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LITERACIES AND IDENTITIES OF THREE GENERATIONS OF SYRIAN-JEWISH
YOUNG ADULT FEMALES: TRADITION AND CHANGE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Literacies and Identities of Three Generations of Syrian-Jewish Young Adult Females:

Tradition and Change

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This dissertation focused on the literacy shifts taking place over the course of three generations of Syrian-Jewish women. Based on sociocultural theory, this research project explored the changing literacy practices of Syrian-Jewish women and how these practices impact the identities of these women, specifically in regards to being members of the Syrian-Jewish community. This research is unique as the Syrian-Jewish community's literacy practices are not discussed in the literature and the community is different from most studied communities as it is affluent, not marginalized, and already well versed in its native tongue, English. Over the course of 1 year I conducted interviews with the main participants and elites, gathered artifacts, and collected archival records from community magazines. The data was organized by research question and coded with both word analysis and category creation. Data was analyzed through the sociocultural lenses of Discourse and literacy practices. The study revealed that a sociocultural theory of literacy is reflected in literacy practices in a myriad of ways. Although other studies revealed alienation of community members because of their lack of literacy skills, this research revealed a community in which alienation of members with greater literacy skills occurred. In addition to findings that are important to the field of sociocultural literacy, this study revealed valuable literacy information about this

community in particular, and communities in general, where literacy shifts have been encountered. Though there is a stereotypical perception that Syrian-Jewish women have limited literacy practices, my findings revealed women with rich, literate lives. The different family groups showed specific literacy patterns and different generations also showed specific literacy patterns. Differences in literacy practices did influence the way participants perceived themselves specifically in connection to the community. In general, changes in literacy practices were influenced by individual, community, and economic factors and were still in flux, meaning that change did not seem to happen over the course of one generation but over many.

DEDICATION

To my Avi, Yisroel, Nesy, and Shalom-

... the people who did not leave me as I sat in my room hunched over my computer.

I love you!

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annoying, distracting, exasperating and embarrassing (that is, for my teenagers) to have a woman in your life travel across the New York area to talk to strangers and then have her ignore you while she stroked the keys of her best friend, the computer. It's over. I'm back and glad to be here!

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In my second year of teaching at Ilan, a private girls' high school in Deal, New Jersey, that services the Syrian-Jewish population of Deal and Brooklyn, New York, one of my 9th-grade students, Ruthie, insisted that she couldn't do her vocabulary work in class because her mother had stolen her vocabulary book and it was at home. This was an original excuse, and her classmates and I waited to hear all of the gory details. She told me that her mother had taken the book in order to practice the words with her because, as she quoted, imitating her mother, "If you don't know vocabulary, how will you be able to follow a recipe? What kind of housewife will you be?"

Although "my mother stole my book" was a very creative excuse, what sparked my interest in her statement was that her mother made a correlation between vocabulary and cooking. It was the first time that I had ever thought of the connection between vocabulary and cooking. I had always viewed literacy as independent and even antithetical to housekeeping; yet this mother was insisting on a connection.

It was experiences such as this one that began to lead my literacy graduate study research into studies that looked at literacy through a sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) and spearheaded my pilot studies that focused on this specific population. I found that literacy and literacy practices cannot be separated from culture and identity, a concept that I had not previously contemplated. This study continues to look at the literacy practices of this population, but instead of focusing on adolescents, this is a comparative case study looking at three generations of women: young adults (age range 20-30), their mothers (aged 40-50), and their grandmothers (aged 55-70).

I felt that I had advanced in my research and understanding of the community of Syrian Jews and that I would like to investigate how the reflections and projections about literacy made by the adolescent participants in earlier studies are playing out in their current lives. More important, there has been a shift in the community's attitude towards literacy and schooling, and I was curious about how this shift impacted these young female members of the community and their literacy practices. The members of this community call themselves SY or SYs (pronounced es-wise); these terms are used interchangeably to refer to the community and its members. I will also point out here that the spelling of G-d throughout the paper will be abbreviated with the omission of an O, as that is the Jewish law.

Terms Defined

In this study the concepts of *literacy*, *literacy events*, *literacy practices*, and *identity* are discussed and because there are many different ways of understanding these terms, I delineate here the definitions that are used in this paper.

Literacy. The term *literacy* has traditionally referred to a set of skills that were acquired through schooling (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). The current mode of thought, influenced primarily by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) and New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1990; Street, 1993) is that there is no one "literacy," but that there are many "literacies," or many different ways of using language for many different purposes. "Literacy as decoding and encoding without consideration of context belies the complex nature of reading and writing" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, the term *literacy* is used to refer to the sociocultural

definition in which literacy is a set of reading and writing skills connected to a certain context, purpose, time, place, and/or culture.

Literacy practices and events. This research is based on sociocultural theory in which it was asserted that looking at reading and writing in context is necessary; the terms *literacy practice* and *literacy event*, specific terms coined by Street (1984) and Heath (1983) will be used in this dissertation. Quotations from Barton and Hamilton (1998, pp. 6-7), and not from the original texts, are used to describe these concepts as Barton and Hamilton were the most succinct in their explanations. They drew on the works of both Street and Heath to derive their definitions.

Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However, practices are not observable units of behavior since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (see Street 1993, p. 12) This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk and make sense of literacy. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, pp. 6-7)

Though the above definition seems all-inclusive when discussing literacy because it describes literacy being used and the attitudes behind it, there is another term that must be mentioned because it is often separated from the concept of practice and used on its own. This term, *literacy event*, refers to activities in which literacy has a role. "Usually there is a written text, or texts, central to the activity and there may be talk around the text" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7).

If these terms were separated in the introductory anecdote, it is clear that Ruthie's mother's literacy practices specifically viewed vocabulary learned from a school textbook as directly correlated to the type of housewife she would be. To her, literacy was to be used for the purposes of being a good housewife. According to the above definition, then, a literacy event would be the mother studying the vocabulary textbook with her daughter or the mother using a cookbook to cook.

When Ruthie's mother stated her concern over what kind of housewife she would be, it was clear that being a good housewife was important to Ruthie's mother and that role was to be a valued identity for Ruthie in the future. It was also obvious that she associated literacy proficiency with being a good housewife, a connection related to the values category of literacy practices. Ruthie's mother's comment invoked the desire to understand the relationship between literacy and identity, particularly with regard to this community's female population.

Identity. The construct of *identity* has undergone a metamorphosis since its inception during the Enlightenment (Alvermann, 2001). While the older definition of identity “evokes an image of a bounded, rational, and unitary self” (Harre, 1989, as quoted in Alvermann, 2001, p. 679), the more modern perspective suggests that there are varied identities that are fluid and reactive to the context and the text of the moment.

The current understanding of identity is derived from postmodern and social constructivist theories that emphasized the constructed and dynamic nature of identity.

For example, Sarup (1998) defined identity as a “construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions and practices” (p. 11). Mishler (1999)

suggested that identity was relational, that is, individuals make claims about who they are by aligning or contrasting themselves with others. (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 228)

In this dissertation, the above understanding that identity is fluid, social, and reactive is recognized, but the concept espoused by Gee (2005, 2008) will be specifically used to provide a personal definition of what is included in the term *identity* because he relates identity to literacy. Gee (2005, 2008) wrote about socially situated identities when he stated that individuals do not have one identity, but rather have several *identity kits* or *Discourses*. He explained that

big D Discourses, or ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort . . . are ways of being “people like us.” They are “ways of being in the world” . . . They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social history. (Gee, 2008, p. 3)

In the opening anecdote it is clear that part of a Syrian-Jewish female’s Discourse (or at least in Ruthie’s mother’s mind) is being a good housewife and being able to utilize text for that task. My experiences at Ilan confirmed the Syrian-Jewish community’s value that a woman should be a good housewife, but further revealed the complexity of the community’s relationship to literacy, specifically for the female members.

Statement of Problem

Although I am no longer their teacher, I still field questions about college and academics from my former SY students and maintain close relationships in which we

discuss personal and community topics and issues. In this role, I am privy to the struggles of these young adult SY females to use the literacy skills they acquired both in school and the community to navigate their world and plan their lives. As some of my students are the first generation of their family to attend college while coming from a community that does not necessarily value female scholarship (Zenner, 2000), they are dealing with issues of identity and practical issues of addressing college and academic literacy without family and/or community models. Even those who are not attending college are also using literacy in ways in which their mothers and grandmothers did not. This is a study of the relationships between community, literacy, and identity that will add to the canon of knowledge about the ways in which literacy practices are socially constructed.

This dissertation is built upon my previous studies on this particular population, but I now compare the literacy practices of three generations of SY women and the ways in which literacy practices have changed as the community has changed. In addition to examining this shift, I am also interested in exploring the ways in which changing literacy practices are impacting the identities of these twenty- something female Syrian-Jewish women, particularly regarding how they view themselves in their roles as young SY females. I am also interested to see in what ways this connection has evolved from the previous generations to this one. Based on the above concerns, this project seeks to find answers to the following questions:

Research Questions

- Q1.** In what ways have the literacy practices of the young SY female (20-30) changed from previous generations to this one?

- Q2.** According to the participants, what has contributed to this change?
- Q3.** In what ways do these literacy practices connect to the way the Syrian Jewish female views herself as being a Syrian-Jewish female?
- Q4.** In what ways have these connections between literacy and identity shifted or stayed the same from the previous generations to this one?

Study Rationale

It is important to understand the relationship between literacy, identity, and change because in traditional Syrian-Jewish societies the woman is the keeper of the home and the one who passes traditions to the next generation (Sutton, 1988; Zerubavel & Esses, 1987). She establishes how and what literacy practices will be part of a Syrian-Jewish lifestyle.

An interview study published by Zerubavel and Esses explained the traditional roles of the sexes in this community. Within this tightly knit community, men's and women's roles are sharply defined. After completing high school most men enter their fathers' businesses, working for a few years until they reach a financially secure position that permits them to marry and begin a family. Women marry immediately after high school or else they work as sales girls or secretaries for Syrian-Jewish businesses or attend college until marriage. Once married, women cease working, raise children, and care for their homes, often with domestic help (Zerubavel & Esses, 1987, p. 529).

