balala informed me that

*if you are not able to read and write, you wait until the end. As a result, you waste your time because you allow people who came after you to go in front.... But if you are able to sign your name, you are full of confidence since you know that you are able to do anything.*

Here Ms. Balala highlighted two problems arising from one's inability to sign their name in some figured worlds. First, you are attended to last as officers tend to prioritise those that are able to sign their names, thereby making you lose time in the process. Second, being unable to sign your name made you lose your self-belief.

Judging from the problems these women said they were experiencing in their lived worlds, I somehow understood the reason why they seemed to narrow down literacy to signing one's name. It was something that was 'functional' in their lives. As Ms. Kalako told me *even at the hospital, these days one faces problems when one goes to deliver a baby. When the baby is born you are told to sign your name. If you fail to sign they use foul language against you.* These examples suggest that formal institutions obsessed with record keeping practices appeared to be the ones that provided this view of literacy some significance.

However, although those adult literacy learners who were able to sign their names were respected and to some extent, were perceived as 'literate' in some figured worlds, the same individuals were officially portrayed as "non-literate." (I look at such conflicting identities in the chapter 9). In other words, the shifting portrayals of literacy made some community members' subject positions unstable thereby making their literacy identities fluid.

To sum up, some adult literacy learners' understanding of literacy as signing one's name gained currency due to the experiences they had in some of their lived worlds. Whilst some had positive experiences others did not. This was the case because signing ones' name appeared to be more than just a physical act. It was also a claim of one's social status. (I discuss positioning and identity in detail in the chapter 7).

### **6.1.3 Literacy as Knowing**

When I started observing the literacy classes, the most common discourse which both literacy instructors and adult literacy learners employed regarding literacy was that of knowing. What fascinated me was the fact that when the literacy officers and community members talked about literacy as *knowing*, they expressed it mostly as a deficit. For instance, during an informal discussion with me, the supervisor said: *Ms. Maulidi and Ms. Suwedi did not know anything at the time they were joining the literacy classes.* And according to the instructor, women such as Ms. Maulidi and Ms. Suwedi were the most eligible persons to participate in the figured world of adult literacy learning because such lessons were *for individuals who do not know anything.* In an interview with me, the literacy instructor elaborated what *not knowing anything* meant. She said: *when we talk about not knowing anything we mean that that person did not know even a single letter.* This explanation was echoed by Ms. Kalako who told me that she had enrolled for the literacy classes because *I wanted to know 'a.'* *I was just staying at home but I did not know 'a.'*

However, as the supervisor told me, ‘*not knowing anything*’ did not just have one meaning. He said that apart from referring to the inability to read and write, ‘*not knowing anything*’ also meant being ignorant. The latter meaning resonated with the broader NALP literacy discourse. As I stated in chapter 2, the Malawi government singled out poverty, ignorance and disease as its enemies. One way of dealing with these enemies, especially ignorance was thought to be through offering adult literacy classes. Therefore, one may not be surprised to note that the community members framed ‘illiteracy’ as *umbuli* (not knowing anything) i.e. ignorance. In other words, this view of literacy had its roots from the dominant official discourses prevalent in the country. What this suggests is that *literacy as knowing* implied more than just knowing ‘a,’ i.e. being able to read. It encompassed the acquisition of knowledge too. Some literacy learners such as Ms. Balala, talked about and perceived literacy in this way. She told me that there were many things that are learnt in the adult literacy class *such as good cooking practices which I would not have known if I were not attending the literacy lessons*. A similar way of looking at literacy emerged from the remarks made by one of the literacy officers at the district office when he said: *our programme is called functional adult literacy. Why the word functional? It is functional because what we want is a result oriented programme. The aim is not that our graduates should get employed. We want them to do in their homes what we teach them in class*. Here the officer suggested that the literacy lessons were meant to achieve more than reading and writing. That is, in line with the national adult literacy policy, the officer expected the literacy learners to acquire some knowledge which they would put into practice at home. But as I illustrate later in this chapter, the application of knowledge assumed to have been acquired from the adult literacy class was more complex than the officer seemed to suggest.

To conclude, for some literacy learners, literacy was not just about the acquisition of the reading and writing skills. They justified their presence in the literacy classes despite being able to read and write because to them, literacy also meant gaining ‘new’ knowledge. For some, inability to read and write meant being ignorant thereby giving an assumption that knowledge can only be acquired from written sources. This perception mirrors the government policy discourses I looked at in chapter 2.

#### **6.1.4 ‘Illiteracy’ as Visual Impairment**

Sometimes when I chatted with some community members, they talked about literacy in terms of its converse i.e. ‘illiteracy.’ In this regard, I encountered some community members who

portrayed ‘illiteracy’ as visual impairment. For example, when I talked to the instructor at her home she told me that *an individual who is not able to read and write is the same as someone who is visually impaired because although they may have their eyes open, they can’t make out what the letters mean*. She told me that such people were supposed to be taught each letter of the alphabet.

Thom shared similar views. Thom was a 43 year old young man from Sawabu village. He withdrew from primary school in grade 7 and he was not attending the literacy classes. He told me that he was a motor vehicle mechanic but that he was not able to get a job because the prospective employers were demanding that he should pay them a surety. Thus, Thom turned to farming and brick making as his major sources of income. From the latter he built a house and he bought a cow.

Thom told me that non-literate persons were somehow handicapped. He said: *The person who is unable to read and write is like a visually impaired person. This is because these days everything hinges on school. A person who is not able to read and write does not know anything. They are in the dark*. Here, Thom appeared to use the words reading and writing as being synonymous to school. At the same time, he too equated ‘illiteracy’ to being visually impaired. He seemed to view ‘illiteracy’ as a disease whose remedy lay in the literacy lessons. In the same vein, he also positioned non-literate persons as individuals who lived in the dark. This characterisation appeared to resonate with the phrase used to refer to adult literacy classes in vernacular, i.e. *sukulu za kwacha* which could literally be rendered as ‘schools of daybreak.’ Thus, if non-literate persons are in the dark, then they need ‘schools of daybreak’ to provide light to help them see. Somehow, Thom created a link among darkness/visual impairment (ignorance), school/reading and writing (literacy) and knowing. That is, the darkness appeared to arise from not being able to read and write (school). To Thom, *school means getting rid of ignorance. You go to school to know things*. In other words, the darkness could only be cleared through learning how to read and write and the individual will now know things.

In this section, I have illustrated how the community members and the literacy officers perceived ‘illiteracy.’ These meanings and discourses are very important because on the one hand, they show how the community member’s experiences with literacy in their lived worlds shape their understanding of it, and how government and other dominant and official literacy discourses permeate and influence the community members’ views of the same on the other. In a way, the multiple literacy meanings and discourses signalled what the adult literacy



learners expected from their literacy class. As such, I would argue that exploring all these literacy discourses and meanings is crucial because in part, it would help us understand how community members position themselves or are positioned in the figured world of adult literacy learning. In the next section, I look at discourses and meanings of adult literacy learning.

## **6.2 NALP Officers' and Community Members' Discourses and Meanings of Adult Literacy Learning**

This section looks at NALP officers' and community members' discourses and meanings of adult literacy learning. Just like literacy, it appeared that NALP officers and some community members framed adult literacy learning in different ways. In this section, I look at adult literacy learning as school, adult literacy learning as continuing with one's education and adult literacy learning as development.

### **6.2.1 Adult Literacy Learning as School**

Generally, both NALP officers and some community members commonly talked about adult literacy and literacy lessons as school. This could be understood because as I stated in chapter 2, the official documents written in vernacular, refer to adult literacy as *sukulu za kwacha*, which could literally be translated as 'schools of daybreak.' In other words, the origin of the understanding of adult literacy learning as school can be traced in part, from the Malawi government literacy policy discourses. However, what was interesting to me was not the mere fact that the literacy officers, especially those based in the village, as well as some community members thought about adult literacy learning as school, rather it was what they did in playing out their roles in accordance to the 'school culture' which I discuss in chapter 8. The 'school culture' appeared to create the impression that the adult literacy class was the same as any formal primary school. For instance, during a focus group discussion, Ms. Maulana, Ms. Tweya, Ms. Usi and Ms. Sanatu told me that they saw no difference between adult literacy lessons and formal schools. That is, they said that their literacy class was the same as primary schools like Akapela or Cipago.

Similarly, when I talked with other literacy learners such as Ms. Maulidi, I was told that their literacy class was *school* because they learn just like kids do. Ms. Maulidi told me that her 'school' was not different from formal schools because kids *go to school to learn how to read and write, we too go there to learn the same in addition to counting our money.*

Apart from the adult literacy learners, literacy officers too, portrayed adult literacy learning in terms of school. For instance, the Chichewa literacy instructors told me that one of the reasons why some adult literacy learners had difficulties with reading was that they *do not focus much on what they learn in school*. She also told me that at the beginning, she received requests from some literacy learners who wanted to enrol for literacy lessons to be helped on certain types of literacies but that such requests were against what the programme expected her to do. She said: *I went to the village headman to talk about such people and he told me to enrol them. He said they too want school.*

I observed similar portrayals of adult literacy classes as school from the supervisor. During one of the literacy lessons, the literacy learners expressed their concerns regarding the difficulties they were experiencing when learning Chichewa because of their Ciyawo language background. The supervisor encouraged them not to give up by paying attention to what they were learning in ‘school.’

*Supervisor: Just have some interest in what we are doing in school. When we tell you that this is ‘tha’<sup>7</sup> you should take it that “they are saying this is tha.” School is the same, age does not matter. It is still school.*

*Ms. Awali: Children also learn the same things.*

*Supervisor: Yes. You will find the same things we are learning here in primary even secondary schools. Everywhere it is the same letters. The only difference is how they are taught. But if we talk about Chichewa don’t we have ‘tha’ in primary school? Don’t pupils in grade 5 learn ‘tha’? We are also learning ‘tha’? In these primers we have some arithmetic problems which even a pupil in grade 7 may fail to solve.*

*Literacy learners: Yes, that’s true!*

*Supervisor: So school is the same.*

Although the supervisor was talking about the similarities of the letters, he also emphasised that adult literacy classes were not different from formal schools. He said that *school is the same, age does not matter*.

Since adult literacy learning was seen as a school, I noted that participants in this figured world played out their roles in tandem with the ‘school culture’ which I discuss in chapter 8. For instance, just like what I experienced during my own primary and secondary school days in

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to syllables, tha, the, thi, tho, thu, just like ba, be, bi, bo, bu.

which the teachers were deemed as our major sources of knowledge, the instructor was expected to play the same role whilst the adult literacy learners were expected to take the role similar to that of schoolchildren *who did not know anything*. One of the literacy learners, Ms. Mkakosya, alluded to this. Talking about her adult literacy class, she said:

*that one is called school because the instructor prepares the content to teach us, reading writing and arithmetic. In that way, it is not different from primary school. In primary school too, the teacher prepares what to teach the pupils, reading writing, arithmetic and English. ...When we were going to register for the literacy lessons we wanted to learn the same things we were learning in primary school, (Field notes, 23/07/2016).*

In a way, this kind of thinking appeared to limit the agency of some of the adult literacy learners in pursuing their desired interests. In this excerpt, Ms. Mkakosya justified the school orientation by drawing parallels in terms of the roles played by different participants in this figured world. According to her, the duty of the instructor was to prepare the content whilst the adult literacy learners were supposed to receive that content just like they do in primary schools.

But such distinct teacher-learner roles created some expectations which to some extent, put pressure on the instructors. Some of these expectations appeared to determine their job security (see chapter 9). That is, since the role of the instructor was to deliver the content which was scripted and the adult literacy learners were required to master it, poor performance in the national exams was largely blamed on the former. For example, one of the literacy officers at the district office told me that sometimes when they administer reading exams, some adult literacy learners just tell stories that are not on the question paper. He said: *when this happens, we know that they are half backed (sic). We tell the instructors that they did not do a good job*. What this suggests is that adult literacy learners' exam performance was believed to mirror the teaching capabilities of the instructors. In fact, during one of the literacy lessons, the supervisor informed the adult literacy learners that the overall performance of their class was better than in some of the literacy centres. He cited one adult literacy centre where *twenty adult literacy learners sat for the exams but none passed and the instructor was sacked from her job*. In this case, the instructor was fired not because she never facilitated the literacy lessons but because her literacy learners did not pass the exams. In other words, as a school, the teacher was expected to take responsibility for the failure of her learners. As I illustrate in the chapter 9, this practice of using adult literacy learners' exam performances to gauge the literacy instructors' teaching capabilities to some extent, influenced some instructors' perceptions regarding the purpose of exams.

Thus, at surface level, the ‘school culture’ with its teacher-learner dichotomies may look innocent, but as I discuss in chapter 8, it somehow cultivated some asymmetric power relationships which in some cases, limited the adult literacy learners’ voices in decision-making processes. This was the case because the participants tried to play out their roles by occupying their expected subject positions in literacy practices as another literacy learner, Ms. Matiki, explained to me during an informal conversation.

*Ms. Matiki: Sometimes the instructor gives orders and since we are ‘initiates’<sup>8</sup> we just follow what the instructors say. If we object to what they say it would appear as if we are being disrespectful to them.... At school, there is always someone in authority sometimes a headmaster.*

*Me: Do you consider adult literacy classes as being the same as formal schools?*

*Ms. Matiki: Yes, they are the same*

*Me: Are there no differences?*

*Ms. Matiki: No, there are none. If you go to primary schools, they have a, e, i, o, u and at adult literacy classes we also have these. The only difference is that we are not flogged whilst in primary school when you do something wrong they flog you. (Field notes, 01/04/2016).*

Here Ms. Matiki positioned the adult literacy learners including herself in a powerless subservient subject position, ‘initiates.’ The only consolation was that *when we do something wrong we are not flogged*. This situation arose because as she said, *at school there is always someone in authority...* and surely that someone was not the adult literacy learner because she told me that she was a *schoolchild* and therefore, *the instructors give me orders*. Similar views were expressed by other literacy learners such as Ms. Faki and Ms. Afadi. The two told me that they went to the adult literacy class to learn how to read and write and that they did not specify the kind of literacy they wanted. When I asked them as to who should have the authority to decide what should be taught and learnt they categorically said: *The instructors are the ones who should have such authority. We do not say what we want because we are afraid of the instructors*. These remarks echo those of Ms. Mkakosya I cited earlier and they thrash out a clear division of labour. What is striking in these remarks is that the adult literacy learners said that they were afraid of their instructors although their interactions at the literacy centre did not support this. To me, the instructors appeared to be flexible and they sometimes took the

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<sup>8</sup> Ms. Matiki used the term ‘*wali*’ which in Ciyawo language refers to the youths who are undergoing the initiation processes. As initiates the youths are so powerless that they cannot do anything without being told, i.e. generally, they do not have any say.

initiative to ask the literacy learners to state what they wanted to learn. What was certain though was that the literacy learners respected their instructors and whenever the adult literacy learners addressed either their instructors or supervisor in person they did not use their names. They called them *madamu* (madam) and *sala* (sir) respectively. In a way, these address terms created a social distance that allowed a teachers-learner relationship to thrive, thereby somehow shrinking the space within which the adult literacy learners would freely state what they wanted to gain from the literacy lessons as Ms. Faki and Ms. Afadi stated. However, these relationships were not firmly fixed. There were instances when they were disrupted and I illustrate this in detail in chapter 8.

To conclude, literacy learners including their literacy instructors saw adult literacy learning as school. This was understood because government documents written in vernacular address adult literacy as school. However, as this section has illustrated, this discourse allowed a subservient and conformist attitude to thrive amongst the adult literacy learners. Whilst such an attitude helped in cultivating a harmonious working environment, it somehow impeded the harnessing of the literacy learners' 'funds of knowledge' for the benefit of all because in this school model, it was the instructor who had the authority to decide what was supposed to be learnt.

## **6.2.2 Adult Literacy Learning as Continuing with one's Education**

During my interaction with some community members, especially adult literacy learners, I got a sense that in addition to portraying adult literacy learning as school, they also thought about it as an avenue for continuing with one's education. For instance, one of the literacy learners, Ms. Msosa, told me she did not like the idea of mixing adult literacy learners whom she called "*knew everything*" with those she said "*did not know even 'a.'*" She said:

*For me I see that Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Afiki, Ms. Balala, Ms. Abasi, are doing much better. These should have been promoted to a different level and that would be understood. These women know everything and they can even teach us. But the rest have a long way to go.... You know, someone who withdrew from primary school in grade 5 goes to the literacy class with a view of continuing with their education. They want to go beyond grade 5 (Field notes, 05/02/2016).*

To overcome the mixing problem, Ms. Msosa suggested a formal school model where the learners were separated and put in different classes based on their competencies. Another literacy learner, Ms. Imani, echoed these views saying *when the adult literacy classes came, I said let me join so that I should be able to know some of the things I did not finish learning in*

*primary*. In these remarks, it was clear to me that Ms. Imani, just like Ms. Msosa, saw the adult literacy classes as continuing with one's education. Here, Ms. Imani suggests that she had some unfinished business in as far as her education was concerned. She therefore, saw adult literacy classes as a way forward. Similar thoughts were shared by Ms. Sanatu, Ms. Tweya, Ms. Usi and Ms. Maulana. The four literacy learners told me that they wanted to continue with their education because when they withdrew from school they had not yet mastered many things.

To sum up, the discourse of adult literacy learning as continuing with one's education is significant because it explains why some women who already knew how to read and write enrolled for the literacy classes. As I explained in chapter 2, some of the women who were attending the literacy lessons withdrew from formal schools due to various reasons and as this section shows, some of them were still harbouring some ambitions to carry on with their education. But as I discuss in chapter 8, these school-based discourses created a 'school culture' that in turn evoked some hopes in the adult literacy learners that turned out to be unattainable. As such, these adult literacy learners were frustrated when they realised that their 'school' or 'education' could not help them achieve their goals or get access to the opportunities they desired.

### **6.2.3 Adult Literacy Learning as Development**

As I continued with my fieldwork interacting and talking, especially with some adult literacy learners, I noted that just as I had observed during my study for a Master's Degree at Chancellor College in 2010, most of the women who were attending the literacy classes at this centre had gone up to grade 4 and above during their primary school. As such, there were many of them who came for the literacy lessons already able to read and write. These were in fact, the ones Ms. Msosa described as '*knew everything*.' According to the literacy instructor, such literacy learners were not supposed to be enrolled in the first place because adult literacy classes were *for individuals who do not know anything*. However, she told me that she did not follow this regulation because *the literacy classes are viewed as development*.

What was interesting to me from this utterance was how the word *development* was understood. In this case, development was not used to refer to what was being taught in class, i.e. the messages. Rather, it was the presence of the adult literacy class in the community which was

seen as development and therefore, everyone was required to support it by attending the literacy classes. This appeared to be the case when Ms. Matiki<sup>9</sup> said:

*that school is in my village. So, if no one from here attends those lessons they will say 'the owners'<sup>10</sup> are not coming. They want us to make a name for their village .... And these girls say that if I withdraw from those classes, they too will leave. That is why I am still attending those literacy lessons, (Field notes, 14/11/2015).*

Ms. Matiki's remarks suggest that her primary concern was to ensure that the literacy class, whose presence signalled development taking place in her community, continued to be operational. As an aunt to the village headperson, she assumed that it was her duty to ensure that the literacy class succeeded. Thus, to her the learning of reading and writing was inconsequential. The village headman too saw the presence of the literacy class as development. He told me that before he was installed as the leader of the community, the village lacked many things. He said he tried very hard to bring some *development* to his community citing roads, water taps and both the nursery and adult literacy schools among them.

Apart from looking at the literacy class as development in terms of a physical activity some adult literacy learners situated it within the context of economic development. Ms. Mkakosya told me that when the *school* opened many women enrolled because they thought they were going to benefit from it economically. She said:

*at that time, we were told that there were going to be different groups at the adult literacy school. Some would be learning home craft. Others would be learning how to conduct businesses.... It was reported that we were going to be given some loans to start small businesses. This is when many women flocked to that class. There were also rumours that women were going to be given goats and chickens to breed. This is why many women rushed to that class. When they saw that such things were not forthcoming, they decided to withdraw from the literacy classes, (Field notes, 23/07/2015).*

In this case, the women extended their perception of adult literacy learning to encompass economic empowerment. Apparently, these assumptions arose from the fact that as I already stated in chapter 4, the MP who funded the construction of the building was known for her work in women empowerment initiatives. I was told that close to a hundred women enrolled at that time. This large turn-out was not surprising because most of the women in the area were engaged in small-scale businesses.

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<sup>9</sup> Ms. Matiki was the aunt of the village headperson.

<sup>10</sup> 'Owners' meant the community members resident in the village in which the literacy class was operating.

On their part, NALP officers also framed adult literacy learning in terms of development albeit from a different perspective. They projected adult literacy learning in terms of social change. Their focus was to see the adult literacy learners do what they learnt in class. Thus, to some extent, it was assumed that the adult literacy learners were ignorant about the issues they read from their literacy primers hence, they were expected to *absorb* such knowledge. Thereafter, they were expected to do what they had absorbed hence social transformation. I should quickly point out that the officer's perceptions of literacy were shaped by official literacy policy discourses. For instance, in the final Draft National Adult Literacy Policy, The Government of the Republic of Malawi defines adult literacy as

a learning process designed to equip illiterate beneficiaries aged 15 and above with specialized knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques to independently engage in listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy, technical and critical thinking intended to promote the development of active citizenship (p. 6).

Looking at this definition critically, I got the impression that reading and writing were not the primary concerns of the policy makers of the literacy programme. The adult literacy learners, whom the definition appears to project as being deficient, are required to be *equipped* not with the abilities to read and write but with specialised knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques. Perhaps, this was why the literacy officer at the district office said: *the reading and writing is secondary*.

Apart from the definition above, the stories which the adult literacy learners discussed from the primer also made the goal of the NALP clear to me. The stories were framed in the manner that denigrated the assumed local knowledge systems which the literacy learners were perceived to possess, and glorified the 'new' ones which the programme assumed they were lacking. This portrayal is evident in the story that follows.



### **This is not a Good Eating Practice**

At Mr. Masina's household when they have chicken for a meal children are not happy. Food is prepared early. Parents eat the '**delicious**' parts. Children are given chicken feet and the head. The parts with **lots of meat** are kept for the husband. Children know that in the evening they will eat **leftovers**.

Parents this is not a good practice.

Children are required to eat the right type of food. It is not good for children to eat together with old people because they do not eat enough. Children must eat separately from old people. Parents we should not forbid children from eating eggs. Eggs are important for our children to grow fast.

Source: *Chuma ndi Moyo* (2014) Lesson 12.

The structure of this story epitomises the assumption the NALP has regarding the state of knowledge and practices the adult literacy learners have and what it expects them to be and do upon completion. The story begins by providing the 'inappropriate' practice which presumably typifies what the adult literacy learners know and do (first four lines). Then, the narrator of the story not only disqualifies the assumed inappropriate eating practice but also changes their role in the story. That is, they change from being just a narrator to an adjudicator by passing a judgement directed not just at the Masina family but at all parents in general, which presumably include the adult literacy learners (line standing alone).

The statement of disqualification is followed by what are regarded to be appropriate 'modern' practices of eating which the literacy learners ought to learn and adopt (last four lines). Apparently, this is the process the literacy officers at the district office referred to when they told me that what they wanted was to see change in the behaviour of literacy learners. Thus, the officers appeared to interactively position the adult literacy learners as lacking the knowledge or practices the programme was promoting. At the same time, this story appears to typify how the figured world of social change is constructed and reified. In this case, the figuring begins with imagining the 'unwanted' traditions represented by the eating practices

that are adjudged to be wrong. Then, those wrong practices have to be erased from the literacy learners' minds through the adoption of the seemingly culturally neutral practices which are somewhat, universally acceptable.

Paradoxically, although some adult literacy learners perceived literacy as knowing in the sense of knowledge acquisition, they appeared not to take the learning of such knowledge seriously. For instance, when the instructor asked them during a literacy lesson whether they put chlorine into or boiled their drinking water they said: *we just drink. We just drink since this is a rural area.* Others said: *it will sieve itself in the stomach.* And some concluded *it is time wasting. Boiled water does not taste good.* What these views suggest is that the use of knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques which the programme advocated was not as straightforward as the officer appeared to project. In fact, it was not just a matter of whether one knew or did not know the issue at hand. Neither was it just a matter of whether resources were available or not. I noted that sometimes the use of such knowledge was a matter of trust and personal values. For instance, in this community chlorine dispensers were installed almost at each and every water tap (see picture overleaf). But when I sat on the veranda of the literacy class waiting for literacy learners to come, I observed women come and draw water from a water tap planted just about 15 metres away from the class. I never saw any of them put chlorine drops in their water buckets. Whilst Ms. Matiki told me that community members avoided the chemical because they did not like the smell and that some felt like vomiting when they drunk water treated with chlorine, the village headman said:

*I have established that people are not using the chlorine because they suspect that the government is using it as a trick. They are saying that the government wants to reduce our child bearing capabilities. It is a form of contraception* (Field notes, 10/06/2016).

Somehow, the community members' suspicions seemed to have been heightened by the fact that it was a health worker from the nearby clinic who presided over the installation and handing over of the chlorine equipment and not officers from the institution that supplied water to the area.



Figure 18: Blue Chlorine Dispenser

Any tap that had a chlorine dispenser had a committee which was responsible for collecting the chlorine from the local clinic and ensuring that the dispenser had the chlorine all the time. Community members who drew water from the taps were expected to position their water containers under the dispenser and draw out a drop for a 5-litre water container, or 2 drops for a 10-litre water bucket. But as I have noted, I saw none doing it at this tap.

What the state of affairs described above suggests is that effecting social change in this community would require more than disseminating knowledge and availability of resources. The chlorine example shows that community members were protesting against social change which was being propagated because they had some deep-rooted cultural norms as well as fears that could not just be dismissed as bad practices. Perhaps, there was need to establish, understand and dialogue over these norms and fears before promoting any change. The examples I have looked at in this section show that the assumption that knowledge leads to practice is erroneous.

In this section, I have looked at NALP officers' and community members' literacy discourses and meanings. Just like literacy, adult literacy learning too, was portrayed in several ways. To some extent, these discourses and meanings appeared to mirror what the officers and adult literacy learners expected from the literacy classes. However, whilst some of the literacy practices at the literacy centre reflected the adult literacy learning discourses and meanings such as those of school and development, others for instance, that of continuing with one's education were somehow muted. That is, I did not witness any literacy learning activities that promoted some adult literacy learners' zeal to move forward with their education. Instead, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, the adult literacy learners who perceived adult literacy learning as continuing with one's education were frustrated by what they considered to be 'repeating the same class.' What has come out clearly for me in this section, is that the promotion of some of the discourses of adult literacy learning such as that of school, cultivated formal relationships that somehow, favoured the voice of the instructors to be heard at the expense of the literacy learners (more on this in chapter 8).

### **6.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at NALP officers' and community members' discourses and meanings of both literacy and adult literacy learning. I have shown that both literacy and adult literacy learning were perceived and understood in different ways. However, whilst the discourses and meanings appeared to be diverse, perceiving adult literacy learning as school appeared to take centre stage. This was the case partly because official documents written in vernacular portray adult literacy learning as school.

The chapter has also shown that some literacies such as signing one's name gained significance due to the experiences some community members went through in other figured worlds. Thus, signing one's name was cherished because first, for those who could sign their names, they earned some respect whilst those who could not, faced shame and humiliation. Second, it helped them participate with ease in activities where this skill was demanded. Third, signing their names was not just a physical act demanded by office procedures, it was also a proclamation of their literacy identities.

