

Literacies, Power and Identities in Figured Worlds in Malawi

Ahmmardouh Mjaya, 2022

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The social turn in literacy studies has promoted an understanding of literacy not only as reading and writing but also as a social practice embedded in people's lives (Street 1993). Ethnographic studies of literacies have long made visible how 'non-literate' individuals engage with texts in everyday activities such as reading bus signs or selling in the market (Street 2001). Building on these ideas, Ahmmardouh Mjaya, Lecturer in African Languages and Linguistics at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, argues that this social view fails to conceptualise the role of power and identity in socially-mediated literacy practices.

This is the key conceptual gap that his book, *Literacies, Power and Identities in Figured Worlds in Malawi*, aims to address. It explores how the concept of figured worlds, proposed by Holland and colleagues (1998), can enhance our understanding of how power and identity are integrally involved in how individuals engage with literacies. Figured worlds are explained as 'people's imagined areas of interests or activities, which are actualized in real life through various forms of engagement' (Chapter 2, p. 18). Therefore, figured worlds are not understood simply as pre-existing domains or contexts where literacy practices happen. They are *socially constructed*. Mjaya explores how individuals (e.g. learners, literacy facilitators) navigate complex power relationships to shape such figured worlds and, in turn, shape their identities.

Mjaya makes this important conceptual contribution by drawing from a long-term ethnographic study of literacy practices of women in an adult literacy class in Sawabu village – a small rural community in Malawi. The book gives detailed analysis of how the adult learners steer competing discourses, ideologies and positions in the adult literacy classroom and other development activities in the village. It focuses on the women's lived experiences and how they value literacy in various aspects of their lives – from attending literacy classes and participating in conditional cash transfer programmes (Chapter 4) to using different languages in formal and informal ways in the classroom (Chapter 7).

I see this book's most significant contribution as the nuanced analysis of the intersection between power and identity and the role that literacy plays in such a dynamic. In Chapter 5, for instance, Mjaya demonstrates how facilitators, learning managers and other learners ascribed women with identities based on what they know and what they can do – creating divides between the 'educated' who can write their names in the chalkboard and the 'uneducated' who cannot. However, Mjaya explains that 'the subject position many learners were assigned to or identified themselves.... were fluid' and that they sometimes 'reauthored' them (p. 72). There was an example of women who were considered as 'not knowledgeable' in the classroom but were able to do basic arithmetic when engaged in their small businesses. These accounts point to how learner's identities are not rigid but are (re)constructed through relations of power in different figured worlds.

Another concrete example of how learners challenge power relationships is in Chapter 6, aptly entitled *The Adult Literacy Class: A Site of Power Struggle*. In this chapter, Mjaya writes about the tensions when activities and guidance reminiscent of formal schooling are

uncritically transferred into non-formal spaces like the adult literacy classroom. He describes how literacy facilitators treat adult literacy learners as if they were pupils – asking women to raise their hands before speaking or sing a song by command. This dynamic, Mjaya notes, became demotivating and disempowering for many women. This observation shows that within a single physical space where literacy and learning practices happen, there could be competing ‘figured worlds’. The book is clear that ‘power’ is not a possession that one has or does not have but it is relational and ascribed. Adult literacy learners – who, Mjaya suggests are often seen as powerless, disadvantaged, ignorant, backwards by facilitators, co-learners and national policies – can also *claim* power through *everyday* actions.

Perhaps of particular interest to policy makers and literacy facilitators is Mjaya’s insightful analysis of how national policies (such as Malawi’s National Adult Literacy Programme, Chapter 1 and National Language Policy, Chapter 8) are experienced and encountered by individuals in practice. It is a striking account of the drastic differences between what national literacy policy makers *think* adults need, versus what the adults aspire for and expect. Mjaya reflected on this disconnect to propose implications from his findings to policymakers, facilitators, curriculum designers and practitioners – including challenging a top-down approach to literacy programming (Chapter 9).

On another note, postgraduate students and researchers could benefit from Mjaya’s candid and deeply personal account of some challenges he faced in his ethnography such as gaining access, note-taking and changing direction (Chapter 3). Particularly insightful was how he negotiated his various identities as “a stranger with many faces” (p. 47) in the field: a resource person, co-instructor, and benefactor. In a way, Mjaya was also navigating his own figured worlds through the conduct of his research.

Overall, this book successfully analyses issues of power and identity and the role they play in the lives of women literacy learners. As a fellow literacy researcher, this book’s conceptual contribution inspired me to think of other theories that could be used to further increase the explanatory power of a social theory of literacy. In terms of audience, this book will be of relevance to a wide-range of audiences – students, academics, practitioners (especially literacy facilitators and programme managers) and policy-makers. It is well-written and accessible, with detailed accounts and excerpts from Mjaya’s fieldnotes and interviews which makes you feel as if you are there. It is an excellent account that could help us reflect on what sort of social change is possible and what can we do in our spheres of influence to facilitate this change.

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