Zenner (2000) confirmed these gender expectations and emphasized the role of the woman as keeper of the Syrian-Jewish heritage when he stated, "women are important in preservation of the Syrian Jewish tradition. Even the memory of ethnic

foods is part of the tradition that women convey and which remains strong in the memories of their children” (p. 182).

As part of this traditional role, a woman’s education and her development of literacy skills were not encouraged. Zerubavel and Esses (1987) explained that in Syria in the early twentieth century only women whose husbands were unable to support them needed to be able to read and write; thus, women generally did not publicize their literacy skills and their business experience. Although Zerubavel and Esses’ interview study was undertaken in the 1980s, and the participants discussed their lives in Syria, the attitudes towards literacy, education, and women’s roles seemed to persist, at least until recently.

Although Syrian culture does not value education for women, both my former students and other community members have told me that the attitude towards literacy, career, and education for women is changing. Fortuna, a former student, told me the story of how an MIT dean came down to speak to her grandfather about allowing her mother to attend the prestigious school, but her grandfather refused. Fortuna, the granddaughter, is currently attending college with her family’s support. She is not the only one. Some statistics told to me by Penny Bloch revealed this evolving trend. Out of eight students in Ilan’s first graduating class in 1998, two graduates went to college, or 25% of the graduating class. Just 12 years later, the graduating class of 2010, with 31 students, had 28 signed up for college, a little over 90%.

In fact, learning and literacy in general seem to have a changed place in the female SY world. Goldie Grossman, director of Special Education services at Hillel, another Deal SY school, told me that 6 years ago, when she worked with parents and discussed with them their children’s issues and the services available, the mothers would

just say, “Tell me where to go and how much I need to pay.” Now mothers ask for reading material and are interested in how they can find out more about their children’s disabilities.

The ultimate goal of this study is to add to the canon supporting the assertion that literacy is socially situated. This research study is a unique examination of a very insular community with very specific religious and cultural practices that have not changed, but whose literacy practices have. It is also unique because the connections between literacy, identity, and community are probed in a community in which the literacy shift does not mean going from illiterate to literate, but rather refers to a change in practices.

CHAPTER II

Conceptual Framework

As discussed above, this project was designed to research the literacy practices and identities of young adult females of a particular community. The two theories in which this study is grounded both speak to all three of those constructs: literacy practices, identities, and community; however, each theory provides a different focus. These theories are also used for distinct purposes to organize and analyze the data. Gee's Discourse theory (2005, 2008) emphasized concepts of identity and community, and Barton and Hamilton (1998) provided a practical framework for further defining and understanding literacy practices in particular contexts. Both of these theories stem from the larger base of socio-cultural theory; therefore, a presentation of this theory and related studies will be undertaken first. The ways in which both Gee (2005, 2008) and Barton and Hamilton (1998) have added to the theory will be highlighted.

Sociocultural Theory and Literacy Practices

Socio-cultural theory was developed by Lev Vygotsky and became a central component of literacy theory when it was translated into English in the 1970s. Vygotsky began work as a literary critic and researcher of the creative arts in Russia in the early 1900s and then branched out to psychology. Throughout his psychology research he attempted to show how psychology and all sciences and disciplines are inter-related (Kozulin, 2002).

The central tenet of his theory was that learning and cognitive development take place through human interaction and that inner thought and dialogue are developed through social interaction with the outside world (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky viewed

language as a mediating tool that helps develop and organize the inner thoughts that develop through human interaction. He proposed that this inner language acts as a guide to an individual's behaviors and understanding of the world. Vygotsky's theory inspired theoretical offshoots that connected culture and society to the development of the mind because this type of learning is socially situated and not achieved in a vacuum (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985).

According to Brandt and Clinton (2002), researchers began to use Vygotsky's theories in relation to literacy as an answer to theorists who viewed literacy

as *autonomous* or decontextualized and decontextualizing technology, imparting unique influences on human culture and cognition (Gee, 1990; Street, 1984).

Through the social paradigm, reading and writing appear highly contextual, interwoven into local ways of life, sustained by talk, various in form and consequences, and sensitive to ideological complexities of time and place. (p. 337)

The notion that literacy was socially situated meant that, "literacy is not a neutral set of skills that we have in our heads and develop through language teaching and learning. Rather, literacy is always and everywhere situated, and what is more, literacy is inseparable from practices" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 3). This theory is in direct contrast to the traditional understanding of literacy, or the autonomous model, in which literacy was perceived as "an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character" (Street, 1993, p. 5).

Theorists who upheld the autonomous model of literacy also viewed literacy as the instrument that separated cultured and more civilized nations from their cruder and

more traditional counterparts (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Street, 1984). The ideological model was a reaction to the prejudices and political agendas perceived to be inherent in this autonomous way of thinking (Moje, 2000a; Street, 1984).

The ideological model of literacy, and the notion that literacy is tied to home and culture, began to emerge slowly and became influential in policy and education in the U.S. as early as the 1960's, even before the translation of Vygotsky into English. In 1965, The U.S. Office of Education commissioned a group of researchers from various fields to examine the relationship between children's language and school success. These anthropologists, sociologists, educators, linguists, and speech therapists found that children socialized in diverse contexts came to school differentially prepared to respond to the demands of school. As a result, they experienced school differently, resulting in success for some and failure for others (Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Heath's (1983) groundbreaking ethnography, *Ways with Words*, told of three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas. She found that the residents of two different working-class communities, one White and one Black, "had a variety of literacy traditions that were interwoven in different ways with oral uses of language" (p. 234). She noted that neither community's ways with the written words prepared it for the schools' ways.

"Heath's study pioneered the way for the new understanding of literacy as social practice (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993) and prompted both teachers and researchers to investigate the functions and uses of literacy in their communities in order to inform classroom practice" (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p. 15). Other researchers followed Heath's lead and explored language and literacy outside of school (Brandt, 2001; Hull &

Schultz, 2002) and the notion of multiple definitions of literacy in various communities (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1993; Weinstien-Shr, 1994). From Heath's initial study, studies of home and community literacy exploded and burgeoned into new lines of research, such as New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1990; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984), critical literacy, Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and third space theory (Moje et al., 2004), among others.

The conceptual framework of this study evolved from New Literacy Studies (NLS); therefore, their evolution and position on literacy will be explained. "The term has been used in relation to a number of scholars who looked at literacy in everyday life" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). NLS are based on the view that reading and writing can only make sense when studied in the context of the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic practices of which they are a part (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1990; Street, 1993). Gee's Discourse theory emphasized the relationship between an individual's reading and writing practices and the context in which they were enacted. In their ethnographic study of Lancaster, England, Barton and Hamilton (1998) focused on the literacy practices in everyday life and what these practices revealed about the people and the place.

Discourse Theory

Gee (2008, p. 155) explained that:

Discourse with a capital D is composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening, and often too, distinctive ways of writing/reading. These distinctive ways of speaking/listening and/or reading/writing coupled with ways of coordinating oneself with (getting in synch with) other people and with various objects, tools

and technologies. All this is in the service of enacting specific socially, recognizable identities.

Throughout his books, Gee (2005, 2008) gave examples of what he meant by Discourse enacting specific socially recognizable identities. He explained that street-gang members, doctors, first grade students in a specific classroom, teenagers, and gamers all have specific Discourses. Additionally, depending on the exact time and place within any category there might be sub-Discourses, for example the “tough-cop Discourse” that exists within law enforcement (Gee, 2008, p. 1).

Discourse and the SY young adult female. The concept of Discourse frames this study because the Discourse of a particular population was examined. What does a young Syrian female have to say, read, and write in order to be part of the young SY female Discourse? In what ways have these Discourses changed over the generations, and why do members think that it has changed? What does the population think about its Discourse? These questions are embedded in the language of my study questions.

Primary and secondary discourse. Gee also differentiated between primary Discourse and secondary Discourse. The primary Discourse is the first Discourse of the child that is acquired at home. “Secondary Discourses are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socialization within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization” (Gee, 2008, p. 168). Gee used the word *acquired* and not *learned* specifically in relationship to Discourse because it is gained through exposure to models and practices. “Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices

through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse” (Gee, 2008, p. 170).

Included in Discourses, both primary and secondary, are *cultural models* (Gee, 2008, p. 7) or *discourse models* (Gee, 2005, p. 71). In this research study the term discourse model is used because that seems to be Gee’s term of preference (2005, p. 61). Discourse models are social theories that individuals possesses that form the basis of their choices and assumptions. They are worlds of the mind that direct ways of thinking about anything and everything. People are usually unaware of these discourse models, even though these models form their understanding of what they believe to be “right” or “normal.” “The different cultural models of different social and cultural groups of people always involve competing notions of what counts as an ‘acceptable’ or ‘valuable’ person or deed” (Gee, 2008, p.109).

Literacy Practices

Although Barton and Hamilton (1998) also discussed identity, literacy, and community, their theory was broken down to into the ideas of literacy practices both theoretically and practically. Their six main points provided a way to think and talk about the concept of literacy practices in an organized fashion. They first posited in their theory that “literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts” (p. 7). In other words, literacy is not just a set of skills, but it encompasses all of the “general cultural ways of utilizing written language that people draw upon in their lives” and all of the “values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships tied into its usage” (p. 6). In addition, because literacy is seen as a construct in many different contexts, there are different literacies for different domains

(p. 9). Literacy that is used in the home is different from literacy used at school. Even in the home, literacy that is used for keeping household finances is different from literacy that is used for relaxation.

All types of literacies, however, are “patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible, and influential than others” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7). Socially powerful institutions, such as schools or tight-knit communities with specific ways of doing things, often dictate which literacies are more dominant or appropriate. This concept is very important to this work as research into what types of literacies the SY community seems to support and promote, and in what ways participants are reactive to those promotions, was conducted.

Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) fourth point, that “literacy practices are embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices,” focuses on the functionality of literacy for individuals (p. 12). Additionally, at a broader level, it is used to look at the ways in which whole communities use literacy. The uniqueness of a community necessitates different usages for literacy. This, of course, influences the individual’s usage, a theme that emerges in the current study’s data.