The chapter has also shown that adult literacy learners and the literacy officers at the district office had different perspectives about development. Whilst the official stance emphasised social change, I have shown that literacy learners resisted it due to their own cultural norms

and fears which the promoters of this change appeared to downplay. Besides, I have also shown that some community members saw the establishment of the literacy centre itself, as development and therefore, it required their support. This is the same support they rendered to other initiatives such as the building of the structure in which the literacy lessons and nursery school were being held. In a way, this mirrored the active citizenship advocated in the policy discourse cited earlier. Some expected the literacy lessons to be linked to livelihoods but this never happened.

Overall, I have noted that these literacy and adult literacy learning meanings and discourses embody some community members' expectations from their literacy lessons. In view of this, I have argued that exploring these literacy and adult literacy learning discourses and meanings is crucial because in part, it would help us understand how community members position themselves or are positioned by others in the figured world of adult literacy learning. Understanding such positioning is fundamental because not only does it underlie community members' literacy identities but it also mirrors power relationships both of which have implications to their participation in this figured world.

## CHAPTER 7

### POSITIONING IN THE FIGURED WORLD OF ADULT LITERACY LEARNING

#### 7.0 Introduction

At the end of chapter 6, I underscored the significance of examining and understanding participants' literacy and adult literacy learning discourses and meanings in relation to positioning in figured worlds. In this chapter, I explore how certain literacy practices and discourses positioned some adult literacy learners in different figured worlds. To do this, I draw on the literacy discourses and meanings I discussed in chapter 6 and examine some literacy practices in different figured worlds so as to understand the subject positions that were available to the adult literacy learners in various contexts. In this regard, I have identified from my data, eight interrelated subject positions namely *the educated*, *the knowledgeable*, *the uneducated*, *the not knowledgeable*, *the intelligent*, *the struggling*, *the instructor* and *the learner*. These phrases are derived from either the actual words my participants used in their discourses or from what I believe they implied by what they did or said.

To enhance my understanding of literacy as a social practice, my aim here is to explore how these literacy subject positions impacted on some adult literacy learners' self-image as well as their literacy learning in the figured world of adult literacy learning. I analyse these subject positions based on the theoretical perspectives which I discussed in chapter 3, especially concepts such as positioning, authoring, agency and cultural models (Holland *et al* (1992) as well as Davies' and Harré's (2007) ideas of interactive and reflexive positioning. Davies and Harré differentiate interactive and reflexive positioning as discursive instances in which 'what one person says positions another' and those in which 'one positions oneself' respectively. The subject positions I look at in this chapter are generally relational. Hence, I present them as dichotomies.

#### 7.1 The Educated and The Uneducated

Some of the most common subject positions available to the adult literacy learners in the figured world of adult literacy learning were those of *the educated* and *the uneducated*. The adult literacy learners positioned themselves or were positioned by others as *the educated* or

*the uneducated* based on their ability to read and write. That is, those adult literacy learners who could read and write were interactively positioned or they reflexively positioned themselves as *the educated* whilst those who were unable to read and write were assigned or took the subject position of *the uneducated*. Such positioning was not surprising since the adult literacy learners' primer explicitly stated that *ophunzira m'sukulu za kwacha ndi anthu a zaka...amene sanapeze mwayi wophunzira*<sup>11</sup> *kale* (the learners in adult literacy classes are individuals who did not have an opportunity to learn/study/be educated in the past). Hence, the adult literacy learners' *educated* and *uneducated* discourse might have been influenced by the discourses employed in official documents.

It should be pointed out from the outset however, that the subject positions many adult literacy learners were assigned to or identified themselves with were never rigid. Rather, they were fluid. In fact, even though some adult literacy learners, such as Ms. Msosa, appeared to accept the subject positions assigned to them by others, sometimes they re-authored them.

Ms. Msosa was a widow who withdrew from primary school in grade 3 because she had frequent discipline cases with the school authorities emanating from her numerous fights against her classmates. She told me that the fights came about because the teachers told the other pupils to laugh at her whenever she failed to read in class. When this happened, she picked on those pupils who laughed first and fought them after classes. Ms. Msosa was a mother of 8 children, 7 sons and one daughter. However, all the 7 sons passed on, leaving behind a number of grandchildren. Only the daughter was still alive. She told me that in the past, she had joined an adult literacy class but the lessons were discontinued because the instructor got married and went away with her husband. She said that she had now joined the literacy classes again because she wanted to be able to read the bible.

During an interview with me, I asked her about her progress and I also wanted to know whether she was at the same level with the other literacy learners. Ms. Msosa said:

*No, we are not and I am surprised that they mix us. Some of those literacy learners are educated. They can read everything. Now some are not able to read anything. They do not know even 'a.' So, what I see as a problem is that they just mix us. They do not separate us as grade ones, grade twos, grade threes etc. All of us are put in grade one. This is why there is confusion* (Field notes, 05/02/2016).

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<sup>11</sup> This word has multiple meanings i.e. learn, study or be educated.

In chapter 6, I noted that the meanings and discourses of literacy and adult literacy learning signalled the expectations and aspirations of some of the literacy learners. In the response above, Ms. Msosa confirms this observation. She was worried about the plight of the adult literacy learners who she said enrolled for the lessons with a view of continuing with their education. What caught my attention though was that she was talking about ‘others’ and I asked her where she put herself.

*Ms. Msosa:* No, I do not put myself in that group. I am not educated.

*Ms. Msosa:* Yes, there is no question about it. (Field notes: 05/02/2016).

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At the literacy class, Ms. Msosa was also interactively positioned as someone who was not able to read and write and therefore, *osaphunzira (the uneducated)*. In addition, the literacy practices at the literacy class somehow projected her as *the uneducated*. For instance, in the encounter below, the literacy practice positioned her as someone who was not able to write her name. On this occasion, the literacy task required the adult literacy learners to write their names on the chalkboard and Ms. Msosa was asked to do this. She was reluctant to participate in this activity. I encouraged her to try. She looked at how her name was spelt on her notebook first before going to the board.

*Supervisor: Are you trying to copy from your notebook?*

*Ms. Msosa: What?*

*Supervisor: Are you trying to copy from your notebook?*

*Ms. Msosa: But it shall disappear. Although I have seen it, it shall disappear. (Field notes: 22/10/2015).*

Ms. Msosa then wrote 'Ag' and said that she had forgotten. The supervisor asked another literacy learner, Ms. Mwenye, to help her and wrote 'Agnes Msosa.' He asked Ms. Msosa to copy this in her notebook.

In this encounter, both the classroom literacy activity and the supervisor positioned Ms. Msosa as someone who was not able to write. In this case, the literacy activity demanded that everyone involved should write their names from memory. Checking the way her name was written on her notebook was more or less cheating and therefore, was not acceptable. With all literacy learners looking on, and time being limited, Ms. Msosa was able to write just 'Ag' prompting the supervisor to call someone to help her. Apparently, it was incidents like these that led to her being positioned as *the uneducated* and she seemed to accept this subject position as I showed in the extract given earlier.

Consequently, whilst some of the adult literacy learners she mentioned in our conversation were allowed to enrol for the English literacy classes, she was not because only those adult literacy learners who were able to read and write in Chichewa, i.e. *the educated*, were eligible for that class.

But although both the literacy practices and the literacy officers interactively positioned Ms. Msosa as not being able to read and write and therefore, projected her as *the uneducated*, her

actions during the interview with me suggested otherwise. Ms. Msosa told me that she had a book which she sometimes read. As I flipped through the book, she ‘read’ all the words and stories on the pages I had some interest in including the ones shown in the picture below.



Figure 19: Ms. Msosa's Book

Ms. Msosa ‘read’ the words on page 84 as well as the short passage on page 85. By doing this, Ms. Msosa appeared to make me understand that she was able to read thereby reflexively positioning herself as *the educated*. That is, through her actions, she re-authored her literacy identity from *the uneducated* to *the educated* one. As we continued with the conversation, she told me that the perceived reading problems she encountered at the literacy centre emanated from the stories found in the official literacy primer.

*Ms. Msosa:* So some people said take this book and when you have time read it. It has ‘a, e, i, o, u.’ They said if you do not know these things you shall not progress in school. I am able to read in some areas of this book.

*Me:* Is that so?

*Ms. Msosa:* Yes. But when I go to the literacy class I note that what I read here and what we learn there is different.

*Me:* You mean the letters are different?

Ms. Msosa: *No. The letters are the same. They are not different. But the stories such as the one that says, 'A Beni afufuza bizinesi.' (Mr. Ben searches for a business).* (Field notes: 05/02/2016).

Here Ms. Msosa attributed her assumed failure to read and write at the adult literacy class to perceived differences in literacy artefacts. What was interesting to me was that Ms. Msosa's subject positions were fluid. That is, at the literacy class, the literacy practices and the literacy officers interactively positioned her as the 'not able to read and write,' and therefore, *the uneducated*. At home, she 'read' the book as she demonstrated to me, thereby projecting herself as someone who was able to read. Thus, she indirectly rejected the subject position assigned to her at the adult literacy class, thereby reflexively positioning herself as *the educated*.

Whilst Ms. Msosa appeared to have two opposing subject positions in two different lived worlds, other adult literacy learners such as Ms. Balala reflexively positioned themselves in opposing subject positions even within the same figured world.

Ms. Balala was one of the women Ms. Msosa interactively positioned as *the educated*. She was a single mother in her early 50s. She told me that she withdrew from her primary school in grade 6. She said that she enrolled for the literacy classes because she still had some other things she needed to know which she had not learnt in school. In other words, she saw adult literacy classes as one way of continuing with her education.

However, in the literacy class, Ms. Balala sometimes reflexively positioned herself as someone who had not yet mastered the reading and writing skills. In this regard, it was common to hear her tell the instructor that she was not able to read or write when she was asked to take part in some reading or writing activities. For instance, during one literacy lesson, she was asked to write some words on the board but she declined saying: *sinditha (I cannot)*. In addition, on several occasions Ms. Balala refused to be separated from the other literacy learners and be given her own slightly more difficult tasks suitable for *the educated* saying *I will learn together with everyone*. By saying this, Ms. Balala not only showed solidarity with her colleagues but also exercised her agency and reflexively positioned herself as one of the *uneducated* who needed the instructor's attention.

Paradoxically, Ms. Balala's actions on other occasions suggested that she reflexively positioned herself as *the educated*. Regularly, Ms. Balala complained that she was robbed of the opportunity of being an actor in the figured world of Social Cash Transfer Programme. She

told me that she was registered during the preliminary registration process and that she was given a slip (see chapter 5) which she said marked her eligibility for the programme. However, she said she was surprised that her name was missing on the final list. She said:

*They told us to keep the slip they gave us. They said we were going to use it to receive the money once the programme started. Then we were called to be photographed. Before the names were called out, the officials had a meeting behind the court. When they came back, they said whoever hears their name is the one who is going to benefit from the programme. The names were printed from the computer. But on this day, they were deleting some names with a pen. Does a computer have a pen? No it does not! I saw it with my own eyes. They deleted my name with a pen to bar me from receiving the money. (Field notes: 02/12/2015).*

Ms. Balala said that she was now *educated* and therefore she could not be cheated that her name was missed by the computer. She told me that she confronted the officers from other zones and they confided in her that it was officers from her own area who were responsible for her name's omission.

I should point out that although Ms. Balala was a woman, the deletion of her name did not seem to suggest that her gender played a part. I indirectly tried to understand her case during an interview with one of the programme officers who Ms. Balala always blamed for the omission. The officer, who was also a woman, told me that the registration process had two phases. The first one, in which Ms. Balala took part, involved collecting data from probable beneficiaries. The data gathered was punched into the computer which was programmed to code it. The second phase was then the actual identification of beneficiaries in which the said computer used the coded data to select the individuals based on pre-programmed set of criteria. The key issue that needed to be resolved though was what happened for Ms. Balala's name to appear on a list of beneficiaries from another village. I did not go that far because I did not have the mandate to so.

That said, I may add that due to being positioned as *the educated (the able to read and write)*, Ms. Balala had many opportunities to hold elected positions. During the elections of an adult literacy class committee, she was elected secretary. She also told me that she was elected as the secretary for the People's Party area committee. Moreover, she was also the secretary for the tap committee in her neighbourhood. In this regard, one would argue that her being positioned as *the able to read and write (the educated)* allowed her to not only participate in but also occupy positions of influence in various figured worlds.

## 7.2 The Knowledgeable and The Not Knowledgeable

Although the subject positions of *the knowledgeable* and *the not knowledgeable* were used interchangeably with *the educated* and *the uneducated*, I decided to separate them because *the knowledgeable* and *the not knowledgeable* seemed to encompass more than the adult literacy learners' ability to read and write. For instance, in vernacular *the knowledgeable* were positioned as *odziwa chichilichonse* (which could literally be translated as the all-knowing) and *the not knowledgeable* were positioned as *mbuli/osadziwa chilichonse* (the ignorant).

Even though none of the adult literacy learners positioned themselves as *mbuli* during the time of my fieldwork, they usually saw themselves as such prior to attending the adult literacy classes. That is, they consistently divided their identities into two. Their identity prior to enrolling for the literacy lessons was generally projected negatively compared to the one they identified themselves with after joining the classes. For example, Ms. Kalako told me that before attending the literacy classes she did *not know anything*. In the same vein, when the supervisor talked about Ms. Maulidi's status prior to enrolling for the literacy lessons he usually positioned her as *the not knowledgeable* and Ms. Maulidi usually accepted this literacy identity as seen in the conversation below.

Ms. Maulidi: *It is true that time I did not know anything*

Me: *Anything?*

Ms. Maulidi: *Yes, I did not know anything at the time I was enrolling for the literacy lessons*

Me: *Is that so?*

Ms. Maulidi: *Yes.*

Me: *I have always been surprised that you have been consistently mentioned as someone who did not know anything.*

Ms. Maulidi: *Yes, I did not know anything but I have been attending the literacy lessons for three years now.*

Me: *I see. (Field notes: 28/11/2015)*

In this exchange, Ms. Maulidi consistently positioned herself as *the not knowledgeable* prior to attending the literacy lessons. As we continued chatting, she told me that things had changed. She was now able to read and write. She said that she was happy that she was able to sign her name.

In some instances, the adult literacy learners positioned some of their colleagues as more knowledgeable than others. In the extract given earlier, Ms. Msosa identified Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Afiki, Ms. Balala, and Ms. Abasi as the adult literacy learners who *know everything and they can even teach us*. The classroom literacy practices somehow confirmed Ms. Msosa's observations. For instance, when solving arithmetic problems, the supervisor always insisted on the need to follow mathematical procedures. He usually asked the adult literacy learners to explain how they got their answers. Such practices positioned those adult literacy learners who were able to explain their answers as *the knowledgeable* whereas those who could not as *the not knowledgeable*. Apparently, driven by their desire to play out their subject position as *the knowledgeable*, two literacy learners, Ms. Balala and Ms. Imani, wanted the supervisor to explain why, in the problem given below, when we borrow 1 from 3 and bring it to the 2 we get 12 and not 3.

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{K532.00} \\ - \text{69.00} \\ \hline \end{array}$$

From the debate that ensued, it seemed as if the two adult literacy learners reflexively positioned themselves as *the knowledgeable* and interactively positioned the others as *the not knowledgeable*. The supervisor was very reluctant to answer the question but Ms. Balala did not relent.

Ms. Balala:

*What is the value of the 1 (one) we borrow from one number and bring it to the other? I notice that the number becomes sometimes 11 or 12, why should I make the other number become 11 or 12?*

Supervisor:

*If we were to explain the issue you have raised then we would confuse the others.*

The response given by the supervisor somehow reinforced Ms. Balala's quest to claim the subject position of *the knowledgeable*. The supervisor said it was the *others* who would be confused not her. I suspected that Ms. Balala's insistence on this matter might have originated from the questions her colleagues may have asked her in class since I regularly saw her explain to others during class work. Therefore, she appeared to be convinced that she was fighting for those who needed help.

Ms. Balala:

*No, just make it short. Just say that the 1 we take from there, ok can I just explain it*

Supervisor:

*Ok say it yourself*

Ms. Balala: *Should I say it*

Supervisor: *You have asked a question so that you should be answered*

Here the supervisor appeared to be in a dilemma. He gave Ms. Balala permission to explain to her friends what was involved but realised that he was abdicating his responsibility as a teacher to a literacy learner. Thus, the power relationships which I shall demonstrate in chapter 8, came into play hence his statement: *You have asked a question so that you should be answered*. What the supervisor implied here was that by asking the question it meant that Ms. Balala did not have an answer and therefore, it did not make sense that she should be the one answering the question. In a way, the supervisor was trying to bring Ms. Balala back to her perceived subject position of *the not knowledgeable*. However, Ms. Balala continued to resist it.

Ms. Balala: *I am deliberately keeping it to myself*

Ms. Imani: *So have you failed to answer the question sir?*

Supervisor: *(Laughs) I have not failed*

Ms. Balala: *When we take that 1 and bring it to 2 it becomes 12. These others do not know how this happens*

Ms. Balala made it clear that she knew the answer to the question she had asked and that the explanation she was seeking was for the benefit of others not her. To show her knowledge, she explained the gist of her question. She was then joined by Ms. Imani who saw the supervisor's reluctance to answer the question as lack of knowledge and therefore wanted him to admit it. The question Ms. Imani posed threatened the position and credibility of the supervisor. He had to either admit failure or provide the explanation they were demanding and he chose the latter.

Supervisor: *The 1 we take there has the value of what?*

Ms. Imani: *10*

Supervisor: *It is 10. When we add 2 to 10 what do we have?*

Literacy learners: *12*

Supervisor: *What?*

Literacy learners: *12*

Supervisor: *But let us leave this aside. It can confuse you. Is that understood? Am I right Ms. Balala?*

Trying not to concede defeat, the supervisor re-asserted his position that the explanation Ms. Balala was seeking was beyond the comprehension of not only the other literacy learners, but of Ms. Balala as well, i.e. *it can confuse you*. Here again, the supervisor was trying to position Ms. Balala as *the not knowledgeable*. The answers to the two questions the supervisor asked appeared to be obvious. The aim of these questions was primarily to stamp his authority as he demanded a yes or no reply. Thus, Ms. Balala had to not only understand but also confirm that the supervisor was not wrong. However, Ms. Balala did not give in without a fight.

*Ms. Balala:* *You are right. But they must know that the 1 has the value of 10. We must know. Yes, we must know.*

*Ms. Imani:* *Because the others can bring that 1 and add it up to 2 and get 3.*

*Ms. Mkakosya (Literacy learner):* *You know that because you worked out that problem in the past.*

*Ms. Balala:* *Yes, but the others must know. I am not sure whether I have offended you (Field notes: 22/10/2015)*

Even after the intervention of another literacy learner, Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Balala maintained that it was not her who was supposed to understand the feared confusion. It was the others who needed to know the value of 1 (one). Then grudgingly, she appeared to succumb to the supervisor's positioning, saying *we must know. Yes, we must know* implying that she too, was amongst those positioned as *the not knowledgeable*. But she closed the conversation by still positioning herself as *the knowledgeable* and regretted any offence she might have committed by her acts, i.e. *yes, but the others must know*.

Maybe it is worth pointing out that it was mainly the classroom privileged procedures of calculating the answers that shaped the positioning of some adult literacy learners as *the knowledgeable* and the others as *the not knowledgeable* as illustrated in the episode above. Otherwise, most of the women at this literacy centre were engaged in small scale businesses and I saw some of them such as Ms. Awali, Ms. Mwenye and Ms. Gesa successfully deal with subtraction and addition in their businesses without necessarily bothering about the procedures highlighted in the encounter above. Sitting outside my rented house, I was able to observe Ms. Awali transact in her businesses. She gave out some of her items on credit and knew how much each customer owed her without keeping a written record. When the customers paid part of the money they owed her she was able to work out the balance mentally.



### 7.3 The Struggling and the Intelligent

In the chapter 5, I noted that adult literacy learning was viewed as a school by both literacy officers and adult literacy learners. I also noted that the adult learners' performance was used as a yardstick to measure the capabilities of the literacy instructors. In keeping with such perceptions, the adult literacy learners were sometimes discursively ranked based on their literacy abilities, i.e. those perceived to be doing well during literacy classes were positioned differently from those assumed to be facing some challenges. Consequently, two subject positions emerged for the adult literacy learners and these were *mbutuma* (*the struggling*) on the one hand and *anzeru* (*the intelligent*)/ *mitunda or patali* (which could literally be rendered as far or high up but figuratively meant the outstanding or the intelligent) on the other.

My habit of arriving at the literacy class before everyone else gave me the opportunity to engage in some informal conversations with anyone who arrived first. And on many occasions, the supervisor came before the literacy learners. On one such occasions, he shared with me his thoughts regarding some of the adult literacy learners. In the extract below, the supervisor positioned the adult literacy learners differently.

*Supervisor: When you ask Ms. Sumani to mention the letters you will hear her say 'J' referring to 'A.' Then you wonder as to when did 'A' change to 'J.'*

*Me:* *Was she here last year?*

*Supervisor:* We started with her when this school began

*Me:* *So, this is her third year?*

*Supervisor: Yes, but she does not know anything. The only one who seems to show some change is Ms. Maulidi.*

*Me:* *Is that so?*

*Supervisor: Ms. Maulidi was the same as Ms. Sumani. She did not know anything. But now she is able to read. She was using her thumb print to receive her fertilizer coupons. Now she is able to sign her name.*

*Me:* *That is encouraging*

*Supervisor:* Yes. Some people were born intelligent.

*Me:* *I see*

*Supervisor: The only problem was that she was not able to be educated in the past. But she is changing here. We can actually see that had*

*this one been educated in the past she would have been somewhere. But there are others who are struggling completely. (22/10/2015)*

In this exchange, the supervisor interactively positioned Ms. Maulidi as *the intelligent* whilst Ms. Sumani was seen as *the struggling* (struggling completely). Apparently, these subject positions were assigned to these women based on the assumption that despite starting the literacy lessons in the same year, Ms. Maulidi was able to do certain things which Ms. Sumani was failing to do. For instance, whilst Ms. Maulidi was able to read and sign her name Ms. Sumani was not.

The supervisor was not the only one who interactively positioned some adult literacy learners as *the intelligent* and others as *the struggling*. Even the adult literacy learners themselves did the same as was the case in the exchange below.

Ms. Awali: *...Their group shall be known. Maybe they shall be in the same group as that of Ms. Balala*

Supervisor: *No they cannot be in that group. Those ones are intelligent.*

Ms. Awali: *Especially our chairlady*

Supervisor: *Ms. Mkakosya?*

Ms. Awali: *Yes, Ms. Mkakosya is intelligent. Here she just pretends as if she does not know (02/11/2015)*

In this exchange, both the supervisor and Ms. Awali interactively positioned Ms. Mkakosya and Ms. Balala as *the intelligent*. At the same time, Ms. Awali alluded to the fact that Ms. Mkakosya reflexively positioned herself as *the struggling* by pretending not to know. Ms. Abudu made similar observations concerning Ms. Balala. She said that Ms. Balala was pretending not to be able to read and write and that at the end “*only we the mbutuma (the struggling) shall remain.*” Thus, Ms. Abudu implied that whilst Ms. Balala and others who were positioned as *the intelligent* would be graduating from the literacy class, she and her fellow *mbutuma (the struggling)* would still be having the literacy lessons. Observing the adult literacy learners do certain literacy activities in class, I got a sense that some of the adult literacy learners reflexively positioned themselves as *the struggling* based on such activities and this appeared to be the case with Ms. Kalako.

Born in 1977, Ms. Kalako was a mother of six children. She told me that she got married in 2002. She said that two of her kids were born during her earlier relationship before she got

married. She informed me that she withdrew from school in grade 1 due to financial problems. The literacy practices at the literacy centre positioned her as *the struggling* as I saw it during the activity captured in the extract below.

*Instructor:* *Ms. Kalako what is this? (Pointing at the letters)*

*Ms. Kalako:* *J, u, m, a. (naming the letters)*

*Instructor:* *Now read the word*

*(Ms. Kalako keeps quiet.)*

*Instructor:* *There. That is where the problem is. When you go to school you need to ask questions. Don't be afraid that others are going to laugh at you. This is what school is all about.*  
(Field notes: 28/03/2016)

Here the classroom literacy practices positioned Ms. Kalako as *the struggling* because she apparently could not combine the letters J, u, m, and a and read them as one word 'Juma.' At the same time, the instructor unequivocally told Ms. Kalako that she had a problem although she appeared to attribute it to Ms. Kalako's lack of agency. I was not surprised therefore, that during an interview with me, Ms. Kalako reflexively positioned herself as *the struggling (not intelligent)* as shown in the exchange below.

*Me:* *You have been attending these classes for three years now, how would you describe yourself?*

*Ms. Kalako:* *It is only that because I am not intelligent but I still continue to attend those lessons. The instructors are good but I think I am not intelligent (laughs).*

*Me:* *(Amid laughter) So, where are you now?*

*Ms. Kalako:* *I am still as I was. I still fail to read anything.*

*Me:* *You mean you are unable to read anything?*

*Ms. Kalako:* *I am failing to read the whole primer on my own. Of course, I am able to read some single words or letters but I fail to combine letters or words.*

*Me:* *Why is this the case?*

*Ms. Kalako:* *Because I am not intelligent, (Field notes: 26/03/2016).*

Here Ms. Kalako blamed her perceived lack of progress in learning how to read and write on what she thought was her limited intelligence. As far as she was concerned, *the instructors are good* and therefore, if at all there was any lack of progress, it was because she lacked

intelligence. She positioned herself as *the struggling* by saying *I am as I was. I still fail to read anything.*

Paradoxically, she said that she was able to read ...*some single words or letters*.... In fact, the literacy activities performed during the closing ceremony of the literacy class, projected Ms. Kalako as someone who was able to read. She 'read' a paragraph from the official primer fluently and her colleagues clapped hands for her. She also told me that she no longer relied on thumb printing. She was now able to sign her name. In this regard, Ms. Kalako seemed to re-author her literacy identity from *the struggling* to *the intelligent*. Besides, the results of the national adult literacy exams showed that she had passed and therefore, she was declared literate. Notwithstanding all these, she still positioned herself as *the struggling*. She appeared not to see such abilities as progress.

But from my classroom observations, I noted that the classroom literacy practices gave more space to the adult literacy learners positioned as *the intelligent* than they did to those projected as *the struggling*. For instance, most of the reading activities were primer based whereby the standard practice was that the instructor read the passage first whilst the adult literacy learners listened. Thereafter, the instructor appointed some adult literacy learners to read a few lines from the passage and usually it was those adult literacy learners who were positioned as *the intelligent* who did the reading whereas those seen as *the struggling* did the listening and in most cases without even looking at the passage being read. In other words, the classroom literacy practices seemed to have created some de facto literacy roles for the adult literacy learners, whereby those positioned as *the intelligent* were *the readers* and those seen as *the struggling* were *the listeners*. This was the case because most of the reading activities placed emphasis on reading the passages fluently so that the messages conveyed in them should be understood. Such a practice seemed to give very little room for the adult literacy learners positioned as *the struggling* to experiment with their perceived limited reading skills.

Although one may not question the fact that the adult literacy learners were not gifted equally, there was another factor which the officers or the literacy learners did not take into account when assigning themselves or others any of these subject positions. For instance, almost all the adult literacy learners who were interactively positioned as either *the educated* or *the intelligent* had attended primary school and withdrew in or above grade four, a class that was used as a yardstick for literacy attainment in Malawi. Generally, the same adult literacy learners also passed the 2015 national literacy exams at this literacy centre. The opposite was generally the

case with the adult literacy learners who were interactively positioned or who reflexively positioned themselves as either *the uneducated* or *the struggling*. That is, unlike those adult literacy learners who were positioned or who reflexively positioned themselves as *the educated* or *the intelligent*, those who were identified or identified themselves as *the uneducated* or *the struggling* had done less than half or no primary school education at all. Moreover, almost all those adult literacy learners positioned as *the uneducated* or *the struggling* appeared to have failed their 2015 national literacy exams and therefore, were not declared literate except Ms. Dailesi and Ms. Kalako. This shows that there was a systematic relationship between educational background and being positioned as either *the intelligent* or *the struggling* and exam performance.

I should point out though that I am aware that apart from educational background, other factors such as work and age may have played a part in making some adult literacy learners struggle with their literacy learning. The instructors too, appeared to suspect the same. In the following exchange, Ms. Ndemanga, the stand-in instructor suggested that Ms. Abasi, was struggling with her literacy learning because she was too busy.

Ms. Ndemanga: *Maybe Ms. Abasi is too busy with her business. I think she does not read, am I lying against you? She does not have interest in reading.*

Ms. Abasi: *I read at night*

Ms. Ndemanga: *Why then are you failing to combine the letters and form words?*

Ms. Abasi: *I just forget*

Ms. Ndemanga: *No.*

Chichewa instructor: *It is possible because people learn differently, am I right? What we need to do is to screen the prospective literacy learners by establishing how far they had gone with their primary school. Then we decide where and how to start from with the class. So, the problem is with us instructors. We should not hide our shortfalls. We make shortcuts. (Field Notes, 23/11/2015).*

In this exchange, the two instructors had different reasons to explain why Ms. Abasi was assumed to be struggling with her literacy learning. Whereas the stand-in instructor thought that Ms. Abasi did not have time to consolidate her literacy skills, the Chichewa instructor thought that Ms. Abasi should have been taught differently from the others. Whatever the case,

Ms. Abasi appeared to admit that indeed, her business did not give her time to study during the day.

The other factor that could also explain why some literacy learners were struggling was age. Ms. Awali, Ms. Matiki, Ms. Faki and Ms. Duniya all complained that they were having problems reading from the primer because of poor eye sight which they blamed on old age. Consequently, the literacy practices privileged at the literacy classroom positioned them as *the struggling*.

However, a critical look at these factors appears to suggest that educational background mattered most. That is, in terms of being busy, it was not just Ms. Abasi who was doing business, Ms. Mwenye and Ms. Afiki too were busy and often missed literacy lessons but they were not positioned as *the struggling*. They were doing well in the literacy practices promoted at the literacy class. As for age, there were some literacy learners who were relatively young, such as Ms. Dailesi, Ms. Tweya, Ms. Sumani, Ms. Usi and Ms. Maulana who were also positioned as *the struggling*. In other words, struggling cut across ages. However, none of the literacy learners who had done their primary school up to grade 4 and above was positioned as *the struggling*.

## **7.4 The Instructors and Learners**

As I stated in chapter 1, although there was supposed to be one literacy instructor at Sawabu literacy centre, the supervisor helped in facilitating literacy lessons whenever the resident Chichewa instructor sought permission to be absent from duty for a prolonged period of time. Besides, the supervisor also instructed a literacy instructor from a non-functioning literacy centre to be reporting at Sawabu literacy centre whilst arrangements were being made for a new centre to be opened for her. She too, helped in facilitating Chichewa literacy lessons. However, the presence of multiple literacy instructors gave the adult literacy learners an opportunity to not only position the instructors against each other, but also to position the literacy instructors relative to the adult literacy learners themselves.

Generally, the adult literacy learners positioned their instructors as *good*. However, during an informal conversation with me, the supervisor told me that some adult literacy learners thought that one of the instructors was not good enough to facilitate the literacy lessons. He said: *the literacy learners were telling me that some of them were far much better than her*. When I

heard this, I remembered the tussles that sometimes emerged, especially when the instructor concerned took charge of the literacy lessons. Some of the adult literacy learners whom Ms. Msosa said “...*know everything and they can even teach us*” sometimes implicitly showed that they were indeed better than the stand-in instructor as was apparently the case during the lesson cited below.

- Stand in instructor:* ...*We apply manure early if<sup>12</sup> it should turn into soil .... They are saying if manure should turn into soil not so?*
- Ms. Afiki:* ...*so that it should turn into soil*
- Stand in instructor:* *We must make sure that the manure is applied at each maize planting station not so?*
- Ms. Afiki:* ... *so that it should turn into soil.*
- Stand in instructor:* ...*it should turn into soil not so?*
- Ms. Afiki:* *They have written that “we apply manure early so that it should turn into soil”*
- Ms. Mkakosya:* *You have said that “if it should turn into soil”*
- Stand in instructor:* *Where?*
- Ms. Tepani:* *Here. Below. It’s getting messed up*
- Stand in instructor:* “...*we apply manure early so that it should turn into soil*” *I have already read that part*
- Ms. Mkakosya:* *that is not what you said. Just below there “so that it should turn into soil” but you said, “if it should turn into soil”*
- Stand in instructor:* *Is that so?* (Field notes: 19/11/2015).

Although one may say that the instructor had made a mistake and that the literacy learners were just trying to correct it, their insistence to have her realise that she had made a mistake suggested that they wanted to show her that they knew how to read the text better than she did. The instructor tried to play down the mistake but the three literacy learners, all of whom were positioned as *the educated* and *the knowledgeable* by their colleagues, were determined to have their concern heard. This incident reminded me of what the supervisor once told me during an informal conversation. At that time, he told me that because of the presence of women such as Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Afiki, Ms. Balala and others in the literacy class, one would be making a mistake to go and facilitate literacy lessons without being prepared. Some may be tempted to

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<sup>12</sup> The instructor misread the text and used the word ‘*ngati*’ (if) instead of ‘*kuti*’ (so that).

suggest that the three women behaved the way they did because the instructor was a woman. However, this may not be entirely correct because I did not observe a similar incident when the Chichewa resident instructor who was also a woman presided over the lessons. In any case, the arithmetic incident, I looked at earlier suggests that gender was not a major underlying factor. Whenever necessary, some of these women elevated themselves to the same position as their instructors.

What I noted was that these women knew the discursive subject positions above. For instance, Ms. Balala told me that the adult literacy learners were not at the same level. She said: *we are at different levels but our colleagues do not understand this. What they say is that these are instructors.* When I asked her how she felt when she was identified as such she said: *I am not bothered. I am happy because it is true. If they are failing to write 'a' but I am able to do it then it means I can teach them how to write 'a.'* In these exchanges, Ms. Balala accepted the subject position of *instructor* which was interactively assigned to her by her colleagues. She said she was different from the others and that she knew how to read and write. She projected the others as *failing*. In view of that, she could teach them.

It was not just the adult literacy learners who elevated some of their colleagues to the status of being *instructors*. Even some of the literacy instructors at the centre appeared to share these views. For instance, during one of the literacy lessons, I heard the same literacy instructor who was being corrected by the literacy learners say: *let me tell you. In this class, we have people who are able to read and write such as Ms. Balala and others. When the instructors are absent do not just disperse and go home. These women should go in front and teach.* In these remarks, the instructor clearly positioned Ms. Balala and others as being capable of facilitating literacy lessons hence interactively positioning them as *the instructors*. I should quickly point out that to some extent, the classroom literacy practices too, positioned the women mentioned as deserving such a subject position. On a number of occasions, the adult literacy learners were asked to volunteer or they were appointed to lead in some activities such as solving arithmetic problems. In most cases, it was those adult literacy learners positioned as *the educated* or *the intelligent* who volunteered or were appointed to lead and they appeared to do well as was the case with Ms. Afiki (see an example in appendix 2). In this case, Ms. Afiki was asked by the supervisor to lead her colleagues in solving an arithmetic problem. She appeared to be very comfortable playing out the role of the instructor. Somehow, these practices made the adult literacy learners who were positioned as *the instructors* stand out in class. The adult literacy



learners such as Ms. Msosa, Ms. Sumani, Ms. Duniya, Ms. Awali and others never volunteered to lead in solving such problems. Even in cases where the instructors dared them to try, they always declined thereby reflexively positioning themselves as *the learners*.

In chapter 8, I shall argue that the disciplinary measures enacted at the literacy centre were limiting the space in which the literacy learners could learn from each other. However, the examples cited here suggest that when the instructors sanctioned it, peer learning was permissible. In fact, sometimes the instructors encouraged the literacy learners to lead in some activities not just for purposes of showcasing their literacy competencies, but also to build their confidence in public speaking. On several occasions, I heard the supervisor say:

*some of us are required to speak in public and this starts in school like here. When you are asked to speak in public you shall not be shy, just staring at the ground. This is why we ask you to come in front to teach each other. So when you are in company of others you are brave. When they say 'Ms. Imani do this' you would not say 'I shall not be able to that' because you already started doing it in school, (Field notes, 23/03/2016).*

Good as it sounds, I would say that in the literacy class, that bravery depended on one's literacy and numeracy abilities. That is, mostly those literacy learners who positioned themselves or were positioned by others as *instructors, the intelligent or the knowledgeable* had the courage to volunteer and lead others in lesson activities because they had the requisite knowledge to share with their colleagues.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

In a bid to enrich my understanding of the social nature of literacy, in this chapter, I have explored some subject positions that were available to the adult literacy learners, especially in the figured world of adult literacy learning. Overall, I have looked at eight subject positions namely *the educated, the knowledgeable, the uneducated, the not knowledgeable, the struggling, the intelligent, the instructor and the learner*. As I explored these subject positions I noted that the adult literacy learners did not rigidly fit into one subject position. Rather, their subject positions were complex and fluid, particularly considering the fact that it was not just what they said that mattered but also what they did. That is, I have shown that whilst sometimes the literacy practices positioned the adult literacy learners in one way or the other, their actions suggested that they re-authored their subject positions to something else. At the same time, the constant changing of the adult literacy learners' subject positions implied that their identities were not only multiple but also unstable.

What is significant about these subject positions is that they impacted on some adult literacy learners' literacy learning processes. I have illustrated how classroom activities such as reading and peer teaching were dominated by the literacy learners who were positioned as *the knowledgeable*, *the educated* and *the intelligent* whereas as those positioned as *the not knowledgeable*, *the uneducated* and *the struggling* played the roles of being listeners and learners. To some extent, this scenario deprived *the struggling* of the opportunity to gain the confidence the instructors were trying to cultivate in them. Besides, these subject positions facilitated or constrained some literacy learners to enrol for the English literacy classes.

Furthermore, I have shown how some adult literacy learners resented the practice of teaching together literacy learners with different levels of literacy abilities. They bemoaned both the confusion and the lack of proper attention, especially to the beginners such a practice created during literacy learning.

Based on the evidence provided in this chapter, I would argue that examining how literacy practices position adult literacy learners in various figured worlds could be a useful way of understanding literacy as a social practice. My analysis has shown not only how some literacy practices shaped the literacy learners' participation in the figured world of adult literacy learning but also how fluid these literacy identities were. Key to some adult literacy learners' shifting of identities was their ability to re-author their subject positions. Such re-authoring implicates power which is the focus of my next chapter in which I deal with the tensions that were experienced at the literacy class as both instructors and the adult literacy learners attempted to exercise power in decision-making processes.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE ADULT LITERACY CLASS: A SITE OF POWER STRUGGLE

#### 8.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I look at what I saw as some struggles for power between the literacy officers on the one hand and between the instructors and the adult literacy learners on the other. Specifically, I look at the extent to which the decisions affecting literacy learners' interests were influenced by power relationships amongst the officers involved in the delivery of the literacy lessons. In addition, I also look at how some social tendencies which I call '*school culture*' gave more authority to the instructors and diminished the adult literacy learners' agency in the decision-making processes. To account for all these issues, I employ the perspectives of power, agency and culture I discussed in chapter 3.

#### 8.1 Dilemmas of Reinforcing Bureaucracy in Non-formal Settings

Perhaps, I should start by pointing out from the outset that I went into my fieldwork with an assumption that the power relationships cultivated at the adult literacy class were very different from what I had encountered in formal classrooms as a pupil. My assumption was based on the fact that unlike in formal schools where the learners are young, in adult literacy classes they would be older individuals. Therefore, I assumed that the relationships between the learners and their instructors would be nurtured by mutual respect and understanding as opposed to rules and regulations. Thus, I assumed that in this adult literacy class, the learners could have some form of control over how the learning process should be conducted unlike in the formal classrooms where rules and regulations gave the teacher the authority to dominate classroom decision-making processes such that the learners' agency was to some extent, muted.

When I started observing the literacy lessons, I noted that the cluster supervisor came to the literacy classes almost daily. I did not establish as to whether he did this due to my presence or that he normally carried out his duties in this way. However, his presence helped significantly in ensuring that the literacy lessons were not disrupted, especially when the resident Chichewa instructor was unable to report for duties due to pressing family problems. Besides, the supervisor turned out to be my key informant. He relayed to me very important news taking place in the village or at the district office.

Paradoxically, his presence also appeared to create some friction between him and the centre's literacy instructors. Since both were involved in facilitating the lessons, each one projected themselves as the one in-charge of the literacy centre. In some circumstances, both wanted to have a final say. But as I witnessed on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015, this struggle for supremacy sometimes did not work in the interest of the adult literacy learners.

*Instructor: Who does not have a primer in this class? Ms. Sumani, not so? Do you have a primer? (Pointing at Ms. Sumaili).*

*Ms. Sumaili: No.*

*Instructor: I have just retrieved one of the books we lent to our colleagues at Cikala. I do not know who I should give this primer to.*

*Supervisor: There are two individuals who do not have a primer.*

*Instructor: Yes, Ms. Sumaili and Ms. Sumani.*

*Instructor and supervisor: (laugh)*

*Supervisor: This one (pointing at Ms. Sumaili) may need it because she can read on her own.*

*Instructor: This one (pointing at Ms. Sumani) needs it most to practice what she has learnt in class.*

*Supervisor: You will discuss and find a way forward.*

*(Field notes: 30/09/2015)*

In this encounter, each of the officers had what they thought was a genuine reason for their preference of one literacy learner over the other. Having failed to agree, they decided to deny access to the primer to both literacy learners. Whether the discussion the supervisor talked about did take place was not clear but what I noted was that the two literacy learners continued to come for literacy lessons without a primer. Thus, whilst the two officers opted for a stalemate, the ultimate losers were the literacy learners. This standoff was not just about who had a plausible argument or not. Rather, it was also about who was in control. I was somehow surprised that none of the literacy learners commented on the issue and all of us just took the role of spectators.

These power relationships became even more complex when it came to deciding what to prioritise between literacy lessons and one of the literacy learners' major sources of livelihoods, farming. As the onset of the rainy season approached, I frequently heard the literacy learners talk about their plans to suspend the literacy lessons. But their request sparked a prolonged

power struggle between the instructor and the supervisor on the one hand and the literacy learners and the instructor on the other. The instructor appeared to be in support of the literacy learners' request whilst the supervisor opposed it. I noted that this situation put the instructor in a very difficult dilemma. As an 'employee of government,' I noted that she knew that she did not have the power to unilaterally make decisions that affected the operations of the literacy centre. She had to take instructions from officers above her. At community level, she appeared to be aware of the needs of the literacy learners. She knew that the literacy learners depended on farming for their livelihoods. Hence, suspending the literacy classes was in the best interest of the literacy learners. I was therefore, not surprised when she told the literacy learners that *the supervisor is not yet back. You are the ones to give me powers because I cannot decide on my own. You tell me what to do.*

As she spoke, I could feel her frustrations and feeling of powerlessness. She could not act on her own. Her sense of agency was subject to what either the supervisor or the literacy learners authorised her to do. Since the other authority was away and the matter needed urgent attention, *you tell me what to do.* But by asking for authority from the literacy learners, the literacy instructor was attempting to put the suspension of the classes squarely in the hands of the literacy learners. That is, if the lessons were indeed to be suspended and she was queried by her authorities, she would tell them that it was the literacy learners themselves who had suspended the literacy lessons and not her. In short, she did not want to take responsibility.

Somehow, I failed to understand the reason why the issue of suspending the literacy classes became so contentious because whilst chatting with me earlier in the month, the supervisor once alluded to the fact that in general, classes were suspended during the rainy season.

*Supervisor: Exams are written in May because during that time, the rainy season, schools are erratic.*

*Me: Is that so?*

*Supervisor: Maybe this one shall not be disrupted because you have encouraged it. So even during the rainy season the women shall be coming but in other villages it is difficult.*

*Me: I see*

*Supervisor: Sir in other villages the schools are not running smoothly.*

(Field notes: 02/11/2015)

In this conversation, the supervisor acknowledged the problem of holding literacy lessons during the rainy season although he expressed optimism that classes at this centre were not going to be affected because I had motivated the literacy learners. Although I was aware that since I came to this community, a couple of literacy learners who had withdrawn from literacy classes had re-enrolled for the lessons, I did not understand why the supervisor assumed that my presence had changed the literacy learners' attitudes towards attending literacy classes during a period that was very critical for their livelihoods. Ironically, the literacy learners' sustained request to write their exams early and suspend the literacy classes at the onset of the rains coupled with the instructor's endorsement of the request, somewhat contradicted the supervisor's assumptions.

As I continued with my fieldwork, I slowly began to understand the complexity of these power relationships. When the crops got matured, the literacy learners made a similar request and the standoff was re-ignited. However, this time the literacy learners exercised their agency and decided to prioritise their crops over literacy lessons. But despite the literacy learners' absence from the literacy classes, I noted that the instructors continued to report for their duties. Sometimes only one literacy learner turned up but still no classes were held and the literacy learner was just sent home. During one of such occasions, I heard the English instructor, the supervisor and Ms. Mwenye, one of the literacy learners discuss the situation so as to chart the way forward.

*English instructor: Are we going to learn today?*

*Supervisor: People are very busy.*

*Ms. Mwenye: Sir, people are saying that they were told that there is a two-week recess.*

*Supervisor: Is there anyone who said this here?*

*Ms. Mwenye: When I was coming Ms. Duniya said 'where are you going? I thought they said we should be on recess for two weeks?' This news has spread all the way to Cilanga village.*

*English instructor: The women did ask that they wanted to harvest their crops first. They have just given themselves that break.*

*Supervisor: They have done it on their own? (Field notes, 11/04/2016).*

In this conversation, the only literacy learner present, Ms. Mwenye, revealed that the literacy learners got the news that the literacy lessons had been suspended. This revelation surprised

the supervisor and therefore he wanted to know if there was anyone amongst the officers who had permitted the literacy learners to be on recess. When the English instructor said: *they have just given themselves that break* the supervisor was not convinced by this response hence, the question: *they have done it on their own?* Apart from casting some doubts about the English instructor's statement, his question portrayed his realisation that the literacy learners had exercised their agency to safeguard their interests. At the same time, his reaction contradicted his observation that *people are very busy*.

However, as this stand-off continued, I began to question as to whether my presence was not exacerbating the situation. Since it was a normal practice for them to suspend lessons during this period, I was wondering as to why they found it difficult to do the same this time around. I wondered whether the supervisor was trying not to disappoint me by carrying on with the literacy lessons. However, he occasionally told me that he was worried that the new District Community Development Officer, who was keen in revitalising the operations of the literacy classes in the district, would come and visit the class.

As the supervisor and the English instructor continued to talk, I heard the former say *it is possible for us to close the school but there is a danger. I am not comfortable with those forms that give the location of the school. I am afraid because of that one*. At that moment, I realised that if I wanted to gain a better understanding of the power dynamics I was witnessing at this literacy centre, I needed to look at a broader picture including the role of official artefacts. The supervisor's remark gave me another idea as to why he had all along been reluctant to suspend the literacy classes. It revealed to me that he understood the literacy learners' position only that he was afraid that his superiors might come to the literacy class unannounced. The document he talked about was an instructor's monthly report form that provided details that could easily allow district officers to locate the literacy class as shown in the picture that follows.

**LIPOTI LA MWEZI NDI MWEZI LA MPHUNZITSI** 13  
(Alenje Mphunzitsi akutaniza kwa omuyang'anira pakutha kwa mwezi alwense)

1. Pakutha kwa mwezi wa \_\_\_\_\_ Chaka cha \_\_\_\_\_ Ward: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Konsitwense \_\_\_\_\_
3. Dzina la Mudzi \_\_\_\_\_ Gulupu: \_\_\_\_\_ TA \_\_\_\_\_
3. Dzina la Mphunzitsi \_\_\_\_\_ Supervisor \_\_\_\_\_
4. Dzina la kalasi \_\_\_\_\_
5. Masiku ophunzira: Lolemba, Lachiwiri, Lachitatu, Lachinayi, Lachisana.
6. Nkhosi yokumanirana \_\_\_\_\_
7. Phunziro lomaliza kuphunzitsa mwezi uno \_\_\_\_\_
8. Kuchuluka kwa ophunzira pakutha pa mwezi (i) Amuna \_\_\_\_\_ (ii) Akazi \_\_\_\_\_
9. Masiku omwe ophunzira pa mwezi \_\_\_\_\_  
(Total number of sessions held per month)
10. Lembani averaji yakabweredwe pa mwezi \_\_\_\_\_
11. Kuchuluka kwa ophunzira omwe sanabwere mwezi wonse: \_\_\_\_\_  
(i) Amuna \_\_\_\_\_ (ii) Akazi \_\_\_\_\_
12. Kuchuluka kwa ophunzira amene akuti sapitiliza \_\_\_\_\_  
(i) Amuna \_\_\_\_\_ (ii) Akazi \_\_\_\_\_
13. Chomwe munachita kuti ophunzira asaleke, ndikutinso omwe anasiya abwerenso \_\_\_\_\_
14. Zipangizo zimene mukufuna \_\_\_\_\_
15. Kuchuluka kwa masiku omwe oyang'anira adabwera \_\_\_\_\_
16. Kuchuluka kwa masiku omwe alangizi ena adadzakuyenderani: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mlangizi wa zaulimi \_\_\_\_\_  
Mlangizi wa zaumoyo \_\_\_\_\_  
Mlangizi wa zamkoma wapabanja \_\_\_\_\_  
Mlangizi ena (Atchuleni) \_\_\_\_\_
17. Chiongola dzanja ndidalandira cha mwezi wa \_\_\_\_\_
18. Ndemanga yanu: \_\_\_\_\_
19. Saini ya Mphunzitsi \_\_\_\_\_ Tsiku: \_\_\_\_\_
20. Ndemanga ya Wapampando \_\_\_\_\_

Saini ya Wapampando \_\_\_\_\_ Tsiku: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 20: Chichewa Instructor's Monthly Report Form

On this form, the instructors were required to state the constituency, ward, traditional authority (TA), group village headman and the village in which the literacy class was located. In addition, they were asked to write the names of the literacy instructor, supervisor as well as that of the literacy class. The supervisor was uncomfortable about these details. His fear was that his superiors would use such details to go to the literacy centre only to find no one present, hence his job and that of his instructors would be in jeopardy. In this regard, the supervisor's reluctance to suspend the literacy lessons was aimed at advancing personal interests and not safeguarding the literacy learners' rights to literacy. What this suggests is that this artefact somehow regulated the operation of this centre.

But whilst the literacy learners thought that their decision to prioritise their crops over literacy lessons was justified, the instructor and the supervisor had different views. They agreed not to suspend the classes formally. They resolved that even if a single literacy learner turned up for the lessons, they were going to teach her. By making this resolution the two were sending a clear message to the literacy learners that they did not have the mandate to suspend the literacy classes. However, the English instructor raised some practical concerns regarding this



arrangement saying: *the challenge I am anticipating is that we have done all this with Ms. Afiki but other literacy learners who have not done these are going to show up one day, what shall I do? Should I start all over again?* In response, the supervisor told her that if Ms. Afiki who had not taken a break was present in that class, then the instructor shall continue from where she stopped with her. Only when she is absent then the instructor shall choose whatever she liked to discuss with them. The supervisor argued that *even in a formal school, the teachers never reteach lessons for the absentees. You just copy notes from friends but they are difficult to understand because you were not taught.* But I saw the approach taken by the supervisor as being a form of punishment against the so-called *absentees*. This stance appeared to be a tit-for-tat just because the literacy learners had suspended the literacy classes *on their own*. In other words, it was an attempt to reclaim his authority which was seemingly undermined by the literacy learners' action of giving themselves a two-week break without his consent. He justified his stance by referring to formal school practices. Although the literacy learners also perceived their literacy learning as 'school' the rationale of expecting them to behave like school pupils who would be keen to copy classroom notes was rather questionable. In this regard, it was not clear as to whose interests this position was meant to serve. I would argue, therefore, that by enacting the 'school culture' in the adult literacy class, the adult literacy learners and their instructors cultivated modes of interaction that created a teacher – pupil power relationship which in some ways impacted on the decision-making processes at this literacy centre.

To sum up, in this section, I have highlighted the tensions that were experienced at the adult literacy class arising mainly due to asymmetrical power relationships enacted by both the literacy learners and their instructors. Thus, although both the instructors and the adult literacy learners understood and knew what was best for them to do, the assumed bureaucratic procedures constrained the instructors to make certain decisions. Whilst the presence of more than one instructor helped the adult literacy learners to have some uninterrupted literacy lessons, it also brought some tensions mainly because the two officers occupied positions vested with different powers in NALP's organisational structure. In this way, the literacy class typified a formal school set up whereby the supervisor had more authority than the instructor in the same way I experienced heads of schools and teachers do during my primary and secondary school days. In this set up, it was the adult literacy learners' capacity to do what they desired which was limited just like pupils in formal schools. This could explain the reason why

none of the two literacy learners spoke their mind on who should get the primer because the ‘school culture’ constrained them to do so.

### 8.1.1 The ‘School Culture’

*No, there are no differences. If you go to primary schools, they have a, e, i, o, u and at adult literacy classes we also have these. The only difference is that we are not flogged whilst in primary school when you do something wrong they flog you. (Ms. Matiki: Field notes, 01/04/2016).*

In chapter 3, I stated that in this thesis I employ the term culture both as a tool to guide my understanding of the adult literacy learners’ ‘emergent behaviour’ (Holliday, 1999) and also as a ‘verb’ by paying attention to ‘what culture does’ (Street, 2010). This is what I attempt to do in this section.

In the extract above, Ms. Matiki who was one of the literacy learners, cited the practices and behaviours which she attributed to formal primary education and linked them to the adult literacy class. This perception was common amongst many adult literacy learners. But the ‘school culture’ alluded to by Ms. Matiki somehow brought with it power relationships which, to some extent, muted the literacy learners’ voices.

In general terms, when Ms. Matiki talked about flogging, she was referring to matters concerning discipline. Although the literacy learners were not physically punished, I noted tendencies of re-enforcing discipline reminiscent of formal schools at this literacy centre. The literacy learners sat on the floor in rows and to some extent they were expected to conduct themselves in the same way pupils would behave in a formal classroom setting. That is, there were attempts to enact teacher – pupil identities that matched with the ‘school culture’ as the extract below suggests.

*Supervisor: If there is any problem tell me, raise your hand. If you ask each other then you are making noise. If you ask amongst yourselves then we shall not hear it. If there is a problem about what I am teaching today raise your hand and I shall come and discuss with you. If there is a problem that has nothing to do with the lesson, then wait until we knock off. Is that understood?*

*Literacy learners: Yes. (Field notes, 12/10/2015)*

In this extract, the supervisor promoted a formal school model that gave the teacher the authority to decide on almost everything. In this regard, he/she was the one to decide when and

which literacy learner was to be given a chance to speak. Besides, whoever wanted to speak they could only be recognised if they raised their hand. Seeking help from a fellow literacy learner on the issue under discussion was looked at as making noise whilst doing the same as permitted by the literacy instructor was not. The general understanding was *if there is anything to discuss then we should just go out*. When the supervisor posed the question: *'is that understood?'* he was trying to stamp his authority as a teacher and those on whom such authority was being exercised, the 'pupils,' had to not only confirm their understanding but also to accept the regulations by saying 'yes.' Nonetheless, despite accepting their instructor's regulations I did not see any literacy learner who raised up her hand in order to have the opportunity to speak during all my classroom observations. When they wanted to join in any discussion they just chipped in.

