

Literacy in an Extended Family Household in Kabul: A Case Study

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Abstract

The following case study is drawn from a Pashtun family of 31 people living together in a house in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, and was collaboratively researched with a member of the household. Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest literacy rates, at 28.1 % literacy (UNICEF, 2004). Finding a way to take into consideration "the symbolic and material transactions of the everyday provide the basis for rethinking how people give meaning and ethical substance to their experiences and voices" (Giroux and Simon, 1989), rings true in the context of Afghanistan, where an ambitious agenda for raising access to education and literacy must find roots in the existing culture, coping mechanisms used by families, and the limited literacy and learning resources to which they have access. The issues brought to light in this case study suggest that validating Afghanistan's literary traditions holds potential for empowering new learners, tapping into literacy practices supported by family networks.



Introduction

How schools and parents can effectively bridge school learning with home learning is a prominent research question in literacy education in the Western world (Hannon, 2000; Cairney, 2000) that has led to a significant output of studies in the area of family literacy (e.g. Purcell-Gates, 1993; Hannon, 1995). This question has also resulted in the development, testing, and evaluation of a plethora of family literacy programs in countries such as Canada, the US, Australia, and the UK. Such programs are developed from a healthy body of research from which to refer and integrate lessons learned from a variety of contexts, including from research done with families of different socio-economic backgrounds, literacy levels, and using a variety of literacy practices, assumptions, and expectations. However, much less is known about the at-home literacy practices of families in the developing world who do not necessarily constitute a parallel to what a family in a Western context resembles. How literacy at home is shaped by different cultural, religious, social, economic, and political environments is largely a sealed vault of rich data from which education policy planners working in the developing world, as well as with immigrant communities, would benefit from drawing upon.

Families that do not neatly fit the nuclear family model common in North America, such as extended families in which multiple generations live together under one roof, make for vastly different home learning environments, offering context-specific and unique advantages and disadvantages for literacy learning. What features of an extended family are enabling for literacy learning? Which might be inhibiting for literacy learning? Knowing the answers to these questions may allow for the development of strategies that draw on strengths and opportunities from the home environment to expose undiscovered assets for furthering educational goals amidst circumstances of scarce resources. In particular, Street (1993) has called for more specific analyses of the ways in which language and literacy resources are used in different cultures. Such an undertaking requires beginning with a study of the different institutions through which literacy learners are socialized into literacy practices (Gee, 1990), including the family.

The following case study is drawn from a Pashtun family of 31 people living together in a house in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. The Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, constitute approximately 42% of the population and dominate the largely rural and culturally conservative Southern region, but are also represented in smaller numbers throughout the country including in major urban areas. The children of the home that is the focus of this study live with their parents, aunts, and uncles, grandmother, and cousins. Living within an extended family network is the typical structure of most Afghan households. The development of the education sector in Afghanistan is financed by Western sources: the governments of Germany, the US, and Canada, United Nations agencies, and the World Bank. The rebuilding of the education sector is also being led in part by a large number of advisors and consultants from these countries placed within the Ministry of Education, or working on specific projects for development firms or organizations, such as those contracted by national development agencies to write textbooks, train teachers, and build schools. An urgent question at this juncture of laying the very early foundations of a new, revitalized schooling system, is whether the experience of the many actors from outside of Afghanistan will mould the education sector into an institution that reflects the realities of Afghan families and will meet their specific needs. There is a very real risk of failing to account for the literacy landscape that characterizes Afghanistan, by not including an understanding of the connections between home and school literacies, and a subsequent forecast of how to hinge what is taught in school upon what children face when they return home each day.

This case study brings into relief the impact of gender roles on access to literacy and shows how literacy in the home is a site of struggle, where the challenge of access is far more pronounced than the challenge of ability. The existence of support and encouragement from one or more family members can be the determining factor over whether a child accesses literacy at all, and therefore, much depends on the individual values and priorities of those family members who yield power and influence in the family. This case also exhibits how the crossover between literacy and literary heritage or culture is found in an emphasis on valuing poetry recitation and calligraphy, an indicator of how conduits of literacy differ from Western

contexts. Most importantly, household economics are the most critical determinant of access to literacy, in an environment where families must band together and use collective strategies to survive firstly, and secondly, to reach towards distant ambitions of educational opportunity for their children.