Barton and Hamilton’s last two points, that “literacy is historically situated” and “literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making” (p. 7), supported the rationale for looking at the current SY young adult female literacy practices vis-à-vis their mothers’ and grandmothers’ practices. To understand the importance of modern-day practices, how the participants relate to their identities in the SY world, and, in turn, how the community relates to them, it was important to look at their practices historically.

The use of Barton and Hamilton's term "acquired" also connects the two theories applied in the current study, as Gee (2005; 2008) also believed in the informal acquisition of the literacy practices aspect of Discourse. Framing this dissertation with these two theories allowed conceptualization, description, and explanation of the data that was gathered.

Using the theories of literacy and community as guides, Barton and Hamilton (1998) collected data on four topics: (a) personal literacy practices, which included reading matter, reading processes, writing practices, writing processes, diary writing, and record keeping; (b) academic literacy practices at home, which included homework, research for reports, studying for tests, and use of the computer for school; (c) literacy practices related to peers, which included notes, letters, computer communications, and text-messages; and (d) values, which included attitudes, morality, identity, community, and religion. These organizational titles were used to guide data collection in the current study.

CHAPTER III

Literature Review

The objective of this literature review is to discuss both theoretical and actual research studies conducted on literacy and community, and literacy and identity. Along with the concept of literacy practices these two constructs, community and identity, guided this research. Also delineated here are the ways in which this study is alike and different from other studies in which literacy practices, community, and identity were investigated.

Community

The first theme, community, can be framed by many different theories. In this section those theories as well as studies related to them are discussed. Also discussed is the concept of shifting communities, as this concept informs the entire research project.

Gee's theory of Discourse (2005, 2008) is employed in this study to examine an individual's place in a community and how an individual becomes part of a community. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of participation and peripheral participation also explored community dynamics, and their theory is valuable in understanding how a person learns to be part of a community. A discussion of their theories is included in this literature review; however, because much of the research by Lave and Wenger was designed to examine business communities, Gee will be used as the guiding theorist in the current study.

Lave and Wenger (1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) explained an individual's entrance into full community membership as follows:

Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skills requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community.

“Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. (p. 29)

Metaphorically, newcomers are on the outside of a circle and as they slowly learn the skills, customs, values, and so forth, of the community, they move slowly to the center, until after a while, newcomers’ acquired knowledge about the community allows them to be part of the circle’s core and be considered community experts.

Community literacy studies. Any study about a community’s literacy usually presents a detailed description of how the learning of the community’s literacy takes place. It also provides information on what it means to be a member of that specific community.

This dissertation falls into the general category of a community literacy study because it focused on a few individuals in a particular community and examined the connections between literacy practices and identities of the participants as members of a specific community (Barton & Hamilton, 1996; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993). The term *community*, however, can mean many things to different people. Contemporary societies are “where social institutions such as communities-and literacies are continually developing, fragmenting, shifting, and merging,” especially because of

the advances of the internet and a global economy (Luke & Luke, 1999, as cited in Moje, 2000a, p. 83). That has not stopped researchers from studying community and literacy, and the extant research literature covers eclectic concepts of communities and their literacy practices.

Moje (as well as MacGillivray and Curwen (2007)), discussed the literacy practices of communities of “taggers”, people who used graffiti to define their membership in a particular group. When Ladson-Billings (1994) investigated effective teachers of black children, she looked at African-American people as one community. Additionally, there has been much recent research on online communities and the identity formations and presentations of involved participants (Meyers, 2009; Thomas, 2006).

In addition to these newer ways of looking at communities, traditional research had been used to look at specific communities whose members were bounded by space or location, often with a shared religion, culture, and/or language. These include studies by Heath (1983), Street (1984), Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Sarroub (2005). In her review of community literacy studies Moje (2000a) stressed that “community has been used in recent years to refer especially to marginalized or minority groups” (p. 82).

The Syrian–Jewish community. This study of the Syrian-Jewish female population and its literacy practices shares similarities to the above community studies, as it examines a community that is bounded by location, religion, language, and culture; however, unlike like the majority of the communities studied, the Syrian-Jewish community is not marginalized from mainstream American life and has generally achieved financial success. No similar studies were found in the extant literature.

This study is also concerned with understanding the repercussions of a possible literacy shift, but unlike the participants in other studies of communities undergoing literacy shifts (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2005; Guerra & Farr, 2002; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Street, 1993) the research subjects in this study are already literate in English, their native tongue, and already middle class. Thus, the shift has more to do with practices and not just literacy skills.

Reviewing the many studies that correlated community, identity, and literacy, Sarroub's (2005) study about the literacy practices of Yemini adolescent girls in Detroit stands out as being most similar to the current study. Similar to Sarroub's, this study is designed to determine how young women successfully negotiate their literate lives and how they perceive their identities, specifically related to literacy and schooling. Like the Yemini-Arab community in Detroit, this Syrian-Jewish community has traditionally discouraged girls from attending college. Unlike the community in Sarroub's study, however, which still looks down on women attending college, the Syrian-Jewish community seems to have shifted its attitude towards pursuing literacy and higher education for women. The SY community also seems to have discovered greater uses for literacy, for both men and women, as will be discussed later.

Community shifts. Most important to the notion of community and the changes in its literacy practices is why these shifts happen and how they affect the community. The seminal text by Brandt (2001), *Literacy in American Lives* detailed an intergenerational study that was used to explore literacy shifts in a Midwest community. She interviewed three generations of families and concluded that literacy is often viewed as a resource, but one that is unstable and has "links to political and economic changes

and to the shifting standards of value and conditions of access that accompany those changes” (p. 7).

Brandt (2001) also discussed how historians view changes in literacy patterns as occurring because of “religion, imperialism, occupations, population density, slavery, urbanization, commercialization, democratization, schools . . . and other social trends and institutions” (p. 27). In other words, literacy shifts do not just come about; they are directly correlated to other events and institutions related to literacy needs. As will be discussed in the Identity Section, all of these shifts have direct impacts on the way people view themselves as being literate beings.

Identity

Although Gee’s (2005, 2008) conclusions were used as the theoretical frame for discussing identity, it is important to understand how Gee’s theory fits into the theoretical ideas that connect literacy and identity and why it is important to correlate them in the first place. Accordingly, a review of theory connecting literacy to identity will be presented first, followed by a discussion of research that has been undertaken specifically focusing on adult studies. There is also a section on first generation college attendees and the issues of identity they encounter as the literacy shift discussed includes first generation college attendees,

The construct of identity has undergone a metamorphosis since its inception during the Enlightenment (Alvermann, 2001). While the older definition of identity “evokes an image of a bounded, rational, and unitary self” (Harre, 1989, as quoted in Alvermann, 2001, p. 679), the more modern perspective suggests that individuals have

varied identities that are fluid and reactive to the context and text of the moment (Alvermann, 2001; McCarthy & Moje, 2002).

How is identity related to literacy and why is studying it important? A statement by Norton and Hooey (2002) explained the reasoning behind research connecting literacy to identity:

When a language learner writes a poem, a letter, or an academic essay, she considers not only the demands of the text, but how much of her history will be considered relevant to this literacy act. Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the speaker. (as quoted in Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 115)

Thus, literacy practices can be precursors to, and producers of, identities, or they can be the outgrowth of particular identifications with the world (Moje & Luke, 2009). It is important to study this reciprocal relationship because people's identities influence and are influenced by the texts that they read, write, and discuss (McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009; Nielson, 1998). This has ramifications for both educational policy and methodology (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Like other research areas related to New Literacy Studies, the notion that literacy and identity have a reciprocal relationship has its roots in the works of Vygotsky, specifically in his explanation of the development of inner cognitive processes through the mediation of semiotic tools used in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch,

1985). Gomez-Estern, Amian, Medina, and Macarro (2010) further explained the connections between identity, language, and literacy.

Semiotic tools alter those psychological functions which they serve. The interesting idea here is that when an individual uses a new semiotic tool (as occurs in the process of literacy), the action and cognitive process performed gets affected, regulated, and transformed.” (p. 233)

According to McCarthy and Moje (2002):

Although Vygotsky (1978) did not use the terms *self* or *identity*, he laid out a scenario for the development of mind in individuals as they interact in society; they internalize practices, knowledge of, and beliefs about the world and about themselves as a consequence of their interaction. . . . Because it seems that selfhood and identity are linked, and because mind and consciousness (as socially constructed) have something to do with learning and using literacy, we can argue that identity and literacy are linked in important ways. (p. 228)

Identities in texts. Another important aspect of identity research correlated to literacy was discussed in Rowsell and Pahl’s (2007) *Sedimented Identities in Text: Instances of Practice*. They explained the notion of *habitus*, which was “defined by Bordieu (1977, 1990) to describe ways of being, doing, and acting in the world across generations, time, and space and its relationship to text” (p. 391). They focused on how text production represents habitus and described texts as artifacts that are linked to the identity of the meaning-maker. Similar to Bordieu’s approach, Rowsell and Pahl (2007) built their theory

on the work of Holland et al. (1998), who argued that identities in practice can be seen within texts and artifacts produced as a result of those identities. Holland and colleagues tell us that identity is a concept that works to connect the intimate and personal worlds with the wider world of social relations. We [Pahl & Rowsell] draw on their conceptualization of “identities in figured worlds” as in “people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland & Lave, 2001, p. 3). (as quoted in Rowsell & Pahl, 2007, p. 393)

Although this dissertation study is also concerned with the notion of habitus and identity, unlike Pahl and Rowsell’s (2007) research, the focus does not lie in the connection between habitus and text production. Instead, the concept of habitus is revealed through the participants’ talk about and relationship towards texts. This theory supports Gee’s theories about identities and texts as it focuses on the ways texts, and talk about texts, support the way that people project their identities and place themselves in a particular Discourse.

Adult literacy and identity studies. The current study focuses on adults in transition; accordingly, it is imperative to include information about previous studies on that topic. Much of the research done with adults on literacy and identity focused on adults who were academically illiterate and who attended school to learn how to read and write, or students who attended adult classes to obtain general equivalency degrees (GEDs) or to develop better writing and reading skills (Bartlett, 2007; Mahiri & Godley, 1998; Rogers, 2004). Much of the time participants discussed how their missing or weak literacy skills engendered feelings of shame and inadequacy, and that their new literate

skills brought feelings of freedom and empowerment (Bartlett, 2007; Mahiri & Godley, 1998; Rogers, 2004). Other studies focused on literacy and cultural identity, a construct “that arises from the relationship that individuals maintain with cultural groups with which they struggle and cooperate” (Woodward, 1997, as quoted in Gomez-Estern et al., 2010, p. 232).

Specifically, the ability to write, and thus to be considered educated, creates a positive sense of self and feelings of empowerment (Bartlett, 2007; Mahiri & Godley, 1998). Scribner (1984) noted, “in a contemporary framework, expansion of literary skills is often viewed as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world” (p. 12). Studies of urban youth in America often depicted students lacking the academic literacy skills necessary to escape the identity and the destiny of the “disadvantaged youth” (Davis, 1996; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). Mahiri and Godley (1998) depicted the correlation between power, identity, and literacy in their study of Viviana, a highly educated and literate Latina college student who, because of an onset of carpal tunnel syndrome, found herself physically unable to write. The authors wrote, “We could see that key aspects of her life as well as perceptions of herself were changing specifically because she couldn’t write . . . she recounted stories of how she was feeling less educated and even less intelligent because she couldn’t write” (p. 419).

In addition to this change in perception of self, studies have found that individuals who shift from being non-literate to literate change the way they talk, act, and/or identify themselves (Bartlett, 2007; Gomez-Estern et al., 2010; Street, 1984). This generated shift was explained through the new academic social situations and the new cultural instruments introduced through academic learning (Gomez-Estern et al., 2010). When

occurring community-wide, this shift had ramifications for the culture, values, and traditions of the community. A literacy shift often includes community members attending college for the first time. The next section addresses the identity issues that often accompany the first generation college attendee.

First generation college attendees and issues of identity. Much of the research on first generation female college attendees focused on minority and immigrant groups who attended college away from home (Levy, 2011; Rivas-Drake, 2008; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These students often experienced feelings of depression, loneliness, and confusion regarding their home community and culture because they were the first ones in their families to attend college and did not have family mentors to help them navigate the system (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Levy, 2011; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Many of these students felt that they must separate themselves from their home community and culture in order to succeed in college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Rivas-Drake, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Latina women specifically felt that they had to negotiate the different gender expectations found in their community versus the ones expected from them in school (Levy, 2011; Parra, 2007). There is evidence, though, that strong family emotional support was a positive predictor of college success and graduation (Dennis, Phinny, & Chuateco, 2005; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The following chapter presents an overview of the SY community and the shift that is occurring.

CHAPTER IV

Methodology

A Comparative Case Study

Although we often think of the case study as an examination of an individual, it can also be the examination of some event or entity that is less well-defined (Yin, 2003). According to Creswell (1998), “a case study is an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61).

In this qualitative study, the three different generations (cases) are studied separately and then comparatively to answer the research questions focusing on literacy practices (Creswell, 1998). Three different cases are compared: three women of the “grandmother generation,” three women of the “mother generation,” and three women of the “daughter generation.” The three generations can be compared because each is a birth cohort, a group of people born at the same time who have similar experiences because of “material and cultural boundaries” and who are “entitled to participate in only one slice of life—their unique location in the stream of history” (Ryder, 1965, as quoted in Brandt, 2001, p. 11).

It is important to note that in the current study practices of young adult females are compared; thus, the data collected from the past two generations is information about when they were young adults, not about their present lives. The following section focuses on how I maintained reliability in my research.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of my findings I employed four methods discussed by Creswell (2002). In order to triangulate the data, information was gathered in numerous ways (p. 202). As will be discussed later, I used interviews, extant research literature, artifact collection, and archival records to corroborate evidence.

Throughout the gathering of data and initial analysis I reviewed transcripts with participants so that they could “judge the accuracy and credibility” (Creswell, p. 203) of both their own and others’ accounts. After the document was written I gave it to a community member who also reviewed it for credibility. She played “devil’s advocate” (p. 202) and some information was clarified or deleted based on her suggestions. Finally, this document was written with “rich, thick description” (p. 203) that “enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred ‘because of shared characteristics’” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 32 as cited in Creswell, 2002, p. 203)

Situating the Proposed Study

Essential historical and sociological information about the Syrian-Jewish community and about the participants must first be presented because the context of the case is so important (Creswell, 1998) and because the “boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). The following sections contain detailed descriptions of both the setting and the participants.

Community history. The first large influx of Syrian Jewry began in 1907-1908 during Syrian political unrest and an economic depression. The immigrants came to New York and established themselves as merchants and peddlers, the work that they had done

in Syria (Sutton, 1979). The Syrian-Jews had “Oriental” characteristics and did not assimilate with the Ashkenazi Jews of European descent. Their customs and ways of life were so foreign to the two groups it was as if they practiced two different religions. It was this bias that helped establish the insularity that continues until today. Syrian Jews socialized and did business only with their own (Sutton, 1988).

This business mindset extended into many areas of life. Coming from an Oriental background, which had not been influenced by the Enlightenment, the Syrian Jews did not value secular education. While their Ashkenaz (Jews of European descent) counterparts looked forward to the day that their sons would graduate school with honors, the Syrians continued with their tradition of hard work and mercantilism that they had brought with them from across the ocean. Education was not important; business acumen was (Chafets, 2007). Like other immigrants, the SYs were busy pursuing the American dream.

Community values and norms. This mind frame and pursuit of the American dream continues today. Value is placed on financial success and members are known for their opulent lifestyles (Chafets, 2007). Their focus on wealth and materialism, which is apparent in the present community, is a cultural mindset from the old Syria (Lagnado, 2007). Family businesses maintain this lifestyle, and as community members intra-marry, greater social and commercial networks are built. “Many more immigrants have arrived since 1907 and the community which numbered 25,000 in 1979, currently is 75,000 and growing” (Chafets, 2007, p. 83). Although affluent and very American, the current SY community is insular and socially separate from both mainstream America and mainstream Jewish Orthodoxy. “Functioning in a huge modern city, even today, they

indicate a ‘folk’ existence, a ‘face-to-face’ society, a network of connections through blood ties and marriage” (Sutton, 1988, p. 71).

Community shift. According to Rabbi Shlomo Diamond, a prominent Rabbi and leader in the community and the dean of Ilan, now is an opportune time to conduct this study as the community’s values, lifestyle, and expectations are beginning to undergo a shift. This cultural shift is impacting the ways that females relate to literacy which is the focus of this dissertation. All of the following information was derived from conversations that I had with him in 2004 regarding the community. All of Rabbi Diamond’s explanations about the reasons for these shifts concur with the work done by Brandt (2001) and the historians she quoted.

Rabbi Diamond said that population growth, economic changes, and the embracing of a Kollel lifestyle (which will be explained later) have all influenced a growing need and trend to encourage both the men and the women of the community to pursue higher education.

Though our conversation took place in 2004, Rabbi Diamond’s theories about a community cultural shift that included changes in literacy events and practices were echoed in the words of my participants seven years later. All three generations concurred with Rabbi Diamond’s explanations of the reasons for a literacy shift. Their dialogue about the literacy shift catalysts is found in Chapter V.

Economic changes. There are three economic reasons for individuals in the population to pursue a college degree. First, traditionally, Syrian-Jewish men supported their families through business, often textile or retail related. These businesses employed family members; however, as both the community and the families grow, so does the

need for positions in the family business. A business that used to support three brothers might now need to support those three brothers and all of their children and grandchildren. There are simply not enough positions for everyone.

Second, the rules of business are changing. The old retail businesses in which many members of the community were employed cannot compete with Wal-Mart and the wholesale businesses. Executives must now learn to function in the new world of a global economy, and many are going to college for the knowledge that will help keep their family businesses viable.

Third, the current recession is affecting both the men and women of the community. Although the men are expected to be the breadwinners, the current economic situation is pushing women into the work force in order to bring in some income.

The Kollel lifestyle. Another source of this more academic shift, specifically influencing the women, comes from a different source, the influence of the Ashkenaz Orthodox Jewish world. There has been a trend in the Orthodox-Jewish world at large for the men to continue learning in a Kollel even after marriage. The Kollel is an institution of higher learning in which men study the Talmud (Shai, 2002). While the Kollel lifestyle has been popular for at least three decades in the Ashkenaz world, it has just started making large inroads in the SY community.

Although most Kollels pay their members for learning, the stipend is usually minimal and cannot support a family. As a result, much of the financial burden of the house falls on the women (Shai, 2002). Until now, the SY women were expected to stay at home, but the Kollel lifestyle necessitates that women work. Accordingly, more girls

are pursuing degrees of higher education so that they can get good-paying jobs. All of the above information seems to indicate a change in the community's way of life and value system, particularly towards its expectations for its women. As evidenced in the data from previous studies, more young women are attending college and are more assertive about using literacy in varied ways in their lives.

Setting

All participants live in Deal, NJ, Brooklyn, NY, or Lakewood, NJ, and some of the grandmothers spend the winters in Florida and most of the Brooklyn residents spend their summers in Deal at their summer homes. The area where participants live is comprised of prime real estate and houses are worth millions of dollars (Chafets, 2007, p. 83). It has a very "city feel" to it as the houses are close together and some are attached.

Deal, NJ, began as a summer resort for the SY population as it is a beautiful suburban location on the Jersey shore. As the years passed, many Brooklyn residents began to make Deal their permanent homes. They built their own schools and houses of worship while still maintaining close ties to the Brooklyn community (Sutton, 1979, p. 44). In addition to the permanent residents, many of the homes that were originally built as summer homes are now occupied by married children who live there rent-free through the winter. During the summer, the entire family lives together. As in Brooklyn, many of the houses are custom built, but with more space, these houses have many more amenities, such as pools and tennis courts. In both Deal and Brooklyn, the majority of the neighbors are SY.

One of the participants, Marcelle, lives in Lakewood, an enclave in New Jersey consisting of a majority Ashkenaz population. Like Deal, it has a suburban feel to it with

space between houses and greenery all around. Marcelle lives in a basement apartment in an Ashkenaz neighborhood. Although she lives outside of the community, the friends she discussed are SY and live in either Lakewood or other locations.

Main participants. The main subjects of my study are nine Syrian-Jewish females. There are three groups of three, consisting of daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. In addition to these family groups, I also interviewed three elites because “Elite individuals are considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed in an organization or community” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105). All participants agreed to participate as a favor and/or because they thought this study was based on an interesting idea and wanted to see the findings. Daughters were contacted first, and they then asked their mothers and grandmothers if they were interested in participating.

The initial plan was to find young women from across the SY spectrum. Young women with diverse experiences were sought, meaning that they would have a combination of the following variations: grew up in Brooklyn versus Deal, attended Ilan versus another school, attended college versus did not attend college, single versus married, if married, husband working versus attending Kollel. Using former students as initial contacts, I obtained the names of young women who fulfilled these diverse criteria; however, after one participant dropped out because of extenuating family circumstances and another withdrew because of her grandmother’s lack of interest, I was left with young women who had attended Ilan (they were all former students), had attended or were in the process of attending college, whose husbands were learning in Kollel. These former students were girls who still had contact with me even after I left Ilan and/or they

graduated. The ramifications of such a homogeneous group will be discussed later in my section on *research limitations*.

Tables 1-3 delineate important information about these young women participants and their mothers and grandmothers. Please note that these names are all pseudonyms except for Granny Smith, Mawmaw, Nanny, and Savta, as those are the names or nicknames that their children and grandchildren used for them.

Abadie family. Cookie is a very intense, determined young woman with a fun side. She is well-rounded, and enjoys dancing as much as she enjoys reading. She talked about the schedule that she keeps for college and work so as not to interfere with quality time spent with her husband and baby. She expressed pride about her teaching but maintained that she was only working part time because she did not want to be away from her baby for too long.

Rachel, her mother, is petite like Cookie, but they look nothing alike. Rachel exudes a certain confidence about herself and her place in the world. She has a generous smile with a positive outlook. When visiting her home, she was a gracious hostess who had no problem showing me the entire house. She let me roam around the house taking pictures while she made little meat pizzas, a Syrian delicacy. Her kitchen was meticulously clean, and she was so neat in her cooking that it looked like she was on the Cooking Channel.

Granny Smith, the matriarch of the family, is slightly taller than her daughter and granddaughter. Her brown eyes dance, especially when she talks about her mother, her children, and grandchildren. She is positive and confident, traits that were clearly passed down to her daughter and granddaughter. She lives in a two-family house that her in-

laws had purchased in the beginning of her marriage. She and her husband occupy the first floor, and for the past 40 years, family members have always occupied the top floor. The children eat every Friday night meal at her house and she only talks about the joys of having such a wonderful family and not about the burden of having to cook and entertain so many people! Information about the female participants in the three generations of the Abadie family is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Abadie Family

Name	Present age	Age when married	Level of education	Grew up in	Currently lives in	Number of children
Cookie	19	18	Completed all-girls Jewish High School (Ilan). Pursuing her B.A. online	Brooklyn	Deal	1
Rachel	43	19	Completed co-ed Jewish High school. Went to Brooklyn college for 6 months post high school	Brooklyn	Brooklyn	5
Granny Smith	64	20	Graduated with commercial high school diploma from public school	Brooklyn	Brooklyn	4

Dueck family. Rena, the daughter in the Dueck family, is a beautiful young lady with dark skin and eyes. Thin and regal, she reminds you of a Moroccan princess. Rena is bright, blunt, and witty. She states that she is happy to be educated and working but

she does wonder how it will affect her children. She comforts herself and says that time spent with children is more about “quality and not quantity.”

Rena’s mother is a softer version of Rena. Also regal looking, Mazal stands tall with grace and confidence. She is proud of her MSW and of her daughter’s success. I worked with her at Ilan where she worked as a guidance counselor. She was very involved in the school and knew enough about both the Ashkenaz and SY cultures to be an interpreter for both sides! As a marriage therapist and recent divorcee, she looked at the community from a psychological and sociological perspective and provided some unique data.

Savta is a feisty woman to be reckoned with. Her skin and hands reveal the many decades that she has lived, but they also reveal her strength. She is a woman raised in an orphanage in Israel who came to America without knowing a word of English, and managed to marry the chief-Rabbi’s son. Her English is slightly accented, and she used Hebrew idioms during the course of our conversations. She spoke with awe and pride about her father-in-law and his leadership qualities. There are many pictures of her father-in-law around the house. Her face came alive when speaking about the rest of her family as well. Like all the other grandmothers, Savta’s house is filled with pictures of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Information about the female participants in the three generations of the Dueck family is shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Dueck Family*

Name	Present age	Age when married	Level of education	Grew up in	Currently lives in	Number of children
Rena	24	19	Graduated from all-girls Jewish High School (Ilan).	Deal	Deal	2
Mazal	50	20	Graduated co-ed Jewish high school. Earned Master's in Social Work in graduate school	Brooklyn	Deal	3
Savta	Low 70's	20	Graduated 8th grade in all-girls Jewish orphanage in Israel	Israel	Deal	6

Tawil family. Marcelle is a 23-year-old who looks like she is 15. She is cute and spunky with a mischievous smile on her lips and a great sense of humor. Marcelle is a hard worker who travels from Lakewood to Staten Island three times per week to work in a special education school. She also works in her former school, Ilan, as a substitute and teaches a weekly Jewish philosophy class. She tolerates this long commute to Staten Island because the pay is better in New York than in New Jersey; she is idealistic and determined to live the Kollel lifestyle even if it means living in a basement apartment and working hard.

Marcelle inherited her great sense of humor from her mother. When asked where the name Mawmaw came from, Mawmaw told me that when her first grandchild was born she was only 38 and felt too young to be a grandmother, so instead of the traditional grandma, she came up with the name Mawmaw! Physically, Mawmaw is taller and

broader than is her daughter. She also has a thick Brooklyn accent and when talking with her you feel like you are talking to a genuine “New-Yorker.” Her pride in Marcelle’s abilities as a housewife and a special educator was expressed through her words, “Marcelle is a beautiful example of how you can do both.” Mawmaw herself is a skilled businesswoman who created her own cheese business from scratch.

Nanny is the mother hen who stands by her children and grandchildren whatever the situation. She looks like the quintessential grandmother, soft and round, but underneath the exterior there is a tough woman with a lot of common sense and a sharp wit. She likes having televisions around the house, and she explained that she is not into the social scene and card games in which other women her age are involved. She worried about Marcelle working so hard, but at the same time, Nanny was proud of Marcelle’s education and determination. While I was at her house she mentioned that she was about to speak to Marcelle’s older sister about maybe helping Marcelle out somehow, so that Marcelle and her family could move to a bigger apartment. She was also not a big believer in the Kollel system and wanted Marcelle’s husband to go to work so that Marcelle could stay home. I spoke to her in the fall of 2011 before she went to Florida for the winter. Information about the female participants in the three generations of the Tawil family is shown in Table 3.

Table 3*Tawil Family*

Name	Present age	Age when married	Level of education	Grew up in	Currently lives in	Number of children
Marcelle	23	19	Graduated all girls high school (Ilan). Earned M.Ed. in special education	Brooklyn	Lakewood	2
Mawmaw	55	19	Graduated public high school	Brooklyn	Brooklyn	3
Nanny	79	20	Graduated public high school	Cincinnati	Brooklyn/ Deal/ Florida	2

Elites. In order to gain more information, triangulate the data, and be able to generalize the information, I also interviewed *elites*. “Elite individuals are considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed in an organization or community” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105). I was able to interview three individuals who fulfilled these requirements.

When choosing elites, I was looking for SY women who were known in the community circle and/or were involved in female education. Although many of the community educators were actually from the community, many of the older ones were Ashkenaz, and if they were SY they were busy and very hard to contact. As a result, two of my experts are Ashkenaz educators in the SY school system, and the third is an SY

grandmother who was born in the community, has been involved in community affairs throughout her life, and has children who are currently involved in community projects.

Penny Bloch is a 37-year-old Ashkenaz woman who married an SY boy whose father is the Dean of Ilan and an important Rabbi in the community. Although she is Ashkenaz, and thus an outsider, her marriage to an SY gives her some community status, and her role as principal of Ilan gives her an insider's perspective of the specific views of parents and students towards literacy. She has the capacity to look at the community from both sides of the fence, but admits that she often looks at the community through an Ashkenaz lens. I worked under her for many years and she was happy to discuss the community with me from an academic perspective.

Dvora Friedman is an Ashkenaz woman living in Brooklyn who has been an English teacher in Magen David, an SY co-ed school, for the past 21 years. By chance, she was brought to my attention by her sister when we met at a wedding. As an English teacher in the community, she had very specific views on the role of literacy in the SY world, but they were also colored by an Ashkenaz perspective. When I contacted her, she was very gracious and immediately agreed to do the interview.

Shirley Cohen is a grandmother who was featured prominently in a movie made by Joseph Jack Sitt and The Sephardic Heritage Museum titled *The Syrian Jewish Community: Our Journey through History*. The production of this film and its showing at Avery Fisher Hall emphasized the community's value of itself as a community. The cover of the playbill can be seen in Appendix A. I attended *Episode Three: Life in Bensonhurst, 1920-1939* on October 9th, 2011, at Avery Fisher Hall in the city of New York. I chose Shirley Cohen because of some of the interesting comments that she made

in the video! She recalled that when she was 13 years old and attending Hebrew school the Rabbi came over to her father and said “*haj* [*enough* in Arabic]. Your daughter knows enough already.” When I called my contact and asked her how I could get in touch with this lady she said, “That’s my mother-in-law!” and gave me her phone number. Like the other elites, Shirley Cohen was interested in my project and happy to do interviews. Table 4 is a summary of the elite’s qualifications.

Table 4

Elites

Name	Qualification
Penny Bloch	Principal of Ilan Girls High School in Deal for 15 years. Ashkenaz, married to Syrian.
Dvora Friedman	English teacher at Magen David High School, Syrian co-ed school in Brooklyn for 21 years. Ashkenaz.
Shirley Cohen	Born into the community. A grandmother who was interviewed for the community videos and very involved in community events.

Data Collection

The collection of data comprised three approaches: interviews; the review of the community’s magazines, also known as “archival records” (Yin, 2003, p. 88); and the collection of artifacts. I went back and forth between methods; information gathered using one would prompt a return to another to clarify data.

Interviews. Interviews were a major focus of my data collection. I wrote notes and used an audio recorder for interviews. Yin (2003) considered interviews one of the most important ways of gathering information in a case study. At least two interviews

were conducted either at home or on the telephone with each participant over the course of a year beginning in August of 2011 and ending in July of 2012. My first session was a *focused interview* (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, as quoted in Yin, 2003, p. 90) in which I asked a certain set of questions from a fixed protocol (see Appendix B). The second set of interviews was of a more open-ended nature (Yin, 2003), piggybacking on the answers given during the first interview session. At least one interview was conducted in the participants' homes so that I was also able to identify and take pictures of literary artifacts.

After an interview was conducted, if a new topic came up, then previous interviewees were often phoned and asked their opinions on the topic. For example, when Marcelle used the word *fluff* (as will be discussed later) to describe what she felt her SY students enjoyed learning, I called Rena to ask if she agreed with this description, and when I spoke to Cookie I asked her the same question.

I had originally wanted to use focus groups to gather interview data as they provide "a wider variety of information" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 102), but timing and location limited my ability to gather people together. All of the interview data, therefore, comes from one-on-one interviews.

Triangulation occurred by interviewing the elites at the same time as the main participants. Using this approach made the interviews cyclical, allowing the collection of data alternately from elites and participants, and enabling clarification of the participants' views. Elite interviews were conducted on the telephone, and I spoke to each elite at least twice.

Archival records. In addition to interviews, I also wanted written text to add to the data, particularly from community publications. These “archival records” (Yin, 2003, p. 88) are used to “corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research in question” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 202). The written text that I obtained came from *Image* and *Community*, community magazines that I had delivered to my home. I began collecting magazine material as early as 2009 as I already knew the direction of my dissertation. Stereotypically, *Community* is considered the more religious magazine as it only includes pictures of women who are dressed modestly, while *Image* includes pictures of all types of women; however, they are both published by and for the SY community. I contacted personnel at the magazines to ask for permission to use their text. *Community* responded and approved the use of their material, asking only that I identify the source of the articles. I never heard from *Image*, but because I used only one ad and one picture from the magazine, I felt that there would be no copyright issue.

As the interviews proceeded, I returned to the magazines to find articles and ads that were related to my interview data. I looked for both articles and advertisements that would support or refute my participants’ dialogues.

Artifact collection. Concrete artifacts related to literacy were also examined. Photographs were taken of objects in most of the participants’ homes, and Granny Smith went through old boxes and shared her diaries, letters, and objects from around the world. I considered the above materials to be artifacts as they “are material and they represent culture” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p.2). Specific attention was focused on Granny Smith’s artifacts because she pulled them out in response to this study, and they represented

“relationships and events that matter” and “also had powerful pulls on her identity” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. 1).

Data Collection Organization

All interviews, text collection, and artifact studies revolved around four topics adapted from Barton and Hamilton (1998):

1. personal literacy practices, which included reading matter, reading processes, writing practices, writing processes, diary writing, and record keeping;
2. academic literacy practices at home, which included homework, research for reports, studying for tests, and use of the computer for school;
3. literacy practices related to peers, which included notes, letters, computer communications, and text messages; and
4. values, which included attitudes, morality, identity, community, and religion.

These categories relate directly to my questions:

- Q1.** In what ways have the literacy practices of the young SY female (20-30) changed from previous generations to this one?
- Q2.** According to the participants, what has contributed to this change?
- Q3.** In what ways do these literacy practices connect to the way the Syrian Jewish female views herself as being a Syrian-Jewish female?
- Q4.** In what ways have these connections between literacy and identity shifted or stayed the same from the previous generations to this one?

Data Analysis

All data collected was immediately transcribed into a single database on my computer. A computer file of pictures taken was also created. Magazine articles and ads were kept in a folder in my bedroom closet. Analysis began during this process as I printed out the data and marked it with possible codes and notes.

General themes began to appear, such as literacy and friendship, and literacy and identity, and new pages of text were created for these themes, but I then realized that it would be more practical to place the data next to the question to which it was most relevant and then discover codes related to specific questions. Table 5 was created to configure my data.

Table 5

Data Organization

	Grandmothers	Mothers	Daughters	Elites
In what ways have the literacy practices of the young SY female changed from previous generations to this one?				
According to the participants what has contributed to this change?				
In what ways do these practices connect to the way the Syrian-Jewish female views herself as being a SYJF?				
In what ways have these connections between literacy and identity shifted or stayed the same from the previous generations to this one?				

Word analysis. The next step of analysis, word analysis, derived from the methods of Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 70), further codes and analyzes the data around specific terms and definitions of those terms according to participants. I first pulled out the words that appeared across daughter, mother, and grandmother participants, leaving the elites for later, trying to understand the meaning of these words and terms for each generation. Words that were repeated and that were connected to my study questions included *community, college, education, learning, school, and money or economy*. I clarified the meaning of these words to the participants and myself: How do the participants define *learning*? What does it mean to be a *Syrian Jewish female young adult*?

For example, the daughters spoke about learning and education in reference to academics, while the mothers and grandmothers used it in a broader sense and viewed it as something that can be done at all times, anywhere. As Shirley Cohen stated, “Education never ends. I’m still going to classes at the Apple store for my computer.” Savta also gave learning a different slant when she explained, “It doesn’t matter to me whether you went to school. I always taught my children to absorb everything around them. The most important thing is to absorb and listen.”

Many participants described the economy or money as major forces behind shifting women’s literacies, but people used the term to refer to different ideas that were often paradoxical. Rachel Abadie discussed how every home needs a dual income, and Cookie talked about the recession; however, while the daughters’ generation felt that *college* is necessary to make a living, the grandmothers’ generation discussed how *going straight to work* was considered necessary to make a living. Granny Smith and Shirley

Cohen explained that people could not afford to send their children to college; they needed them to go to work right away.

I then went through the elite data and examined the elites' usage of these words. All of this was done by hand using a highlighter and a pen for comments. These repetitive words and the text around them were separated from the other data.

Subcategories. Using those repetitive phrases and words, subcategories were created, a tactic often associated with grounded theory studies (Creswell, 1998, p. 57). For example, under "classes," I found information about academic classes, adult women's religious classes, and classes that were listened to on tape. I traced these words across generations, families, and vis-à-vis the elites. Breaking the information down into smaller parts exposed valid themes.

Two different methods of coding, *word coding* and *creating subcategories*, enabled access to a full picture of repetitive themes. I went back and forth between these two methods to make sure that my information was clear and true. Many comments were added to the charts and lists. Participant data was also compared and contrasted by generation, by family, and by elite data. There were definite patterns across families and across generations. The text in selected magazines was then consulted to determine if there was information that either supported or weakened the themes. Some text had already been identified as applicable and further magazine perusal uncovered more data which confirmed the findings of this study.

While typing and labeling information, the literature was checked for definitions and descriptions not yet included. For example, there were sections on religious literacies, but a review of the data revealed that no strict definition had been established

for the term. This necessitated a return to review earlier research and to undertake further research. The findings will be discussed later in the section titled Religious Literacies.

I proceeded from that point, which I considered the “findings section,” to interpret the themed data according to the theoretical framework discussed in the literature review. For example, as the study was framed within the context of sociocultural literacy, findings about the connections between literacy, community, and identity were brought into focus. Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) writings were reviewed to aid in the discussion of the meaning of literacy practices related to social institutions and power relationships, and to discuss in what ways these practices are embedded in the broader social goals and cultural practices of this community. It was important to discover the relationships between the community and the individual, specifically in cases of literacy, because the community influenced participants’ ways of life. In other words, Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) work provided guidance on analyzing the data about practice on a community-macro level through the eyes of individuals. This allowed me to answer the first two questions of the study.

Q1. In what ways have the literacy practices of the young SY female (20-30) changed from previous generations to this one?

Q2. According to the participants, what has contributed to this change?

Although the concepts espoused by Gee (2005, 2008) were used to interpret the data about literacy and community, I think that Gee’s theory allowed me to understand the individual participant’s literacy experiences and the identity constructs related to them. Gee’s theory of Discourse relies strongly on the concept that we develop our identities and our understandings through our interaction with others. He explained that

Discourses are ways of being “people like us” (Gee, 2008, p. 3). The SY community is very insular and has/had established very specific gender roles for its members; therefore, this theory allowed an interpretation of the data and specific answers to the last two research questions.

Q3. In what ways do these literacy practices connect to the way the Syrian Jewish female views herself as being a Syrian-Jewish female?

Q4. In what ways have these connections between literacy and identity shifted or stayed the same from the previous generations to this one?

By posing my dissertation questions, I was actually asking my participants to reflect on their personal Discourses (Gee 2005, 2008). The review of artifacts, magazines, and discussions with elites supplied information about the primary and secondary Discourses in these young women’s lives. In what ways do the participants view the magazines’ messages and how is that tied to their personal identities? Are their identities so fluid that they change outside the community? Based on the literature review and my previous research, this study attempted to answer the following questions:

Q1. In what ways have the literacy practices of the young SY female (20-30) changed from previous generations to this one?

Q2. According to the participants, what has contributed to this change?

Q3. In what ways do these literacy practices connect to the way the Syrian Jewish female views herself as being a Syrian-Jewish female?

Q4. In what ways have these connections between literacy and identity shifted or stayed the same from the previous generations to this one?

CHAPTER V

Findings

A discussion of the findings would benefit from first returning to the definition of the term *literacy practice* that was used in the beginning of the dissertation.

Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However practices are not observable units of behavior since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (see Street 1993, p. 12) This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk and make sense of literacy. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 6)

This quote was chosen because I felt that it used the term *literacy practice* as an all-encompassing term that included interaction with literacy, attitudes about literacy, and the notion that literacy is connected to people's social milieu and senses of self. As a result, no distinction is made between the terms literacy practice and literacy event, which is the "what people do with literacy" part of the definition. Based on the above quote from Barton and Hamilton (1998), the term *practice* can be used to refer to both concepts. As many of the community shifts that will be discussed involve all aspects of literacy practice, it was important to establish one word to refer to both attitudes and events.

The findings are presented in the categories: literacy and community, literacy and family, and literacy and self. I felt that moving from the macro to the micro gives the reader a clearer understanding of the lives of the participants. It is important first to

discuss how individuals use literacy in context because this is such a tight-knit community and the community is such a central part of individuals' lives. The findings about community and family are addressed first because they both give a generalized view of literacy shifts across the community and thus answer the main question: In what ways have the literacy practices of the young SY female (20-30) changed from previous generations to this one? Included in these findings about community and family are opinions from the participants about their personal perspectives on any literacy practices or shifts within the community. These answers pertain to the second question: According to the participants, what has contributed to this change? The section on literacy and self very clearly addresses the last two questions: In what ways do these literacy practices connect to the way the Syrian Jewish female views herself as being a Syrian Jewish female and in what ways have these connections between literacy and identity shifted or stayed the same from the previous generations to this one?

Literacy and Community

In this section, some sociological findings about the community and the role literacy plays in the lives of its female members are described. This section is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on *religious literacy* and the second on *academic literacy*. The division of literacies under these categories became obvious early in the coding process. These titles are used in the section on community but not in family or self because there was much literacy and community data that split into these two themes.

Much research was devoted to the term *religious literacies*, but a satisfactory definition was not found, either because there was no overt definition (Sarroub, 2005; Street, 1995) or because the definition was too limiting, focusing on just one aspect of

religion, like artifacts (Rumsey, 2010) or spaces where faith is expressed (Eakle, 2007). In addition, many of the above sources used the term *faith literacies*, which seemed to encompass only literacies directly connected to faith and not to other aspects of religious life, such as practice and ritual. Therefore, the term *religious literacies* is used in this dissertation study.

The source that was initially referred to me as driving research in faith literacies was Becoming Literate in Faith Settings (beliefs); however, this organization's homepage also did not have a direct definition for faith literacies. In order to ascertain the veracity of this finding two PowerPoint presentations offered on the beliefs website were checked, *Bangledashi Muslim Children's Learning in Faith Settings*, presented in December, 2010, and *Handing down the Magic: Literacy as a Gift Between Generations and Siblings*, presented in July, 2010. Although each presentation had excellent research questions relating to the current study, once again, there was no direct definition.

In the absence of an explicit definition, I decided to coin my own term and refer to *religious literacy* as any literacy practice (including both perspectives and events) that is connected to religion. In this research study religious literacy is described as a broad term that includes (a) prayer, (b) reading and writing Hebrew, (c) learning Jewish philosophy and history, and (d) reading Jewish texts in both Hebrew and English. Any literacy that is involved in rituals or religious observance goes under this umbrella term. It is important to note that all prayer that is done in the Synagogue is in the Hebrew language.

The second part of this section is devoted to literacy practices associated with academics and school "with its particular brand of learning" (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p.

12). Hull and Schultz (2002) noted that academic literacies, or the reading and writing that are demanded by school, are often in conflict with the reading and writing that students do in their home settings. Lea and Street (2006) discussed the concept of academic literacies in a university setting. According to Lea and Street (2006), academic literacies referred to reading and writing that was cognitively based on changes from one academic discipline to another.

Academic literacies are the literacies and values connected to school. Thus, those who pursue higher education after high school are employing the academic literacies first taught in elementary and high school. According to participants and elites, valuing these specific types of literacies and acknowledging that continuing to use academic literacies by attending college is important were both new phenomenon for the SY female. As a result, much of the section on academic literacies is used to discuss college attendance and the literacy practices related to it. College attendance for females was seen to be a major shift in this generation's literacy practices.

The omnipresent community. Before discussing literacy practices, it is important to understand how tight-knit the community is and how much this ubiquitous community affects its members. It is evident from all sources that, though there are changes in the literacy practices of the young females in the SY community, the primary focus for individuals is still community and family.

The centrality of community is revealed on the cover of the May 2012 issue of *Image*. Instead of featuring an attractive picture of a community leader, an event, or a paid advertisement, there is a plea: "Help feed our own: Sephardic food fund: Food with dignity." By using the words *our own*, the magazine and the Sephardic food fund are

emphasizing the concept of responsibility towards members of the community, and despite the perceived wealth in the community as discussed in the short article, there are still members of the community in need, and it is the role of the community to step in and help.

Community, the competitor magazine, also had nearly the exact same cover with a very similar article in its May 2012 publication, which reflects the understanding that although there may be competition in the community or even differences in religious levels, a community member's need transcends all differences and any competition.

The strength of the community is revealed in another article written by Mizrahi in the May issue of *Image* (2012, p. 102) titled "Sephardic students mentorship program: A peer to peer mentor network." A retreat of mentors who gathered for fun and discussion about the community and its strengths and weaknesses was described. He stated: "We all felt proud to be part of this beautiful community and believe that our colorful culture, traditional values, and never-wavering network of hesed (kindness) are not only the roots for our stability but also make up the foundation on which we can grow."

The magazine samples were used to try to explain the responsibility members feel towards each other, the insular nature of the community, and the exceptional influence the community has on its members. It is only after understanding this that an explanation of the role literacy has in the lives of its members and why and how the community affects the ways that women think about and practice literacy can be understood.

All participants, including the elites, felt that the role of literacy in the lives of young SY women has changed from the early 1940s until now. When they spoke about

this change, they were referring to both attitudes and practices related to both religious and academic literacy.

Religious literacy and community. Of the three grandmothers interviewed, only Savta read and wrote Hebrew and “that,” she explained, “is because I grew up in Israel.” The two other grandmothers stated that Hebrew school for girls was not a priority. There were not any religious or Hebrew language adult education courses for women either, so women did not have the ability to review or obtain knowledge or Hebrew literacy skills once they were older. The repercussions for the community at that time (1930’s-1960’s) of women not being knowledgeable about their religion and not being able to read Hebrew, was explained by Penny Bloch, principal at Ilan High School:

The women had less of a connection to religion because so much of religion is tied into Hebrew. Going to Shul, reciting prayers, knowing religious terms—the women might have had the religious fervor and passion, but they did not have the knowledge—the substance to keep them holding on to the religion. Passion without substance is ignorance. They were losing community and religion because the women didn’t know anything. Their own mothers did not have the knowledge either, so it wasn’t as if they went to public school and when they went home, they gained the strong knowledge they needed to keep them in the community.

Shirley Cohen, the elite grandmother I interviewed, attended Hebrew school, read Hebrew, and learned many Jewish texts while attending Hebrew school; however, she explained that she was the only girl in the after-school class. When she was about 13 years old the Rabbi told her father that he should pull her out. This story is told in the

community movie made by Joseph Jack Sitt & The Sephardic Heritage Museum, titled *The Syrian Jewish Community: Our Journey through History*. What she told me personally when I interviewed her that it was not so much that the Rabbi thought she must stop her education, but that she was too much of a distraction to the adolescent boys! She also explained that her family looked at education and literacy differently than the typical SY at the time because her parents and ancestors had been teachers and intellectuals in the old country, Syria. In other words, her *discourse model* (Gee, 2005) of literacy and higher learning was that literacy was valuable. This was acquired through living in her home, and while Shirley Cohen and her family ‘owned’ this model, it was at odds with the secondary Discourse of the community.

Of the mothers I interviewed, the oldest one, Mawmaw, did not know how to read Hebrew as she went to public school and did not attend Hebrew school afterwards, while the other two attended Yeshiva day schools and therefore could read, write, and understand Hebrew. All three daughters attended Jewish day and high schools and therefore knew how to read, write, and understand Hebrew, along with being able to read, comprehend, and analyze both new and old Jewish texts.

All participants described the advances the community has made in terms of religious and Hebrew education for the women, not only in their community elementary and high schools but also in adult education. Rena discussed a learning program in Brooklyn dedicated to women called Yad Yosef. Mawmaw also described many of the learning programs in Brooklyn and in Deal (available especially during the summer). When exploring where the desire for these classes came from, Mazal, Rena’s mother, emphatically insisted that, “The women are the ones who want it. They are the ones who

are running a kosher and Jewish home and there is a thirst for knowledge.” Her comments support Barton and Hamilton’s premise that “literacy practices are embedded in social goals and cultural practices (p. 12) as she describes members of a community who want more information to keep the traditions and laws of their heritage.

There are many levels of classes available, some more philosophic in knowledge, some more practical, and some more text-based. The text-based classes are considered a little more intellectually sophisticated. It is interesting to note that some of the young women who attended Ilan and felt that they received an intellectual, stimulating Jewish education, such as Rena and Cookie, found many of the classes to be too low-level.

Fluff. Rena attended an Ashkenaz seminary post-high school in Israel and contrasted those adult-level classes to the SY classes for women. She said, “Some of the classes are text-based. Most are not. Syrian women like fluff. I can’t go to Shiurim anymore because when I was in Israel I got spoiled. Now the only ones I like are given by Ashkenazim!”

Rena used the term fluff to describe a type of lesson that is very inspiring, that makes the listener feel emotional and want to be close to G-d or/and one’s fellow man but lacks text and substance. In many of my earlier unpublished studies, the teenage participants also used the term fluff to describe the typical lesson that the SY female enjoys. Marcelle, a part-time teacher in Ilan, echoed this sentiment when she described a conversation she had with another teacher. “All they want is fluff—to hear G-d loves you and some nice stories that inspire them.”

When I asked Cookie, a teacher at Ilan, about the term *fluff* she described it as a hypothetical lesson where you say we have to look into ourselves and think about what

G-d wants and then repeat that in many different ways over the entire period. She stated that when she did “fluff up” a lesson, she saw that it did not hit home, and she changed the format of her lesson. Her opinion was that, in general, Syrians do not go for fluff and they tune out when you are “fluffing.” She did agree, though, that stories are very popular with the students and make an impact, but “sometimes I’ll say a story and they’ll get the chills, but I can tell that they totally missed the point.” She concluded this discussion by saying that “a lot of what I am saying is just me,” meaning that she understood what others meant when they said that SY women like fluff, but she disagreed.

Adult classes. To return to the concept of classes, Rena’s grandmother, Savta concurred with Rena’s evaluation of the classes offered as being too low-level. As someone with a strong Jewish and Hebrew background cultivated by growing up in Israel, she found some of the classes too basic and some of the questions asked reflecting too much ignorance, so she also stayed away from them.

In most cases, however, the women were proud of the classes that the community offered as they give the women a time and place to learn about religion, Jewish texts, and Jewish philosophy. It also gave them an opportunity to use knowledge gleaned in the classes to connect to their children and grandchildren on a religious level, something that they would not be able to do without these classes. Granny Smith eloquently stated:

I myself go to classes. If it’s over my head or not, I come out learning something. I’m able to converse with the younger ones about the Parsha of the week . . . when they ask me to help them say the Shema [a common Hebrew prayer] and I tell them that I can’t, and they look at me as if they

are about to cry, and they say, Grandma, you don't know how to read Hebrew? I say that I do, but it will take me too long to read it and I think they feel bad that I missed out.

The Parsha of the week is a portion from the Bible that is read on Saturday. All younger children learn about the Parsha stories in school and the older students read about them and analyze them with commentaries. This practice is an integral part of a Jewish Day School curriculum. Granny Smith said that she would be unable to discuss the Parsha with her grandchildren if not for these classes and that she would be missing the opportunity to share an important part of their lives.

I understood from the participants that attendance at these classes was now a part of the SY female culture, or the SY Discourse (Gee, 2005, 2008), and most of the women did so to further their Jewish and Hebrew knowledge. I actually attended one, and I saw many of the women taking notes or recording the class. It was an interactive Parsha class and many of the women interrupted to ask or answer questions posed by the lecturer. Cookie also mentioned that she and her husband listen to some of these recorded classes in the car when they drive back and forth from Deal to Brooklyn.

The participants all spoke about the teachers of these classes with much reverence. Although many of the classes were taught by Rabbis, there were also classes taught by women. Mawmaw spoke with pride about the fact that the women giving the classes were not Ashkenaz, but Syrian. She reflected on the fact that many of the women giving these classes also had large families, but successfully balanced everything because of their priorities.

Classes given for women are listed in Appendices C and D. Appendix C is a pamphlet from 2011 listing summer classes for both men and women in Deal. Note that there is only one Ashkenaz lecturer, Gitta Neufeld. Appendix D is a list of classes sponsored by Yad Yosef as described by Rena above. This list was found in the October 2011 issue of *Community*. All lecturers are SY except for Reb. Vital Kalmanowitz.

Cookie emphasized that a woman who is learned in Jewish subjects is respected by the community members. The value placed on women's Hebrew and Jewish literacy attainment and knowledge by the community has changed from being viewed as unimportant for women to being one of great value and pride to its members.

Penny Bloch believed that these classes replaced the mahjong games that both the grandmother and mother generations described as commonplace when they were young mothers. She feels many women come for the social interaction. Cookie hinted to that when she said that she often was not interested in attending a class because she did not want to have to socialize. Looked at in that perspective, then, these classes are a prime example of a literacy event that is social in nature as described by Heath (1983).

This section described the shift in attitudes and practices of Jewish and Hebrew literacies in the SY community; the following section provides a look at academic literacy practices and values and their connection to the community.

Academic literacy and the community. In order to understand the connections between literacy, identity, and community a socio-cultural framework was chosen to look at literacy as a social practice (Hull & Schultz, 2002), and also to look at the social institutions and power relationships that influence literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7). This chapter on academic literacy focuses on the attitudes towards

homework, school, college, and the practices related to them as seen through the eyes of members of the community.

History of general perspective of college attendance within the community.

Before discussing SY females and college attendance it is important to understand the community's perspective on college relating to both sexes. All participants and elites were in tacit agreement about the history of the community's attitude towards an academic education for both sexes. The *discourse model* (Gee, 2005) was clear. Mazal stated that, "As a community, we have never seen education as a high value." Nanny concurred with her and added detail. "In my father's time even the richest people couldn't read or write!" Savta contrasted the SY mindset with the Ashkenaz when she said, "the Ashkenazim, the Europeans, they were all into learning, getting an education. The Syrians were into business from Syria and they brought it over."

All of the participants agreed that college attendance for men has become more popular because there are fewer jobs, the market is more competitive, and the way business is being done requires skills learned in college; however, the time when college became more popular was debated.

Savta and Shirley Cohen related that men began attending college in the 1970s and 1980s when the community had more money so parents could afford to pay college tuition and let their children gain more education. Mrs. Cohen told the story of how her sons graduated high school and wanted to join their father's business. He told them, "I've had enough dumb people working for me. You go to college and then you can join me." So they did! This was in the early 1980s.

Other participants felt that the expectation for men to attend college is more recent, happening in the last 20 years or so. They attribute it to the fact that there are not enough jobs in the family business for everyone and, even if there were, academic knowledge provides an edge over competitors.

The above discussion about the SY community's value of male attendance of college is provided as a background against which to view the attitudes towards female scholastic endeavors and attitudes towards college attendance for women. All participants agreed that the community has made great strides in acknowledging the importance of academic literacy for women and particularly the events of college attendance, graduation, and attainment of a career. The novelty of this perspective can be seen in an anonymous ad placed in the November 2010 issue of *Image* magazine (see Appendix E). By equating the price of catering to education, the writer is trying to persuade the readers that the money used for the extravagant affairs common in the community would be better spent on education.

College attendance and women. All of the grandmothers and Shirley Cohen remembered that while their parents urged them to do well in elementary and high school, and encouraged them in their homework, there was also an underlying expectation that women would not pursue any more education after high school and that there was a danger to being too smart. Both Mrs. Cohen and Granny Smith remembered their grandmothers saying, "a girl goes to college, she'll never meet a husband; she'll be too smart." Mrs. Cohen actually came from a more academic family who encouraged her to attend college. She did for a year, but she dropped out because none of her friends was going to college.

The mothers' generation also remembered their own parents being on top of their homework and wanting them to do well in school, but the mothers also felt that college had not been a priority for women during their schooling years. The mothers' generation had an interesting mix based on age and personality. Mawmaw, the oldest of the mothers, recalls only one of her friends attending college in the mid 1970s. She also joked that when Marcelle used to study in high school, she would tell her daughter that she did not have to study so hard, because "how much do you need to know to stuff cabbage and vacuum?" That was the perspective from which she, herself, had been raised.

Mazal, who is 50, went to college in the early 1980s immediately after high school and finished her B.A. in English Literature at the age of 21, after she was married. She later got her MSW while her three children were in school in the early 1990s. Mazal reflected on her college experience and described a community at odds with women wanting to go to college and of women appreciating academic literacy. She recalled being the only one of her peers to graduate college. Everyone dropped out after getting engaged, if they went at all. She also remembered being looked at as unfeminine and feeling different from her peers. Until this day, she feels that her college attendance separates her from her SY peers.

Rachel is 42 and attended college right after high school but dropped out after 6 months when she became engaged. Rachel explained that she was an excellent student in high school and an avid reader, but for some reason she was placed in remedial reading classes in Brooklyn College. As a first generation college attendee, she did not have the knowledge about college procedures to fight the placement.

Rachel felt that because she had such a negative college experience she did not even think of continuing. If her college experience would have been better, she might have wanted to finish.

It is interesting that the six participants discussed above were encouraged to do well in school and to read. Many mentioned literacy events such as going to the library, reading newspapers, reading to their children, and helping children with homework. Why, then, was college not encouraged, and college attendance stigmatizing as described by Mazal? When I asked these questions all of the participants responded similarly, with an answer that can only be understood through a socio-cultural lens.

According to the participants, a woman who continues to attend college after marriage is indicating that her husband is not a capable enough breadwinner, a pitied and even contemptuous role for a male in the SY community. Women do not want to be viewed as being a *hazita*, an Arabic word meaning “a woman to be pitied,” especially in the realm of materialism. Looking at this through Gee’s lens (2005, 2008), attending college was not part of the young SY female Discourse for both the mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations. It was not part of “being people like us.” In fact, including college attendance as part of your “identity kit” (Gee, 2008, p. 155) would estrange you from the rest of the community, as described by Mazal.

All participants agreed on this perspective, as did two of the elites; however, they also agreed that times are changing, and the attitude towards college is different. It was hard for them to pinpoint when this change in the attitude towards female college attendance began, but they all agreed that it was sometime in the past 10 years and that

the community is still in a transitional stage. This change in attitude, though, explained why all three of the daughters are attending or attended college.

Societal changes. Once again, participants of all generations agreed on the societal changes that are encouraging SY women to attend college, many of the societal changes having to do with economics. All of the women discussed the recession and its impact on the community's wealth and businesses. They felt that the recession has really changed the SY culture. The stigma attached to women working is changing; therefore, the stigma attached to a woman attending college is waning. According to all, both families and schools are encouraging girls to attend college. In explanation of this phenomenon, all participants and elites pointed out that for the majority of young, SY, female college attendees, it is a choice primarily related to the economics of today.

The three daughters explained that the main reason for their college attendance was that they wanted to marry a Kollel boy, and needed a means of support, as the Kollel does not pay a lot, if at all. Savta echoed that sentiment when she said that, "the religious girls need to work to support their husbands." At the same time, all grandmothers and mothers acknowledged that Kollel wives certainly needed to attend college for a lucrative career, but they all felt that the entire community was encountering a shift on its perspective towards women attending college because families now need a dual income to survive.

Penny Bloch, the principal of an SY girls high school, agreed that attending college was becoming more of a community expectation for its girls. She said that her school began offering AP classes about 12 years ago, and girls became serious about taking them around eight years ago- 2005. Around that time, