Shaping Literacy Definitions: Organizational Constraints

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Abstract

The world recognizes the benefits a literate population possesses, and as a result continues to undertake initiatives to strive for the eradication of illiteracy. Despite this, there are still varied definitions in use by states, NGOs, and individuals. The lack of a universally agreed definition of literacy has led to a variety of standards and explanations since literacy programs often look at literacy through different lenses. This paper examines literacy definitions within literacy organizations and assesses the consistency of those definitions. This is done through an analysis of interviews and texts collected from literacy programs located in London, rural Uganda, and Nairobi. The definitions of literacy in use by these organizations are compared and analyzed to determine which definitions are currently in use in different parts of the world, along with possible connections or patterns that emerge among these definitions. The conclusions derived from this analysis suggest that there does not remain one, singular definition of literacy used by literacy programs. Instead, there are two foci of definitions: literacy as concrete skills and literacy as tools. These changes between the organizations’ ideal literacy definitions and the applied definitions occur due to constraints on literacy organizations.
Introduction

Literacy is many things to many people. It is often taken for granted in the developed world and used in every day activities ranging from reading the menu at McDonald’s, to filling out a job application, to reading the instructions on a medicine label. Literacy might be reading the latest information about new farming techniques or writing in a candidate’s name on a local ballot. According to one participant in a Haitian literacy project, “If I’m capable at the end of the project of signing my name or understanding what’s happening when they fetch me for the elections, I know I’ll have lived for something” (Living Literacy, 2001, p. 16). To most, literacy is essential if an individual wishes to reach his/her full potential. While at its most basic form literacy may consist of skills like the ability to sign one’s name, for many people literacy has become a means of accessing information and power in society. According to Michael Omolewa, an ambassador from Nigeria, “governments fear that once you make people literate, [you] won’t be able to misinform them” (Education Today, 2002, p. 6). States have recognized that illiteracy remains a powerful tool for controlling a population.

Currently, there are over 700 million individuals in the world who are illiterate (Education For All, 2005, p. 165). Two-thirds of these illiterate adults living in today’s world are women (Literacy Initiative for Empowerment, 2007, p. 14). This has negative repercussions for the literacy rates of their children, gender equity efforts, and overall family health (Education For All, 2008, p. 141-142). Additionally, three out of every twenty children around the world are not currently enrolled in school (Literacy Initiative for Empowerment, 2007, p. 13), which likely guarantees their status as illiterate for life. Not only will these children likely grow up “unable to cope with situations requiring reading, writing, and arithmetic”, but they are also likely to live in poverty (Education For All, 2005, p. 30). 75% of the illiterate population can be
found living in only 12 countries, all of which are found in the developing world (*Education For All*, 2005, p. 17). This disparity in access to education further widens the inequality gap between the developed and the developing world. Although developing states are seeing more students enrolled in education, they are not receiving an education equal in quality to developed states. For example, a child born in Mali has less chance of finishing his/her primary education, which would equip him/her with very basic literacy skills, than a child in the United Kingdom has of entering university level education (*Education For All*, 2008, p. 27). Education is considered to be pivotal to economic growth and development, both of which are crucial to enabling developing states to advance.

Commitment to improving literacy by governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals is fragmented and does not receive sufficient monetary support. “Literacy typically receives only 1% of [a] national education budget” and literacy efforts are not an important recipient of international aid (*Education For All*, 2005, p. 5). The world is aware of the benefits that literacy can bring to a population, but is currently lacking the unified support necessary to eradicate illiteracy. Although there are international initiatives such as the United Nations Literacy Decade, the majority of literacy efforts, outside of providing basic primary education, are the state’s responsibility. The majority of states do not have national programs dedicated to the eradication of illiteracy and instead provide resources for localized literacy programs. Literacy programs are in constant competition for these limited resources, often limiting their capabilities to make progress as it requires funding for programs to hire and train staff, conduct research with the local community to find out people’s literacy needs, and create a literate environment. This competition also affects the individuals these programs serve. Typically, in order to demonstrate that improvements in literacy levels have been made,
organizations must use some form of a quantitative literacy definition. This has unfortunate effects on individuals as organizations are forced to focus less on how literacy may improve an individual’s life and more on whether they are able to advance to the next standardized level (Roberts, 1995, p. 415-416).

Although many literacy programs may use some form of a literacy definition that enables literacy to be numerically measured, that does not mean there is agreement among literacy programs about which definition should be used. “The range of definitions of ‘literacy’ and ‘illiteracy’ advanced in the past half-century is quite remarkable, yet there remains little agreement among ‘experts’ over what these terms mean” (Roberts, 1995, p. 412). The most basic definition of literacy is often defined as the ability to read and write, although even this basic definition is contested as it is not agreed how much one must be able to read or what one must be able to write. The definitions of literacy continue to vary including the following: the ability “to interact with the specific environments in which people live and function” (Harman, 1987, p. 96), “the capacity to express oneself in writing, to establish oneself in society, to get recognition from others, to master and transmit one’s cultural features, and to participate with full autonomy in today’s societies” (Ouane, 1992, p. 75), and “the ability to say written words corresponding to ordinary oral discourse and to understand them” (Kaestle et al., 1991, p. 3). These definitions continue to foster academic debate, but they are also responsible for shaping the definitions utilized by literacy programs and governments.

This paper examines literacy definitions used within literacy organizations and assesses the consistency of those definitions. This is done through an analysis of interviews and texts collected from literacy programs located in London, rural Uganda, and Nairobi. The definitions of literacy in use by these organizations are compared and analyzed to determine which
definitions are currently in use in different parts of the world, along with possible connections or patterns that emerge among these definitions. Instead of simply identifying the patterns existing among literacy definitions, this paper also examines possible explanations for the existence of these patterns.

This paper begins with a discussion of the relevant literature regarding the defining of literacy. This section starts with an overview of the different developments of literacy chronologically. Additionally, it looks at literacy thematically in relation to identity, power, and organizational structures. The paper will also explain why determining how literacy is defined is important. Following this section, there is an explanation of the methods used in the analysis of the data collected during the visits to London, Uganda, and Nairobi. This paper presents the results of the analysis. It will then discuss what these results mean in relation to the research questions posed and its impact on the larger picture of defining literacy. The next section is recommendations to help literacy programs obtain consistency in their literacy definitions based on the results of the research. The paper concludes with final observations and additional topics for future research.
Literature Review

There are 700 million individuals in the world who have been classified as illiterate (EFA, 2005, p. 164); a word that has a negative connotation, and arguably negative repercussions. Fortunately, the world is beginning to recognize the importance of literacy in an individual’s life. Literacy is recognized as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is instrumental for accessing information, a highly important commodity in today’s world. Increasing literacy rates has been linked with improving everything from personal hygiene to voter turnout (EFA, 2005, p. 137-145).

Some claim literacy is something that is easily identified as a set of skills, a process, or an end goal (Horning, 2007; Jackson & Mumford, 1938). Others argue it is something that is known when possessed, but otherwise remains vague and undefined (Friere, 1970; Ouane, 1992). According to the Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report, published by the United Nations, “people’s notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences” (2005, p. 147). There is also an acknowledgement that the definition of literacy has changed as foci have shifted. Literacy has been measured as the acquisition of specific technical skills, economic skills and knowledge, or knowledge of cultural specific texts that would enable an individual and society to grow (Freire, 1970; Smyth, 2005). There is a difference among the definitions of literacy used in the developed and developing world, international organizations and states, and the definitions used yesterday and today. For most individuals, but by no means all, literacy is no longer limited to the skills of reading and writing. This may have been literacy’s humble beginnings, but it has since advanced into a complex, individual and context specific way of interpreting information (Bernardo, 2000; Ouane, 1992).
Development of Literacy Definitions

Until the 1960’s literacy was commonly defined as the ability to read and write. There was no variation; literacy was seen as being a static end goal that everyone was capable of achieving. This interpretation of literacy is described by Paulo Freire as a diet of words that can be fed to an individual to make him/her full (Freire, 1970). Based upon this description, the solution to solving the illiteracy problem then was the implementation of wide scale literacy campaigns, typically through primary education. If literacy was simply giving people the ‘sustenance,’ then simplistic programs that were able to reach the largest number possible were the best solution.

The 1960’s and 70’s saw the advent of functional literacy. This new definition of literacy viewed literacy not as the end goals of reading and writing but as a “necessary condition for economic growth and national development” (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005, p. 153). Functional literacy itself also shifted from a narrow, work-oriented, economic consideration of literacy to a broader sociopolitical and cultural one; it remains a definition used today as it espouses many goals people have for a literate population (Smyth, 2005). The initial definition, linking literacy to economic growth and development, has been abandoned as experiments using this definition, such as the Experimental World literacy Programme, have failed to demonstrate a causal relationship between literacy and economic development (Jones, 1999, p. 355).

The definitions of literacy also evolved during the 1970’s thanks to Paulo Freire. Freire agreed that the process and results of literacy were more than simply the ability to read and write. Literacy was to be used as a means of giving a voice to those individuals who had been forced, inappropriately, to the margins of society by their illiteracy. He considered literacy an act of knowing; this meant the illiterate individual must have an active role in the process as it is not
just the memorization of words that makes one literate, but the critical reflection on the process of reading and writing itself (Freire, 1970). Whereas functional literacy was thought to represent an avenue to increased economic development, Freire considered literacy to be an avenue to personal and societal advancement.

In the 1980’s and 90’s, there was a strong emphasis on primary education as the means for obtaining literacy, causing funding to decrease to other methods of imparting literacy. This did not stop the evolution of literacy definitions. New technologies, including television, computers, and the Internet, were introduced into conceptions of literacy (Johnson & Kress, 2003). These new technologies, including electronic communication, “[obliterate] both time and distance which is unmaking linguistic forms which had been developed as a response to both” (Johnson & Kress, 2003, 5). Literacy is changing today as knowledge becomes highly situated, rapidly changing and more diverse than ever (Johnson & Kress, 2003; Millard, 2003). There is a fluidity of movement between different texts or screens as individuals get information and create meaning from the juxtaposition of printed text, image, sound, and movement (Horning, 2007; Millard, 2003). It was also during this period that literacy definitions expanded further to include the idea that literacy is embedded in activities and practices of a community, and that it is an activity that largely involves extracting and processing complex meanings from a community’s texts and other printed forms of language (Bernardo, 2000). Literacy not only grew to encompass new technologies, but it also became more cultural, or situation specific (Horning, 2007).

Currently, there are definitions of literacy in which reading and writing are never directly mentioned, although this is not common (Horning, 2007). Many authors of literacy definitions have focused on the relativity of literacy; whether it is the task, the culture, or simply the
individual to which it is relative (Bernardo, 2000; Friere, 1970). In many definitions, literacy cannot exist without its relativity to something else. Also in recent years, there has been an undeniable push for the global community to be involved in all areas of literacy through its connection to education. Many countries are unable to successfully help their peoples’ access literacy, leaving the responsibility to fall on the shoulders of international organizations (Jones, 1999). This international shift has resulted in the implementation of definitions on a world wide basis.

There is also the promotion of the concept of multiple literacies, which like literacy has various definitions but typically refers to the idea that literacy may come in different forms for different situations in combination with different practices (Bloome & Enciso, 2006). In addition, literacy may be used to interpret texts in multiple forms such as the sound and print form of television (Paul & Wang, 2006). Literacy has evolved from being a skills based end goal to an evolving process with ever increasing complexity.

**Literacy and Identity**

Identity formation is an additional area where literacy is a crucial component. Recently, there have been a number of articles exploring the importance of literacy as part of identity particularly in relation to indigenous cultures (Bialostock & Whitman, 2006; Hermes & Uran, 2006; Romero-Little, 2006). Indigenous literacies “are framed within oral societies” causing them to often be “neglected or viewed as inferior versions of literacy unsuited for modern life and society” (Romero-Little, 2006, p. 399). This is causing indigenous languages, and often other key components of their way of life including economic, political, and spiritual elements, to be lost in the standardization of paradigms and practices of literacy (Romero-Little, 2006, p
401-402). Whether done intentionally or not, the language in which literacy is acquired can be used to strip individuals of their identity and force assimilation into the desired ‘modern’ society.

Additionally, literacy is also often mixed with empowerment ideology, which can lead not only to advancement but also to the individualization of “the child, setting him or her apart from the parent” and also “negat[ing] familial and larger social networks of generational authority and expertise” (Hermes & Uran, 2006, p. 395). While individuals are gaining the mainstream literacy skills deemed necessary by the higher authorities, typically national governments, they are losing vital components of their identity and culture.

On the other hand, literacy may work to enable individuals to regain an identity and place in society. Literacy programs can promote debates and discussions and provide marginalized individuals with the opportunity to meet and openly talk about their position in society and concerns for the community, while giving support to embrace new identities (Enslin & Parajuli, 1990). In some societies, literacy is also important to identity formation as it may be a major source of prestige. While the skills of reading and writing may be valuable in recording information, writing letters, etc., being labeled ‘literate’ is the more pressing reason for acquiring these skills. Literacy is associated with modernity, development, and wealth encouraging people to claim this particular identity (McKeown, 2006, p. 368).

**Literacy and Power**

The implications of defining literacy go beyond academic debate and personal identity formation. Literacy contains power, whether it is enabling an individual to participate in electing a president or allowing that president to remain in power thanks to the advances s/he has made for the country’s literacy rate. Literacy can be a key tool in a struggle for power as an avenue for increasing awareness of an existing injustice and the means of providing the oppressed with the
skills to make changes and the motivation to do so (O’Cadiz & Torres, 1994, p. 212). In recent history, literacy has often been linked with larger social movements ranging from the national Workers Party Movement of Brazil in the 1990’s to the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. The poor, disenfranchised, and oppressed are often the targets of literacy programs and initiatives as it is these populations who typically lack literacy skills.

These programs and initiatives have the power to shape countries because they are equipping a sector of society not only with the concrete skills of reading, writing, and numeracy necessary to thrive in society, but they are also providing the people with a larger political voice and motivation to seek change (Enslin & Parajuli, 1990). Literacy gives people the power “to unfold the mysteries of the written language in an effort to understand their world better and to act upon it more effectively” (O’Cadiz & Torres, 1994, p. 219). Typically, literacy is not the main focus of social movements, but it is extremely useful as a starting point for addressing larger issues facing a society. This is because “literacy programs can contribute by bringing into a legitimate sphere of public debate the latent potential of the participants” (Enslin & Parajuli, 1990). In a society striving for empowerment or development, literacy can be a key starting point because literacy legitimates knowledge (Enslin & Parajuli, 1990). This implies that those who are literate contain substantial power over those who are not as “knowledge serves as the most significant factor in the contestation over power, identity and public spaces” (Enslin & Parajuli, 1990).

Literacy can also be an important weapon in a power struggle between individuals. “[F]ew human interpersonal relations are exempt from oppression of one kind or another” (O’Cadiz & Torres, 1994, p. 213). When individuals are illiterate they are often placed in a position of inferiority because they are forced to seek out and rely on other individuals for all
tasks involving literacy. This places an illiterate individual in a position of dependence and vulnerability while giving the literate individual substantial power to dictate the relationship.

However, by pursuing and achieving different levels of literacy, individuals are able to renegotiate their relationship to power in situations moving from a position of inferiority or victimization to a position of superiority or equality (Shethar, 1993).

**Why Defining Literacy Is Important**

As touched on above, scholars from disciplines including anthropology, education, political science, and history, have entered the debate of how literacy should be defined. Much of this debate centers on the proper methods of imparting literacy, particularly through the education system to young students. Defining literacy may not appear to be an issue that would garner academic, political, national, and international attention. This is because, for many literate Westerners, literacy is commonly defined as the ability to read and write. In reality, however, literacy is not that simple. The defining of literacy can have many consequences or benefits for specific populations and ideologies. Literacy definitions have the potential to advance the ideas of individualism, freedom, and human rights, giving a definition great power (Bialostock & Whitman, 2006, p. 382). Definitions that include a focus on using literacy as a means to achieve greater economic growth or political rights allows these ideologies to reach a large, impressionable portion of the population through literacy efforts. When literacy is understood not as a process of adaptation but as a process of consciousness whose goal is the liberation and transformation of human beings, it gives power to other liberation ideologies such as individualism and human rights (Gomez, 2005).

Definitions, and their success in increasing the measured number of literate individuals in a population, are used in a competition for funding (Jones, 1999). It can be entirely irrelevant
whether or not these individuals identified as literate are able to function successfully in their local communities or the larger world, or whether the definition may include inherent biases against parts of the population inaccurately labeling them illiterate. Due to the need to either include or exclude numbers of a population and apply the labels of literate and illiterate, literacy is frequently transformed from being a complex and situation dependent phenomenon to a simple numerical indicator by organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This indicator does not provide any useful information regarding the actual literacy of the people it is measuring, but it is extremely useful for deciding who should and should not receive funding (Gomez, 2005).

The stakes are high for defining literacy as it involves issues of inclusion and exclusion, and therefore power over a population (Roberts, 1995). This power comes from the fact that literacy definitions are linked to tangible resources, as funding decisions (both at local and international levels) are often tied to individuals’ or groups’ abilities to demonstrate their literacy or lack thereof. As a consequence, defining literacy is a political battle in which groups “seek to dominate others through controlling policy decisions, capturing a larger share of educational (and other) resources, and ensuring compliance to a given social order” (Roberts, 1995, p. 413). The winning group has the ability to reinforce or destroy individual’s identities, dictate major language usage, and decide which skills the population will pursue in their desire for literacy.

**The Role of Organizational Influences**

Political consequences aside, the world recognizes the benefits a literate population possesses, and as a result continues to undertake international initiatives to strive for the eradication of illiteracy. Guiding these initiatives are a variety of standards and explanations, as literacy definitions are often interpreted through the lens of small-scale, localized literacy
programs that seek to bring individuals up to a specific level of accomplishment for a specific task (reading, using a computer, understanding legal consequences). Because of these individualized programs, it is difficult to tell whether or not there is an underlying connection remaining between different definitions of literacy or if a universal conceptualization of literacy, even if in practice only, has ceased to exist. Although international initiatives may have a guiding definition of literacy, by the time the definition is implemented by a literacy program it is likely to have been modified. The definitions may alter due to lack of communication, additional goals driving literacy programs, or external constraints literacy organizations face.

Although an organization’s mission statement, demographics, resources, or culture may not appear to directly influence literacy they play an important role. An organization, whether it is a for-profit, nonprofit, or literacy organization, is shaped by the aforementioned items. Additionally, each of these influences often has an extremely important role dedicated to the continued efficiency and existences of organizations such as ones dedicated to providing literacy classes. As the mission statement, demographics, resources, and culture are all partly responsible for the continuance of an organization, they play a role in shaping what activities an organization pursues and how those activities are implemented.

**Mission Statement**

The mission statement is something that is often associated with for-profit organizations, but they are also part of nearly every organization. The mission statement “expresses the organization’s reason for existence and conveys the organization’s identity, focus, and direction to its stakeholders” (Buelens, Desmidt & Vandijck, 2007, p. 132). The mission statement is meant to conveniently sum up an organization is a few sentences. Although the mission statement may be a short message, its brevity means that each word conveys an important
message. A mission statement is not something to be taken lightly, as the mission statement may become the “communication instrument which expresses the essence of the organization to its internal and external stakeholders” (Buelens, Desmidt & Vandijck, 2007, p. 132). There is a difficult balance an organization, especially one that is not-for-profit, must maintain to ensure that the mission statement is broad enough to cover all of the activities the organization may undertake yet narrow enough to provide “specific guidance on the direction the organization should take in regard to programs, services, and activities” (Wolf, 1999, p. 23).

For many individuals, it is assumed that the mission statement has a role in organizational performance. The mission statement is to provide a guide for decision making and motivation for employees (Buelens, Desmidt & Vandijck, 2007, p. 132). However, there is some debate whether or not the mission statement actually affects performance. Rigby (2001) suggests that the mission statement does not provide an organization with the tools to succeed, instead good organizations “know how to use tools [such as the mission statement] more effectively, and by using those tools more effectively they drive more value to the bottom line than do their peers” (p. 152). Additionally, organizations that were both successful and not successful utilized similar tools (Rigby, 2001, p. 150), such as the mission statement, suggesting that it is not the mission statement itself that is responsible for an organization’s outcomes.

The mission statement may also not be as powerful in directing a not-for-profit’s activities as desired due to it being lost in information about the “organization’s goals, objectives…program plans…and principles or ‘values’ held by the constituents of the organization” (Smith, Bucklin & Assoc., 1994, p. 15). The board of directors may have a clear and concise understanding of an organization’s mission statement, but their understanding may not be successfully communicated to the rest of the staff of the organization. If the staff is
unclear about the precise mission statement, it is possible for each individual “to selectively retain that piece of information which agrees with their singular perception of the organization” (Smith, Bucklin & Assoc., 1994, p. 15). This can lead to variations in how the mission statement is interpreted and applied to an organization’s activities.

An organization may also choose a specific mission statement because of the notion of accomplishment. An organization can lay claim to literacy through titling itself a ‘literacy’ organization. However, the title is not enough to prove to competent individuals, such as governments or other funding agencies, that literacy is ‘being done’ by the organization, meaning the organization is actively connected to literacy in some manner. Since being labeled as a literacy organization is insufficient, organizations must accomplish literacy. Garfinkel “argues that everyday commonplace and routine activities are ‘accomplished’ through the competent use of a variety of skills, procedures, and assumptions by different individuals” (Prasad, 2005, p. 64). A literacy organization can accomplish literacy by providing classes in reading and writing, providing reading materials, offering discourses literacy pedagogy, or other activities that are continually constructed as literacy activities. In order to ensure that all of its activities fall under the category of literacy provision an organization may decide to place a certain definition of literacy at the center of its mission. This mission may not accurately reflect the reality of the organization’s practices, but it may ensure that the organization is perceived as accomplishing literacy, thereby enabling the organization to continue functioning.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture refers to “the construction and negotiation of values and meanings as expressed through organizational artifacts, motivations, and behavior” (Lewis, 2003, p. 214). Although it is not easy to discern an organization’s culture that does not mean that its culture
does not permeate all of an organization’s activities. This culture is not something that is simply established and agreed upon; instead, it is constantly being negotiated among the individuals working in an organization allowing ample opportunity for conflict and misunderstandings (Lewis, 2003, p. 216).

Organizational culture can play an important role in determining how an organization makes decisions. Yaghi (2007) argues that nonprofits, especially those which have a religious purpose, are likely to see their decision making process influenced “through the values…that decision makers embrace and/or bring with them to the organization” (p. 355). Organizations which exist to serve and not to earn profit are likely to attract individuals who bring strong values with them. This is especially true as many nonprofit organizations are dependent on volunteers, individuals who believe strongly enough in a cause to support it without remuneration. There is a possibility that “external influences (i.e. influence by donors) and internal influences (i.e. influence by organization members)” may disagree and result in conflict (Yaghi, 2007, p. 358). In order for an organization to be successful, it is crucial that competing influences are balanced and all parties become part of the organizational culture.

Some organization’s have a more difficult time establishing shared values and motivations, which can result in the organization acting in divergent manners at different levels of the organizational hierarchy or on individual projects. This can cause problems regarding the organization’s sustainability (Lewis, 2003, p. 218). If an organization reaches out to the community with a specific message, which its actual programs or workers do not appear to promote, there may be a lack of continued support by funders and clients for an organization (Buell, 2008, p. 22). However, when an organization has a strong organizational culture it can
have an extremely positive impact on that organization’s effectiveness (Denison & Mishra, 1995).

Demographics

Another component which influences the practices of an organization is the population which the organization serves. When a not-for-profit organization begins, it must decide which sector of the public it wishes to serve. Although most organizations would like to be able to offer their services to anyone who has need of them, most are constrained by the availability of resources and funding so a smaller portion of the population is usually selected. The choice of who to serve “has ramifications for programs and activities, fund raising, budget planning, and staff size and structure” (Wolf, 1999, p. 32). The organization must carefully select who it decides to serve and how. A literacy organization working in traditional society must be aware that there are difficulties in educating both men and women in the same room in the same manner. In this situation, it is likely that men would stop attending the program as it causes them to lose prestige in the local community if their wives or women in general do better in the class (Muiru & Mukuria, 2005, p. 96). An organization which defines its “constituency too narrowly…may have negative consequences (Wolf, 1999, p. 33).

It is crucial that an organization understand who it is serving. After all, “the very purpose of the organization is to determine the needs and wants of its [constituents] and to satisfy them through the creation and delivery of appropriate and effective programs” (Smith, Bucklin & Assoc., 1994, p. 96). Unlike for-profit organizations which are only concerned with those individuals who will impact their profits, not-for-profit organizations only exist to serve a population. Not understanding the needs of the population may cause an organization to become
ineffective and unable to attract constituents, funding, or other necessary resources (Smith, Bucklin & Assoc., 1994, p. 95).

**Resources**

Nonprofit organizations face additional challenges that their for-profit counterparts do not. All organizations need funding and resources in order to remain in operation. For-profit organizations typically obtain this funding through providing products or services in exchange for payment. Nonprofit organizations do not have a similar relationship with their clientele. Typically, the nonprofit organization exists because the clientele are unable to pay for the product or service (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006, p. 111). Therefore, they are more dependent on donor support which “may come in the form of cash grants, in-kind contributions of goods or services, or volunteer labor” (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006, p. 111).

Nonprofit organizations also seek government funding when available and may be forced to draw on the very constituents they serve for resources when other sources of funding are insufficient. This is a challenge as the constituents are typically disadvantaged creating a “limited and unstable” pool from which nonprofits are able to draw (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006, p. 118). In order to help stabilize their resource pool, many organizations utilize all available connections and relationships. Most organizations that decide to form partnerships, share similar goals or are serving the same population (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006, p. 122). Often, organizations only form short-term partnerships which last the length of one program or initiative (Marciano & Wei-Skillern, 2008, p. 40). These dependencies on other organizations, donors, and constituents presents an opportunity to “constrain program activities so much that…[the ideal] work is inhibited or crowded out” (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006, p. 124). These dependencies do not always have negative results; organizations that are willing to put
their mission first and organizational growth second, can make a great impact on the individuals they serve by willingly forming long term connections with other organizations attempting to address the same issue or population (Marciano & Wei-Skillern, 2008).

“Furthermore, when funding is plentiful only for a particular type of service, organizations may be encouraged to stray from the focus of their missions” (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006, p. 124). Barman (2002) refers to this process as differentiation, or nonprofit organizations pursuing a niche position in their competition for limited resources (p.1192). When the pool of resources is limited and there are multiple organizations competing for these funds, organizations either differentiate and make themselves somehow unique and different from their competitors or they adapt to the environment in hope that they will be able to obtain additional resources (Barman, 2002, p. 1192).

Summary

Defining literacy remains a contested subject. Although many would agree that literacy began as the skills of reading and writing, it no longer remains so easy to identify. Definitions have evolved through the years moving from literacy as reading and writing, to a key to economic growth, to a path to liberation, to an abstract method of information gathering. These different definitions guide individual literacy programs, larger literacy organizations, national literacy policies, and international literacy initiatives. Ensuring individuals become literate remains an important topic in many national agendas as literacy contains power. Literacy has the power to shape individual’s identities and to limit individual’s capabilities to access political structures in a society or pursue economic advances. This gives governments and other bodies incentives to dictate or control how literacy is defined, although definitions are also inevitably influenced by the organizations providing literacy programs for a population.
Methods

This research examines how literacy is defined through literacy programs located in London, Nairobi, and rural Uganda. It utilizes data collected from texts created by different literacy organizations, interviews, and observations. In order to receive data from programs which may have different resources available and to allow for comparison, it was necessary to use various methods of data collection. While there is ample research and discourse about the positive effects of literacy and the need to improve literacy rates, there is little discourse about what the concept of literacy is. In order to focus on the concept of literacy, the research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: How is literacy defined by literacy programs?
   A: What definitions are stated explicitly within the organizations’ literature?
   B: How is literacy defined implicitly within organizational action?

RQ2: What are the common themes among organizations?

Program Selection

I selected my programs based on access and availability. Literacy programs were visited in London, Nairobi, and rural Uganda.* I chose to visit organizations in these different locations in order to get a variety of perspectives; however, the sample is a convenience sample. I visited those organizations that either responded to my requests for participation or were accessible to me through other contacts. My expectations were that at each program texts would be collected,

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* Initially, my intention was to conduct my research in two different cities, London and Nairobi. These two cities were chosen due to their different literacy needs, populations, and perspectives. The two cities are in different areas of the world, at different stages in the development process, and Nairobi specifically is located in a country with two national languages which presents greater literacy challenges. Upon my trip to Africa, I also traveled to Uganda and had the opportunity to visit resource classrooms in rural communities. I was not expecting to be able to visit any rural literacy programs as it is difficult not only to learn of these programs, but also to organize a visit. Due to my fortune in being able to visit one of these programs, I have included data from one of the resource classrooms in my analysis of literacy definitions.
observation would occur, and an interview with a representative of each organization would be conducted. In order to solicit participation, I emailed organizations in London which I found through the internet asking them about scheduling a site visit and collecting the materials. For the sites in Nairobi, I began with a basic internet search as I had done for London but did not come up with any promising prospects. Rural Ugandan organizations could not be solicited in advance. However, I was able to pursue a relationship with an organization, Shalom House, which had an existing relationship with North Central. I worked with one of the staff members, Michael Ochieng, to set up and coordinate site visits with different programs in Nairobi.

Literacy Organizations

I visited nine organizations total in Uganda, Kenya, and the United Kingdom. The literacy organizations differed in areas such as size, programs offered, and population. The next section of the paper briefly describes each of the literacy organizations I visited in order to provide the context in which each organization is operating, along with some of the individual programs or activities each organization offers.

Valley View Academy

This is not a literacy-only program; it began as a program created to provide for the needs of the children who were not being serviced by formal education and has grown into a more formal education center while remaining true to its goal to help the children in the area. Although it is not a literacy-only program, the headmaster and founder of the program said that the organization is committed to literacy. The organization is located in the Mathare slum in Nairobi. This slum is more prone to violence than the surrounding slums in Nairobi, saddling the individuals who live there with even greater disadvantages.
Kiscodep

This is a program created by individuals living in the Kibera slum meant to help other individuals in need living in the Kibera slum in Nairobi. There are many different activities offered by this organization, one of which is the running of a small classroom meant for those children living in the slum who had slipped through the cracks of formal education. The program does have specific goals for what the children were to learn at this program, and it is officially meant to focus on pre-primary aged children although there are students in the program in their teens. The class is staffed by two volunteer educators who use any resources which are available.

Resource Class Room

The class rooms are organized by the Association of Evangelicals in Africa Commission on Relief and Development (AEA) throughout Uganda. The majority of the class rooms are located in rural areas typically to help fill in the areas where formal education is lacking. Although the framework comes from the AEA, it is the communities which are responsible for the organization and running of the class rooms. This meant that there was great diversity in each of the individual class rooms throughout Uganda. The major focus of the class rooms is creative learning that is meant to supplement and not replace formal education.

Domus Marie

Unlike the other programs, Domus Marie was primarily focused on providing formal education. It is one of the few secondary schools in the area and the site contains more than the physical school. Domus Marie has a unique student population with on site housing for a large number of the students along students coming from different centers that strive to help street children. The school was located just outside Nairobi, in the countryside. At the time of my
visit the school had been running for less than a year, so it was still shaping its relationship with literacy provision. At the moment, the school is mainly focused on ensuring it meets government requirements but the headmaster of the school has a vision to expand beyond the requirements to better cater to the needs of the students. The school is the newest and most spacious of the programs that I visited in Africa, however they were still lacking supplies, primarily text books or other readers, necessary for educational provision.

*Kivuli*

Kivuli is located in Nairobi and its primary purpose is to help street children. There are roughly sixty boys who live on site at Kivuli. The program initially focused simply on getting the children off of the street and into an environment that would be nurturing; now, it has evolved to encompass literacy provision. The director of the educational programs at Kivuli said the program focus is on providing literacy through a holistic program in order to ensure that the children remain engaged and continue in the program. The program has one on one tutoring and counseling, computer classes, and instruction in creative learning to help the boys understand that they can continue learning using the knowledge they already possess.

*Book Aid*

Book Aid is an organization which is located in London in the United Kingdom, but it does not focus on literacy provision in the United Kingdom instead it focuses on sending books to programs in Africa. Book Aid currently works in 12 countries in Africa, partnering with schools, libraries, and community centers. The organization is also focused on influencing literacy policy in the UK and in the African countries where its partners are located. Book Aid originally was focused solely on shipping books to Africa, but as the organization has evolved it
has realized the importance of training for literacy instructors and the support of local publishers expanding its influence.

**National Literacy Trust**

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) is an independent charity based in London that works throughout England. It provides various literacy focused programs for individuals, schools, and communities. The Trust has programs geared towards helping individuals improve their literacy skills at all stages of life beginning with infancy. It also conducts independent research regarding literacy efforts and strives to bring together key organizations in literacy provision. The Trust is not a center where learners can come and visit, instead it is best defined as a hub of activities where literacy programs are created and supported, but then implemented in locations outside of the Trust such as schools, homes, and libraries.

**Reading Connects**

Reading Connects is actually one of the programs offered by the National Literacy Trust. However, I counted it as a separate program as I was able to obtain a manual dedicated specifically to explaining the goals of this program and how it should be run and I also spent time interviewing an individual at the NLT whose primary focus was the Reading Connects program. Reading Connects works with schools in an effort to improve reading. The goal is to increase the amount students read and to demonstrate how reading can fit into their lives. The program works in primary schools hoping to lay the foundation for reading which will continue on in upper level education. Reading Connects provides the resources for schools to use, it does not provide instructors to implement the programs.

**CLPE**

CLPE or Centre for Literacy in Primary Education is an organization which works in the London area. There is a center where parents, students, and educators can come to pick up
resources, take classes, or talk to a literacy counselor but many of the organization’s activities are focused on affecting literacy practices outside of the center. CLPE works with universities and different publishing organizations to create and distribute literacy focused materials to educators. One of their major efforts has been the creation of a pedagogy with all of the necessary materials and lessons plans for educators to use to implement literacy based learning in their classrooms.

**Data Collection**

“Texts are of importance for qualitative research because, in general terms, access can be easy and low cost, [and] because the information provided may differ from and may not be available in spoken form” (Hodder, 2000, p. 704). These are a few of the reasons which I chose to utilize texts as the major source of data collection for my research of understanding literacy definitions. The texts which I planned to collect included teacher training materials, annual overviews of the program, and program guidelines submitted to grant organizations. These documents were selected as the basis for the research due to their likelihood of defining literacy within their contents as used within the program. “The writing down of words often allows language and meanings to be controlled more effectively” (Hodder, 2000, p. 704), suggesting that in these documents the literacy organizations would have used words purposefully, providing an opportunity to understand how they define literacy. Additionally, documents give shape to an organizations philosophy. Once its purpose, goals, and motivation are written down an organization has a target to strive for. Documents “provide a way of gaining access to, for example, a set of events or processes, which you cannot observe…without recourse to verbal descriptions and reconstructions” (Mason, 1996, p. 72). While I was able to observe
organizations teaching classes or view the facilities available providing me with a broad view of the organizations view of literacy, texts are able to provide access to the details of the definitions.

I decided to supplement my analysis of the collected texts with observations and interviews. These additional methods of data collection aided me in placing the texts within their specific contexts (Hodder, 2000, p. 704). I made observations of the facilities used by the different literacy organizations. These observations fall under the category of naturalistic inquiry, or field research for the purpose of “studying phenomena in the ‘natural’ environment with a minimum of observational intrusion” (Berryman-Fink, 1981, p. 119). The purpose of the observations was to verify that the definition found within the literature is the definition of literacy being implemented within the program. I wished “to witness what is going on in a particular setting or set of interactions” (Mason, 1996, p. 67). The major areas which I wished to observe included: how the organizations were using resources, how the teaching facility was structured, and how the class was conducted. “The emphasis is usually more on obtaining a detailed picture of the processes and interactions of a given group of individuals, without being overly concerned about generalizing the results to a larger population” (Hardyck & Petrinovich, 1975, p. 57). In this research, the concern was not about successfully generalizing one organization’s literacy definition, program structure, or facility set up for any other, the concern is the individual organizations themselves.

Along with the collection of texts and a facility observation, I conducted an interview with a representative from each organization. I chose to conduct interviews as the structure of an interview fit my needs for data collection. An interview would allow me to pursue “a range of topics, themes or issues” (Mason, 1996, p. 38) which was useful as I wanted the answers to open ended questions and interviews give the opportunity to follow up and clarify answers to these
questions (Mason, 1996, p. 42). Additionally, I needed a method of obtaining data which was semi-structured so there was some consistency in the topics covered among interviews with individuals from different organizations. This interview was meant to further my understanding of the definition of literacy espoused by the organization, giving me the opportunity to understand what these individuals believe their organizations are achieving in regards to literacy and how they are doing so. Additionally, I intended the interviews to further clarify my knowledge of instruction methods and any specifics regarding the program unlikely to be evident in the literature or facility observation.

**Coding and Analysis**

The texts and field notes were analyzed using grounded theory. The first step in this process was to organize concepts into categories through the process of open coding. During this step “the data [was] broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions [were] asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). My data includes the texts I have collected from the different organizations, the transcriptions of the interviews conducted, and my notes from my site observations. In order to code the data, I read each text in its entirety, and then went through sentence by sentence and decided what each sentence was describing. As I was examining the data I would ask questions such as: who is this referring to? what is occurring? why or how? I then gave each sentence a one or two word code based on the answers to my questions. Sentences had multiple codes if the sentence was referring to different subjects. Some of the codes which emerged were: community, resources, organization, ownership, culture, motivation, and methodology. I placed the codes into an excel spread sheet so that I was able to keep the
individual codes organized, with each sheet representing a new document and each column representing a page in the document.

After coding the first three documents, I created a list of existing codes and defined what each code meant. While this list did not initially contain all of the codes I would employ by the end of open coding, it gave me a frame of reference for what codes I had already used to represent certain concepts. After I finished assigning individual codes to all of my data, I returned to my master list of codes to determine if there were any codes which were similar or referring to the same topic. There were many codes which were referencing the same topic which I then condensed under one code. I then created ten categories into which I placed all of the individual codes. The ten categories used were: participation, structure, context, sustainability, diversity, recognition, collaboration, accessibility, constraints, and responses. Each of the categories had between five and twenty-two individual codes.

I then proceeded to the second phase of coding, axial coding, which allows the researcher to more closely examine themes that emerge and clarify connections among them for more precise and complete explanations about phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this phase the categories I identified in open coding were then analyzed further so that themes were formed. Then relationships were formed between the categories and themes through a process of making comparisons and asking questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 114). These themes placed multiple categories together and represented the connections often found between the categories and individual codes. The four themes which emerged from my analysis were involvement, environment, relevance, and implementation. For example, the theme of environment included the categories of context and structure. As I was coding the data, I was also noting any time a literacy organization explicitly mentioned a definition of literacy or an organization’s practices
were described. Noting these definitions along with the other information present in the data was important so I could determine the relationships between different organizational literacy definitions, and whether these relationships resulted in any commonalities.
**Results Overview**

Literacy organizations exist in part because societies wish to ensure that individuals become literate. To achieve this goal these organizations embrace a definition of literacy which serves as the focus of their program and is generally expected to guide their actions. At the same time, these organizations are limited in the ways that they can apply that definition. As a consequence, my research found that although most of these organizations have a definition of literacy which drives their core purpose, many of the definitions of literacy derived from their practices differ from the idealized definition. An organization which may define literacy as being able to read and write in practice utilizes a working definition, which stresses literacy as being the development of general skills that will give an individual a key to success. Similarly, an organization whose idealized definition of literacy considers literacy a tool or key to life improvement may instead be focused on getting books to individuals and not the actual abilities necessary to function in society.

These changes between the organizations’ ideal literacy definitions and the applied definitions occur due to constraints on literacy organizations. In the world of literacy organizations, the definition of literacy embraced by each organization has less to do with the needs of the population and instead is defined by programs which are shaped by the available resources. Also, instead of focusing on an idealized literacy definition, some organizations may shape their definition of literacy based solely on the available resources.

In this results section, I will provide examples from my data to demonstrate how idealized and working definitions of literacy differ. First, I will show how the data I collected resulted in two major classifications of idealized definitions. Second, I will describe the two major categories of constraints, involvement and environment, which affect literacy
organizations and therefore their definitions. I will follow this with an analysis of commonalities among literacy definitions. Additionally, I will discuss the prevalence of two specific literacy definitions and their roles within literacy organizations. I will conclude with a description of the effects of specific constraints on the definitions of literacy used by African and British literacy organizations.

**Organizational Literacy Definition Classifications**

I identified the idealized definitions as those which were either explicitly stated as being a literacy definition in organizational literature or in the interview with an organizational representative. An idealized definition can become a guide for developing the organizations programs and shapes organizational action. The definition of literacy is often an ideal, or a goal towards which the organization strives. The idealized definitions themselves fell into two major categories: literacy as skills and literacy as a tool. Literacy as skills refers to defining literacy as the acquisition of concrete skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy. This category views the acquisition of these skills as an end goal. An individual has obtained literacy when s/he can read and/or write. Literacy as a tool may also encompass the skills of reading and writing. However, when one has obtained these skills it does not make him/her literate. Instead, an individual has obtained literacy when s/he is able to use those skills to improve his/her life. The ability to use reading and writing as a life enhancer is the focus of the category of literacy as a tool.

The definitions which I placed into the working definitions category were not explicitly identified in an organization’s literature or by an organizational representative. Instead, I derived the definition from an organization’s practices. I was able to gain a basic understanding of an organization’s practices primarily through the interviews with the representatives. However, a
fair amount of the literature I collected also described various activities of the literacy
organizations. Just as the idealized definitions, the working definitions also fell into the two
categories of literacy as skills and literacy as a tool.

**Idealized Literacy Definitions**

**Literacy as Skills**

The first classification of idealized literacy definitions focuses on the acquisition of
concrete skills (RCR, Valley View, Kiscodep). The definitions which are placed into this
category mainly come from the African organizations. The headmaster at the Valley View
Academy said that he considers his school to be one which provides an education of literacy, and
that this literacy consists of the ability to read and write. Although there was not an explicit
definition, the Resource Class Room instruction manual (RCR) makes an effort to stress that the
focus should not end with the basic skills of reading, writing, and numeracy but should stress
these skills in the context of individual development. The skills alone do not make an individual
literate but they must be present for an individual to be literate. In addition to these definitions,
the National Literacy Trust impact report, has defined literacy as “the reading, writing, speaking
and listening skills [people] need to fulfil their potential” (National Literacy Trust, 2007, p. 3).
In all of these definitions, literacy is centered on reading and writing, or similar tangible skills.

**Literacy as Tools**

The second classification of idealized literacy definitions includes those definitions which
view literacy as a tool meant to achieve other ends (Book Aid, National Literacy Trust, Reading
Connects, CLPE). This tool should be used to improve an individual’s life by enabling an
individual to access information considered necessary to modern development or giving an
individual the avenue to become politically active. Book Aid, an organization which bridges the
divide between African states and the United Kingdom, defines literacy as a fundamental human
right which ensures that people have the capacity to make informed decisions and participate in
social development. In the document entitled Books Build Futures, literacy is defined as “a
human right…essential…to help people escape from poverty and play a full role in society”
(Book Aid, 2008, p. 8). Book Links, another publication by Book Aid states that “literacy
unlocks peoples’ potential to realize their rights in society” (2008, p. 4). The Reading Connects
Program defines literacy as more than a necessary life skill; instead literacy is a life enhancer. In
my interview with the director from CLPE, she described the organization’s conception of
literacy as one which was based on books and the vocabulary, writing, and speaking skills which
accompany books along with the development of the imagination and an understanding for why
one is reading and the ideas, questions, and information which lies behind the act of reading.

Working Definitions

Literacy organizations may strive to achieve their idealized definition, but fall short of
their goal and instead utilize a different definition of literacy. The definition of literacy which
can be derived from organizational activities is a working definition. In this section, I do not
place the definitions into categories as I did for the idealized definitions. Instead, I categorize the
relationship between idealized and working definitions. The categories are as follows: from a
tool to skills, from skills to a tool, and realization of idealized definition. The category from a
tool to skills refers to organizations that have an idealized definition of literacy as a tool and a
working definition of literacy as skills (Book Aid, NLT, Reading Connects). The category from
skills to a tool refers to organizations that have an idealized definition of literacy as skills and a
working definition of literacy as a tool (Kiscodep, Valley View). The category realization of
idealized definition means that an organization’s idealized and working definitions were both literacy as skills or literacy as a tool (RCR, CLPE).

From Tools to Skills

Book Aid’s reports frequently explain how literacy can enable individuals to make informed decisions or participate in their development. However, their primary focus is on how to get books into people’s hands. When describing efforts to establish new partnerships with libraries in Africa, Book Aid describes literacy as the foundation which “underpins educational achievement in all areas” (Book Links, 4). This is the idealized view of literacy held by the organization, but its support for libraries in Africa occurs through the provision of over 500,000 books.

Reading Connects also may wish to see literacy become a life enhancer, but it also focuses on getting students to read—in particular creating the motivation in students to read. This motivation is often based on the concept that reading can be fun and enjoyable. Reading the Game, which also ideally focuses on using reading as a ‘life enhancer’, also spends the majority of its time and resources on getting individuals, primarily boys and men, to pick up a book, magazine, or newspaper and read. The organization is unable to devote its time and resources into promoting literacy as a tool useful for an individual’s life beyond the acquisition of concrete skills; instead it must focus on ensuring that individuals acquire those concrete skills.

From Skills to Tools

Although the Valley View Academy emphasizes reading and writing, when I talked with the headmaster about the school activities there was little reference to these skills and far greater emphasis on providing emotional support and guidance, along with encouraging the students to pursue talents in drama, sport, or music or whatever basic talent they may already possess.

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During the interview, the discussion kept returning to the importance of providing support so that a child can succeed in whatever manner possible. While reading and writing may have served as the initial foundation for success when the school was created, the foundation of success grew to encompass more skills which are perceived to be important to an individual’s life.

**Realization of Idealized Definition**

The Resource Class Room’s idealized definition of literacy was a combination of literacy as skills and literacy as a tool. Literacy is taking reading and writing beyond the concrete skills into something particularly relevant for the individual. The RCRs that I observed had three different working definitions of literacy. Some of the resource rooms were well stocked with books to encourage the skills of reading, writing, and numeracy but did not have the necessary cultural elements to ensure that these skills would lead to personal development. The second observed definition suggested a lack of reading and writing materials available for the students use, but an abundance of culturally relevant materials. There were also a few classrooms which were able to put the idealized definition of literacy into practice with rooms that had a successful balance of reading/writing materials and important cultural materials, leading to the third observed definition or the realization of the idealized definition.

CLPE was an organization whose idealized definition of literacy appeared to be implemented fairly successfully into their programs. Their initial focus was on books, and then using books to develop additional skills which would in turn spur individual development. They have successfully created pedagogy, materials, and relationships with publishers, local libraries, families, and schools to ensure that their definition of literacy is being implemented in their programs. CLPE had an idealized definition of literacy which it was able to use as a guide for the creation and implementation of the rest of its programs. The organization did not work on
creating literature or funding seminars which strayed from their belief that a literate individual is able to take a written text such as a book and use it to develop skills leading to personal development and growth.

Constraints

The previous section categorized the explicit or implicit literacy definitions used by the different literacy organizations. The two categories identified were idealized and working literacy definitions. Some organizations, such as the Resource Class Room and the CLPE, were able to put their idealized literacy definition into practice. There were other organizations who did not utilize their idealized literacy definition in their day to day activities. The next sections will explain some of the possible reasons why difference exists. The common theme is that external constraints placed on the literacy organization play a large role in determining an organization’s working literacy definition.

‘Constraints’ refers to forms of external limitations a literacy organization encounters. They are challenges which make it more difficult for an organization to function in the manner it desires. Two major categories of constraints emerged during my research: involvement and environment. Each of these categories contains different constraints which impact the efforts of literacy organizations to impart literacy. These constraints are important because they can affect the organization’s definition of literacy. I will first explain the general category of involvement followed by the individual constraints with examples from the organizations. Then I will explain the general category of environment followed by the constraints which make up this category with examples from the organizations.
**Constraints: Involvement**

The constraint category of involvement refers to who is participating in a literacy program and why they are participating. Participation is not limited to an individual who attends a literacy class, it is also important to understand the relationship between a literacy program and the wider community. Although an individual may make the choice to participate, the community and its power and relationship structures must be accepting of the program before most individuals will be willing to participate. Additionally, other literacy organizations, schools, or public libraries may participate in developing, funding, or housing literacy programs. Who a literacy organization decides to work with in its endeavors to make literacy programs available will most likely shape its definition of literacy. The individual constraints which I examine are called participation and collaboration.

**Participation**

The first involvement constraint is participation. I use the term participation to refer to those who take part in a literacy program. This includes both an individual, literacy learner and the wider community to which that individual belongs. A literacy organization may have an idealized definition of literacy which cannot be practiced due to limitations occurring from the individuals or communities participating in the literacy programs. Individuals must have a reason for participating in the literacy program, and those reasons may not fit with the organizations initial definition. Additionally, communities may wish for a literacy program to fulfill specific needs which they have as opposed to the goals of the literacy organization.

For example, the National Literacy Trust, a literacy organization which strives to promote literacy as a tool to unlocking greater things, had to make changes to its working definition of literacy when boys (a major target of their programs) would not pursue literacy unless it was
couched in excitement and fun. Kivuli also faces the challenge of individual motivation, choosing not to present literacy as a specific end goal to be obtained to the street children they work with. Instead, they understood the need for the boys to be motivated and determined to participate in the program and therefore literacy instruction became part of a more holistic program including fun activities such as acrobatics, counseling, and learning how to incorporate literacy practices into their everyday lives.

The role of the community in literacy programs also shapes the practiced definition of literacy. This may be due to support provided by the community in the form of resources such as materials, funds, or teachers or the desire of the community to ensure that the program is relevant to the needs of the community. The RCR suggests that those setting up the classroom should utilize both the resources and skills of community members. Those communities lacking reading materials emphasized culturally important items such as medicines or musical instruments and utilized more traditional methods of learning. Domus Marie’s literacy definition is also affected by the community; however, this is due to the demand by the community to incorporate different learners into the program. Domus Marie desires to focus on literacy in relation to the concrete skills of reading and writing in English. The street children who have been incorporated into this program do not typically command a sufficient knowledge of these skills to succeed in this school, and therefore the teaching methodology has to encompass the wider demographic.

Collaboration

The second involvement constraint is collaboration. I use the term collaboration to refer to multiple organizations working together to enable a literacy program to be available to the public. Typically organizations will collaborate with another to combine resources or to reach a wider audience. No organization has unlimited funding to create and support all of the programs
it desires, therefore collaboration is often utilized to maximize the effectiveness of limited resources. The most common of these collaborations are between literacy organizations and schools or community libraries.

When a literacy organization works with a school, it is extremely likely that its working definitions of literacy will change to accommodate school regulations. For example, Reading Connects’ definition shifts from focusing on literacy as a life enhancer to a focus on reading likely due to its close collaboration with schools. Most schools have a strong focus on developing concrete reading, writing, and numeracy skills because that is the foundation on which children are tested, although utilizing literacy as a life enhancer and not this concrete end goal may be more useful to children. This shift in definitions is acknowledged by the RCR which states that the resource class room located within a school “is more likely to be used in the same ways as a traditional classroom and that the focus will be mainly on the official syllabus” (Mugabi & Mueller, p. 18). Although the resource class room gains access to the resources of the school, the definition of literacy shifts from seeing literacy in the context of individual development to a tool for fulfilling the schools needs regarding achievement.

Collaborating with a library is also likely to change a literacy organizations definition of literacy. Book Aid’s idealized definition recognizes the transformational power which literacy holds. It acknowledges that people have the capacity to make informed decisions and participate in social development. Book Aid is a UK based literacy organization whose primary focus is improving literacy in African nations. Therefore, they must utilize partnerships in Africa to make a difference and these partnerships are frequently with community libraries. Although Book Aid supports programs the community library may put on regarding societal development, the major way in which it is able to contribute is through tangible resources—books. While
Book Aid continues to strengthen and develop new partnerships, its current working definition undeniably has a focus on developing the skill of reading and the benefits which come from employing this skill.

**Constraints: Environment**

The constraint category of environment refers to what is used in literacy instruction, where it occurs, and what details are taken into consideration in the implementation of the program. Environment can also be thought of as the context in which a literacy organization works. The environment includes tangible items such as the buildings and books used for literacy instruction as well as intangible items such as teaching methodologies. The environment also includes influences which exist outside of the physical presence of the literacy organization. The culture in which the program is operating and the governmental policies which guide or regulate the program also play a role in dictating what definition of literacy is implemented. The individual constraints which I examine in the next section are structure and pedagogy, culture, appropriateness, and policy provision failures.

**Structure and Pedagogy**

The first environmental constraints are structure and pedagogy. Structure refers to the physical presence of a literacy organization. The building in which the programs occur, the manner in which the desks, tables, and chairs are placed throughout the room are all components of structure. Structure also refers to whether or not there is a clearly designated area for students and instructor or whether any of these materials are present at all.

A literacy program must have a physical manifestation in order to promote literacy. This manifestation can occur in the home, school, or designated area but there must be a space in which literacy is practiced. These spaces, and the structures which shape them, influence how
literacy is defined. The literacy programs in Africa were heavily constrained by physical space. Due to its location in the slums, Kiscodp’s classroom was restricted to a 10 x 10 foot square, tin room. The limited benches and sole chalkboard they had were frequently stolen leaving the children to sit on the dirt floor. Valley View Academy had similar difficulties, although the physical space in the classrooms was limited. What further hindered the program was the fact that they were forced to pay a large amount of rent for the space they were using preventing them from expanding. The structure inside of the room also affects literacy; space constraints cause learners to sit tightly packed in bare, uninspiring classrooms where instruction is reduced to writing on the blackboard and expecting the learners to recite as opposed to the self-directed, free moving learning literacy organizations such as the RCR advocates.

Additionally, a pedagogy such as the one developed by CLPE, affects literacy definitions by forcing instructors to incorporate certain elements of literacy into their teaching practices. Pedagogy refers to the teaching methodology which is utilized by a literacy program or instructor in imparting literacy to learners. Pedagogy can affect the way in which a room is organized, what materials are present and utilized, and what role students have in the classroom. CLPE’s pedagogy focuses on inclusion of different personalities, genders, and cultures. Along with being inclusive, the pedagogy creates an environment where learners’ emotions are engaged and that promotes thinking, reflecting, and discussion. Therefore, instructors who use this pedagogy are incorporating CLPE’s definition of literacy.

Culture

The second environmental constraint is culture. I use the term culture to refer to the shared values, beliefs, and traditions of a particular group of individuals. The culture can determine what teaching methodologies are considered proper, who should be teaching a class,
when the class should be held, and what should be taught in the class. Additionally, if the literacy definition used by an organization is not relevant or pertinent to an individual’s culture, then literacy is less likely to be perceived as a valuable skill and something valuable to be pursued.

In the RCR in Uganda, skills such as reading and writing are valued, but in many societies, other skills such as a proficiency in storytelling or knowledge about local plants, medicines, and animals become more valuable to the individual. Therefore, literacy definitions have expanded to incorporate these valuable elements of the local culture. Book Aid also acknowledges that working definitions are constrained by culture. The Chiwamba Community Information Centre in Malawi, a partner of Book Aid, has seen a demand for information relating to local activities. This means that Book Aid provides resources which cater specifically to topics such as starting small businesses, agriculture, and health. Resources provided on other topics are likely to be disregarded and remained unused. Given that Book Aid’s major goal is to help individuals, it is easier to fulfill the community’s demands than to try and create an environment that demands resources about civil society or economic development.

**Appropriateness**

The third environmental constraint is appropriateness, which refers to whether or not the materials, teaching method, and space are relevant and suitable for the learners. Appropriateness means that literacy programs must be useful and teach learners lessons that they will be able to apply to their lives. This affects literacy definitions because it forces literacy to change from an ideal which is applicable in theory to every individual, to a literacy which is appropriate for one individual.
For example, Book Aid has recognized the need for appropriateness in their efforts to encourage African publishers to create children’s story books. Currently, most African publishers focus on producing widely used textbooks and readers, limiting literacy to the academic classroom. Book Aid wishes to see literacy expand beyond the classroom and wants children to be able to access books which are not focused on academic achievement but cultural lessons and enjoyment. The RCR also strives to include learner appropriate materials in its classrooms. Appropriateness is deemed crucial by this organization because it needs to encourage learning. Once again, the organization must strive to include materials that the learner will use, the language must be correct, the information age appropriate, the manner understandable, and every aspect must be relevant to an individual’s life.

Policy Provision Failures

A final environmental constraint on literacy organizations which affects their definitions is policy. Policies are laws and regulations which govern something, in this instance literacy provision. They may determine what belongs in educational curriculum, who must be educated, where they must be educated, and how this education will be funded. While policies that are successful and enable literacy organizations to carry out their work affect definitions, the greater influence comes from those policies which fail, encumbering literacy organizations. These policy failures abound in both Kenya and Uganda, one of the most problematic is the attempted implementation of universal primary education. While this policy is well intentioned, the existing educational system is not equipped to handle the large number of children enrolled in school causing children to attend schools that do not have sufficient space or resources to provide them with a worthwhile education.
Children are sent to Valley View Academy without shoes, uniforms, or books. Uganda’s universal primary education policies have strained literacy provision due to a lack of trained teachers, severe shortage of books, and lack of availability in some rural areas. All of these challenges often mean that literacy organizations are not able to implement the individual, context specific definitions and instead must help students achieve at least a partial, formal education.

Discussion

On the basis of my initial research question, I wished to determine whether or not there were connections between literacy definitions employed by literacy organizations in different parts of the world. Although the data I collected led me to answer slightly different questions, they are still useful in understanding the connections between literacy definitions and why there are differences. The literacy organizations I visited in Africa had different idealized definitions than their counterparts in the United Kingdom. Although these definitions were different, no organizations definition of literacy strayed very far from two concepts: equipping an individual with concrete skills particularly those relating to reading and writing, and using literacy as a tool to enhance an individual’s life. Based on the various definitions which were in use by literacy organizations, there does not appear to be one universal literacy definition. However, there do appear to be commonalities between definitions as evidenced by the ability to place organizations’ literacy definitions into two categories.

The separation of the definitions followed geographic locations. The organizations in Africa generally defined literacy as concrete skills whereas organizations in the UK defined literacy as a life enhancer. It was not surprising that the differences in definitions would follow geographic boundaries. The needs of the populations are very different, the challenges the
organizations face differ, and governmental polices and support for each country are by no means the same. What was particularly interesting was that the organizations’ working definitions seemed to fall into the opposite category of the idealized definitions. African organizations utilized literacy as a life enhancer whereas UK organizations utilized literacy as concrete skills surrounding reading, writing, and speaking. Clearly, this was not the case for those organizations that were able to implement their idealized definition of literacy (CLPE, Resource Class Room).

While my research was unable to explain why this particular phenomenon occurred, I was able to draw some conclusions from my data which explained why there was a discrepancy between idealized definitions of literacy and working definitions. This discrepancy may be due to constraints placed on literacy organizations stemming from involvement and environment. Both the United Kingdom and the countries in Africa were constrained by involvement and environment. However, the constraints were not identical for both regions. The individual occurrences of these constrains, for example Reading Connects was impacted by collaboration with schools whereas Book Aid was impacted by collaboration with libraries, may cause different working definitions of literacy.

The African organizations suffered far more severely from lack of access to materials, space restrictions, and policy failures. These constraints often made it difficult, if not impossible, for the organizations to pursue literacy definitions centered on the skills of reading and writing. One cannot teach reading without books and for most organizations those books that were available were either not appropriate for instruction or spread far too thinly among learners to make a difference. Additionally, it appears as if culture and familial concerns are more pressing for African organizations. These constraints may have made it more practical for
African organizations to switch literacy definitions. If the resources were not available to teach reading and writing, the community was willing and able to ensure that the learners gain some valuable skills. Resource shortage is not a new difficulty in Africa, which may play a role in the increased importance placed on culturally, relevant skills in literacy organizations.

Conversely, British organizations were constrained by individual participation, the use of specific pedagogies, and collaboration with schools. British organizations understand the importance of literacy in an individual’s life and wish to focus on literacy’s ability to be the foundation for a democratic, equal society. The United Kingdom is an information based society and those who lack the tools to access this information will likely be disadvantaged throughout their lives. Although the organizations are aware of this, it does not matter unless they are able to motivate individuals to participate in the programs. It is difficult to convince a child that literacy will have a serious impact on his/her life twenty years from now; however, it is possible to convince him/her that reading is fun and enjoyable. British literacy organizations also frequently worked with schools affecting their definitions. This collaboration occurred in part due to the easy access of learners and also because of the limit of financial resources available. Although collaboration with schools often means more learners are reached, the literacy organizations are often forced to accommodate a literacy definition which has a greater focus on the acquisition of skills, a crucial component of an educational institution.

The different occurrences of these constraints help to explain some of the variation of literacy definitions in use by literacy organizations. I do not wish to state that the constraints of environment and involvement are the only reasons why idealized and working definitions differ; there are any number of possibilities that help to explain why there are differences. However, it is important to understand the role of these constraints in shaping literacy definitions.
Organizational Recommendations

Based on my research, one of the greatest obstacles to consistency in literacy organizations, meaning, their ability to practice their ideal form of literacy instruction, was organizational constraints. It is commonly assumed that organizations are more effective and successful when their mission statements, idealized definitions, organizational culture, etc. match their practices; however, as I found, coherence of mission and strategies was rarely the case because of the constraints created by a lack of resources or the specific needs of the population served. In my interviews and site visits, I observed some organizational best practices, that if shared among organizations may enable literacy organizations to achieve agreement between their idealized and working definitions of literacy.

Use of Available Resources

My first example of an organizational best practice results from issues stemming from the limits of funding. All literacy programs have costs, ranging from rent, to purchasing materials, to advertising, to staff salaries. Most literacy organizations do no have unlimited funding with which they can pay for these costs. Teacher remuneration is a cost that many literacy programs have been forced to avoid. When a budget is limited, paying teachers salaries is often thought to be impossible. Therefore many literacy programs turn to volunteers who are willing to either teach in return for a small honorarium or extremely low wages. This often attracts volunteers who do not possess the skills necessary to effectively teach literacy learners. There is also a high turnover rate as most individuals cannot remain in a position without remuneration for a substantial amount of time (Abadzi, 2003, p. 21). An associated cost with teacher remuneration is that of training. Teachers need pay to be attracted to the position, but they also benefit from an
initial training session and continual refresher courses to ensure that they remain up to date on new pedagogies, technologies, or skills which are used in literacy instruction.

Organizations may not have the funding available to cover both of these costs; however it is possible to maximize the resources available. For example, Kivuli relied heavily on volunteers to fill counseling positions at the program, which then enabled them to hire a few professionals to train and equip the volunteers with proper education techniques (fieldnotes). Kivuli does not have the funding available to hire already trained instructors, pay them, and continue to update their training. However, they do have the ability to rely on volunteers and provide them with sufficient training to ensure that they become trained instructors. Every organization’s needs are different, some may benefit more from directing funding to help pay teachers while others may benefit more from providing training for their volunteers. When an organization decides to provide training, the challenge is to do it in a manner that does not further constrain literacy educators. Training should not place an undue burden on literacy volunteers.

One example of a literacy organization that successfully provided both an initial training class for their educators and ongoing refresher courses was the Resource Class Rooms. In order to work with the teachers in attending an ongoing training session, the seminar was held over the course of the weekend in a centrally located town so no educator had to travel an overwhelming distance. Additionally, the local community provided the visiting educators with meals and lodgings so that they did not incur any extra expenses while attending the training seminar (fieldnotes). These steps made it easier for literacy educators to commit to attending training courses.

A second major cost is the provision of literacy materials. The majority of the programs I visited in Africa (Kiscodep, Kivuli, Valley View Academy, and Resource Class Rooms) were all
constrained in their literacy efforts by a lack of literacy materials. As it is difficult for organizations to procure additional funding to make large purchases of materials, they should ensure that the funding they have available is used to obtain culturally relevant materials, meaning books on topics pertinent to learners’ lives or in a native language. If the books that are received are solely old textbooks, in a foreign language, or on subject matter completely irrelevant to the culture the literacy program is no better off by using these books to fill their shelves.

If books cannot be obtained, projects similar to one used by the National Literacy Trust may be a good option. The National Literacy Trust brings members of the community together in order to compile stories about the local sports team and then publishes the book for the community to have and use. A similar application of this strategy would be working with the community to compile local fables, histories, or life lessons into books. Although these materials may not be as long lasting or professional, The National Literacy Trust has found that they were able to provide valuable culturally relevant materials for new literacy learners for very little cost.

The Resource Class Rooms used a similar strategy to maximize their resources. They prioritized the purchase of locally published materials and found that these materials were actually relevant and engaging to the students and saved them money on more expensive, often culturally unrelated materials that would not benefit the students. The relevance of the materials was more important than the quantity. Additionally, the community provided additional cultural materials that ensured literacy became a tool for the students. Musical instruments, medicines, and art pieces were all incorporated into the literacy curriculum. Some Resource Class Rooms partnered with local schools, which increased learners’ access to reading and writing materials.
Resource Class Rooms creatively decorated the rooms while engaging in teaching opportunities as the learners themselves created the majority of the posters, signs, and labels that were found throughout the room. These activities are cost effective ways to ensure that resources are being maximized and learners are still able to become literate.

Access

My second illustration of organizational best practices is taken from organizational strategies that address issues relating to access. Although illiteracy can affect anyone in society, it is typically those groups who have been marginalized due to issues of ethnicity, class, or gender who most commonly suffer from illiteracy. Therefore, literacy program best practices worked to be aware of the barriers to participation in literacy programs and strived towards engaging these minority sectors of the population in literacy efforts. Literacy organizations that worked to understand the needs of the population were best able to create programs and use resources accordingly.

Poverty is one problem that affects individual participation in literacy programs. “It is impossible to teach a hungry, homeless person how to read and write” (Muiru & Mukuria, 2005, p. 92). High levels of poverty mean that learners are often unable to afford giving up the time necessary to participate in a literacy program as they first most focus on fulfilling the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Therefore, programs that understood the demographics of the population they were serving were able to help to offset the costs an individual might incur by attending a literacy program. For example, Kiscodep provides one very basic meal during the school day for its students so they are able to learn in class and not be focused on attempting to find food. Having enough to eat is a pressing concern for the students at Kiscodep and the program realized that this must be addressed before time could be spent learning. Similarly,
Valley View Academy has focused some of its resources on ensuring its learners have uniforms and shoes to wear to encourage students attend classes. Students who receive these items now have one less concern that prevents them from focusing on learning. All literacy programs that can accommodate the needs of their learners help break down the obstacles to continued learner participation.

Literacy organizations in the United Kingdom do not have to face the same extreme poverty as most African organizations, but poverty still affects access for literacy participants. For example, programs that are not accessible by public transportation struggle to provide services to those individuals who do not own automobiles. Additionally, literacy programs have worked to adjust to work schedules because individuals living in poverty are less capable of missing work in order to attend literacy programs or bring their children to the program. The CLPE was forced to stop offering literacy classes for adults as attendance was low due to complications arising from work schedules and other existing commitments. For reasons such as this, many literacy programs in the UK have had a difficult time targeting illiterate adults in a community and therefore focus on children (Reading Connects). Others hope to attract parents and families to literacy programs through their children’s involvement (fieldnotes, National Literacy Trust).

Although poverty affects African and British literacy organizations differently, best practices show that this issue must be taken into consideration when deciding what definition of literacy a program should use. African organizations may struggle to impart the skills of reading and writing to the population if the individuals are unable to purchase food or clothing. Effective strategies account for this and adapt their definitions of literacy in order to accommodate these needs as well.
Environment

My third set of best practices relates to environmental practices of organization. The environment includes the necessary creation of a literate environment as well as the need to ensure that the context of literacy programs is understood. One of the major challenges facing any literacy initiative is the lack of a literate environment which sustains and nurtures individual’s literacy skills. The literate environment includes attitudes in the home about literacy, the prevalence of reading materials such as signs and newspapers in the community, and even the availability of textbooks in the classroom. In Uganda, the Resource Class Rooms I visited often appeared to be one of the few spaces in the community where there were materials to read. There were typically no street signs, informational posters, or newspapers in the community setting. Nairobi had far more opportunities for individuals to participate in literate activity. This is likely due in large part to the fact that Nairobi is a large city and contains residents who are wealthier and more educated than their rural counterparts in Uganda. However, the existence of this environment for literacy learners means that they have the opportunity to use their new skills and that literacy has a great potential to make an impact in their lives.

When a literate environment does not already exist, literacy is more likely to be sustained when it is incorporated as part of a larger development project where the skills developed are more likely to see continued use (Muiru & Mukuria, 2005, p. 98). Kivuli realizes this obstacle and incorporates literacy as a life practice along with cooking, cleaning, and other skills to that literacy skills do not necessarily stand alone. Those literacy programs that stress literacy as the achievement of the specific skills of reading and writing must ensure that there are materials which will be available after the completion of the program for individuals to use. For this
reason, some organizations strive to partner with local libraries or other institutions which will be able to continue supporting the community in literacy development.

Many British literacy organizations have followed this path of collaborations (National Literacy Trust, Reading Connects, CLPE, and Book Aid). Most British communities have reading materials that are available or even necessary for daily life. However, for those individuals who are lacking such materials in their homes, partnering with libraries provides an avenue for individuals to obtain those materials without incurring any expenses. African organizations can benefit from partnerships with local libraries, schools, or community centers may be beneficial regarding the acquisition of supplies. Individuals living in the community may not be aware that there are books or similar materials available for their use. Once again, literacy organizations may be operating in locations where libraries do not exist and schools do not have sufficient resources; however, these restrictions are not devastating and organizations have found strategies and potential partnerships that may benefit their learners.

Additionally, every individual must have a reason to participate in a literacy program, and it is likely to see variance in these motivations, but it would be fallacy to not seek to understand and work with these motivations. “[T]he knowledge and wishes of learners should both inform learning programmes and be their starting point” (Education For All, 2005, p. 217). The literacy program is meant to be providing a service to the public. Best practices of organizations adapt to the wants and needs of the population it is serving. Domus Marie has worked to incorporate street children into its program based on the concerns of the surrounding community. Kivuli has added computer training to its curriculum because the learners have requested such training. The National Literacy Trust has created a program which seeks to motivate communities to read through a program which unites sports teams with fans to create a
book entitled Till I Die. Many individuals in the community, who would not normally participate in an event that seeks to improve literacy skills, are willing to participate due to their enjoyment of sports. Some individuals may be going against cultural or gender norms by participating in the program and an organization which is unaware of this situation is unlikely to successfully help the population. Best practices of literacy programs demonstrate an understanding of the context, culture, and situations of the communities in which they are working.

An awareness of limitations faced regarding resources is an important part of program construction. A literacy organization may want to focus on the skill of reading and promote itself as capable of teaching learners how to read. However, if there is a severe book shortage in the region then the program may be unsuccessful in acquiring books for its endeavor and individuals will likely not be able to sustain their skills as they will not have access to materials to read. Kivuli could not offer computer classes to the population without first ensuring that they would have computers for the students use. This difficulty faced nearly all of the African literacy organizations. Organizations were not successful at keeping their focus solely on reading and writing often due to the fact that the learners did not have materials which to read or write with (Resource Class Rooms, Kiscodep, Valley View).

**Literacy Definition**

The previous section describes examples of organizations utilizing creative responses to overcome challenges facing their organization. These examples lead to a general recommendation for literacy organizations regarding literacy definitions. Based on the challenges and realities of literacy instruction, literacy organizations would be better suited in pursuing literacy which is defined as a life enhancer. This does not mean that reading, writing,
and numeracy should be ignored. Instead, literacy as a life enhancer would build off of those skills but also provide the flexibility needed by literacy organizations to pursue additional skill development. It is a fact that there are not sufficient resources in Uganda and Kenya to provide every literacy program, home, school, and community with reading materials. This is a reality which learners in these countries face. When materials are available, learning the concrete skills of reading, writing, and numeracy are crucial and useful in improving an individual’s situation. However, when the materials are not available, that does not mean that literacy instruction should stop. British literacy organizations can also benefit from this flexibility. Many organizations already stress literacy as a life enhancer, but could benefit from emphasizing that reading and writing are important components of literacy as a life enhancer providing greater clarity and guidance for their organizations.

Defining literacy as a life enhancer allows organizations to pursue more holistic programs of literacy accounting for those times when resources may be limited. It also allows for community and personal concerns, knowledge, and traditions to be embedded into the program making literacy more relevant to individuals. Literacy as a life enhancer allows literacy programs to work with the challenges they face such as HIV/AIDS, poverty, instability, and lack of motivation. The use of this definition also facilitates collaboration between literacy programs and other initiatives meant to tackle other problems relating to health, income generation, or democratization.
Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to determine whether or not there was a universal conceptualization of literacy. As the literacy community is continuing to expand, the definition of literacy has been forced to expand as well to encompass the variety of literacy practices. According to sociologist Emile Durkheim, this broadening of the definition of literacy means that literacy is losing its concrete foundations. Prior to the 1950’s, the ‘world’ was able to rally behind the definition of literacy as reading and writing. However, these connections between literacy organizations are weakening as literacy becomes more abstract and there is not one, singular definition. It is a possibility that this weakening means that we are moving towards a crisis, where the literacy community will have no shared meaning of literacy (Mellor & Shilling, 1998).

When the first mass campaigns to eradicate illiteracy were implemented, literacy simply meant the ability to read and write. Once individuals had been equipped with those skills, in the dominant language, they were to be considered literate. There was little or no concern about what language individuals should become literate in, what should happen once an individual becomes literate, or what the individual should be learning to read and write. Over the past fifty years, literacy has evolved from the acquisition of reading and writing, to a condition for economic growth, a method of self empowerment, and the ability to interpret information from different media.

My basic research questions were: how is literacy defined by literacy programs? And what are the common themes among organizations? The answers to these questions can be summed up as follows. First, there does not remain one universal conceptualization of literacy. There was not one definition of literacy which was shared by all of the organizations which I
visited. Instead, there were two major definitions which reoccurred in every literacy organization: literacy as the skills of reading and writing, and literacy as a tool meant to enhance an individual’s life. However, the idealized and working definitions were often inconsistent. For Africa, the majority of their idealized definitions focused on literacy as concrete skills whereas their working definitions were focused on literacy as a life enhancer. The opposite was true for British organizations; the majority of their idealized definitions focused on literacy as a life enhancer and their working definitions focused on literacy as concrete skills.

One way to understand these results is to equate an idealized definition of literacy to an organization’s mission statement. Both guide an organization’s actions and express the organization’s reason for existence. The idealized definition of literacy becomes an organization’s goal or target which it strives to reach. However, this idealized definition of literacy may not accurately reflect an organization’s demographics or resources. Demographics and constraints are two of the sources of constraints affecting literacy organizations. In order for any organization to survive, it must be aware of the wants and needs of the population it is serving. The same is true regarding resources. Organizations cannot provide services or materials which they are unable to access; they can only work with the funding and resources available for their use.

The literacy organizations that I visited appear to be aware of the need to cater to their populations and of the restrictions arising from resource limitations as evidenced by the shift in working definitions of literacy. While most organizations’ idealized definitions of literacy did not accurately reflect their activities, the working definitions were more reflective of the reality of literacy provision. The constraints which literacy organizations faced appear to be more pervasive in shaping a literacy organization’s definition of literacy than its mission statement.
This is not to say that the activities and programs pursued by the literacy organizations I visited are not worthwhile endeavors; in fact, I believe that more literacy organizations should strive to see that they change their idealized definition of literacy to fit the needs of their populations and resource limitations as well. This is likely to facilitate the decision making process in many organizations as it clarifies a literacy organization’s position in relation to literacy provision. By clarifying the organizational culture, it is possible that an organization will be able to use its limited resources more effectively as the decision making process will not be as conflictual.

Although many governments, academics, and policy makers recognize the importance of literacy, there remains limited research on important topics pertaining to literacy. Literacy is often ignored as a research topic in favor of education, and this is something which needs to be remedied. Before more effective literacy policies and programs can be created additional research needs to be done to measure the effects of specific literacy programs and initiatives. Are literacy programs which deliver literacy as part of a more holistic program more effective at seeing individuals achieve and maintain literacy? Or, is it more important that the concrete skills of literacy be obtained prior to couching literacy in wider development rhetoric? Existing research needs to be confirmed and expanded to create a firm foundation of knowledge regarding the creation and implementation of literacy initiatives. Illiteracy is not a problem which only affects a few individuals. There are people living in every country in the world who have been identified as illiterate. Although one universal conceptualization of literacy does not exist, this does not mean that literacy is unimportant. It is unlikely that the importance of literacy will decrease. Instead, as states continue to develop it is likely that the demand for literacy in every aspect of an individual’s life, from work, to the home, to the public forum, will increase.
Therefore, enabling the identified 700 million individuals to obtain literacy should be an issue which remains firmly placed on every state’s agenda.
Works Cited