In the international intervention context of Afghanistan, where a large-scale effort is underway to reform the country's education system, Afghans and strangers from the industrialized world frequently find themselves together at the policy table, tasked with achieving higher literacy rights and stronger education indicators. This case study suggests that collaborative research partnerships between Afghans and foreign researchers may yield potentially useful findings about the cultural role of literacy in Afghan communities and households. Understanding these cultural roles with the assistance of an insiders' perspective can make for better formulated literacy interventions which draw upon home-school connections in literacy practices and their linkages to culture, ability, and access issues. Participatory research methodologies are particularly relevant in such cross-cultural contexts and may facilitate respectful and empowering partnerships. Findings resulting from such approaches can be applied towards developing literacy resources which are more smoothly integrated with the specific social realities of literacy learners and which build on the strengths that the family environment adds, and therefore stand a better chance of success (Auerbach, 1989). To this end, the body of theory on situated learning may provide useful frameworks for shared methodological design and analysis between a foreign researcher and local collaborator(s), seeking to meaningfully connect education to learners' community of practice, cultural environment and context (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Context: The Locale

The "Parwani" family (all names used are pseudonyms) lives in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. Kabul is Afghanistan's largest city and has a population of 2,536,300 or more. It is considered to be over-crowded and strained under the return of hundreds of thousands of former refugees, having originally been a city planned for a much smaller population. Kabul has been severely damaged during the last three decades of violent conflict and underwent particularly severe destruction during the 1990s. While reconstruction is taking place in many parts of the city, and infrastructure slowly improving, Kabul remains a city of poverty, with no sewage system, thousands of homeless people and squatters in abandoned homes, intermittent electricity, and corrupt municipal institutions. As a larger city with a small elite and an ex-patriot population numbering approximately 30,000, Kabul is considered to be more liberal than most of the rest of the country, with many girls enrolled in schools and universities, and a diverse mix of ethnicities, sects and linguistic backgrounds living side-by-side and in relative tolerance with each other. At the same time, many families preserve their tribal traditions, even after generations of living in Kabul. Cultural traditions are resistant to state law and continue to regulate gender roles, power dynamics within households, the circumstances in which marriage takes place, and access to resources, including access to formal and informal education opportunities.

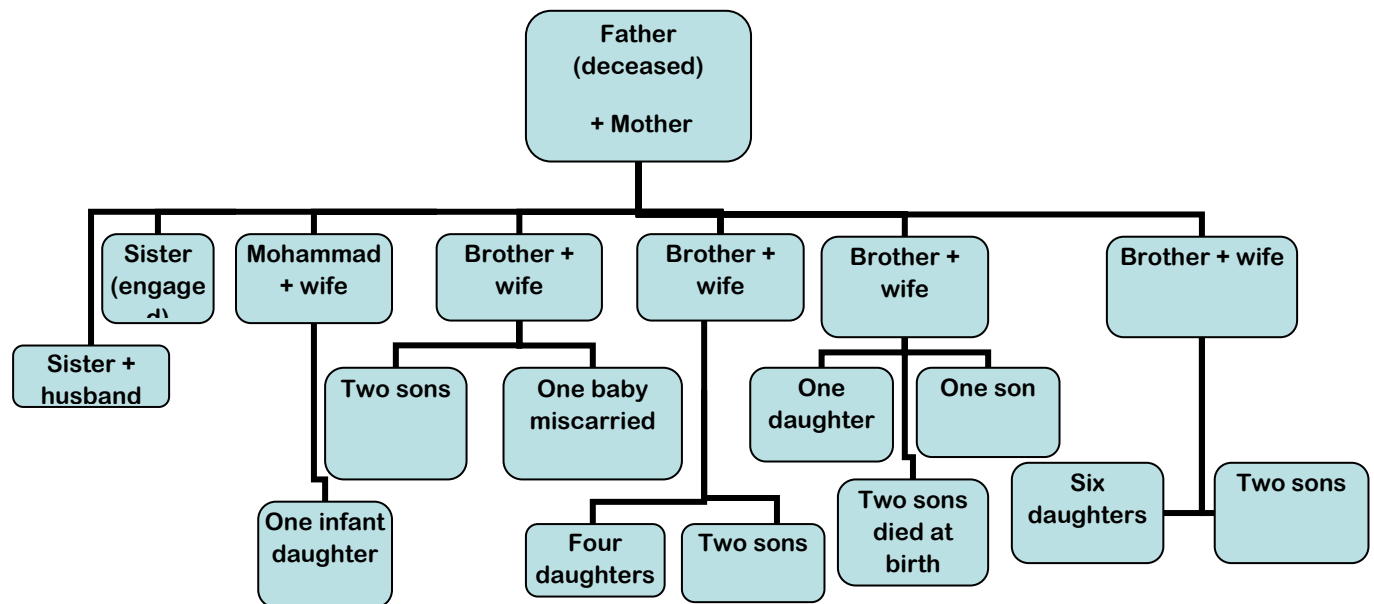
Afghanistan's largest ethnic group is the Pashtuns, who constitute approximately 40% of the population. Pashtuns are known for their organization along tribal lines and their adherence to the *Pashtunwali*, a strict code of behavior, honour preservation, traditions, and prescriptions for dispute resolutions. They are often considered to be particularly conservative, practicing *purdah* (the segregation of women in the home), and some Pashtun communities are resistant to girls' education and women's work outside the home.