Although I noted that the discipline measures provided order in the classroom, I also realised that, to some extent, they limited healthy debates amongst the literacy learners. Restricting literacy learners to discuss any issues they had with the instructor only created the impression that learning took place only through the interaction between the teacher and learners i.e. teacher centred approach. Besides, I also saw that these measures denied the learners opportunities to socialise.

Also, strict adherence to discipline measures sometimes created tensions between the instructors and the literacy learners culminating into the latter's voices being muted. I saw this happen with Ms. Matiki. Ms. Matiki was one of the literacy learners who liked joking. On this day, she came to the lessons late. As she walked towards where her colleagues were sitting, she said in English: *late comer, don't worry*. The instructor reprimanded her immediately saying *'we have banned noise making.'* She looked deflated and said: *I am sorry*. Then, she remained quiet and unresponsive. During the lesson, the instructor wanted to know whether or not she was following what was being taught but she did not answer. When pressed further, she said *just go on* in a very low tone. Yet, Ms. Matiki was a literacy learner who was usually very active in answering questions in that class. Such tensions were also sometimes manifest between the literacy instructors and the literacy class as a whole. For instance, just like what I experienced during my primary school days, the literacy learners were asked to sing songs as lesson interludes. I often heard the supervisor say: *sing songs, do not make noise*. Thus, the supervisor saw singing songs as a way of controlling 'noise' amongst the literacy learners. I should point out that by 'noise' the instructor was referring to 'talking to each other without

being permitted to do so regardless of the pitch.’ Although the literacy learners often complied and sang the songs, they sometimes resisted the practice as the following example shows.

*Supervisor: Songs are like lessons. They are special lessons. So, as we prepare for the next lesson you should be singing songs. You get rid of worries through singing songs. I want to write something on the board so sing songs.*  
*(Silence)*  
*Sing songs.*  
*(Silence).*  
*Should we say the person who leads in singing the songs is absent today?*  
*(Silence)*  
*(None of the literacy learners starts a song. Instead, they are chatting as the supervisor writes on the board.)*  
*(Field notes 03/11/2015)*

Sitting on my bench, I felt the tension building up as this episode unfolded. The literacy learners appeared as if they did not hear what their supervisor was asking them to do. They carried on talking to each other whilst their supervisor who appeared dismayed by their lack of cooperation wrote on the chalkboard. When he finished writing he said: *let us stop talking. We have failed to sing songs.* I was rather surprised that the supervisor saw the literacy learners’ action as failure rather than resistance. He later told me that he would not stop asking the literacy learners to sing songs because according to him, ‘*they were special lessons.*’ Despite his claim that songs were special lessons, I noted that the other instructors never asked the literacy learners to sing songs.

But singing songs in the literacy class appeared to have broader implications than I first assumed. The literacy class was part of the wider community and therefore, certain things happening outside the literacy class had a bearing on how the literacy learners participated in classroom activities. On one occasion, the supervisor asked Ms. Afadi to lead in singing songs but she refused saying *I cannot sing. I have just had a funeral recently.* What this suggests is that Ms. Afadi saw the singing of songs not just as ‘*special lessons*’ as the supervisor suggested but rather as a form of entertainment. In this regard, Ms. Afadi did not want to appear to be merry making when her family was still mourning the loss of one of their relatives. Although Ms. Balala finally led in the singing of the songs, Ms. Afadi did not join in. With her right hand propping her head below the chin, she just sat there and appeared downcast.

Apart from issues of ‘noise,’ coming to the literacy lessons on time was another discipline issue. Although I understood the reason why the instructors emphasised punctuality, I was somehow surprised that they went to extent of making a decree that *if you are at home up to 3 o’clock do not come here. We do not want to start the lessons again. We must start together.* By issuing this decree, I wondered as to whose interest the supervisor was attempting to safeguard. The supervisor justified the decree by showing his displeasure at restarting lessons to accommodate latecomers although I never witnessed such a situation since I started observing the lessons. The literacy learners who came late just knocked on the door, came in, and sat down. What the supervisor did not like however, was the fact that *you will start asking others, what lesson? By asking others, what lesson, you cause noise in the classroom.* But in a village setting like the one we were in, the concept of time was generally problematic, especially among older women who in most cases used the position of the sun to tell time. In most cases when I arrived at my rented house, I found that Ms. Awali one of the literacy learners was not yet ready for the classes. Although she had a radio, she usually asked me about the time and when I told her, she often told me that the sun was still high up. Even when I requested the women to permit me to observe their group activities, they rarely started at the time they told me. Therefore, although punctuality was important to the instructors, I was not sure whether this decree was going to work. In fact, even after this order was given, the women came for the lessons at the times they thought were convenient to them. When on one occasion Ms. Gesa came late and was asked to be punctual, she said that she was busy with some work and that when she finished, she decided to go to the literacy class saying to herself, *let them send me away.* I saw Ms. Gesa’s action as a form of open defiance to the decree. This encounter underscored the fact that enforcing punctuality rules in a non-formal set up as one would do in a formal school environment was rather problematic. On this particular occasion, all the instructor had to say to Ms. Gesa was: *you are not going to be sent away. It is better to come late than being absent,* which was a contradiction to the order.

Having noted the complexities that were emerging as the literacy instructors tried to enforce some disciplinary measures at the literacy class, I asked one of them if at all there were any rules and if they had, who made them. In response, the instructor said: *the school has some rules. For instance, we tell them to be punctual. We tell them to be disciplined in class.* Here the literacy instructor’s language was suggestive of a master – subservient relationship. In other words, the instructors projected themselves as the ones issuing the instructions whilst the literacy learners were supposed to obey, i.e. *we tell them....* However, although I was informed

that such rules were made by the literacy school committee in collaboration with the instructors, I was not aware of the existence of that committee except the one that was set up whilst I was there.

To some extent, perceiving the adult literacy class as ‘school’ in the same way as in formal education somehow limited the agency of the literacy learners in some decision-making processes. Even in some cases when the instructors asked the literacy learners to tell them what they wanted to learn I heard the latter push the responsibility of selecting the content back to the instructors saying *that is how things should be*.

Occasionally when the literacy learners attempted to state what they wanted to learn, they just restricted themselves to picking issues from their literacy primer. They identified topics they said they found difficult to comprehend. Yet going around the community listening to what many people including the literacy learners themselves said, I got a sense that *signing one’s name* dominated their discourse. But as stated above, they did not ask the instructors to prioritise this literacy because somehow that would go against what they believed to be the school norms.

Perceiving adult literacy classes as ‘school’ not only cultivated the complexities discussed above, but it also brought about frustrations amongst some literacy learners. Some of the literacy learners in this class already knew how to read and write before coming for the lessons. Some of them told me that they went to the literacy classes to ‘continue’ with their education. However, it appeared that the literacy class failed to satisfy their aims. Consequently, they became frustrated as I heard from Ms. Imani.

*Me:* You have told me that you go to the adult literacy class with a view of continuing your education. It has been three years now since you started attending the literacy lessons, do you think your aim is being achieved?

*Ms. Imani:* No, it is not being achieved. I am just learning Chichewa. Also, I am not being promoted to another class. They do not say ‘you are going to the next class.’ This means that you are still in the same class. In primary school, you write exams as we do in the literacy class if you pass you go to the next class. If you remain in the same class it means you have failed and therefore you are repeating the class.

Me: *Should I say you view the literacy class as being the same as primary school such that when you pass you move on to the next level?*

Ms. Imani: *Yes, we should move to the next level. They should say 'you have passed, go to this class.' But we are writing the exams and remain in the same class.*

In this conversation, Ms. Imani's frustrations were palpable. She too perceived the adult literacy class as 'school' hence, her comparison of the literacy class to primary school. Ms. Imani's complaints suggest that as a 'school,' the literacy class did not live up to her expectations. She expected the literacy class to have more than one subject. In addition, she expected to see many classes so that learners could be promoted from one class to another. According to her, being in the same class and learning the same content every year meant that *you have failed and therefore you are repeating the class*. What this suggests is that the 'school culture' brought up some hope to Ms. Imani to continue with her education. But as she told me, she was frustrated that her goal was *not being achieved*. Perhaps, these frustrations are heightened further by the fact that the NALP is not linked to formal education.

It is worth pointing out though, that both the literacy instructors and the officers at the district office were aware of the frustration facing the literacy learners, such as Ms. Imani. During my classroom observation, I heard one of the instructors talk about the need to screen literacy learners during the registration exercise to establish the grades they went up to in primary schools. They said that once that was done *then you determine how to proceed with your class*. Similarly, officers at the district office said that the literacy learners were sometimes separated. *Those literacy learners who seem to be ahead are put on one side and those that are lagging behind are put on the other side of the room*. This was not done at this literacy class. Even if it had been done however, it may not have helped in addressing Ms. Imani's frustrations. Such acts might help in addressing practical concerns regarding the teaching and learning of literacy but not resolving matters of promoting literacy learners from one class to the other. In any case, since this was a government literacy programme which was also primer based, the different groups that would be identified in the class would be taught using the same primer every year. This would result into the same frustrations of being in the same class and being taught the same content as Ms. Imani had put it.

Apart from being frustrated, I also observed that looking at the literacy class as 'school' in the same way as formal education cultivated false hopes among some literacy learners. Many of

the literacy learners I talked to in relation to the examinations they had written gave me the impression that they did not see any difference between their exams and those written in formal schools. Perhaps, this is why in the extract above Ms. Imani equated writing exams to being promoted to another class. At the same time, other women such as Ms. Usi saw passing such exams as a way of getting a certificate that would help her get a job. *It could be a job I never expected because it is the certificate that shall act as evidence that I am educated.* But as I heard from another literacy learner, Ms. Awali, and some officers at the district office, Ms. Usi's expectations could be farfetched. In an informal conversation I had with Ms. Awali, I felt her frustration and sense of despair when she said:

*I do not see any benefits from those exams. If I may tell you I started school long time ago. In those days when my sight was good I attended literacy classes for 6 months. We wrote the exams and I received a blue certificate which I have misplaced. They said, 'this one has benefits.' I put it in my suitcase. I said I may use this to get a job as cleaner. But it did not have value. It was just getting worn out in my suitcase. I have not heard that there is anyone who got employed using that certificate. I just go there to make sure that I master my name so that when we are called for some other activities I should be able to sign using a pen.* (Field notes, 11/02/2016).

In this conversation, Ms. Awali told me how she admired hospital cleaners. She said that she longed to push the trolleys and serve food to patients. She informed me that when she got her adult literacy certificate, she was very happy that her dream was going to be fulfilled. She waited for her opportunity to come until she realised that her certificate *'did not have value.'* After failing to achieve what she wanted, Ms. Awali changed her focus to at least mastering her name so that she was *able to sign using a pen.* That was the goal she was still pursuing when I found her. She appeared to be satisfied with this goal and she was receiving praises from many people including the village headperson for being able to sign her name in various social activities. Interestingly, Ms. Awali's observation about the value of the adult literacy certificates was echoed by some officers at the district office who said: *those certificates are just honorary.*

In summary, the impression I got about the effect of the 'school culture' cultivated by both the literacy officers and the adult literacy learners was rather ambivalent. On the one hand, the discipline measures appeared to diminish the adult literacy learners' spaces to interact, socialise and learn from each other. At the same time, it raised false hopes for some literacy learners who saw the literacy classes as a route to getting better jobs. Others had the impression that the literacy classes would provide them a chance to proceed with their education. On the other hand, the adult literacy learners were not naïve to do whatever their instructors directed them



to do. Neither were they oblivious of what the literacy lessons could help them achieve. In this regard, I would say that the ‘school culture’ was a process that was subject to reinterpretation.

My data have illustrated that strict adherence to the ‘school culture’ was sometimes challenged by the adult literacy learners. I have discussed how the adult literacy learners decided to suspend the literacy lessons on their own. I have shown how the adult literacy learners continued to chat in class despite being constantly told to keep quiet. They resisted singing songs when they were not in the mood to do so. They came to the literacy class at the time that was appropriate to them and not a fixed one determined by the class despite pleas from the instructors for punctuality. In view of this, I would argue that although I have suggested that the ‘school culture’ muted the voices of the adult literacy learners, it may be fair to say that this muting reflected respect rather than inability to act. The literacy learners wanted to maintain a cordial relationship with their instructors by allowing them to take a lead in decision-making.

### **8.1.2 We will Go, Let them Send us Back**

My understanding as well as assumption about the adult literacy lessons I was observing was that these were classes in which one enrolled voluntarily based on one’s needs. As such, decisions concerning what kind of literacy one had to learn were supposed to be entirely in the hands of the individual concerned. My assumption seemed to be confirmed by the supervisor when he told me that the literacy learners would be given the freedom to choose whether to be in an English or Chichewa literacy class once the lessons resumed. However, on the registration day, the instructors placed a restriction for enrolment into the English literacy class but the literacy learners questioned the rationale behind it.

*Supervisor: How are we going to divide ourselves?*

*Ms. Upile: You mean we should have one group learning Chichewa and the other one learning English?*

*Supervisor: Yes.*

*Ms. Upile: But those of us learning Chichewa literacy also want to learn English. Just like school children they learn both English and Chichewa we too want the same.*

*Supervisor: The policy for adult literacy is that we must have just one subject. This is why you receive just one primer. It is not possible to teach both English and Chichewa to same group. Those literacy learners who shall be in the Chichewa literacy class shall not attend English literacy classes the same shall be the case with those in English literacy class. (Field notes, 08/03/2016).*



Other literacy learners: Ms. Imani,  
 Ms. Sanatu: Ms. Sanatu  
 Ms. Upile: Ms. Upile  
 Supervisor: In English literacy class?  
 Ms. Upile: Yes  
 Supervisor: I think you should start in a Chichewa literacy class  
 (Field notes, 08/03/2016).

Here by posing the question: *in English literacy class?* The supervisor did not just want to confirm what he had heard but also appeared to cast doubts about Ms. Upile's eligibility as an English literacy learner. I saw this question as an indication that to him Ms. Upile did not meet the criterion for being in that class hence, his suggestion *I think you should start in a Chichewa literacy class*. In this regard, the supervisor was exercising his authority both as a supervisor and a teacher to judge Ms. Upile's literacy capabilities to place her in a class he thought best suited her. By doing this he was inadvertently or otherwise inhibiting literacy learners' access to the literacies they wished to acquire. Conversely, when Ms. Upile answered, 'yes,' I saw it not just as a confirmation of what she had said but also as an assertion that she had the right to be in the English literacy class. In other words, she was exercising her agency and thereby sending a clear message that she knew what was good for her.

After the registration exercise, the supervisor confided in me saying *some of those that have decided to be in the English literacy class such as Ms. Upile shall go back to Chichewa literacy class. She is just too proud of herself. She is not able to read and write properly in Chichewa.*

These remarks gave me the impression that the supervisor was not happy with the decisions made by some of the women. In addition, his observations somewhat portrayed him as someone who did not seem to accept that the women too, had the power to choose what they wanted hence, his prediction that they *shall go back to Chichewa literacy class* which she never did. He substantiated his claims by sticking to his assumptions that Chichewa literacy was a prerequisite for learning reading and writing in English. However, it appeared that he used this explanation to exercise power over the literacy learners because in any case, the literacy learners were not asked the kind of English skills they wanted to learn. Although reading and writing were emphasised, both my formal and informal conversations with the women suggested that many of them wanted to learn how to speak English in relation to their lived

worlds. The English literacy instructor confirmed this during an informal conversation with me as follows:

*Me: What aspects of English are you teaching?*

*English instructor: At the moment I started with level 2 book 1. What we have done so far is how to welcome someone at your place. The women said that before I taught them anything they wanted to know how to welcome a customer in their businesses. So, I just touched on this one.*

*Me: I see. You did what they wanted.*

*English instructor: That's right. They told me not to bother about writing. They said that when an English-speaking person comes to their business benches they are unable to talk to them. Instead they call other people to assist them. So they wanted to know how to welcome customers.*

This conversation made me believe that the literacy learners who went to the English class had multiple agendas. What was striking to me was how these literacy learners employed their agency to achieve their goals. As I demonstrated in chapter 6, when these same literacy learners were in the Chichewa literacy class, they said that they could not tell the instructors what they wanted to learn because they were afraid of them. What this suggests is that their apparent inability to suggest to the instructors what they wanted to learn may not be explained by just power relationships alone. Their felt needs mattered too, as the excerpt above shows.

## **8.2 Conclusion**

In conclusion, although adult literacy classes were voluntary, my data have shown that some bureaucratic practices created some tensions among literacy officers. Even though part of the tension may be credited to the presence of more than one instructor who were vested with varying positional powers, my analysis has shown that the situation was exacerbated by the presence of official artefacts that would help district officers locate the centre whenever they wanted. Such artefacts limited the flexibility of the literacy officers in decision-making at this centre.

As far as classroom practices were concerned, both the adult literacy learners and the instructors enacted tendencies that mirrored what I have termed the 'school culture.' Whilst the 'school culture' allowed them to create a school like atmosphere, it also limited the space for them to interact freely and make decisions aimed at advancing their interests. In this regard, I have demonstrated that the power to decide who should learn what kind of literacy was largely

in the hands of instructors. However, I have also shown that such power was not absolute. Consequently, the adult literacy learners had the capacity to resist and even defy the authority of their instructors to pursue their own interests. I would therefore, say that despite promoting the 'school culture', the adult literacy learners were not naïve to accept whatever their instructors dictated. Thus, I would argue that their perceived school was subject to reinterpretation and was generally underpinned by mutual respect. These seemingly fluid and contradictory states of affairs were also evident in the figured world of examinations which I look at in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 9

### DILEMMAS IN THE FIGURED WORLD OF EXAMINATIONS

#### 9.0 Introduction

During my fieldwork at Sawabu village, I had the opportunity to observe the literacy learners write their examinations which in this chapter, I frame as a figured world. My rationale for framing examinations as such is that although they are part of literacy teaching and learning process, they have their own unique figuring in terms of the actors that are recognised, the acts that are given significance and the outcomes that are valued. Thus, as activities within a broader figured world of adult literacy learning, examinations have their own assumptions, norms and expectations.

As I conducted my fieldwork, I often heard the instructor remind the literacy learners about the need to be fully prepared for their exams. These reminders, coupled with my own experience as a teacher, gave me the impression that exams were an important part of the literacy learning process. In this chapter, I examine the assessment processes I encountered at Sawabu literacy centre in relation to my assumptions and experiences of the same as a teacher. Furthermore, I examine both some community members' and district officers' perceptions regarding the value and purposes of literacy exams in general, and assessment in particular. To account for all these, I employ the concepts of figuring (which in this context signifies both the interpretation and enactment of the figured world of examination), artefacts, agency, disruption and improvisation.

#### 9.1 The Adult Literacy Assessment: Examination Administration and Processing

When I went for classroom observations on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2015, I noted that the supervisor had brought with him some past arithmetic and Chichewa exam papers. He gave me some to look at. The supervisor told me that the literacy learners had written those exams in May 2015. A few weeks later, I was told that the exam results were out and this news brought some excitement among the adult literacy learners. They pleaded with the supervisor to give them the results because you *never know sometimes we may be asked the same things*. But listening to the exchanges carefully, it appeared that the literacy learners and the supervisor talked about different kinds of examination artefacts. That is, the literacy learners appeared to understand

results in terms of each candidate's examination scripts, hence *did you say that you are going to give us the exam scripts on closing day?* On the contrary, the results the supervisor was talking about was a different assessment artefact, i.e. a list of names of literacy learners who were said to have passed the literacy exams which he later showed me. The supervisor said that out of the 14 adult literacy learners who sat for the exams at the centre, 8 had passed. When I went through the results sheet, I saw that it had a legend and a note that said: "take note that a learner is declared literate if she/he scores 50% or more at each assessment i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic." This artefact constructed the literacy learners' performances as follows: 0 - 39% = level 1; 40 - 69% = level 2; 70 - 100% = level 3. Although I understood these figurings in terms of numbers, I was not able to comprehend them in terms of the candidates' literacy abilities. That is, I did not understand the reading and writing competencies these figures represented. The assessment artefact appeared to assume for example, that an adult literacy learner who scored 50% as outlined can read and write whilst the one who scored 1% less cannot. Thus, whilst the former would be recruited into the figured world of the literate, the later would remain in the figured world of the non-literate where he or she would be assumed to be in need of help. Overall, this artefact made me believe that in adult literacy learning, the figured world of examinations operated in the same way as it did in formal education.

This belief was heightened by the fact that during literacy lessons, the instructor and the supervisor frequently talked about literacy exams. In fact, the instructor gave the literacy learners tests and on one such occasion, she complained about the literacy learners' performance saying:

*but what disappointed me was that the whole class I had yesterday, I am not sure whether there were 13 or 14 literacy learners, when one literacy learner got one problem wrong everyone failed the same. I do not know how it happened. Tomorrow we are writing another test and I want everyone to sit on their own. I want to see each person's individual performance.* (Field notes, 25/11/2015).

Here the instructor appeared to suggest that the literacy learners were sharing their work and that such acts were inappropriate. In other words, she was trying to inculcate the norms and expectations of the official figured world of examinations among the literacy learners. In such a world, independent writing was the act that had significance. She therefore, gave them another test. The instructor's remarks and her emphasis on individual performance resonated with my own figuring of assessment as a teacher in a formal educational setting.

So when in January 2016 I had the opportunity to observe the literacy learners write their exams, I went into the examination room with many assumptions. First, I assumed that the exams would be regulated in terms of time allowed for the literacy learners to write each paper. Second, I assumed that there were rules and regulations that guided the literacy learners' conduct during the writing of the exams. Thus, I assumed that certain acts such as conferring and sharing answers with fellow candidates would be forbidden. Third, I assumed that every candidate shall have her own question paper.

As we were waiting for the literacy learners to assemble, the supervisor showed me the exam question papers and he said *they seem to be the same exams that were written last year*. But the literacy instructor disputed this. Nonetheless, I confirmed that the exams were indeed the same. In fact, the arithmetic paper had the same error in question 3 where the literacy learners were asked to divide 2 by 22 and the marking key gave 11 as an answer. As I checked through the papers, I noted that they did not have instructions for the literacy learners. Time allowed to write and finish each exam paper was also not indicated. In fact, the papers did not have a date or the year in which they were supposed to be written as shown in the picture that follows.

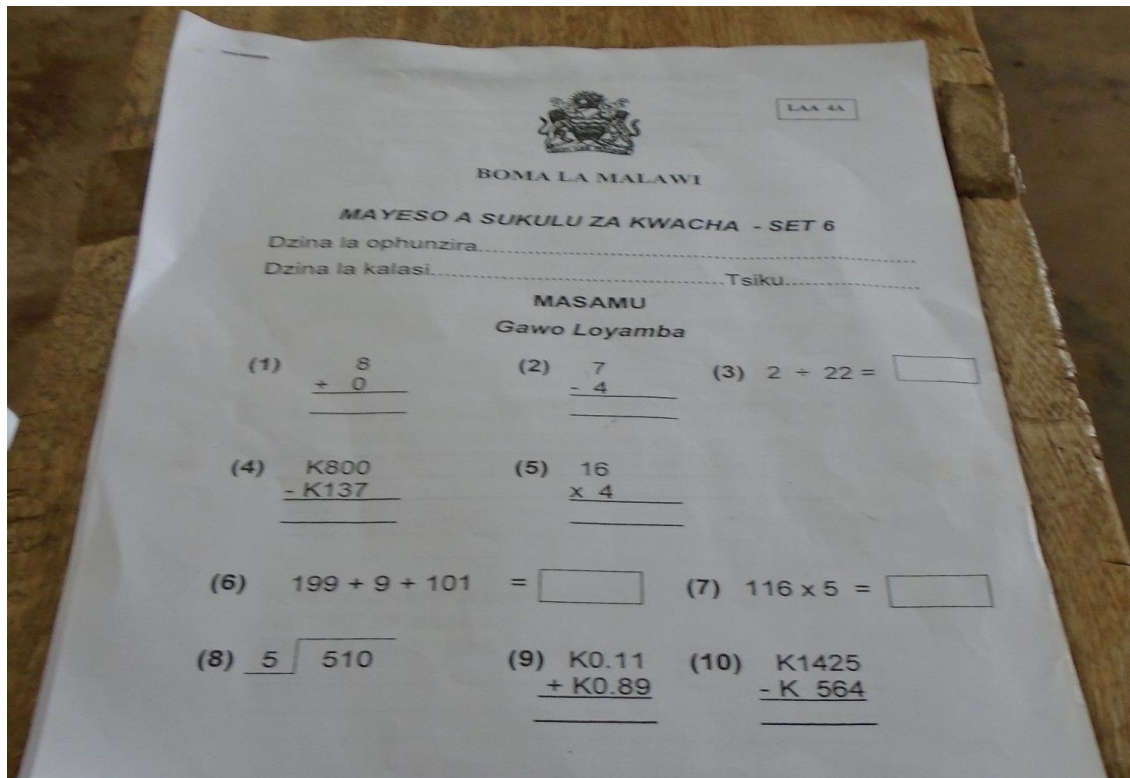


Figure 21: 2015 Arithmetic Exam Paper



What I had seen on these question papers made me revisit my own assumptions about figured worlds of examinations. I realised that if I were to understand what literacy assessment meant in this context, I needed to see the process from a different perspective. I noted that these examinations were guided by different norms and expectations and therefore their results were supposed to be understood in their own right.

### **9.1.1 Administering Arithmetic Exam**

When the exams were about to start, the supervisor welcomed the literacy learners and said: *the exams we have been talking about have now come. But they are the same exams we had last year.* To which the literacy learners responded casually, *we are in trouble because we failed those exams and we are going to fail again.* In this conversation, it appeared that the supervisor and the literacy learners had different feelings towards having the same exams. Whilst the supervisor was bemused by the state of affairs, the literacy learners were uncomfortable, considering the fact that when they wrote the same exams the previous year, only 8 of them had passed. The literacy learners' reaction made me believe that the outcome they valued most in this figured world was passing and not gauging whether their literacy competencies had improved.

Then the supervisor told the literacy learners to extract papers from their notebooks, write their names, the name of the school and the date. This instruction surprised the literacy learners. They argued that the previous year they did not use papers from their notebooks to write the arithmetic exam. They said that they thought that they had written their answers on the question paper itself. Although the supervisor disputed the literacy learners' observations, the structure of the paper above confirms the literacy learners' opinion. On this question paper, there are spaces where the literacy learners were required to write their names (*Dzina la ophunzira*), the name of their literacy centre (*Dzina la kalasi*) and date (*Tsiku*).

As the supervisor handed over the question papers to the literacy learners, he issued further instructions: *copy the questions on your answer sheets and lend the question papers to others because I have very few of them. Keep the question papers clean because I am going to administer the same in all other centres.* These instructions implicitly revealed the reason why he disputed the literacy learners' observation about writing the answers on the question paper. That is, the instructions implied that the supervisor was just trying to be pragmatic. He had 7 question papers to be issued out to not only the 24 literacy learners at this centre, but also to

other literacy learners in centres that were under his jurisdiction. The supervisor was trying to solve what appeared to be a crisis by improvising a way out. Although the supervisor's suggestion was plausible, I doubted whether it would work in this context. However, the literacy learners did not comply with the instruction. Instead, they exercised their agency and improvised their own way of dealing with the problem. They grouped themselves and started writing the exams using papers extracted from their notebooks as answer sheets.

But the shortage of question papers surprised me somehow because on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, the supervisor indicated that the district office had instructed him to register the names of the literacy learners who wanted to write the 2015 exams for purposes of planning. He said: *we will take a list of those people who want to write the exams in 2015 so that the question papers for literacy learners at Sawabu literacy centre should be adequate. They want to calculate the number of question papers required for the whole district.* The names were written and sent to the district office and yet only 7 arithmetic question papers were available to be administered in all literacy centres that fell under the supervisor's cluster. Later, the supervisor said that the limited number of question papers was because of financial resource constraints.

The exam room was buzzing as the literacy learners talked and laughed whilst writing their exams. Overall, the candidates appeared to be enjoying the examination process. In their groups, the literacy learners had the opportunity to interact and share their literacy skills. Even the literacy learners who could not do the exams because they had not yet mastered the reading and writing skills, took part. They sat together with the others not as passive observers but as active participants in the discussions and laughter as their colleagues wrote or read. Literacy learners could be heard asking each other: *is no 2 division? No, it is subtraction*, replied the others. *Is this not number 3? Are these not similar?* Some wondered. From an outsider's point of view, it appeared that on this day, the literacy learners had disrupted the privileged norms and expectations underlying the official figured world of examinations by providing other figurings that assigned significance and legitimacy to the act of sharing answers. Perhaps, buoyed by the fact that passing was the valued outcome in the official figured world of examinations, the literacy learners appeared to be interested in helping each other although such tendencies contradicted the official stance which revolved around independent effort as reflected in the performance scores I discussed earlier.

### 9.1.2 Reading and Writing Exams

After the arithmetic exam, the literacy learners wrote a comprehension exam. The literacy learners again extracted papers from their notebooks to be used as answer sheets. Here too, there were just three question papers and literacy learners scrambled for them. Sometimes it appeared as if it was a tug of war and I jotted down.

*I notice that it is becoming difficult for the learners to share the comprehension test papers because the passage is on one side and most of the questions are on the other side. Hence when one finishes reading the passage they would want to answer the questions overleaf whilst others want to finish reading (Field notes, 19/01/2016).*

The literacy learners walked around the room in search of question papers that were free. The instructor tried very hard to do the same and then she voiced out her frustrations: *it is as if it is not a government exercise. It's shameful.* Whenever she got a question paper that was 'free,' she could be heard announcing: *who wants a question paper? Me!* Some literacy learners responded whilst others had their hands raised in the air.

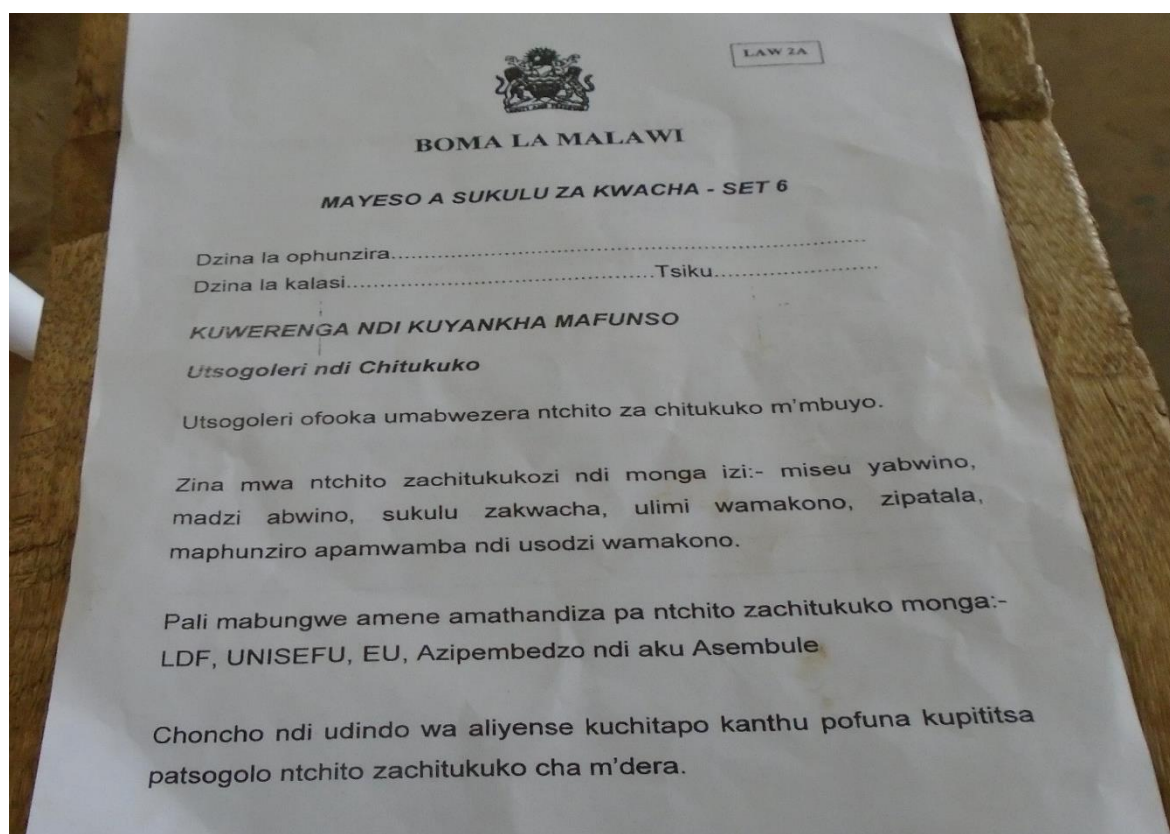


Figure 22: Comprehension Exam Paper

Here too, the literacy learners disrupted the taken for granted norms and expectations of the official figured world of examinations. Most of the writing was done collaboratively which in a way challenged the literacy learners' expected ascribed identity of examination candidates. As the comprehension exam was in progress, the supervisor administered the reading test because he said time was running out. The literacy learner who finished the comprehension exam was asked to go and do the reading test. The test had three parts, single words, a sentence and a poem. The supervisor asked me to keep him company in the backroom where the reading exam was being done but I declined because I thought my presence could have affected the literacy learners' performance. However, I sat slightly opposite to the entrance of the backroom so that I could see and hear what was happening inside. I heard some literacy learners tell the supervisor that they could not read and the supervisor respected their excuses. Later the supervisor informed me that he did not insist on testing the adult literacy learners who excused themselves from the exercise because he thought doing so would be time wasting. Unlike the figured worlds of examinations I had experienced before in which candidates that had done a reading test were not allowed to interact with those who had not done it yet, in this context the candidates went back to their places and mixed with their friends freely.

The final test they wrote was dictation. This exam too, had three parts, single words, a sentence and a paragraph as shown in the picture that follows. Thus, like the comprehension exam, dictation too, reflected the guidelines I outlined in chapter 2 which ranked reading and writing in terms of single words, sentences, paragraphs and passages. In other words, the guidelines appeared to suggest that reading or writing single words was easier than doing the same with sentences and paragraphs.

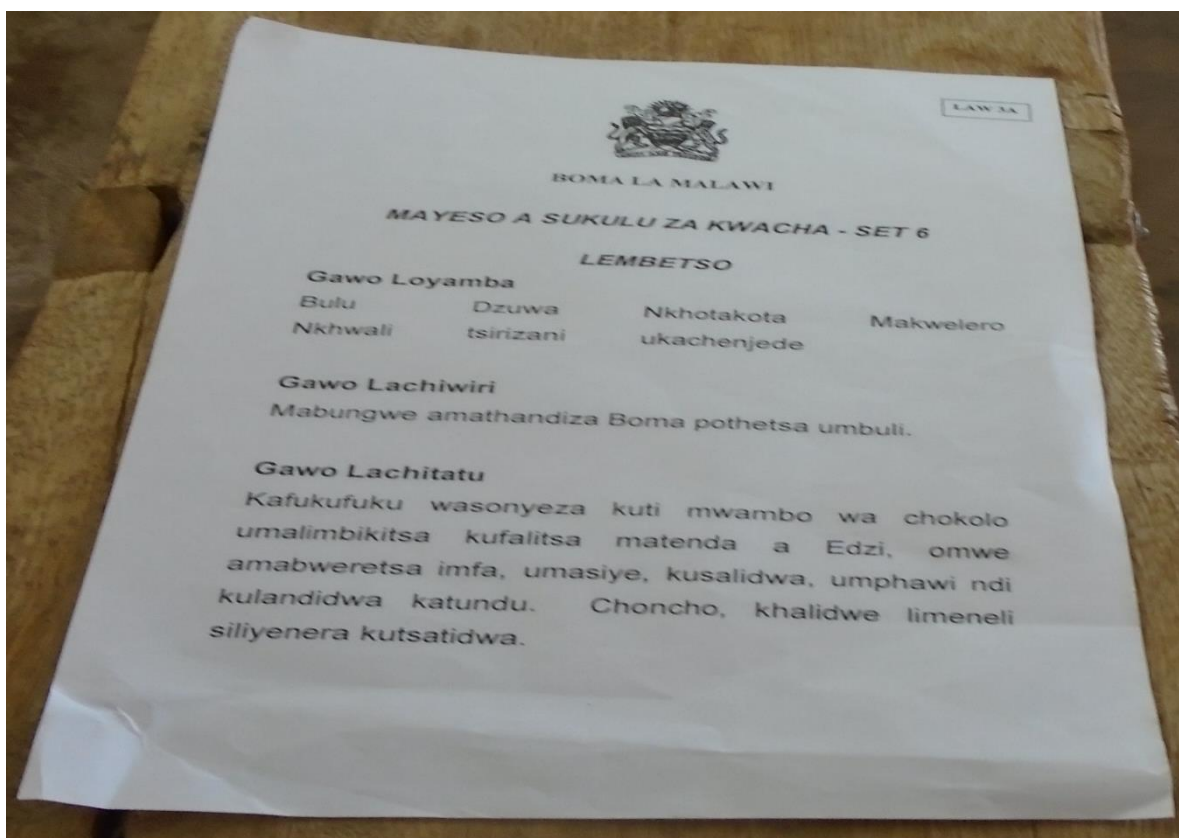


Figure 23: Dictation Exam

Contrary to the assumption I have highlighted above, I noted that the literacy learners found it equally hard to write single words. But I was fascinated by the literacy knowledge the literacy learners brought to these exams as this exchange shows.

*Ms. Matiki:* *Can you repeat please?*

*Instructor:* *From the start? The first word is 'Bulu' (donkey)*

*Literacy learners:* *No, on 'makwerero' (ladder)*

*Instructor:* *Ma-kwe-re-ro (pause) ma-kwe-re-ro*

*Ms. Matiki:* *Capital 'M'?*

*Instructor:* *Yes, it has to be capital 'm.' Have you finished?*

*Some literacy learners:* *We haven't even started.*

*Instructor:* *But when I ask if you have finished you say 'yes.' The fifth word is 'nkhwali' (Red necked spur fowl)*

*Literacy learners:* *What?*

*Instructor:* *Nkhwali*

*Literacy learners:* *Nkhwali*

*Ms. Mwenye:* *You have just said khwali*

Ms. Tepani: *Are we not going to put 'M'*  
 Ms. Mwenye: *Don't we have 'm'*  
 Instructor: *There must be 'n' (mentioning letter), nkhwali 'n' (sounding)*  
 Literacy learners: *'n' (sounding)*  
 Instructor: *'n' (sounding)*  
 Literacy learners: *(laughter)* (Field notes: 19/01/2016).

This exchange shows that the literacy learners knew that there were occasions when capital letters were required and that in some cases they were not. It also shows their ability to distinguish between the 'm' and 'n' sounds hence, their question to seek clarification as to whether what they heard was the former or the latter so that they could represent the sound with the appropriate letter. At the same, we see how the instructor was constrained by the norms and expectations of the official figured world of examinations. In this context, she was no longer the same actor, i.e. their instructor and they too were no longer just literacy learners. She was their invigilator and they were exam candidates. As such, although she understood the difficulties they were facing, there was a limit to which she could assist them.

Three months later, the supervisor brought the scores for all the areas that were assessed. Overall, 14 literacy learners passed the exams and were therefore, declared literate. This was an improvement from the previous year's results whereby just 5 adult literacy learners excelled in the exams. Commenting on the results, the supervisor said: *as regards the exams then I would tell you that this year the results are good. I have compared with last year's results. This year it is much better. This is because this year you were very dedicated to literacy lessons and I urge you to continue with that dedication.* The supervisor's remarks underscored the assumptions and expectations of the official figured world of examinations which gave more significance to the overall performance of the centre than the gains each literacy learner had made through the literacy lessons. The supervisor was satisfied with 2015 results due to several reasons. First, there was an apparent increase in the number of literacy learners declared literate. Second, there was an increase in the scores the literacy learners got in almost all areas tested in general, and in reading in particular. He therefore attributed these perceived improvements to the literacy learners' dedication to literacy lessons. However, I should point out that there were some literacy learners who had passed their exams and were therefore, declared literate in 2014 such as Ms. Afiki, Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Tepani and Ms. Balala who were also amongst the 14 who were declared literate in 2015.

To sum up, this section has shown how resource challenges constrained the administration of exams at Sawabu literacy centre. I have demonstrated that the literacy learners disrupted the official figuring of examinations which gave independent efforts significance and enacted an alternative which allowed them room for collaboration. Thus, the adult literacy learners' focus appeared to be on passing the exams and not determining who was doing better than the other or assessing how far they had gone in mastering literacy skills. This disruption raises questions as to whether a monolithic official figuring of examinations is the best model for assessing literacy competencies of the adult literacy learners at this centre.

## **9.2 Value and Purposes of Literacy Exams**

Having seen the examination process which somehow made me revisit my assumptions concerning literacy examinations at this centre, I was then left wondering as to how community members and literacy officers valued literacy examinations in general, and assessment in particular. But as I tried to understand this aspect of examination, I soon realised the tensions between the school culture which I looked at in chapter 8, and the spirit of collaboration the adult literacy learners displayed when they were writing their exams.

### **9.2.1 Perceptions of the Purposes of Examinations**

When I talked with some literacy learners such as Ms. Matiki, I got a sense that they valued their exams very much. Ms. Matiki told me that the exams literacy learners wrote were very important *because they show who is intelligent or not. When one passes the exams, it shows that one is intelligent.* When I told her that I thought she went to literacy lessons just to learn how to read and write, she said then she would not be attending the literacy classes. Similarly, Thom who was not participating in the literacy lesson also seemed to share this view when he told me that he saw literacy assessment as a form of screening to identify *who was paying attention to the instructors and who was not.* Ms. Matiki's and Thom's remarks project the 'school culture' I looked at in chapter 8. To them exams are not just about demonstrating one's literacy abilities but also about testing the individuals' natural capabilities as well as their dispositions in the classroom.

In the same vein, Ms. Kalako saw examinations as part of the learning process. She told me that exams were important because *if one writes those exams frequently one may improve on his/her reading and writing skills. Those exams are meant to sharpen our reading and writing skills by giving us different tasks to do.* Similarly, Ms. Imani said that exams are important

because *when you pass you know that you are making progress. If you fail, you know that you must work hard.*

Here Ms. Kalako and Ms. Imani appeared to see literacy assessment as having something intrinsically rewarding. That is, the two literacy learners valued assessment in terms of what it did to them intellectually other than helping them to achieve something tangible in their lives. However, these perceptions were contradicted by the collaborative tendencies they displayed during the examination administration process I discussed earlier.

On her part, the literacy instructor appeared to view examinations as a form of motivation to both the literacy learners and herself. She told me that exams are very important because *when the literacy learners write and pass those exams, I get encouraged and know that what I am doing has a future. It means that what they come here to do and the time they invest in it is not just wasted. The exams encourage the literacy learners in that they help them assess themselves.*

During an interview with me, one of the literacy officers at the district office said that the purpose of the exams: *is just a matter of assessment. We want to know whether the 10 months have been effective or not. These exams reflect on both parties. It is either the facilitators did not do enough to help the literacy learners or there were problems with the literacy learners themselves. Both can contribute to the success or failure of our programme.* Here, the officer made it clear to me that the purposes of the exams were two-fold. First to evaluate the progress of the literacy programme. Second, to assess the competencies of both the literacy learners and their instructors. But then he went further and said: *it is unfortunate that the same exams are administered every year.* Judging from the tone of his voice, I sensed some disappointment maybe because he realised that the tendencies of reusing question papers somehow undermined the evaluation process he was talking about. He said that the exams were set at the National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education (NCLAE) but *because of lack of resources they recycle the same exams. Sometimes they just say 'print the same exams from there. We are going to give you toner.'* This is the problem. *Because of this, districts are now forming their own exams. They say, 'these exams were administered last year, let us set our own fresh exams.'* Whilst I sympathised with the officer on this state of affairs, his remarks seemed to suggest more than lack of resources. He appeared to imply that the inability of NCLAE to set fresh exam papers was caused by financial problems, yet the same office was able to send toner to



reprint the old ones. In this case, the remarks made me believe that *setting* examinations cost more than reprinting them.

Regrettably, the officer noted that the tendency of reusing the same question papers had some negative effects. *This makes some facilitators not to take the exams seriously. They may keep copies of the exams and by the time the exams are being administered the literacy learners are already familiar with the papers,* (Field notes, 22/06/2016).

Furthermore, the officer said: *there is something that is also happening. To protect their jobs, some facilitators write the exams on behalf of the literacy learners.* These utterances confirmed a story the supervisor once told me. At that time, he said that a literacy instructor had mobilised people from her village to write exams at a centre she was supposed to have been teaching. The supervisor for that centre discovered the malpractice and dismissed her from her job.

The perceptions of both the literacy learners and the officer generally mirror the figured world of examinations characteristic of formal education where competition and ranking is the norm. However, as I have illustrated, the challenge was that in practice, the adult literacy learners disrupted the official figuring of examinations and provided other ways in which consciously or otherwise, collaborative writing gained significance in the same way as independent work did. Consequently, in some cases these contradictory figurings gave rise to some tensions, especially concerning adult literacy learners' literacy identities.

For example, Ms. Abasi was one of the literacy learners who were regularly appointed to read from the primer during literacy lessons but during the exams she said she could not read and therefore, did not pass the exams. Hence, when her name was suggested by her fellow literacy learners to be part of the English literacy class, the Chichewa literacy instructor said: *no, Ms. Abasi should remain with me.* By insisting that Ms. Abasi should still be in the Chichewa literacy class, the instructor implied that she was not yet literate in the language hence, not eligible for English lessons.

Just like Ms. Abasi, Ms. Dailesi was able to read some words when given a chance to read in class. During the exams, she scored 80% in reading, 100% in arithmetic and 100% in writing which meant that she passed the exams and she was therefore, declared literate. That status earned her entry into the English literacy class. However, the English literacy instructor was not convinced that Ms. Dailesi was literate in Chichewa saying: *we have people like Ms. Afiki, Ms. Mwenye and Ms. Sanatu who are doing well. But we have one who joined us yesterday,*

*Ms. Dailesi, I think she should go back to Chichewa.* Here too, by suggesting that Ms. Dailesi should go back to Chichewa, the English instructor implied that Ms. Dailesi was not literate in the local language. What we see here is a mismatch between the literacy identities ascribed on these literacy learners through exam scores and those identities they performed through the actual literacy practices. For Ms. Abasi, her interaction with literacy artefacts projected her as someone who was literate whilst the literacy scores showed the opposite. The converse was true for Ms. Dailesi. These two cases illustrate the challenge of reconciling the exam scores and the performance guidelines I outlined in chapter 2.

In conclusion, both the literacy officers and adult literacy learners saw exams as serving various purposes ranging from ranking the learners, providing opportunities for consolidating literacy skills as well as assessing the teaching competencies of the instructors using the literacy learners' results as a proxy. All these purposes resonate with the official figuring of examinations. However, the key challenge was that the adult literacy learners and to some extent, NCLAE enacted certain tendencies that generally undermined the accomplishment of these purposes.

### **9.2.2 Perceptions of the Value of Examinations**

One of the key features that stood out in my discussions with the literacy learners concerning examinations was the fluidity of their perceptions towards assessment. That is, although they articulated the purposes of exams as I have illustrated above, some of them thought that the exams were worthless in practical terms. For instance, even though Ms. Matiki valued literacy assessment in general, she also thought it was valueless in terms of helping her achieve anything in life saying: *even if I write, what is going to come out? Even if it comes out, of what help shall it be?* Such views were also expressed by other literacy learners such as Ms. Awali who said: *I do not see any benefits from those exams.* The two literacy learners were frustrated due to the realisation that the exams were not going to provide them with anything tangible. These perceptions contradict the purposes of exams which I discussed earlier. This suggests that although the literacy learners were aware of the uses of exams, they knew that their exams were different.

During informal discussions with me, both Ms. Matiki and Ms. Awali separately told me what they had aspired to become and I therefore, understood their attitudes towards the exams. Ms. Matiki told me that when she was young she wanted to be either an announcer on Malawi

Broadcasting Corporation or a medical doctor. She told me that all those dreams were gone. She said that some time back she had an opportunity of helping in weighing up babies at her local clinic but quit the task because she was afraid of making errors in recording the weights of babies due to her perceived 'illiteracy.'

Ms. Awali on her part, said she wanted to be a cleaner. She told me that she envied the women who pushed trolleys in hospitals and wanted to be one of them. Her hopes of becoming a cleaner were raised when she attended literacy lessons and got a certificate. However, reality soon caught up with her and she realised that her certificate was valueless.

Other literacy learners such as Ms. Maulidi told me that they had received similar certificates and kept them in their suitcases where they went missing. Thus, like the other artefacts I looked at in chapter 5, the value of the literacy certificates was largely symbolic.

Similar assessment perceptions appeared to be prevalent among some officers at the district office. During an interview with me, one of the officers said: *exams are very important when at the end one is going to use the results to get some employment*. He said that in formal education, the exams are important because they determine the candidates' future. *As far as our exams are concerned, they do not guarantee that the literacy learners shall gain any meaningful employment. The literacy learners will continue to be farmers*. In these remarks, the officer confirmed the literacy learners' observations regarding the value of literacy learning assessment. He said that they will continue to be farmers. He made a distinction between two figured worlds of examinations. The first, which was gainful was associated with formal education. The second, which was rather worthless was assigned to adult literacy learning. Thus, the officer restricted his perception of literacy examinations to tangible gains. He did not appreciate examinations in their own right as some literacy learners did. He further noted that *there are no restrictions because the end result is not very important. The exams are even kept in the open. The exam results are secondary. Our major aim is to see a change in behaviour in our literacy learners* (Field notes, 22/06/2016).

But there were some contradictions in the officer's figuring of examinations. First, he said that *the exam results are secondary* yet his office uses the same results to evaluate the progress of the literacy programme. Second, he claimed that *the reading and writing is secondary* and yet the results his office uses to evaluate the literacy programme are based on reading and writing and not *a change in behaviour in our literacy learners*. (I discuss more on the application of

knowledge purported to have been gained from literacy lessons in the next chapter). These remarks made me understand why the administration of exams at Sawabu literacy centre was very flexible I illustrated earlier.

### **9.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have focused on the administration and processing of literacy exams on the one hand, and the examination perceptions of literacy learners, the instructors and district officer on the other. I have demonstrated that although the adult literacy examination processes aroused similar assumptions and expectation as other exams elsewhere, they should be understood in their own context. Through the concept of figured world, I have shown how the adult literacy learners disrupted the official figuring (interpretation) of examinations which was based on individual effort and enacted their own in which collaboration was acceptable. Although some may argue that it was the problem of resources that made the literacy learners to improvise their own way of dealing with it which in the process led to the disruption of the official figuring of examinations, I have reported similar tendencies during classroom tests which their instructor complained about. Perhaps, what this disruption suggests is that the official figuring of examinations at this centre needs some rethinking.

However, the challenge with the adult literacy learners' figuring was that it did not match with what both the literacy officers and the adult literacy learners themselves perceived as the purposes of exams. Their ideas regarding the purposes of exams stressed competition and ranking. The officers saw literacy exams as a tool for measuring the performances of both individual literacy learners as well as the competencies of the literacy instructors. Such perceptions of examinations contrasted sharply with the collaborative approach I witnessed when they wrote their 2015 exams. It was due to this mismatch that some literacy learners got contradictory literacy identities. As I have illustrated in this chapter, based on the scores they obtained from the exams, some literacy learners were declared literate but the reading and writing skills they displayed in actual literacy practices made the instructor to adjudge them otherwise. Perhaps, this is why some literacy learners realised that their certificates were simply artefacts that could not fetch them a job to earn a living. In the next chapter, I pull together the key findings from all the analysis chapter and discuss them through the conceptual perspectives I outlined in chapter 3.

## CHAPTER 10

### LITERACY, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN FIGURED WORLDS

#### 10.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I pull together the key findings emerging from chapters 5 to 9 and discuss them by employing mostly Holland, *et al*'s (1998) concept of figured world and related concepts which I examined in chapter 3. In order to enhance my discussions, in some cases I draw on the materials I used in my analysis chapters whilst in others, I incorporate new ones. My aim is to explore how the concept of figured world would enhance my understanding of literacy as a social practice. In this regard, my focus is to demonstrate how community members' literacy practices, meanings and discourses as well as power relations can be unpacked by conceptualising some of their literacy mediated social activities as figured worlds.

In chapter 3, I stated my decision to integrate my overarching theory of literacy as a social practice with Holland, *et al*'s (1998) concept of figured world and highlighted some key concepts from the latter which I found useful particularly identity, power and privilege, positioning, artefacts, refiguring, resistance and agency. As far as identity is concerned, I explained that I found Holland, *et al*'s (*ibid*) conceptualisation compelling and stated my desire to combine it with Gee's (1999, 2005) perspectives of identities. Similarly, on positioning, I explained that my study was going to employ Holland *et al*'s ideas of positionality with Davies' and Harré's (2007) adapted characterisation of interactive and reflexive positioning. In the sections that follow, I employ my interpretation of these concepts to discuss some community member's literacy practices, meanings and discourses as well as their power relationships in some of their lived worlds. My approach involves pulling together the findings that relate to specific notions and discuss them under those lenses.

#### 10.1 Towards Understanding Literacy Practices in Figured Worlds

In chapter 3, I discussed figured worlds as “socially produced, culturally constructed activities” (Holland *et al*, (1998: 40-41). In these activities, “significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (*ibid*: 52).

As I illustrated in chapter 5, community members' involvement in various activities which I framed as figured worlds, provided them with the opportunities to experience a range of literacies associated with them. Such figured worlds included the Cash Transfer programme, Farm Input programme, Emergency Food Aid Programme, Health, Income-generating Groups, Committees and Seminars. To navigate through all these activities, the community members had to, among other things, pay attention to the demands of the literacies involved. For instance, to participate meaningfully in the figured world of Social Cash Transfer Programme, the actors and characters (Holland *et al*, 1998) in this figured world were required to not only read and understand the procedures laid out in the programme leaflets, but also to be conversant with how the money they were receiving was being calculated. Similarly, the community members who were taking part in community savings groups (community banks) were expected to read and understand their records which included their shares, debt, credit and interest. What seems to be clear to me is that these activities were not mediated by one and the same autonomous literacy acquired elsewhere (Street 1984). Rather, they involved different and multiple literacies (*ibid*).

However, as my findings in chapter 5 show, the community members did not treat the understanding of artefacts such as ration and money cards as their major priority. This was the case because of two reasons. First, the act of understanding these artefacts was not given significance in these figured worlds. As such, the literacies associated with them were marginally relevant to the community members' participation in these figured worlds. Second, the community members received some support from either programme officers or friends and relatives through mediation. Therefore, they did not view their inability to read the contents on the ration card, money card, mosquito nets and agricultural leaflets as a major impediment to their participation in any of the figured world evoked by these artefacts. In fact, some of them, such as Ms. Awali and Ms. Maulidi, kept some of these artefacts in suitcases like mementoes to be retrieved when required. They used such artefacts as evidence of their participation in the events in which they received them. Hence, even when prompted to suggest what they would desire to learn in the literacy classes, they hardly mentioned these as their preferred content. Their major concern revolved around the activities which obliged them to demonstrate their literacy abilities in public such as that of signing one's name. In this regard, I would argue that it was not just the ability to write meaningful symbols that mattered most, rather, it was its outcome, i.e. the feeling of being valued or being subjected to shame and humiliation, (which I discuss later) that had some significance.

Signing one's name was the act that was valued and given significance in most of the activities outside the literacy class, such as the Emergency Food Relief Programme, Social Cash Transfer Programme, and Farm Input Subsidy Programme. As I showed in chapter 5, such significance, coupled with both positive and negative experiences some community members went through in these figured worlds, made some literacy learners such as Ms. Awali, Ms. Duniya, Ms. Faki and Ms. Suwedi prioritise this skill in their literacy learning classes.

Ms Awali said that she was attending the literacy classes *to make sure that I master my name so that when we are called for some other activities I should be able to sign using a pen*. This decision was based on her experiences with literacy in the figured world of the 'Modern' Farming. She proudly recounted how people clapped hands for her when she signed her name during the distribution of fertilizer coupons. Although based on my experience, clapping hands after an individual had done something worth appreciating was not unusual, Ms. Awali's case was significant. As I shall discuss later, Ms. Awali was considered as an old person and the officers and other people taking part in this event associated her age with 'illiteracy.' They were therefore elated to see her do what they did not expect her to do, hence the hand clapping.

Ms. Awali also fondly remembered how the officers responsible for the programme said they respected her because of her ability to sign her name. Even the village headperson for her community was proud of her due to the same reason. The happiness such sentiments gave Ms. Awali was critical, especially when we consider the social status of the people involved. Ms. Awali was a *munthu wamba* ('ordinary' person). The individuals who appreciated and gave significance to her ability to sign her name were 'respected' members of society, i.e. government officers and her own traditional leader. Being praised by such individuals was somewhat an honour.

What we see here is that the literacy practices taking place in some figured worlds provided the "context of meaning" for Ms. Awali's ability to sign her name (Holland *et al*, 1998). By using the valued cultural artefact (ibid) employed in the literacy practices of these figured worlds, the pen, Ms. Awali was able to influence her own and other people's views towards her (ibid).

Apart from the figured worlds mentioned above, the community members were also involved in some literacy practices at home. In chapter 5, I illustrated how Ms. Suyu and her sisters, namely, Ms. Wasi and Ms. Mkapita navigated through various literacy mediated social activities

despite reflexively positioning themselves as ‘non-literate.’ The three sisters decided not to enrol for the adult literacy lessons, citing age as their limitation. They said that their hands were feeble and therefore, could not handle the pen.

However, the three sisters employed the “cultural artifacts” (Holland et al, 1998) of the figured world of school to make sense of their grandchildren’s progress in school. They said

*We go through their notebooks and when we see zithetho (crosses) we tell them that they got those things wrong and when we see zichongi (ticks) we tell them that they got those things right. When there are many crosses we know that they are not getting anything from school. They cry when we tell them ‘look your friend here got everything correct but you failed almost everything.’*

As Holland *et al* (ibid) contend, “the actions, the deployments of artifacts such as pronouns and chips, evoke the worlds to which they were relevant, and position individuals with respect to those worlds” (p. 63). The three sisters’ actions and their deployment of artefacts appear to corroborate this claim. They were using their knowledge of the cultural artefacts (crosses and ticks) that evoke the figured world of school to make meaning of their grandchildren’s progress in school. To the three sisters, crosses and ticks evoked the world to which they were relevant, the school, and indeed, the two artefacts positioned the children with respect to that world. The children too, understood such positioning and that is why those who got many crosses cried because the crosses inscribed on them an identity of failures. What was significant in this finding was the fact that despite being non-literate, the three sisters informally learnt that artefacts such as crosses and ticks were “mediators of people’s activity” (ibid: 117). To some extent, the three sisters’ case is supported by Street’s (n.d.) assertion that “‘illiteracy’ like literacy is not a single monolithic state” (p. 14). This finding is also supported by Gebre, Rogers, Street, and Openjuru’s (2009: 2) who observe that all adults even those assumed to be non-literate “can and do negotiate” an array of literacy tasks.

To conclude, this discussion underscores the social and contextual nature of literacy. It illustrates how fruitless it may be to have *a priori* determination of what counts as literacy in all contexts. It reaffirms Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) assertion that literacy is what people do. The experiences my participants had with literacy show that literacies derived meaning from people’s social practices in specific contexts. What is intriguing to me though, is the fact that it was not what literacy allowed them to do that mattered most, rather it was what it did to them that was valued. For Ms. Awali, signing her name allowed her to participate in some literate activities but what she cherished most was the sense of being valued that this literacy



skill afforded her. It made her escape the shame and humiliation that troubled some of those who lacked this ability as I discuss in 10.6. The discussion further demonstrates how “power to define and name what counts as literacy and illiteracy” (Street, 2010: 581) privileges some literacies over others, thereby making literacy identities both unstable and contested. In the next section, I discuss how the community members reinterpreted their literacy classes and challenged the government’s power to define what adult literacy classes meant.

## **10.2 Power Relations in Literacy Learning: Agency, Refiguring and Resistance**

The Malawi government ‘constructs’ adult literacy as a process of learning a myriad of “social goods” (Gee, 1999) which include specialized knowledge, skills, attitudes and techniques. The individuals who are presumed to undergo this process are “illiterate beneficiaries aged 15 and above,” (Government of the Republic of Malawi, 2007). In this way, the government positions itself as the benefactor whilst the literacy learners are imagined and discursively positioned as individuals in need of help. Although the government literacy policy does not go far in describing who these “illiterates” are, the primer identifies them as those individuals who did not go to school when they were young. Such are the individuals to be recruited into the figured world of adult literacy learning in Malawi.

In chapter 1, I observed that the National Adult Literacy Programme (NALP) in Malawi is delivered based on the autonomous model (Street 1984) in which everyone is expected to learn the same officially scripted content in the same manner as well as in sequence. Once the adult literacy learners master such content, they are expected to employ it in all contexts where literacy is required. Typical of any formal learning programme, the adult literacy learning is evoked by centrally produced artefacts (primers, instructor’s guides, attendance registers, examinations, monthly report forms and examination results forms). Significance is given to the teaching and learning of the content outlined in the official documents. At the same time, the passing of the official exams is the outcome that is valued most. In terms of teaching and learning methods, the programme advocates for strategies that are ostensibly different from those used when teaching schoolchildren (see chapter 2).

### **10.2.1 Refiguring and Power Relations in Figured Worlds**

I went into my fieldwork carrying the assumptions about adult literacy teaching and learning as outlined above. However, as I demonstrated in chapter 6, the community members refigured

the figured world of adult literacy learning into a model which they appeared to cherish. Both the literacy learners and their instructors fashioned their own way of interacting which was in sharp contrast to that figured by the government. To them adult literacy learning was school. As such, they tried all they could to ensure that their literacy class had the identity of a particular formal school and in chapter 8, I called such tendencies ‘the school culture.’

To enact the ‘school culture,’ the literacy learners called themselves schoolchildren and did things as if they were who they said they were (Holland *et al*, 1998). Such a culture brought with it relational identities (ibid) imbued with asymmetrical power relationships. They called their instructors either *madamu* (madam) or *sala* (sir). That way, the figured world of adult literacy learning was “peopled by the figures, characters, and types who [carried] out its tasks and who also [had] styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it” (ibid: 51). Holland *et al* (ibid) explain that the production and reproduction of figured worlds involves two things. First, the “abstraction of significant regularities from everyday life into expectations about how particular types of events unfold” (p. 53). Second, the “interpretation of the everyday according to these distillations of past experiences” (ibid). In the case of my research participants, the knowledge some of them had concerning teaching and learning was school based. Hence, the ‘significant regularities’ they abstracted came from the experiences some of them had during their childhood school days. Their behaviour and actions in the figured world of adult literacy learning suggested that they were using such experiences to interpret what they were doing in this context. Thus, as I demonstrated in chapter 8, the women either consciously or unconsciously sat on the floor in rows. They sang songs just as I did when I was in primary school. The supervisor insisted that such songs served as lessons despite facing resistance from the learners on a few occasions. They were expected to raise their hands to ask or answer a question. Talking to each other in class was deemed as making noise. They were expected to notify the instructors if they were unable to come for the lessons. They were very eager to have their work marked. Anyone who missed a lesson was to copy notes from those who were present because the instructors were not going to reteach lessons for their sake. At the end of the lessons, the register was called out and the literacy learners answered loudly. In fact, the literacy learners who were attending English literacy lessons demanded that the instructor should teach them ‘how to answer the register.’

Within the same ‘school culture’ other adult literacy learners refigured the literacy classes as a way of continuing with their education. This was the case, especially with those adult literacy learners who had done their primary school to a level at which they were able to read and write. These literacy learners such as Ms. Imani, Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Balala, Ms. Mwenye and Ms. Afiki refigured adult literacy classes as an avenue for completing what they had failed to accomplish during their childhood education. They employed a school-related discourse model to explain how they expected the literacy classes to operate. They said that since they were writing exams at the end of their literacy learning process, it made sense therefore, that those literacy learners who ‘passed’ such exams should be promoted to the next class. They observed that *if you remain in the same class it means you have failed and therefore, you are repeating the class.*

Somehow, I was not surprised that these adult learners perceived their literacy class as school because even official documents constructed them as such (see chapter 2). Hence, their idea of school might have emanated from such policy discourse. In fact, by singling out individuals who never went to school as the legitimate actors and characters in the figured world of adult literacy learning, the primer implicitly suggests that the literacy classes are schools for adults. However, what was interesting to me was how these literacy learners went further to create actors and characters (Holland *et al*, 1998) with roles and acts that were in opposition to the official figured worlds of adult literacy learning. Their figuring was in tandem with Holland *et al*’s (ibid: 49) postulation that “figured worlds rest upon people’s abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized ‘as if’ realms.” Through such abilities, the adult literacy learners refigured their literacy learning as being the same as primary schools. They argued that they learnt the same things as those taught in primary schools. The only difference they saw was that *we are not flogged when we do something wrong.*

The adult literacy learners’ stance towards the authority of their instructors was reminiscent of my own experiences during my primary and secondary school days. As a pupil, my colleagues and I saw the teachers as all-knowing and therefore, their decisions could not be questioned. Discipline was about listening and doing what the teachers wanted us to do. This ‘school culture’ appeared to be the same as the one literacy learners and their instructors were enacting at this literacy centre.

### 10.2.2 Agency, Improvisation and Resistance in Figured Worlds

However, the potency of the ‘school culture’ was not unbounded. Although the adult literacy learners viewed themselves as *wali* (initiates, see chapter 5) who had to be told what to do, sometimes they exercised agency and resistance. Citing Inden (1990) Holland *et al* (ibid: 42) describe human agency as

the realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only to know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable, though not necessarily from the same point of view.

In chapter 8, I illustrated how the adult literacy learners sometimes resisted their instructor’s demands to sing songs. I also demonstrated how the adult literacy learners employed their agency to defy their instructors’ adherence to the stated English literacy enrolment policy in which only Chichewa literacy ‘graduates’ were to be allowed to participate in English lessons. As Holland *et al* (ibid) note, people are capable of reasserting “a point of control through the rearrangement of cultural forms as evocations of position” (p. 45). In this case, the literacy learners argued that there was no link between their ability to read and write in Chichewa to learning English. They cited the learning of English by kids in kindergarten as their cultural means to counteract their instructors’ English policy arguments. Consequently, some of them exercised their agency and enrolled for English literacy lessons against the recommendations of their instructors.

Besides, the adult literacy learners resisted any decision the instructors made that clashed with their priorities. On several occasions, the instructors suggested that the number of days for holding literacy classes should be increased from three to at least four. However, the literacy learners were reluctant to have classes on Thursdays because it was one of the market days on which they ordered items for their businesses. They also resisted any proposal to hold literacy classes on Friday because this day was set aside for prayers. Moreover, when the planting season came, they suspended the literacy classes against their instructors’ recommendations. The agency and resistance these literacy learners exercised in these instances, is supported by Holland *et al*’s (1998) postulation that “even within grossly asymmetrical power relations, the powerful participants rarely control the weaker so completely that the latter’s ability to

improvise resistance becomes irrelevant” (p. 277). For these literacy learners, their agency and resistance afforded them the opportunities to accomplish what they desired as individuals.

In chapter 9, I demonstrated how the resource constraint the centre experienced allowed the adult literacy learners to disrupt the ‘school culture’ by improvising their own approach to the exam. Realising that the situation created by the shortage of exam question papers was rather novel, the adult literacy learners exercised their agency and grouped themselves together and began writing the exams disregarding their instructors’ request to copy the questions first. That improvisation disrupted not only the ‘school culture’ but also the figuring of examination by allowing collaborative efforts to thrive alongside independent exam writing which is generally cherished in formal education. This finding is fundamental because as Holland, *et al*, (1998:18) observe improvisations “constitute the environment or landscape in which the experience of the next generation ‘sediments,’ falls out, into expectation and disposition.”

Meanwhile, the adult literacy learners’ agency revealed the challenges of enforcing a strict bureaucratic operational system in an activity whose participants join voluntarily. Such a system creates complex power relationships among the participants putting some of them in perpetual dilemmas. My analysis in chapter 8 showed that despite understanding the plight of the women, the instructors could not act on the women’s request to suspend the literacy classes because they were afraid that one of the official artefacts would expose them. In this case, it appeared as though the district officers’ action had been taken over or was delegated to these artefacts (Latour, 2005).

When the adult literacy learners finally exercised their agency and suspended the lessons, tensions were palpable amongst the instructors concerning who authorised it. I was rather surprised about these tensions because the instructors appeared to know that they did not have absolute control over the adult literacy learners’ class attendance. As I understood it, the instructors’ major concerns were not about the disruption the suspension was going to cause to literacy learning, rather it was about the implications it had on the security of their jobs.

To sum up, in this section, I have suggested that the refiguring of the adult literacy learning as school, narrowed the space within which the adult literacy learners could exercise power and agency, thereby limiting their role in decision-making processes. In chapter 5, I mentioned that even in cases where the instructors gave them opportunities to tell them what they wanted to learn, the literacy learners usually remained silent. The least they could do was to mention the

difficulties they had with arithmetic problems involving division. Yet in other figured worlds, they were facing shame and humiliation due to their failure to sign their names (see section 10.5). In addition, they were receiving different kinds of artefacts they needed to read and understand. They could not mention any of these. In private, they told me what their interests were and they claimed that they did not tell the literacy instructors what they wanted to learn because *we are afraid of the instructors*. They saw the dominance of the instructors as a legitimate norm i.e. *that is how things should be*. However, the discussions have also demonstrated that “human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention” (Holland, *et al*, 1998: 5).

### **10.3 Understanding Cultural Means in Adult Literacy Learning**

Gee (2005) defines cultural means, which he also calls discourse models, as “simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted, theories about how the world works that we use to get on efficiently with our daily lives” (p.71). He posits that we use such models to deduce what we think is ‘normal’ “...and tend to act on these assumptions unless something clearly tells us that we are facing an exception” (ibid). The community members who were attending the literacy classes constructed different simplified theories and recreated events in a form of stories that took place in such events. They employed such stories to justify their participation in the literacy classes. Thus, some of them said that they enrolled for the literacy classes to avoid being cheated. Others said they wanted to avoid boarding wrong buses or getting lost due to failure to read boards and street names. In this case, the literacy learners drew on “idealized events, actors and other physical entities in these events” (Quinn & Holland, 1987: 31) to make sense of their lived worlds. These typical stories were fashioned along the same lines as those narrated by participants in the figured world of Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States of America as reported by Holland *et al* (ibid). They began by stating their perceived vulnerable state prior to enrolling for the classes and compared this to their current assumed secure position after joining the classes.

However, as Gee (2005) notes, these discourse models are not innocent. They “often involve us in exclusions that are not at first obvious and which we are often unaware of making” (ibid: 72). This is what we see in the discourse models above. They construct a simplified world of literacy and enact two forms of exclusion involving both people and modes of knowing. As far as people are concerned, they typify literate people as the ones who are not cheated in their endeavours. In addition, they project literate people as the ones who do not miss boarding

correct buses. In terms of modes of knowing, the discourse models privilege ‘school’ forms of reading and calculating. In this way, they exclude other ways of dealing with calculations and modes of knowing as I found out from Ms. Suya.

In chapter 5, I illustrated the strategies Ms. Suya employed to board correct buses as well as to keep her financial records despite reflexively positioning herself as non-literate. During a focus group discussion, Ms. Suya declared that the individuals who board wrong buses due to their inability to read choose to do so. When I asked her about the discourse models above, she said: *why can't they ask? Even those people who can read and write do sometimes ask, so what is the problem with that?* She wondered.

As far as being cheated was concerned, Ms. Suya challenged that she never felt susceptible to such practices. She said she could count and keep a record of her money in ‘her head’ regardless of the amount. The only difference she saw was that she could not write down the figures on paper. The same was the case with some community members who were attending literacy classes such as Ms. Awali. She too was able to account for her small-scale businesses as well as the money for the community group to which she was the treasurer, through memory. Yet in the figured world of adult literacy learning, Ms. Awali was interactively positioned as someone who was struggling with arithmetic. Personally, she reflexively positioned herself in the same way. She always complained about her failure to compute division problems by following the procedures valued in the figured world of adult literacy learning.

In conclusion, what these discussions show is that the discourse models are not as transparent as they appear to be. As such, they should not be taken at face value. As I have discussed in this section, unpacking these discourse models is critical because they embody numerous assumptions about literacy and people. The discourse models above assume that literacy provides security and that non-literate individuals are somewhat insecure. However, my findings do not support this. Instead, they resonate with Gee’s (2005:72) contention that “simplifications in Discourse models can do harm by implanting in thought and action unfair, dismissive or derogatory assumptions about other people.” The community members’ discourse models assume that individuals who were thought to be non-literate could not successfully handle calculation processes. They also assume that such individuals would get lost due to their inability to read routes on buses as well as street names. However, I would argue that such assumptions over simplify people’s complex lived experiences by privileging some dominant modes of knowing and enumerating.

## 10.4 Positioning, Identities and Re-authoring in Figured Worlds

In chapter 6, I teased out several community members' literacy meanings and discourses such as *literacy as reading bus and road signs*, *literacy as signing one's name*, and *literacy as knowing*. I followed up on these in chapter 7 and I identified several subject positions including *the educated*, *the not educated*, *the knowledgeable*, *the not knowledgeable*, *the intelligent*, *the unintelligent*, *the instructors* and *the learners*. In the subsections that follow, I discuss these subject positions using the concepts of positioning and re-authoring.

### 10.4.1 Literacy Learning and Positioning in Social Change

Holland *et al* (1998:44) view positionality as “the fact that personal activity (the identified action of a person) always occurs from a particular place in a social field of ordered and interrelated points or positions of possible activity.” They posit that individuals view their lived worlds through the lenses of the positions they are “persistently cast” (ibid). In chapter 2, I stated that the Malawi Government perceives poverty, ignorance and disease as the enemies it should fight and defeat. I also noted that the government constructs literacy as a major tool for promoting the figured world of development. To enact this figured world, the government employs a cultural model that interactively positions non-literate people as individuals with deficits. That is, non-literate people are figured out as lacking the ability “to understand and make use [of] many of the modern techniques, ideas and messages relating to improved living standards and values” (Ministry of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services, 2005: 6). They are therefore, expected to “develop their abilities, [and] enrich their knowledge in order to change their attitudes and values” (ibid: 6).

My findings in chapter 9, suggest that the literacy officers at the district office had internalised this cultural model. They said that reading and writing was not their primary concern. To them, the goal of the NALP in Malawi was to see some behavioural transformation amongst the literacy learners. By saying this, the officers interactively positioned the adult literacy learners as individuals whose behaviour was inappropriate.

As I demonstrated in chapter 6, some of the stories which the adult literacy learners discussed from the primer also interactively positioned them in the same way. They were mostly framed in the manner that denigrated the assumed local knowledge and practices which the literacy learners were perceived to possess and do, and glorified the ‘new’ ones which the programme



assumed they lacked. The structure of the stories epitomised the assumptions the NALP made regarding the state of knowledge the adult literacy learners had, and the practices they were involved in, and concluded with what the programme expected them to be upon completion. At the same time, the stories typified how the figured world of social change was constructed and reified. Overall, both the structure of the said stories and the figuring of the world of social change provided the adult literacy learners only one subject position, i.e. *the not knowledgeable* (the ignorant).

However, my findings in chapter 6 also show that some of the adult literacy learners were not entirely oblivious of the issues discussed in the literacy classes. Ms. Awali told me that most of the issues they were reading from the primer were not new to them. She said that they took part in discussing such issues in class just because the instructors brought them up and they felt obliged to contribute.

Looking at the way the literacy officers at the district office talked about literacy and social change, I got the impression that they assumed that the process was somehow straightforward. That is, they appeared to think that once the adult literacy learners were ‘enlightened,’ then they were going to amend their ways of doing things. On the contrary, my analysis in chapter 6, has shown that the application of the knowledge purported to have been gained from the literacy classes was far more complex than it was thought. My analysis shows that a number of factors such as trust, community members’ tastes, as well as their personal fears influenced the use of such knowledge.

In chapter 3, I indicated that Sawabu village had some basic facilities such as piped water. However, water and health experts considered this water unsafe for human consumption. As such, they encouraged community members to apply chlorine which was made available at each water tap but some community members were reluctant to use the chlorine. The villagers suspected that the chlorine was a chemical which the government wanted to use to stop them from bearing more children.

Incidentally, birth control is one of the topics covered in the adult literacy primer. When the adult literacy learners discussed this topic in class on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2015, they reflexively positioned themselves as individuals who already had knowledge of birth control. Some of them cautioned against the ‘modern’ methods of birth control. Ms. Mkakosya narrated her personal story and questioned the effectiveness of some of the contraceptives she used. Others

such as Ms. Awali cited some complications or negative side effects their loved ones went through after using some of the contraceptives. Possibly, such experiences could explain their reluctance to be drawn into using chlorine which they suspected to be a form of birth control.

Apart from trust, the literacy learners' tastes mattered as well. The issue of making water safe for drinking was also discussed in one of the literacy lessons. The literacy learners discussed various ways of making water safe for drinking, including boiling and filtering it. However, some of them said that they did not boil their drinking water because once it is boiled, the water loses its taste. As for chlorine, apart from the suspicion discussed earlier, the literacy learners said that they did not use it because they did not like its smell. Some said that the chlorine made them feel sick.

Lastly, their quest to safeguard their marriages and self-image also influenced the decisions they made on whether to do what they learnt in class or not. For example, when they discussed gender roles during one of their lessons, the literacy learners said they would not allow their husbands do a 'woman's' job such as pounding maize. They said that they would not even try it for fear of breaking their marriages. They argued that even if they did try and their husbands agreed to help in doing it, the community at large would accuse them of casting some spells on their husbands and that their husbands would be subjected to ridicule. For them, the husbands were the heads of their families and they could not therefore, be subjected to doing what they considered to be a 'woman's' job. Thus, the literacy learners were very much interested in reflexively positioning themselves as 'good wives' in the eyes of the community at large. They employed their assumed cultural expectations as their "prescriptive norms" (Heath and Street, 2008) to justify their perceptions. In this regard, the issue was more than just lack of knowledge. The women were looking at a bigger picture than the simplistic approach the literacy lessons were propagating.

To conclude, what comes out from the foregoing discussion is a disjuncture between what the literacy providers assume the literacy lessons would achieve and what was happening in practice. It highlights the tension between the powerful official discourses that interactively construct and position the adult literacy learners as passive and lacking agency on the one hand, and the literacy learners' discourses that reflexively position them as receptive but constrained by cultural traditions and expectations on the other. I should point out that my intention in acknowledging these cultural traditions is not to essentialise them, but rather to highlight "what culture does" (Street, 2010: 581) to these literacy learners. In this case, I would argue that

culture appeared to “define and name” (ibid) the practices of a good wife. Besides, the discussion also raises the issue of power imbued in literacy learning. In a nutshell, I would argue that although the programme’s construction of social change succeeded in positioning the adult literacy learners as *the not knowledgeable* and therefore, to some extent, ‘wrong doers,’ it fell short of assessing and understanding why they did some of the things it sought to change. That is, the programme did not consider that some of the adult literacy learners’ actions were based on, for instance, their knowledge about family planning including their beliefs as well as experiences regarding the smell or taste of treated water.

#### **10.4.2 Authoring and Re-authoring Identities in Figured Worlds**

In chapter 6, I illustrated how some community members equated literacy with schooling. They assumed that anyone who was not able to read and write did not go to school and following on this finding, in chapter 7, I identified several subject positions (see 10.5). In this subsection, I use the notions of authoring and re-authoring to discuss four subject positions that were pervasive relative to the school culture I discussed in section 10.2. The four subject positions include *the educated*, *the uneducated*, *the intelligent* and *the unintelligent*.

As I demonstrated in chapter 7, the literacy practices promoted in the figured world of adult literacy learning made Ms. Msosa interactively position Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Afiki, Ms. Balala, Ms. Abasi, as *the educated*. Her reason for doing so was that whenever the instructors asked these adult literacy learners to either read or write, they were able to do so without any assistance. In this regard, Ms. Msosa used her knowledge of the literacy practices valued in the figured world of adult literacy learning as her cultural resources (Holland *et al*, 1998) to ascribe the four women an identity of being *the educated* (the able to read and write). On her part, Ms. Msosa had some difficulties in participating fully in the literacy activities privileged in the figured world of adult literacy learning. She faced challenges in writing words on the chalkboard as well as reading the stories from the primer in the literacy class. Consequently, she reflexively positioned herself as *the uneducated*. Thus, typical of any figured world, the figured world of adult literacy learning provided Ms. Msosa the context to interpret the literacy practices and in the process she “named” some “social positions” and “conducted” some “social relationships” (Holland *et al* (1998). In other words, the practices the adult literacy learners performed in this figured world, allowed Ms. Msosa “to recognize” each one of the four women above “as a particular sort of actor” (Urrieta Jr., 2007).

Nonetheless, when I interviewed her at her home, Ms. Msosa appeared to negotiate her identity of being the *uneducated* by using the resources at her disposal and re-authored (Holland *et al* 1998) herself to become *the educated*. She showed me a book she kept in her house. As I flipped through the pages of the book, she read the contents of the pages. Thus, through this *socially situated activity* ('reading in my presence'), Ms. Msosa appeared to enact a *socially situated identity* (Gee, 2005) leading me to recognise her as someone who was able to read (*the educated*). This shows, as Holland *et al* (1998) put it, that "none of us is occupied singularly: we are not possessed by one identity, one discourse, one subject position" (p. 211). Ms. Msosa's case also suggests that instead of empowering her, the literacy practices that were promoted in the figured world of adult literacy learning disempowered her. Since the adult literacy learners treated me as one of the literacy officers (see chapter 3), by 'reading' from her book in my presence, Ms. Msosa demonstrated to me, consciously or otherwise, that although my colleagues and I interactively positioned her as *the uneducated*, we were somehow imposing (Gee, 2000-2001) this identity on her. That is, she implicitly rejected the identity that the instructors and I somewhat ascribed to her. Hence, just as she used the literacy practices and the artefacts employed in the figured world of adult literacy learning to "affect others" she used her own artefact to affect herself (Holland *et al*, 1998).

Ms. Msosa was not the only literacy learner who employed the cultural resources associated with the figured world of school to author her own and other literacy learners' subject positions. Ms. Kalako did the same. Just like Ms. Msosa, Ms. Kalako too, had problems coping with the literacy activities privileged in the figured world of adult literacy learning. This was evident when the instructors asked her to write words on the chalkboard. They dictated the letters to her. She wrote them down but when they asked her to combine and read them as words, she could not. Meanwhile, Ms. Kalako was aware that the instructors were interactively positioning some adult literacy learners such as Ms. Mkakosya, Ms. Afiki, Ms. Balala and Ms. Tepani as being *intelligent* because of their ability to read and write. Hence, during an interview with me, she reflexively assigned herself the 'natural identity' (Gee, 2000-2001) of being *unintelligent*<sup>13</sup> That is, she linked her perceived struggles with literacy in the literacy class with her assumed naturally limited intellectual endowment and employed them as her cultural resources to author her subject position.

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<sup>13</sup> In Ciyawo, Ms. Kalako said "ligongo jwangali lunda" which could literally be rendered as "because I do not have intelligence."

Interestingly, some of the adult literacy learners who were interactively positioned as *the educated* and *the intelligent* sometimes employed their literacy and numeracy knowledge as tools for re-authoring themselves (Holland et al, 1998) and negotiate their identity of being learners. Such tendencies are attested by Holland et al's (1998: 45) claim that

when individuals learn about figured worlds and come, in some sense, to identify themselves in those worlds, their participation may include reactions to the treatment they have received as occupants of the positions figured by the worlds.

In chapter 7, I illustrated how Ms. Balala and Ms. Imani insisted that the supervisor should explain to the 'other' literacy learners the value of 1 (one) borrowed from another number during subtraction. When he resisted offering the explanation they demanded, they asked him: *so, have you failed to answer the question Sir?* They then offered to do the explanation thereby reflexively positioning themselves as *the instructors*. They emphasised the fact that the explanation they were seeking was for the benefit of the other literacy learners and not them saying, *they must know that the 1 (one) has the value of 10*. By saying this, the two literacy learners re-authored their identity and repositioned themselves relative to their colleagues. They implicitly, made it known that although they were ascribed the identity of being *the not knowledgeable*, they had something to offer. Their insistence in this matter somehow disrupted the 'school culture' I discussed in chapter 8. But as Holland *et al* (1998: 143) note, such re-authoring is expected because

positional identities are not without their disruptions. The same semiotic mediators, adopted by people to guide their behavior, that may serve to reproduce structures of privilege and the identities, dominant and subordinate, defined within them, may also work as a potential for liberation from the social environment.

In this case, the literacy learners used the same knowledge that put the supervisor in a position of authority to disrupt the 'school culture' and somehow resist their identities. The supervisor understood this disruption and attempted to reassert his authority saying: *But let us leave this aside. It can confuse you. Is that understood? Am I right Ms. Balala?* By telling Ms. Balala not to pursue the issue any further to avoid being confused, the supervisor was not only claiming his position as the legitimate source of knowledge but also as the gatekeeper of the same. The supervisor positioned himself as the authority who cared and knew what was good for the adult literacy learners. The two closed questions which he asked Ms. Balala, above served only to stamp his authority and force the two literacy learners into submission and assume a subordinate subject position by demanding from her a "yes or no" answer.

The adult literacy learners' self-authoring (ibid) was very much pronounced when a stand-in instructor from a nearby non-functioning literacy centre facilitated the literacy lessons. They kept on correcting both her writing and reading and sometimes the tension in the classroom was palpable as I witnessed in the following exchange.

Ms. Balala: Madam, could you write that ‘r’ properly, it looks like a seven  
(7)

*Stand-in instructor: This 'r?' Does 7 face this way (pointing to the right) I thought it faces that way (pointing to the left).*

*Ms. Balala:* *Just write it for us.*

As my analysis in chapter 7 demonstrated, what we see here is an attempt by the instructor to stamp her authority by using her knowledge of the letters and numbers but Ms. Balala resists it. Ms. Balala's final utterance is an imperative and not a request. As such, the instructor had to do it whether she liked it or not. Hence the instructor's explanation was not relevant. What was required of her was to write the disputed letter properly. It was situations like this that made some of the adult literacy learners who were positioned as *the educated* and *the intelligent* reflexively position themselves as *instructors* arguing that they could teach better than she did. At the same time, these literacy learners appeared to be positioning this instructor as *the incompetent*. The instructor appeared to have sensed this hence her attempt to resist that subject position.

In summary, what these discussions mean is that the figured world of adult literacy learning provided the space in which the adult literacy learners' and the instructors' "social positions and social relationships [were] named and conducted" (Holland *et al*, 1998: 60). That is, the literacy practices promoted in this figured world provided the means through which the adult literacy learners constructed their literacy self-image relative to others. Whilst some adult literacy learners internalised and accepted their 'institutional identities' (Gee, 2000-2001), others sometimes re-authored and repositioned themselves subject to the context, thereby demonstrating the fact that an individual's identities are very unlikely to be "settled once and for all" (Holland *et al*, 1998: 189).

## 10.5 Artefacts and Identities in Figured Worlds

In chapter 5, I looked at various artefacts that evoked specific figured worlds. I illustrated how some artefacts such as the brochure on the treatment of mosquito nets, agricultural and social

cash transfer programme leaflets used different modes to provide the information required. These artefacts employed writing, illustrations and colour to convey their messages. As Kress (2010:1) notes, “each mode does a specific thing... writing *names* and image *shows* while colour *frames* and *highlights*” (original emphasis). In addition, the artefacts were structured and formatted in different ways and some employed font sizes to frame and give significance to specific pieces of information. Therefore, reading and understanding such artefacts required multiple abilities. The producers of these documents assumed that their audiences would easily relate to these modes and get the intended meanings. However, my experience during lesson observations revealed that reading illustrations required additional instruction. Most of the lessons scripted in the literacy primer had illustrations. But the discussions concerning those illustrations were limited to just stating what the literacy learners saw. Therefore, expecting these community members to make sense of complex artefacts in the manner demanded by the agricultural leaflet was rather too ambitious. Fortunately, as I demonstrated in my analysis, the literacy learners who encountered these leaflets relied on the officers and others to read and explain to them. This state of affairs may tempt us to question as to whether producing and distributing these artefacts to provide information to members of this community is the best option.

Nevertheless, as Barton (2007: 81) notes, “particular texts may have little significance, but the overall effect is a consistent one positioning people and structuring their identity.” This appeared to have been the case with the ration and the money card respectively. My analysis has shown that the ration card employed English, a language not familiar to the beneficiaries of the programme. Such language choice, to some extent, constrained the full participation of community members in this programme. I illustrated how some beneficiaries acknowledged receipt of food items whose amounts were not shown on the card. Somehow, the ration card functioned “to include – and to exclude” (Barton, 2007: 79) the beneficiaries at the same time. This shows that indeed agency is sometimes delegated to artefacts (Hamilton, 2016).

Both the ration and money card had instructions written in Chichewa. The form of language used was interpersonal. This use of local language and of interpersonal point of view not only invited the beneficiaries to read the instructions but also made some assumptions about them. They appeared to have assumed and positioned the beneficiaries as individuals who were literate in this language. Nevertheless, the complexity and structuring of these cards gave the impression that their primary purpose was to regulate the beneficiaries in the two programmes.

Hence, the participants' reading and understanding of the two artefacts was inconsequential. In this regard, I would agree with Kress that "there are times – perhaps many times – when communication isn't really the issue, and power is" (ibid: 3).

My discussions in chapter 5 also suggested that although all the artefacts facilitated the construction of some community members' identities, there were two namely, the pen and inkpad, which they either cherished or denigrated. This was the case because the literacy practices these artefacts mediated made the community members expose their literacy identities in public. In the remaining part of this section, I shall focus on these two artefacts because they were unique in two respects. First, they were the only ones that aroused opposing and complex emotional attachments amongst community members who employed them. Second, the two artefacts were employed across figured worlds in which signing one's name was required.

In section 10.1, I discussed how some community members such as Ms. Awali, valued signing one's name. When talking about signing her name, Ms. Awali did not just talk about her ability to do so. She recreated the scene through imagery saying *I got hold of the pen*. In chapter 5, I suggested that the pen symbolised literacy and getting hold of it was not just a physical act. As Bartlett (2005: 3) notes, "cultural artefacts are essential for identity work." In this case, by getting hold of the pen, Ms. Awali was consciously or unconsciously, making a claim about her literacy identity. Though interactively positioned as non-literate in the figured world of adult literacy learning, by getting hold of the pen, a valued cultural artefact for literacy, Ms. Awali negotiated her identity and repositioned herself as someone who was literate. This resonates with Bartlett's (ibid) argument that "one way in which people develop the figured elements of their identities and thus counteract powerful social positioning is through the adoption and use of powerful, compelling cultural resources, or artefacts." Ms. Awali appeared to have succeeded in counteracting such powerful social positioning as evidenced by the response she got from the officers i.e. "*we respect you.*" This shows that "[artefacts] are not inert beings but have real effects when they are activated through networks" (Hamilton, 2016: 8).

For others, such as Ms. Faki, their encounters with these literacy artefacts brought shame and humiliation. Ms. Faki could not hide her desire to use the pen and her distaste in using the inkpad saying: *others are using a pen to sign their names and I am using a thumb print, it is shameful*. The scale of the humiliation was so intense that she felt as if the earth was going to open up and suck her in. The reason for this was that the inkpad symbolised 'illiteracy' and



therefore, it was devalued. Hence, individuals who used this artefact to facilitate their participation in literacy mediated social activities were ascribed the same low status. In chapter 5, I illustrated how Ms. Afiki recounted the shame and humiliation some women had to go through because they used this artefact instead of the pen. Ms. Afiki said that using the inkpad made the women feel uncomfortable because they were looked at contemptuously. Here too, thumb printing was not just a physical act to help one navigate through a literacy mediated activity. It was a declaration of who one was and the inkpad inscribed that identity. I would argue therefore, that the way the pen and the inkpad were being utilised by some of the community members confirms Holland *et al's*, (1998: 50) assertion that artefacts are “tools that people use to affect their own and others’ thinking, feeling, and behaviour.”

Maybe, I should quickly point out that the issue of thumb printing and shame was more complex than it appeared at face value. First, it had something to do with one’s status in society, as was the case with Ms. Duniya. As I stated in chapter 5, Ms. Duniya was a traditional leader in her community. For someone who was highly respected, the act of thumb printing posed a threat to her social standing relative to her subjects. By virtue of her position, Ms. Duniya was involved in many literacy practices both at home and in government and NGO organised activities elsewhere. Whilst she always got some help from her counsellors and niece to navigate through literacy mediated activities at home, she sometimes had to hunt for helpers in other contexts which she said was humiliating. She recounted an occasion in which officers ridiculed her because she had to use the inkpad and she felt disgraced.

Second, the age of the person involved also sometimes mattered. Most of the literacy learners who narrated shameful experiences with thumb printing were relatively younger. These literacy learners said they were laughed and shouted at. Above all, they were denigrated when they printed using their thumbs. They talked about the responsible officers wondering as to why they had not taken advantage of the country’s free primary education which the Malawi government introduced in 1994. They recounted instances in which as they printed using their thumbs, they were sarcastically asked: *where were you?* In some way, this question implied that the women who used their thumbs to print were somehow irresponsible. That is, they were being questioned as to where they were when others were in school as if all of them chose to be out of school. They said that they were told to enrol for the adult literacy lessons. It was encounters like these that made them feel ashamed. At the same time, community members who were older such as Ms. Suya and her sisters were treated somewhat respectfully. The

officers were ready to help them print using their thumbs hence, *they grab our hands and make us print using our thumbs*. Ms. Suya said that she was used to this practice. She conceded that due to her old age, her hands were feeble and therefore, she could not handle the pen properly. To some extent, this explains why the officers were surprised when they saw that Ms. Awali, who was considered to be as old as Ms. Suya, was ready to sign her name.

Third, shame was instigated by the attitudes some officers had towards thumb printing. Ms. Suwedi enrolled for the literacy lessons to learn how to write her name because she had an encounter with some officers who insisted that she should sign her name. They wrote her name on a piece of paper and made her copy it onto their forms. She was told that they did not want their forms to be spoilt through thumb printing. Ms. Balala talked about some officers who sometimes publicly announced that thumb printing would not be allowed, *everyone must sign their name*. Such tendencies did not go unnoticed. Some community members such as Ms. Kalako could not hide their displeasure concerning the demand for one to sign their name. She recollected that *in the past thumb printing was not an issue but these days things have gone bad*.

To conclude, in this section I have shown that artefacts are not inert objects in figured worlds. Whilst the money and ration cards regulated the participation of community members' in the figured worlds of Social Cash Transfer and the Emergency Food Aid Programmes, the instructor's monthly report form regulated the operation of the literacy centre.

Apart from these documents, I have also discussed two artefacts whose use implied a claim of subject position which some community members either cherished or denigrated. Holland and Cole (1995) use hammer as an example to explain what artefacts do saying "every hammer can be seen as an encapsulated 'theory of the task' and simultaneously a 'theory of the person' who fulfils the task" (p. 482). Similarly, in this section, I have discussed how the pen and the inepad were not just "theories" of the tasks to which they were employed but also of the individuals who employed them. I have argued that it was not what these artefacts allowed the women to do that mattered most, rather it was what they did to the women that was significant. Besides, I have asserted that it was the context that provided the value of the literacy skills the women demonstrated. My discussion has also highlighted the fact that some programme officers saw non-literate people as the cause of their perceived 'illiteracy' problem although as I stated in chapter 2, the reasons that led individuals to withdraw from school were multiple and some were beyond their control.

## 10.6 Summary and Conclusions

My thesis in this study, is that literacy studies based on the social theory of literacy could be enhanced if they took into account some community members' literacy discourses, meanings, identities, and power relationships. Through Holland *et al's* (1998) theory of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world, this study has explored some community members' literacy practices in their lived worlds. One of the key issues I have raised in this study is how the official perceptions of adult literacy learning differed from those of the community members. Through the notions of figuring and refiguring, I have demonstrated how the community members refigured the adult literacy classes into their own perceived formal school model with its own culture. In this regard, I have argued that to some extent, such refiguring muted the adult literacy learners' voices, especially in terms of decision-making. Notwithstanding this, through the notion of agency and resistance, I have also shown that the school culture was occasionally disrupted, especially when it threatened the literacy learners' sources of livelihoods.

To some extent, these findings appear to be contradictory. But this apparent contradiction is inherent in and predicted by the theory itself. My understanding of Holland *et al's* (1998) construction of the theory of self and identity including the concept of figured world is that they blend culturalist and constructivist perspectives of identity. In this regard, whilst the school culture enacted by the adult literacy learners and their instructors mirrored the culturalist perspectives by presenting elements that were stable and durable, its disruption signalled some elements of the constructivist dimension by showing aspects of "continual development" (ibid: 45). In short, Holland *et al* (1998) contend that "figured worlds *happen*, as social process and in historical time" (original emphasis; p. 55). This is why in chapter 3, I suggested that in this thesis, I view culture both as "an active process of meaning making" (Street, 2010: 581) as well as "the composite of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping" (Holliday (1999: 247). What this mix suggests is that the school culture was not stable and static, rather it was subject to reinterpretation since "it is not impossible for people to figure and remake the conditions of their lives" (Holland *et al*, 1998: 45). Such fluidity had implications on the power relationships enacted, especially by the adult literacy learners and their instructors at the literacy centre. Thus, although the school culture required the cultivation of a "relational and asymmetrical" (Lukes, 2005) form of power, whereby the instructors had the privilege to exercise power over

the literacy learners, the latter had the ‘capacity,’ facility’ or ‘potential’ to influence events at this literacy centre.

The social theory of literacy emphasises the social and contextual nature of literacy and therefore, questions the labelling of individuals as literate and ‘illiterate.’ This study not only attests this postulation, but also consolidates it further. Through the notions of positioning, authoring and re-authoring, I have illustrated how some literacy learners’ literacy identities shifted from one context to another or within the same context. Through these notions, I was able explore some community members’ literacy identities which they enacted either through their discourses or actions. In this regard, I have argued that it was not just what they said or did that mattered most, but also the motives underlying such discourses and actions. My findings suggest that in this context, to understand the individuals’ literacy identities one should go beyond what the participants say or do. There is need to examine how their discourses or acts position them relative to their own ascribed identities as well as to those of others.

Like other literacy studies, this study too, has revealed that literacy mediation helped many community members take part in various figured worlds. However, instead of looking at literacy mediation simply as the support individuals assumed to be non-literate get in literacy mediated activities, in this study, I have gone further and explored the emotional experiences such individuals go through in those literacy practices. I have demonstrated how the ability to sign their names made some adult literacy learners feel valued whilst those who could not were despised. In view of this, I have argued that in this context, it was not just the ability to code and decode meaningful symbols that was crucial to the literacy learners, rather, it was the emotional experiences evoked by the abilities or inabilities to showcase such skills that was critical.

As I discussed in chapter 3, text is a key component in the social theory of literacy such that any study of literacy is in part a study of texts (Barton and Hamilton 1998). However, in this study, I opted for the notion of artefact which I considered to be broader. Thus, through this notion, I have demonstrated how some artefacts such as pens were cherished and inkpads were denigrated. In this respect, I have contended that in this context, it was not just what these artefacts afforded the community members to do that was valued, rather it was what they did to them that was fundamental, i.e. ascribing literacy identities on those who employed them.

## CHAPTER 11

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 11.0 Introduction

Many literacy scholars who conduct literacy studies based on the social theory of literacy employ the notion of domain “to identify broad areas of social activity in which” literacy has a role (Papen, 2002: 84). However, having employed the concept of figured world in this study, I begin this chapter by discussing what I consider to be the limitations I could have faced had I characterised my participants’ activities as domains. My aim in doing this is not to discredit the notion of domain, rather I seek to underscore how the integration of the social theory of literacy with other sociocultural theories, particularly the concept of figured world enhances the understanding of literacy as a social practice.

In chapter 3, I stated that many of the studies that employed the concept of figured world focused more on formal education. Only a handful (Kalman, 2005; Bartlett, 2005) employed part of this concept in non-formal education. My study sought to add to the latter body of knowledge by studying literacy as social practice in relation to identity and power. In this regard, my thesis has not only employed the concept of figured world in non-formal education in a comprehensive manner, but has also tried to blend it with Gee’s (1999) perspectives of identity as well as adapting Davies’ and Harré’s (2007) discursive understanding of positioning. Such blending has allowed me to explore literacy, power, and identity from multiple perspectives.

In the sections that follow, I tease out the major findings of my study and draw out some implications for theory, policy and practice as well as my methodological approaches before revisiting my research questions. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on my research context.

#### 11.1 From Domain to Figured Worlds: A Comparative Glance

Barton and Hamilton (1998:10) view domains as “structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned.” Thus, areas such as family, health, education, religion and commercial activities are a few examples of such domains. However, as this study has demonstrated, the potency of the concept of figured world as compared to domain lies on its flexibility to narrow down these broad areas into specific socially and culturally imagined

activities. Thus, instead of grouping together the social support programmes which were operational in my research site, such as the Social Cash Transfer, the Emergency Food Aid, and the Farm Input Subsidy as a single bureaucratic domain, I found it more useful to perceive them as different albeit interacting figured worlds. This allowed me to understand how the community members were positioned or positioned themselves in each of these worlds. Also, unlike in domains where artefacts are discussed more in terms of access to literacy practices and use in specific domains, through the concept of figured world, I explored the role such artefacts played in figuring community members' identities. To me, the value of conceptualising the contexts of meaning making described in this study as figured worlds and not domains lies in the former arguably having well-developed conceptual 'tools' that help us to systematically account for participants' power relationships and identities in the social activities being studied. Thus, in order to address my first research: *How can community members' uses of literacy be explored using the concept of figured world?* I examined some community members' literacy practices in their lived worlds which I framed as 'figured worlds.'

Apart from revealing the variation and multiplicity of literacies which is supported by other scholars (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Papen, 2002), this study has also established that, to some extent, some literacies derived their significance from the practices valued in specific figured worlds. My examples in chapter 5, suggest that in the figured world of adult literacy learning, the community members saw literacy as reading road and bus signs, knowing, and education and that signing one's name did not count as literacy. However, in other figured worlds where this "routine bureaucratic literacy event" (Bartlett, 2005:4) was valued, community members saw signing one's name as literacy. In such figured worlds, the community members involved were called upon to provide evidence of their presence by signing their names as others looked on. Such practices implicitly compelled them to unmask their literacy identities to the public. In this regard, whilst some community members were happy with the ensuing literacy identities, others felt dejected. These findings are supported by other scholars such as Bartlett (2007: 547) who observes that "one of the words frequently associated with 'illiteracy' is 'shame.'" However, as I demonstrate in chapter 10, my account goes further by revealing that 'illiteracy shame' was far more complex than it would appear at face value. I have shown how age, social status and the attitudes of the officers responsible play a part.

Key in Holland *et al's* (1998) characterisation of figured world is the notion of artefact. This study has demonstrated the value of conceptualising literacy mediating items as artefacts rather than the word 'text.' However, by saying this, I am not questioning the value of the word 'text,' rather I am simply acknowledging the fact that artefact is broader than text. By conceptualising documents and other literacy mediating items as artefacts, the concept of figured world allowed me to understand not only the emotional attachments aroused by such artefacts, but also their social implications in terms of the identities they ascribed to the individuals who employed them. My data have shown that some community members gave significance to the artefacts that made them demonstrate their literacy abilities in public. I have illustrated how such artefacts made the community members feel either valued or shamed and humiliated. In chapter 5, I established how the use of the pen and inkpad brought about differing emotions and social positions among some community members. I demonstrated how Ms. Awali was thrilled by the recognition she received after using a pen to sign her name. I also illustrated how the use of inkpad disheartened Ms. Faki. I suggested that the pen symbolised literacy and the inkpad marked 'illiteracy.' I therefore, argued that by getting hold of the pen, Ms. Awali was positioning herself as someone who was literate. I also suggested that the feeling of shame and humiliation that engulfed Ms. Faki arose from the fact that the use of the inkpad was a declaration of her being 'illiterate.' These findings are supported by Bartlett (2005) who states how "famously painful" it was "for people who have difficulty signing their names" (p. 4) to register to vote in Brazil. She writes about how the inkpad "functioned as a powerful, even dreadful, artefact collectively imbued with meaning that threatened to position" her participant "as animalistic and illiterate" and how the participant evaded such positioning by picking up "the pen - another artefact with quite a different embodied history and hence meaning - and signed the document" (p. 4). On the basis of these findings, I have argued that it was not just what the artefacts afforded the community members to do that was important, rather it was the literacy identities they implicitly ascribed upon them which was critical.

On shame and humiliation associated with the use of inkpad and thumb printing, this study has gone a step further. My study emphasises that such feelings were not simple and straightforward but rather multifaceted. Thus, whilst some community members who were considered to be old, such as Ms. Faki were ashamed of using the inkpad others such as Ms. Suya were not. At the same time, whilst some officers did not see anything wrong with the use inkpad by individuals they considered to be old due to their assumption that such people would be 'illiterate,' they had different expectations from community members who were relatively

younger. In chapter 5, I illustrated how some community members who were relatively younger felt disgraced by the programme officers who blamed them for their ‘illiteracy.’ I have shown that the officers perceived such non-literate individuals as being irresponsible due to their assumed failure to take advantage of the seemingly free primary education the country adopted in 1994. In other words, the officers expected all younger persons to be literate.

Apart from age, my study has also suggested that a person’s social status contributed to the shame and humiliation they felt towards the use of inkpads. Thus, I have shown how, as a village headperson, Ms. Duniya was perpetually ashamed of her use of the inkpads in government and donor assisted activities.

The three sisters’ case in chapter 9, demonstrates the significance of Street’s (1984) ideological model of literacy. Ms. Suya and her sisters employed their knowledge of crosses and ticks to determine whether their grandchildren were making progress in school. Though positioned as non-literate, the three sisters employed the cultural artefacts of the figured world of school to participate in their grandchildren’s activities in this world. Their actions are supported by Gebre, *et al*’s (2009) who assert that all adults including those assumed to be non-literate “can and do negotiate literacy tasks such as money, bills, letters, election notices etc” (p. 2). To some extent, this finding suggests that accounts which create the impression that it is only the literate individuals who “are more likely to send their children to school and to help them with their studies” (UNESCO, 2005: 22) should not be taken at face value. The finding implies that even in their assumed status as ‘unschooled’ parents, the three sisters were not passive observers of their grandchildren’s education. This finding resonates with Bartlett’s (2008a) assertion that “doing literacy is not merely about mastering a code, but largely about developing command of literacy practices that are recognized as ‘legitimate’” (p. 37). In this case, the three sisters appeared to have some degree of command of the school practices and their grandchildren recognised the legitimacy of that command. Hence those who had many crosses cried. What this finding suggests is that some of the non-literate community members’ “ways of knowing are different from our own” (Gebre, *et al*, 2009:5) and therefore, need to be both explored and enhanced by literacy practitioners.

As I demonstrated in chapter 5, community members encountered different literacy artefacts in different figured worlds that demanded varied and multiple literacies. However, my study has established that community members did not take the reading and understanding of such artefacts as being central to their participation in such figured worlds. Thus, some of them



simply put those artefacts in their suitcases as mementoes. I have illustrated that part of the reason why community members apparently undervalued the reading of these artefacts was that the social activities in which these artefacts were used did not compel the participants to read and understand them. I therefore questioned the rationale of producing and distributing such artefacts in this context. Second, I have shown that community members who could not deal with the literacies demanded by such artefacts, including those who were not able to read and write on their own, relied on the assistance of those who were literate. This finding is supported by other scholars in their contexts (see Wagner, 1993; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Papen, 2002; Kachiwanda, 2009). However, this study stresses the fact that literacy mediation in this context, was not innocent. Through the notion of positioning, I was able to understand that whilst *anthu wamba* ('ordinary' community members) such as Ms. Suyu and her sisters were comfortable with literacy mediation, others who held respected social positions such as Ms. Duniya resented it because to her, seeking for mediators was demeaning and somehow, threatened her social standing. Besides, some community members were afraid that literacy mediation could expose them to individuals of ill will, especially in cases that involved reading bus and road signs.

## **11.2 Understanding Literacy Meanings and Discourses through Figured Worlds**

In my review of theoretical literature in chapter 3, I joined other scholars such as Papen (2005), to observe that not many literacy studies based on the social theory of literacy have comprehensively examined people's literacy discourses. On the basis of this observation, I formulated my second sub-question as follows: *to what extent can the concept of figured world help in understanding how community members construct their literacy meanings and discourses?* In chapters 7 and 8, I examined fragments of some community members' formal and informal discussions through the notions of positioning, and cultural means. I teased out the community members' literacy meanings and discourses, as well as their subject positions in their lived worlds. Unpacking these literacy meanings and discourses was crucial because as Holland *et al* (1998: 52) posit "when talking and acting, people assume that their words and behavior will be interpreted according to a context of meaning—as indexing or pointing to a culturally figured world."

In terms of literacy meanings, this study has established that literacy carried multiple and varied meanings in this community. Thus, while some saw literacy simply as reading road and bus

signs, others perceived it as signing their names, knowing, and education. Notwithstanding these diverse and multiple literacy meanings, this study has established that it was signing one's name that was given significance, especially among some of the women who had not yet grasped the skills of reading and writing. This finding is significant because it signals how dominant bureaucratic literacy practices in official figured worlds influenced some community members' understandings of literacy. Writing about signing one's name among the women taking part in Muthande Literacy Programme in South Africa, Millican (2004: 202) observes that "the ability to sign rather than provide a thumbprint when receiving a pension is personally and socially significant, even though the thumbprint is functionally as efficient." In this regard, I would agree with Kalman (2005) that "in order to understand why the [women] go to school, we must look beyond the learning context to how they situate themselves in their world" (p. 198). Indeed, my examples in this study suggest that some adult literacy learners were not very much concerned about the literacy practices that were valued in the figured world of adult literacy learning. Their interest lay in figured worlds beyond the literacy class where they faced specific literacy challenges. Kalman (ibid) makes similar conclusions in her study in Mexico. She argues that "in the immediacy of their daily lives, reading and writing [were] not widespread activities" among her participants "except for those moments when they [came] into contact with social or institutional demands beyond their patio gates." In my study, the literacy learners took note of the changing attitudes of some officers towards thumb printing in their lived worlds. In chapter 5, I demonstrated the different experiences some women had with literacy in some of their lived worlds. Hence, by prioritising signing their names in literacy lessons, they were trying to reposition and situate themselves in those worlds. Thus, I would argue that the women's understandings of literacy and their quest to "become literate [were] embedded in a larger social picture" (ibid: 188).

Apart from literacy meanings, the concept of figured world also enabled me to explore some community members' literacy discursive and situated subject positions in various contexts. Through such subject positions, I was able to understand how some of these positions "fossilized" (Holland *et al*, 1998) and became synonymous with some community members' identities in their lived worlds. My examples have revealed that some community members such as Ms. Msosa, were discursively positioned as *the not educated* and this became their identity in the figured world of adult literacy learning. The instructors used this subject position to distinguish Ms. Msosa from some of her colleagues. However, as my analysis has also illustrated, "positional identities are not without their disruptions" (Holland *et al*, ibid: 143).

As such, my study has established that some community members' literacy identities were not only discursive and contextual but also fluid and contested. My data have shown how Ms. Msosa 'read' from her book in my presence to reposition herself as someone who was able to read, thereby implicitly claiming the identity of *the educated*. Besides, I have also shown how some adult literacy learners reflected on and challenged their being positioned as *the not knowledgeable*. They discursively refigured their identity and reflexively positioned themselves as *the knowledgeable* with the same acumen as the 'instructors.' What these findings suggest is that integrating the social theory of literacy with other sociocultural notions to understand participants' literacy discourses and meanings allows us to explore literacy from multiple perspectives and this can enhance the study of literacy as a social practice.

### **11.3 Unpacking Power Relations through the Concept of Figured Worlds**

One of the key issues that emerged in my critique of the social theory of literacy in chapter 2, was that the NLS does not "sufficiently theorize issues of power with regards to literacy" Papi (2005: 15). In view of this, the third and final sub-question this study sought to address was: *how do literacy practices shape power relations among community members; how can such relations be unpacked through the concept of figured world?*

Writing about identities in figured worlds, Holland *et al* (1998) make a distinction between positional (relational) and figured identities (see chapter 2). Through the notions of agency, refiguring and positionality, I have demonstrated how the concept of figured world can help us understand the power relations shaped by literacy practices in various activities. In chapter 6, I have shown how the community members refigured the figured world of adult literacy learning into a formal school model peopled by actors and characters vested with both hierarchical and asymmetrical powers. I have shown how, in this imagined world, I was *ahedi* (headmaster), the instructors were teachers and they were addressed as *madamu* (madam) and *sala* (sir) respectively. The adult literacy learners called themselves *ana a sukulu* (schoolchildren). These were not mere titles. All of us were expected to act as though we were who this figured world framed us to be. This shows that indeed, "figured worlds, like activities, are social encounters in which participants' positions matter" (ibid: 41). Given this state of affairs, my study has established that, to some extent, this school model constrained the adult literacy learners' power and agency. As such, their voice in decision-making, especially in the figured world of adult literacy learning was somewhat muted. Thus, my examples have demonstrated that it was partly due to these asymmetrical power relations that the issue of

suspending literacy classes stalled, prompting the adult literacy learners to give themselves time out from the literacy classes. My examples in chapter 8, suggest that the adult literacy learners saw the domination of the instructors in important decision-making processes as the norm. I have further shown that the instructors determined what counted as literacy in the figured world of adult literacy learning. This in turn, influenced the way the adult literacy learners reflexively positioned themselves during the literacy lessons. I have illustrated how some adult literacy learners feigned ignorance or literacy inabilities during literacy lessons only to tell me in confidence during informal conversations or interviews that they had knowledge of the same. Their understanding was that *at school there is always someone in authority, sometimes a headmaster.*

However, my study has also revealed that the ‘school culture’ that was enacted at Sawabu literacy centre was subject to reinterpretation. Thus, this study has established that despite the adult literacy learners being constrained by the power relationships that were being enacted at the literacy class, sometimes they exercised some agency. My examples in chapter 8, have revealed how the literacy learners resisted some of their instructors’ decisions, especially those that had a bearing on their occupations as farmers and business-women on the one hand and on their religion on the other. By exercising such agency, the literacy learners somewhat regained their voice and created some space for themselves to undertake the activities that were equally important to them.

By theorising power through agency, improvisation and resistance and conceptualising identity as being both relational and figurative, the concept of figured world, gives us the lenses through which we can explain the fluidity and contextual nature of power relationships and identities in literacy practices from multiple perspectives. As Urrieta Jr. (2007: 109) observes “the significance of figured worlds is that they are recreated by work, often contentious work, with others; thus, the importance of activity, not just in a restricted number of figured worlds, but across landscapes of action.”

Notwithstanding the value of the concept of figured world which I acknowledge above, Urrieta Jr. (2007: 111) observes that one of the main critiques he has encountered concerning the concept of figured world is that the concept “is not defined in a concise and concrete way” for empirical studies. He however parries this critique arguing that since the notion is used to analyse social/cultural phenomena, it cannot be “reduced to one simple, content-specific definition” (p. 112). Urrieta Jr. (ibid) argues also that not many scholars employ Holland *et al’s*

(1998) whole theory of self and identity. In this regard, he appears to suggest that the reason why the critics of the concept of figured world find it inadequate lies in their partial application of the framework. Although Urrieta Jr.'s observation appears to be plausible, I would have wanted him to go further and explain why many scholars do not apply this theory exhaustively.

My experience in using this theory made me realise that a partial application allowed me to not only remain focused on the questions my study sought to address but also to provide a detailed account of the same. Thus, consistent with other scholars who have used parts of this theory in their studies (see chapter 3), I have put much emphasis on the concept of figured world and to some extent, the concepts of positionality and authoring. What is significant however is the fact that this partial application of the theory does not take away the merit and credibility of my findings or those of the researchers who did the same before me because figured world appears to be the lynchpin of Holland *et al's* (1998) theory of self and identity.

#### **11.4 Implications for Literacy Theory**

In chapter 2, I stated that this study is grounded on the notion of literacy as a social practice. I also noted that some literacy theorists and experts tend to share the view that literacy is intertwined with power and identity (see Street, 1993; Collins & Blot, 2003; Papen, 2005; St. Clair, 2010). However, my critical review of literature on the social theory of literacy revealed that there were certain aspects of literacy particularly those concerning power relations and identity, I could not examine better if I confined my study exclusively to this theory. The key challenge was that although through the ideological model, the social theory of literacy recognises power and identity, it does less in providing conceptual tools with which to analyse and understand these aspects in literacy practices. I therefore, decided to integrate it with Holland *et al's* (1998) sociocultural theory of self and identity, especially the concept of figured world. Holland *et al's* theory provided me with a number of conceptual tools such as positioning, cultural means, artefacts and agency which I combined with Gee's (1999) perspectives of identities as well as Davies and Harré's (2007) ideas of interactive and reflexive positioning.

The findings of my study, attest the complex interplay between literacy, power and identity. The study has established that just as literacy varied from one context to another, the same was true with literacy identities subject to what the actors and characters in the specific figured worlds valued. Besides, the study has also revealed that whilst the more powerful actors

ascribed literacy identities to the less powerful participants in some figured worlds, the latter sometimes resisted, negotiated or refigured and performed the literacy identities they desired. What these findings suggest therefore, is that studying literacy in relation to power and identity adds to our understanding of the multiplicity of literacies as well as the complexity and fluidity of being literate or non-literate. Crucially, the findings suggest that the concept of figured world has the potential of enhancing literacy studies based on the social theory of literacy in a Malawian context.

## **11.5 Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings I have reported in this study are based on my interactions with some community members in a small village in Malawi. As such, it would be problematic to draw on them in order to generalise about the National Adult Literacy Programme or indeed, literacy practices in other parts of the country. In other words, this study was not “seeking grand generalisation but real life lessons to be learned” (Openjuru, Baker, Rogers & Street, 2016: 23). In this regard, the value of my ethnographic account lies in part, in the potential it has in offering “an element of critical reflection” (Mosse, 2004: 667) towards policy processes.

This study has revealed that the community members encountered multiple and various artefacts in some of the social activities they participated. But rather than restating the proposals made by other literacy researchers and experts (Rogers 1994; Pemagbi & Rogers, 1996; Rogers, 1999; Rogers *et al.* 1999), that the artefacts that demanded specific literacy practices may be considered as part of the curriculum to be covered at this literacy centre (e.g. the agricultural leaflet, the mosquito net brochure, record books), I focus on how the community members navigated through such literacy practices. I have illustrated that community members did not show much interest in reading and understanding such artefacts mostly because they received some literacy support from either programme officers or relatives and friends. This finding is supported by other scholars such as Kachiwanda (2009) in other contexts. However, my study adds a critical perspective to literacy mediation by illustrating that it is not an innocent practice. I have shown how some community members resented the practice saying it was both shameful and humiliating. What this contradiction suggests is that instead of pushing for the inclusion of the artefacts I analysed in chapter 5 in literacy lessons, there is need to understand how they are used. Such understanding not only brings us to the contexts in which such artefacts are employed but also allows us to explore the subtle complexities that come into play

in such social encounters. Thus, based on such an ethnographic approach, my study has revealed that community members' ambivalent attitudes towards literacy mediation depended on the individual's age, social status and the programme officers' disposition. Besides, my study has also shown that some community members were very much interested in literacy practices that obliged them to demonstrate their literacy abilities in public thereby indirectly forcing them to expose their literacy identities which sometimes threatened their self-image in society. What these findings suggest is that for policy makers, the crucial question should not just be "whether, but rather *how*" (Mosse, 2005: 2; original emphasis) the NALP works for the adult literacy learners in this context.

In chapter 6, my examples have revealed that some adult literacy learners felt disenfranchised in classroom literacy practices because they were put together with other literacy learners who already knew how to read and write. At the same time, I have illustrated that the adult literacy learners had different meanings of literacy and literacy learning and therefore, enrolled for the literacy lessons with different expectations. The implication of these findings may be that the NALP needs to consider providing some space for other literacies to be taught at this literacy class instead of privileging just one. Paradoxically, my data have also revealed that to some extent, the school culture which the same literacy learners enacted at the adult literacy centre constrained them to articulate such expectations. What this suggests is that there is need to find ways of balancing between respecting their conscious or unconscious refiguring of their literacy learning as a formal class on the one hand, and meeting their expectations on the other. In this regard, I agree with the observation Papen (2005) makes elsewhere that if we were to conduct a study aimed at developing a curriculum, then that study needs to not only explore the "instrumental uses of literacy" but also "examine the symbolic roles literacy and education play in people's lives" (p. 14). I may add that such studies would also require us to understand "who we are" so that we are able to articulate "how development programmes can respond to the diverse needs and intentions of participants" (Robinson-Pant 2008: 790).

My study has also established how a top-down approach to policy formulation and implementation can sometimes create tension among participants at this centre. The study has illustrated how some women were denied the opportunity to join the English literacy classes because of an English literacy policy which some adult literacy learners questioned and defied. Given the 'school culture' I referred to earlier, the 'self-promotion' which some adult literacy learners effected to join the English literacy class was not appreciated by their instructors.

Based on these findings, I would therefore suggest that there is a need for greater flexibility in the operations of the literacy centre, especially when it comes to responding to adult literacy learners' wishes since as Mosse (2005: 7) observes, "governance brought by development schemes cannot be imposed; it requires collaboration and compromise."

## **11.6 Implications for Literacy Research Methodology**

This study explored community members' literacy practices, discourses, meanings, identities, as well as power relations in their lived worlds. As such, my decision was to conduct it through ethnography because I believed that "as a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings, of other people's actions, and perhaps even of what we do ourselves" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 4). This approach allowed me to employ various methods to deepen my understanding of community members' literacy meanings, discourses, practices, and identities. By using more than one method to examine and understand a specific literacy phenomenon, the reliability of my data was, to some extent, tested. For instance, whilst observing the literacy lessons I heard both the literacy learners and the instructors identify some individuals as *not knowing anything*. I picked this up in an informal conversation with one of the instructors who explained to me what *not knowing anything* meant to her (see chapter 7). I also picked up the same during semi-structured interviews with some of those adult literacy learners who were assumed not to know anything before enrolling for the literacy lessons, such as Ms. Kalako, Ms. Suwedi and Ms. Maulidi. In so doing, I gained a deeper understanding of this discourse from multiple perspectives obtained through various methods.

Although this approach offered me an opportunity to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of people's practices of everyday life, there were some unexpected lessons I learnt. First, much as I tried to integrate myself and be part of the community, to some community members, I remained a stranger. This was exacerbated by my institutional identity (Gee, 2000-2001) of being a university teacher. Being someone who was more educated academically, I was given the title of headmaster by the community members. On several occasions, I was asked to provide guidance on how the classes should be organised. Notwithstanding the fact that I tried to avoid being involved in such matters, this suggests that my presence in this community reinforced the 'school culture' the community members were enacting at the adult literacy class.



Second, although being a native speaker of the language predominantly spoken in the community and a member of the religion practised by most of the community members played a part in making some community members cautiously take me as their own, sometimes it created some dilemmas. For instance, on several occasions, the supervisor and the resident instructors, who were non-Muslims, suggested holding literacy classes on Fridays. During informal conversations, some literacy learners ‘tactfully’ sought my opinion on such sensitive matters not just as their ‘headmaster’ but also as a member of their faith. Distancing myself from such decisions would result in having the literacy officers construed as being insensitive to the learners’ faith. Accepting my involvement in the same would raise questions regarding my faith. The least I did was to ask them to explain to me how and who was responsible for making such decisions. What this implies is that belonging to the same category as the research participants may sometimes have some costs. Therefore, one has to tread carefully.

Third, as I stated earlier, I chose to employ an ethnographic approach in my study because I wanted to have an in-depth understanding of some community members’ literacy practices. In line with this approach, I tried as much as I could to spend most of my time in the community. Paradoxically, I realised that living in the community was not enough for me to gain access to some community members’ everyday literacy practices. As my data have shown, the community members were involved in many social activities where literacy played a part. Whilst I gained access to some of these activities, I failed to do the same to others, especially those involving relief and related programmes. The community members who took part in such activities kept the dates and venues to themselves. I only saw them on their way back carrying whatever they had been given. I did try to ask them to let me accompany them to such events but it did not work. Even my landlady whose house was a few metres from my own, did not divulge details regarding when and where such activities would be conducted. In a context where many community members were aggrieved at their exclusion from the programmes concerned, I understood why such information was somehow sensitive. What this implies is that ‘being there’ was not equivalent to seeing everything. It had a limit subject to what I was allowed see. Under such circumstances, what I managed to do was to request those involved to share with me their experiences, especially with literacy in such activities.

Lastly, there were some issues concerning language. In terms of communicating with the community members, I had no problems but there were some challenges regarding terms. During my data collection process, I realised that asking people to define literacy was rather

redundant. Instead, I found it useful to find out for instance, what literacy meant to them in terms of what it allowed them to do. This approach somehow, saved me from terminological challenges I would have faced because both Chichewa and Ciyawo language do not have single words that are equivalent to the English terms such as literacy, illiteracy, literate and illiterate. Instead, both languages use descriptive terms such as *kulemba ndi kuwerenga* (Chichewa) *kelemba ni kuŵalanga* (Ciyawo) (writing and reading/literacy) and such phrases would have made it hard for me to ask the community members to tell me their meanings of literacy as one would do in English.

Overall, the ethnographic approach provided me with the opportunities to enrich my understanding of some community members' literacy practices in their lived worlds. As my analysis has shown, through sustained interactions with the community members and the use of diverse and multiple methods, I was able to discern their fluid literacy meanings and identities in different contexts.

## 11.7 Revisiting Research Questions

During the data collection process, I realised that some of my research questions were limiting and therefore I could not get the data I was looking for. For example, in chapter 1, I stated that my first sub-question was: *how can community members' uses of literacy be explored using the concept of figured world?* This question essentially directed me to focus on literacy events rather than the broader notion of literacy practices. The question was limiting because, in principle it was leading me to pay more attention to exploring what community members did with their literacies. Although this is important, my interest was to go further and extend my account to understanding community members' "values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998: 6) in social encounters mediated by literacy. The notion that would allow me explore both, i.e. to understand community members' "ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2003: 79) was literacy practices. In view of this, I reformulated it as follows: *How can community members' literacy practices be explored using the concept of figured world?* Thus, my data analysis, discussions of the findings as well as the conclusions outlined in this chapter have been guided by this reformulated question.

Apart from limiting my scope, some questions could not adequately yield the data I needed. This was the case with my second sub-question which read as follows: *To what extent can the*

*concept of figured world help in understanding how community members construct their literacy meanings, discourses and ideologies?* My preliminary data analysis illustrated that exploring community members' literacy ideologies was far more complex than I had anticipated. More time and interaction was needed. I therefore understood why Blommaert (2005: 158) asserts that "few terms are as badly served by scholarship as the term ideology, and as soon as anyone enters the field of ideology studies, he or she finds him/herself in a morass of contradictory definitions...." Hence, I decided to drop my quest to understand community members' literacy ideologies and instead focused on examining their literacy discourses and meanings. Similarly, looking at the data I was getting, I realised that my wish to examine 'how the community members construct the literacy meanings and discourses' could not be adequately addressed. Consequently, I revisited my second sub-question to become: *To what extent can the concept of figured world help us in understanding community members' literacy meanings and discourses?* These modifications did not affect the overall orientation of my study since the purpose of this study remained to contribute to the NLS by exploring some community members' literacy practices, discourses, meanings, and identities as well as the power relationships enacted in some of their lived worlds in Malawi.

## **11.8 Reflecting on my Research and Professional Context**

In chapter 1, I stated that not much has been done in Malawi to understand literacy based on contemporary perspectives of literacy as a social practice. I noted that apart from Kachiwanda (2009) whose study focused on languages used in information dissemination, and my earlier work in which I attempted to unpack the discourses employed in national adult literacy documents in Malawi, there was scarcely any study that set out to understand literacy in general, and adult literacy teaching and learning in particular in the country. I highlighted how the Malawi government emphasises the need to expand the research base so that literacy policies in the country are informed by empirical evidence. This study therefore, not only builds on the limited literacy studies that have so far been conducted in the country, but also expands the knowledge base referred to above. It presents an alternative in-depth approach to the study of literacy using both the social theory of literacy and sociocultural perspectives of self and identity, which is less common in Malawi. Through this in-depth approach to the study of literacy, I was able to unpack some community members' understandings of literacy that go beyond the coding and decoding of symbols. In other words, through this approach, I have demonstrated that the current understandings of literacy promoted by the NALP in this

community are not only narrow but are also limiting. Through my sustained interaction with the community members, I was able to look at and listen to what they had to tell me about their literacy experiences (Rogers and Street, 2009). In the process, I understood how “being literate” was “less a state of being” but rather “an ongoing, continual accomplishment” (Bartlett, 2008a: 36). Besides, through such prolonged encounters, this study, just like others elsewhere (see Doronila 1996; Prinsloo and Breier 1996; Barton and Hamilton 1998), has shown that literacy is both social and situated. It has demonstrated that literacy is not just a skill which an individual acquires and performs alone, rather it is “something one actively *does*, in concert with other humans” (Bartlett, 2008a: 36), (original emphasis). Being arguably, one of the first ethnographic study to comprehensively explore literacy practices among adults in a single village and a single adult literacy centre in the country, my study may therefore, act as a springboard for more studies of similar nature in other localities in Malawi in future. Such studies together with this one, may provide useful insights to both adult literacy policy and programme designers.

In chapter 1, I traced my journey into literacy studies and generally noted that it was my desire to find answers to some questions I encountered concerning the NALP in Malawi that drove me deep into literacy studies. It would appear though that the more answers I sought, the more questions I encountered. Trained as a secondary school teacher, I went into this study with some experience of secondary, college and university teaching. As I sat in the adult literacy classes during the early days of my study, I could not resist playing the role of a school inspector who was there to see how the teaching and learning was being done against my assumptions of how it ought to be done. The setting was reminiscent of my experiences with student teachers on teaching practice where I sat at the back of the class with a checklist of what the student teachers were supposed to do in their teaching. Shedding those assumptions and tendencies was a process rather than a decision I had to take. Participant observation allowed me to experience what both the literacy learners and their instructors were going through during the literacy lessons. Such interactions made me continuously question my assumptions and beliefs about literacy teaching and learning. I studied literacy in my earlier works but I found this study rewarding because it was not just about understanding my participants, but it was also about learning about myself (Rogers and Street, 2009). The opportunities I was given to facilitate some literacy lessons made me understand what it means to teach adults. These encounters made me realise that apart from educational qualifications, you need a heart to teach adults.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1 Topics Covered in Malawi's NALP Primer**

1. Income Generation (Business)
2. Food Management
3. Nutrition
4. Family Planning and Population
5. Water Management
6. Environmental Hygiene and Sanitation
7. Preservation and Conservation of Natural Resources
8. Diseases
9. Governance
10. Community Development
11. Dressing
12. Family
13. Farming
14. First Aid
15. Time and Calendar
16. Letter Writing
17. Savings and Credit
18. Religion
19. Parenthood
20. Gender

## Appendix 2A      Peer Lesson Facilitation

*This is an example of the situations in which the adult literacy learners who were positioned or positioned themselves as the educated or the intelligent showed their knowledge. In this example, Ms. Afiki was asked to lead her colleagues in working the following arithmetic problem.*

K27.20

$$\begin{array}{r} \times 7 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Ms. Afiki: Let's do this problem. It involves Kwachas and Tambalas (Malawian money similar to pound and penny) and it is a multiplication problem.

7 x 0

Other literacy learners: 0

Ms. Afiki: Now we go to the next number 7 x 2, or we should say two sevens put together

Other literacy learners: 14

Ms. Afiki: Are we going to write 14 as a whole?

Other literacy learners: No

Ms. Afiki: What are we going to write?

Other literacy learners: 4

Ms. Afiki: Now because we have kwachas and tambalas what are we going to do here (pointing at the space between kwachas and tambalas)

Other literacy learners: We put the point

Ms. Afiki: The problem continues, 7 x 7?

Other literacy learners: 49

Ms. Afiki: Are we going to write 49 as a whole?

Other literacy learners: No

Ms. Afiki: What are we going to put?

Ms. Mkakosya (literacy learner) We are going to add the 1 we kept from the 14 and add it to 49 and together it shall be 50.

Ms. Afiki: And are we going to write 50 as a whole?

Other literacy learners: No

Ms. Afiki:	What are we going to write?
Other literacy learners:	0
Ms. Afiki:	<i>What have we kept?</i>
Other literacy learners:	5
Ms. Afiki:	7 x 2
Other literacy learners:	14
Ms. Afiki:	<i>Let's add to 14 the 5 we kept</i>
Other literacy learners:	19
Ms. Afiki:	<i>Are we going to write 19 as a whole?</i>
Other literacy learners:	Yes
Ms. Afiki:	<i>Have we finished?</i>
Other literacy learners:	No
Ms. Afiki:	<i>What should we write?</i>
Other literacy learners:	'K'
Ms. Afiki:	<i>Have we finished or not?</i>
Other literacy learners:	<i>We have finished</i>
Ms. Afiki:	<i>It means this is our answer not so? (K190.40)</i>
Other literacy learners:	Yes.

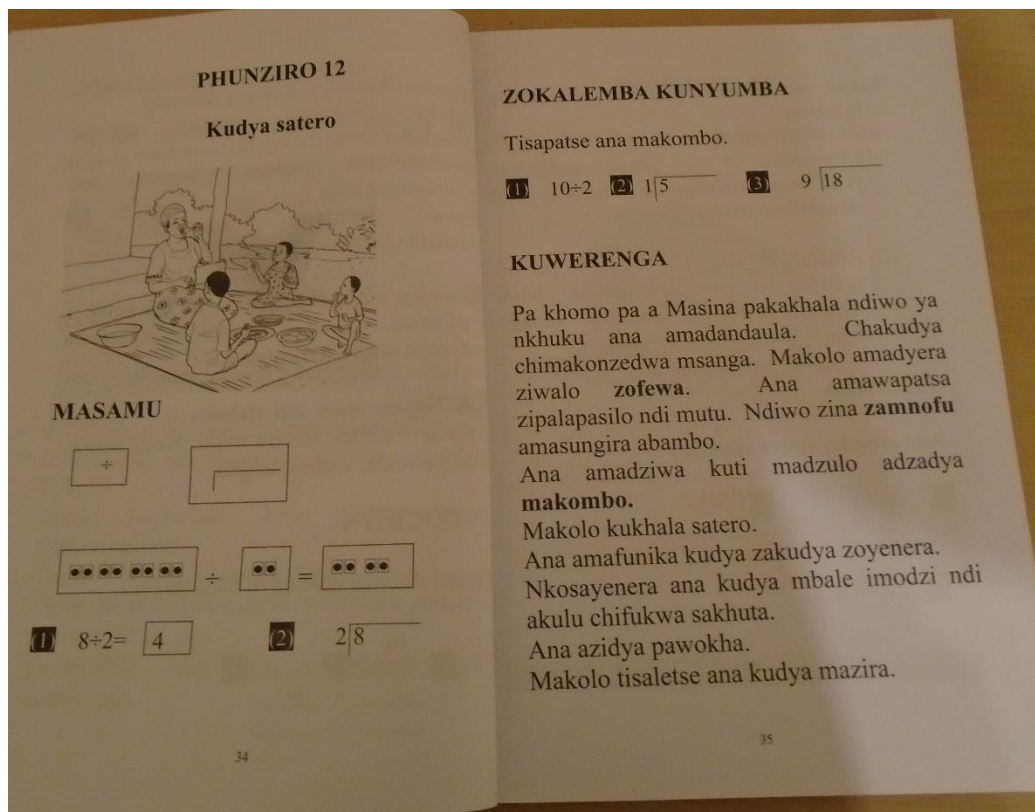
(Field notes: 09/11/2015)

## Appendix 2 B      Peer Lesson Facilitation (Original Chichewa Version)

Ms. Afiki:	Tipange samu iyi. Samuyi ndi ya makwacha, samuyi ndi ya taimusi samu yomweyinso ndi ya matambala. 7 x 0
Other literacy learners:	0
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye tibwere uku 7 x 2, kapena tinene kuti ma 7 awiri
Other literacy learners:	14
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye tilemba 14 yense?
Other literacy learners:	Ayi
Ms. Afiki:	Tilemba chiyani?
Other literacy learners:	4
Ms. Afiki:	Chifukwa choti apa pali tambala, apa tipanga bwanji (pointing at the space between kwachas and tambalas)
Other literacy learners:	Tiyika kadontho.
Ms. Afiki:	Ikupitirira samuyi. 7 x 7?
Other literacy learners:	49
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye tiyika 49 yonse?
Other literacy learners:	Ayi
Ms. Afiki:	Tiyika chiyani?
Ms. Mkakosya: (literacy learner)	Titenga 1 tinasungira ku 14 uja tiphatikiza ku 49 pamodzi ikhala 50.
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye tiyika 50 yonse?
Other literacy learners:	Iyayi
Ms. Afiki:	Tiyike chiyani apa?
Other literacy learners:	0
Ms. Afiki:	Tisunga chiyani?
Other literacy learners:	5
Ms. Afiki:	7 x 2
Other literacy learners:	14
Ms. Afiki:	Tiphatikize ndi imene tinasungira ija, 5 kuphatikiza 14
Other literacy learners:	19
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye tiyika 19 yense?

Other literacy learners:	Eeee
Ms. Afiki:	Samuyi yatha ilipo?
Other literacy learners:	Ilipo
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye tiyike chiyani?
Other literacy learners:	‘K’
Ms. Afiki:	Pamenepa yatha kapena ilipo?
Other literacy learners:	Yatha
Ms. Afiki:	Ndiye kuti ansala yathu ndi imeneyi eti?
Other literacy learners:	Eeee

### Appendix 3 Original Chichewa version of the Story on page 136



Source: Chuma ndi Moyo (2014)