Context: The Participating Family

The Parwani family live in Kabul in a three-story home in District 4 of the city within the neighbourhood known as Taimani Watt. The house is considered to belong to the mother and the family has lived there together for 24 years. The oldest member of the family is the elderly mother, aged between 55 and 60 (at the time of her birth, birth certificates were not issued, thus the family is not certain of her exact age), whose

husband was deceased 29 years ago. Her five sons and one daughter who is engaged, all live in the house with her, along with the couples' children. One daughter is married and lives with her husband's family. The wives of each of the five sons came to live with the parents of their husbands following marriage and each of them will raise their children in this household, a practice based on both tradition and economic necessity, though different members of the family have said that they hope to save enough money to eventually each live in their own homes. Their parents arranged the two oldest sons' marriages, the two middle brothers were consulted on their choice of marriage partner when marital arrangements were being made, and the youngest brother selected his own marriage partner. There are a total of 19 children, 11 boys and eight girls, in the household between the ages of 0 to 16. In total, 31 people live together in the home and share common areas, such as the living room (which also functions as an eating area) and kitchen. Friends and relatives frequently come to visit and the family is well acquainted with their neighbours. The family owns a shop, which faces out to the street on the first level of their home.

Figure 1. *The "Parwani" house family tree*



The former head of the household, "Jamal", now deceased, had finished school up until the eighth grade and was a soldier, and later worked in the office of a construction company. All of his grown sons are employed, except one, who was formerly a police officer. One brother manages the family shop on the first level of their home, another is a doctor with the Afghan military and another owns a yard selling old cars and car parts. The youngest brother, "Mohammad", is a lawyer who also works full-time in the office of a foreign human rights organization in Kabul. Mohammad is the key respondent in the study and also filled the role of a research collaborator. None of the adult women work outside of the home and none are literate, though all of them have expressed interest in learning literacy and regret their illiteracy as adults.

All income earned by individual family members is pooled to be used towards household expenses, such as rent, food, and school fees. The incomes of most of the brothers are so low that they are barely able to contribute to any household expenses, as the cost of living in Kabul has risen significantly over the last eight years. For example, the doctor earns the equivalent of US\$60 per month. Mohammad is the only family member who earns enough income to meet the household's economic needs as a result of his employment in a foreign non-governmental organization (NGO) with a country office in Kabul. Foreign NGOs are known to pay salaries far exceeding the average amount earned for skilled labour or to well-educated Afghans working

in government institutions. As a result, an entire extended family often depends on the salary of one family member employed with an international organization and landing such a position is considered to be lucrative.

The Parwani family consider themselves to be middle class. As the breadwinner of the family, Mohammad is the patriarch, despite being the youngest son. All decisions within the family take place only with his approval and he is widely consulted by all family members on a variety of issues. Different family members use his influence for different purposes, such as the girls convincing their parents to allow them to continue to go to high school and to delay their marriages. As a family member with a university education, Mohammad yields tremendous respect and is easily able to enforce actions and changes within the household that reflect his values and beliefs, such as his belief that both boys and girls have an equal right to education.

Pursuing a deep personal commitment to the law, Mohammad graduated from Kabul University Law School and has worked as both a prosecutor and a defence lawyer. His law thesis was concerned with the law, domestic violence, and Islam and he moved on to a career in the field of human rights. An intense dedication to human rights law and realizing the rule of law for Afghanistan permeates both Mohammad's professional and private life. In casual conversation, he regularly makes reference to the legal basis of a statement he makes, and is quick to intervene in situations where he perceives human rights to be in violation, from minor incidents such as a traffic police infringing on the rights of a pedestrian, or to major incidents such as going to the police station to help an acquaintance be acquitted for a crime that is not found in the penal code. In his home, he has prevented his nieces from being withdrawn from school when they reached puberty and secured the promises of their parents to allow them to at least finish high school before marriage. He actively encourages both the women and the men in his family to participate in family discussions and decision-making, frequently asking after the opinion of a quiet family member during conversations and encouraging everyone's input.

Methodology

Data collected for this case study was initially through several site visits to the Parwani family home in Kabul, during February and March 2008, but was complemented by other informal visits in 2007. This study is approved under the Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia. I had met Mohammad the year prior when we worked together on a gender-focused research project initiated by an international organization running training programs in Afghanistan. I gradually came to meet and spend time with the other family members during regular visits to the country each year for work on various education, human rights and gender programs.

Visits were made during the evenings when all family members were present and assembled in the living room, as well as one-on-one time spent with Mohammad in a variety of contexts. Two formal interviews were then conducted and recorded with Mohammad via Skype between Kabul and Vancouver, and follow-up data collected by e-mail. After each interview, Mohammad agreed to collect literacy artefacts from the home and report back on them, as well as interview his nieces and nephews on their literacy practices and interests. This allowed Mohammad to become a collaborator in the research. He developed an interest in discovering what his nieces and nephews were reading, found reading material in the home he had been unaware of, and learned some of the challenges they face acquiring reading material for school. As a result, Mohammad worked with his nieces and nephews to assist them to acquire the books they needed for school that he had been aware of and changed the previous arrangement of giving them funds for schoolbooks without asking precisely what was needed, and now helps them to identify the specific books they need in local bookshops.

Mohammad's role as a co-researcher began as the practical response to the language barrier between me, who does not speak Pashto, and the other family members; as well as due to access constraints for the women who did not venture far away from the house and were not computer literate. However, his evolving role proved to contribute significantly to collecting a broader and richer array of data and was also essential

in helping to dismantle my assumptions about family literacy rooted in a Western model. Working with him to determine which questions were relevant to the Afghan context and to identify issues I had missed was invaluable to the research process. As such, Mohammad played a role in designing the research as well as in analyzing the data. At the same time, unlike a detached, temporarily involved investigator, he now returns to his family context with his new understandings about their literacy practices, able to apply new understandings in every day actions in the household and to adapt and evolve his role as a literacy mentor. This approach is in line with a definition of action research, which emphasizes both localization and a mechanism for change making:

Action research takes its cues- its questions, puzzles and problems- from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts. It bounds episodes of research according to the boundaries of the local context. It builds descriptions and theories within the practice context itself, and tests them there through *intervention experiments*- that is, through experiments that bare the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desired change in the situation. (Argyris & Shon, 1991, p. 86)

Such an approach, inadvertent as it may have been, reflects the ethical stance of participatory action research, which aims to empower research participants through their active involvement, including at the design and decision-making phases of research, as well as in the analysis of findings' validity, and even in application. For education researchers working in communities in the Global South, participatory action research serves as a powerful method by which to ensure research subjects become *participants* at all stages, including in designing the methodology and research questions at the outset. Participants are thus empowered to guide the researcher in understanding what issues are relevant for their realities and what kind of new knowledge found will contribute to their lives in a way that has meaning and utility for them, rather than the researcher's assumptions of what discoveries hold value (Posch & Mair, 1997).

Literacy in the Parwani Home

The Parwani family are of Pashtun ethnicity and have lived in Kabul for several generations. The first language of most of the family members is Pashto, though two wives' first language is Dari (the Afghan dialect of Persian), the lingua franca of Kabul. While Pashto is the main language spoken at home, all family members can also speak Dari, which is the language taught in school, the language of Afghan television stations, and the language used to communicate across Kabul's many different ethnic groups.

In this study, Gray's definition of functional literacy is applied: functional literacy is the ability to "engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in culture or group" (1956, p.24). All of the adult men in the home are literate, though their literacy levels vary significantly. For example, the two brothers who have gone to university (medical school and law school) are literate in both Dari and Pashto and in academic and scientific terminology respectfully, one brother struggles with basic literacy (i.e., he has memorized characters that he needs to use often, such as the numbers on his cell phone key pad but struggles with longer texts), one is newly literate and another one is working on improving his literacy. None of the adult women of the family are literate, though some of them profess a desire to gain literacy skills, but feel they are now too old to pursue any level of education. All the children, both boys and girls, who are in school (age 7 and above) are literate in Dari and Pashto. English is taught as a subject in school, but Mohammad is the only family member with full fluency.

All the books in the home are in Dari or English and there are no Pashto books despite this being the family's first language. While Pashto is widely spoken in Afghanistan, there is no local publishing industry and only a small one over the border in Pakistan, making Pashto books less accessible than the more widely available Dari books. Most books in the home are kept in cabinets in the living room and are for a university-level reading ability. The older children in the home have expressed interest in them and wanted to take them out to read but Mohammad had explained to them that they are too difficult for their level of reading

comprehension. There are occasionally magazines and newspapers found in the home that are brought home by Mohammad and read by all literate family members and occasionally fought over upon first arrival.

The children who are of school age all own their own books, which are mainly for school use, but none of these books were provided by the school except for some exercise books in Dari. The children explain to Mohammad which books they need to purchase for school and he normally provides them with pocket money to get the required books. In the course of the research, by discussing the schoolbooks in the house with his nieces and nephews, Mohammad learned that they needed additional books but did not have the funds to purchase them and had not wanted to ask. Mohammad then bought these books for them. All books and school-related materials (notebooks, pens, etc.) are provided by Mohammad. Mohammed explained that the reason there is little personal reading material (not to do with books needed for school purposes) was because books are “considered a luxury” and the family has to prioritize income for purchasing food and other basic essentials, though the family values reading and clearly associates books with learning and opportunity, as well as with amusement and pleasure. Mohammad’s nieces frequently ask him to bring home any books he can borrow from his workplace, but he explains to them that he is usually not allowed to borrow them or that they are not on subjects that would be interesting for girls of their age.

No one in the household has ever used any of Kabul’s three public libraries except Mohammad. Mohammad explained that most residents of Kabul are not even aware that there are libraries in the city and going to a library is simply not part of daily life for Afghans. Indeed, Kabul’s libraries are in such a state of deterioration and neglect, it would be surprising if anyone at all uses them on a regular basis.

All the children in the home of school age attend public schools, which are sex-segregated, and began school at age seven, entering Year 1 (the equivalent of Grade 1). To supplement the girls’ education, Mohammad has a tutor come to the house daily to help them with math and to begin learning English. If income permits in the future, he would also like to have a tutor come for the adult women, whom the women have often requested. Mohammad generally seemed more focused on the girls’ education than the boys’, and more anxious for the girls’ educational futures. He was knowledgeable about their interests in calligraphy, Persian literature and poetry, but regretful that there were no poetry books or calligraphy supplies in the house, because he could not afford to buy these items. Nevertheless, the girls often recited poetry orally amongst each other, evidently for fun, and practiced calligraphy skills learned in school with ordinary pens.

As the person in the home considered to be “the smartest”, Mohammad is the only adult regularly consulted by all the children on homework problems. Mohammad works long hours but tries to be home each evening to be on hand for homework questions from his nieces and nephews. During the researcher’s visits, there was often a line-up of children waiting for their turn to seek assistance from Mohammad with a homework problem. He described one niece’s struggle over math and her stress over the difficulty it brought her. He jokes about his poor math abilities and says he is only able to help in certain subjects and to give encouragement, and advice on good study habits and practices.

The following table shows the different subjects by class level that the Parwani children are currently studying, and the range of educational levels of the many children of the household, as related by Mohammad.

Table 1. Current school subjects for the Parwani Children

Parwani children enrolled in school	Class level	Subjects	Provision of school books
“Susan” (F) and “Nadira” (F)	1	Dari, Math, Calligraphy and Art	None provided by school, purchased by family.
“Nadir” (M) and “Nahid” (M)	2	Dari, Math, Calligraphy, Art, Quran life and customs, and Sport	Only some Dari language work books provided by school

"Saghar" (F) and "Sadiqa" (F)	3	Dari, Math, Calligraphy, Quran and Doniat (religion), Art, and Sport	None provided by school, purchased by family.
"Basira" (F)	5	Dari, Math, Calligraphy, Quran, Social sciences, English, Pashto, Science, Doniat, and Sport.	None provided by school, purchased by family.
"Jamila" (F)	6	Dari, Math, Calligraphy, Quran, History, Pashto, Geometry, Science, Sport, Doniat, and Art	None provided by school, purchased by family.
"Lida" (F)	7	Dari, Math, Calligraphy, Quran, History, Pashto, Geography, Chemistry, Science, Physics, Arabic, Biology, Hadiths (prophetic verses), English, Religious Science, Geometry, Ethics, and Sports.	None provided by school, purchased by family.
"Zarifa" (F) and "Waghma" (F)	8	Dari, Math, Calligraphy, Quran, History, Pashto, Geometry, Science, Sport, Doniat, Chemistry, Physics, Hadiths, Religious Science, Information, Arabic, Biology, English, and Sport.	

F = female; M = male

Gender & Literacy At Home

The Parwani house exhibits a striking change in literacy between generations. All of the adult women in the house are illiterate, while all the young women are literate and are excelling in school in an environment where their educational futures are an intense preoccupation. The young women have supplemental resources poured into their educations, with the provision of a private tutor, attention to their achievement in school, and consistent encouragement and belief in their potential to do well with literacy. They are provided with books required for their courses, unlike many of their classmates, who cannot afford to buy the necessary texts. Economic sacrifices have been made for the enhancement of their studies, such as using funds for a tutor, over other expenditures desired by the household. In a short time span they moved from being members of what Mohammad has described as at-risk of dropping out of school for early, arranged marriages to being in the small tier of females in Afghanistan who go on to complete high school, resisting dominant cultural notions against time spent outside of the home corrupting young women and making them bad wives.

Mohammad has described his family as being a "very traditional, conservative Pashtun family". He described in detail his efforts to show them "with logic" and from a legal perspective why girls should have equal access to education. He repeatedly said "none of my nieces would be in school now if I were not here" (alluding to time he spent away from his family in Iran, during the Taliban period of 1996-2001). He no longer encounters resistance from any of his family members and is acutely aware that he enjoys their respect and is considered the unchallenged head of the household.

Where gender inequity is a characteristic of the home and community environment, literacy becomes a site of struggle (Rockhill, 1994). Issues of capability are far less urgent and immediate than issues of access. Female literacy in this household depended on a single family member who had privileged life opportunities, including access to higher education and the chance to leave Afghanistan during a period of turmoil and violence, where he was exposed to a new set of values and ideas about gender and education. And yet, the family still had to go to great lengths to preserve the realization of this hard fought access: Mohammad rushing home from long work days to assist with homework; setting aside scarce funds to purchase books for school; and moving the girls to a different school where they would face less harassment

from cat-calling boys on their walk to and from school, a common hazard facing school girls in Afghanistan. The resources and efforts demanded to ensure girls' access to education are significant and go far beyond merely ensuring the existence of a school in the vicinity, which remains a challenge in itself in many parts of the country. Girls' literacy is thus intimately related to struggle and resistance, and to the perseverance of families who face the threat of neighbourhood gossip, "disgraced" unmarried girls, insecurity, and other risks. But even more importantly, it is fundamentally tied to family economics.

Literacy and Economics in the Home: Value vs. Access

While Mohammad's education, legal arguments, or convincing impassioned oratories on the need for equity between men and women have certainly contributed to shaping the changing views of his family on gender roles in their family (as evidenced, for example, by the changing pattern of arranged marriages among the five brothers), the fact that he is the family's breadwinner is what has ultimately given him the authority to enforce his views. The capacity for the female household members to realize their right to education, to have access to literacy opportunities, and to be exposed in a positive way to literacy materials in the home is due primarily to the division of economic power within the household. It is this that allows Mohammad to ensure his family resists the many obstacles to girls' education, such as gossip and criticism from the community, insecurity, and concerns around marriage ability (which also constitute economic concerns).

At the same time that the Parwanis are likely exceptional in many ways in light of the intense and explicit emphasis on girls' education prevalent in the household, access to literacy is still limited by economic conditions. The *value* placed on education cannot fully translate into *access* under conditions of scarce resources and uncertainty about the future where families are compelled to focus foremost on the needs of daily survival, and must pool and share all resources within an extended family situation.

Literacy as a Cultural Site: Untapped Potential for Literacy Pedagogy

Afghanistan has a long history of appreciation for Persian¹ and Dari poetry. The great Persian poet, Rumi, was born in what is today's Afghan province of Balkh. Afghan women and girls widely revere a 10th century female poet, Rabia Balki, also born in Balkh. Recitation of poetry is a highly valued skill, including among women and girls. Similarly, the art of calligraphy has deep roots in Afghan society and the ability to produce high quality calligraphy is venerated across all of Afghanistan's ethnic groups. Some of the older Parwani children study calligraphy at school as well as practice it at home for both pleasure and skill development. Knowledge of the great Persian poets and the ability to recite passages from heart as well as artistic talent in calligraphy were important features of the literary culture in the Parwani home, reflecting talents valued in Afghan culture generally and which cuts across ethnic lines (Hatch Dupree, 2002). Discussion of these literacy practices was crucial to painting a portrait of how literacy is valued, how ability is demonstrated, and how literacy practices are shared among family members.

The multiple forms which literacy takes in the Parwani household offer a rich plane of opportunities for new learning interventions in the classroom. Pedagogy in Afghanistan is largely based on traditional methods such as rote memorization and there is little interaction between student and teacher or between students. This pattern is both a result of the lasting influence of Soviet approaches to education in the region and the lack of resources and interruptions to the education sector caused by violent conflict and under-development throughout the last three decades. Finding new strategies to promote literacy through the reform

¹ Dari is a dialect of Persian (or Farsi), and the languages are mutually intelligible.

of pedagogical practices, such as those that engage cultural practices in which Afghans find pride and enjoyment in home and community literacy activities, may be critical to the future of literacy in Afghanistan.

Moving Literacy Forward: Culture and Family as Tools

In Afghan communities, as in other parts of South and Central Asia, the extended family structure is one example of a condition that differentiates how literacy is enacted in the home. The large number of children in the Parwani household provided ample opportunity for literacy performances. Oral poetry recitation was a preferred practice, far more prevalent than silent reading for pleasure. Similarly, Anderson and Mui's study (2008) of an Indo-Canadian extended family living together in Canada found that multimodal literacy practices, popular culture and play were engaged in far more than storybook reading, and were being used successfully to further school literacy.

In the Parwani home, Mohammad's role in assisting with homework, engaging a tutor, closely following educational achievement, offering praise for calligraphy art created by his nieces and nephews, and maintaining a constant focus on their education, was pivotal in creating a meaningful enabling environment for literacy development. There is a growing body of literature analyzing the role of parents in language and literacy acquisition (e.g. Snow, 1983; Wells 1985), but little literature that considers the role of other adult family members in extended family structures, like the Parwanis'. In particular, there is a striking absence of research on family literacy, multiliteracies, and the role of culture in furthering academic achievement, in precisely those countries where literacy indicators are the lowest in the world, like Afghanistan. Mohammad's unique devotion to girls' education and the lengths to which he was willing to go to nurture an environment of school achievement for his nieces and nephews make him exceptional in many ways. Yet understanding what facilitates someone like Mohammad's role as a champion for literacy within his family may offer up important findings relevant to policy designers and researchers seeking to use family literacy to nurture school learning outcomes. In Afghanistan, where resources for education are scarce, mobilizing the different stakeholders in a child's education (family members, community leaders, teachers and others) to be actively contributing to their literacy development could help grow the kind of social capital a learner has to tap into.

Discussion of the full extent of literacy practices in the Parwani home, including and beyond school-based literacies (such as poetry recitation as a hobby) was crucial to painting a portrait of how literacy is valued, how ability is demonstrated, and how literacy practices are shared among family members. Understanding the culturally and socially rooted meanings and functions of literacy in the home, and the involvement of parents and other adults in these practices, may allow for identifying what Moll (1992) called "funds of knowledge" transferable to school settings.

Capturing the use and impact of diverse literacy practices in the home could influence the development of curriculum and pedagogy for Afghan classrooms, which are reflective of cultural literacy traditions. For instance, giving the much revered talent of poetry recitation a place in the classroom can bring to bear the value and richness of this cultural literacy practice into educational settings where new pedagogical practices, which engage with students' interests and abilities, are much needed. In an environment where literacy rates are among the world's lowest, the education system faces a daunting uphill battle to rebuild itself, and girls face extra barriers to education, finding locally embedded means of reinforcing literacy are required if the fledgling education system is going to be meaningful and sustainable for Afghans hoping to enter a new era of peace and development.

Finding Local Literacy Practices for Home-School Connections: Nurturing Cross-cultural Collaborations

The presence and use of arts such as calligraphy and poetry in the Parwani family is an important indicator of a family's literacy interests, values, and points of departure for future research in home-school literacy connections in the Afghan context. Working with an Afghan helped ensure that the appropriate points of entry were identified and helped guide me in identifying indicators which had something meaningful to tell. This could not have been accomplished simply by continuously digging with questions,

but depended on the close involvement of a local, knowledgeable research collaborator who corrected my frames of reference to be more relevant to the context at hand.

As Afghanistan plays host to a large contingent of education advisors and consultants from the West and the rebuilding of the education sector is financed by Western sources (national development agencies such as the US Agency for International Development, the German Technical Cooperation organization, and the Canadian International Development Agency, or the World Bank and United Nations agencies), there is a strong likelihood that Western notions of how literacy is manifested will dominate the design of literacy programs. Yet, these will have little chance of success if locally valued forms and practices of literacy do not find a place in the policy and planning process. Legitimizing and valuing those forms of literacy used within families will help sustain literacy between home and school (Tett & Crowther, 1998), and will honour an indigenous basis of literacy, in addition to the imported literacies coming into Afghanistan.

To this end, it may be of particular importance in research partnerships between North-based and South-based researchers or institutions that research is participatory in the truest sense of the word- from design stage to analysis, to the dissemination of findings, and to the application to practice. Subtle, but rich cultural nuances are easily lost in the templates a researcher brings from home. Other studies have found a lack of representation in the research planning process from the community under study will impose limitations on the scope of findings and their interpretation (Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006).

Conclusion

Literacy is most likely to be successfully acquired if the practices of literacy are integrated within the social reality of the learner (Auerbach, 1989), thus cultural awareness is critical and the most assured conduit is an insider with cultural literacy. In this case, Mohammad's collaboration resulted in more nuanced data, while also building upon his own understanding of literacy in his household. Further, limiting the participation of informants to that of "subjects" helps preserve the status quo of power being vested in Western-resourced institutions and ways of doing, denying the possibility of blending perceptions and approaches, which can lead to exciting new methodologies which might hold value for global South and global North contexts alike.

As our world globalizes and we find ourselves rubbing shoulders more often with cultures new to us, researchers and practitioner need methodologies which ensure the validation of aspects of the other culture which are supportive of literacy development, such as calligraphy and poetry in the Afghan case or the role of a family champion for literacy, and which help avoid imposing a template that may not be empowering for learners, by disregarding their own literatures. Longwell-Grice & McIntyre tell us that, "the spaces created with and through literacy are limited by broader contexts of culture and society" (2006, p.129). Yet, culture can equally create spaces of possibility in the service of literacy, if care is taken to identify and tap into relevant cultural tools. Theories of situated learning emphasize that meaningful and effective learning takes place when the process of learning is connected to the learner's community of practice, cultural environment and context (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For instance, Hare (2005) demonstrated how a literacy of the land and nature held valuable utility to First Nations people in Canada, contributing to their survival and cultural enrichment; but in the mainstream school system, such literacies receive little regard. Opportunities to build on them, or to use them as bridges to "reading the world" (Freire, 2000), are thus lost. As Afghanistan embarks on rebuilding its educational institutions and practices, it has a unique opportunity to build new curricula and pedagogical practices that narrow this divide, and use its rich cultural heritage and local literacy traditions in the service of education.

How literacy is manifested, limited and supported in the context of an extended family living amidst challenging and uncertain external conditions (war, poverty, political instability, etc) is a critical area for further research. Beyond the scope of this case study are a plethora of areas which make for fascinating further study: the role of siblings and cousins in supporting literacy within large families; the role and influence of grandparents; the legacy of literacy left by older generations; tensions between generations; how

culturally-specific physical space is used for literacy; how literacy resources are shared; and how literacy materials are created and valued; among others.

The role of an impervious champion for girls' literacy in the Parwani family played a crucial role in facilitating their access to education and in nurturing their literacy at home. What happens in the absence of such a champion? There exists a high risk that gender inequities in the household are simply replicated from generation to generation. A breadwinner, controlling the family purse strings, who believed in girls' education, was what allowed the Parwani girls an education, though limits were still imposed (access to books for personal reading for example) by the family's economic situation. Family economics and gender roles intersected sharply to determine the literacy opportunities in the household. The role of family economics in determining the social stratification in societies between men and women at the macro-level is well known (Huber, 1991). Thus, understanding literacy in the home is arguably as important as ensuring well-functioning schools in a developing country context.

Further, understanding the role and potential for family literacy in Afghan families may also enhance educational interventions among Afghan immigrant communities, which are prominent in Canadian cities like Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Vancouver. Weinstein-Shr (1991) called for a more family-centred approach in aiming to improve academic achievement among immigrant and refugee families, which would call for an understanding of literacy practices and perceptions in the home of immigrant families. Such practices and perceptions could then be used as resources in relevant literacy development efforts, honouring meaningful and rich traditional literacy practices rooted in the home culture.

Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest literacy rates, at 28.1 % literacy (43% for males and only 13% for females) (UNICEF, 2004). Finding a way to take into consideration "the symbolic and material transactions of the everyday provide the basis for rethinking how people give meaning and ethical substance to their experiences and voices" (Giroux and Simon, 1989), rings true in the context of Afghanistan, where an ambitious agenda for raising access to education and literacy must find roots in the existing cultural uses of literacy, coping mechanisms used by families, and limited material resources to which they have access. Validating Afghanistan's literary traditions holds tremendous potential for empowering new learners, tapping into literacy practices supported by their family networks.

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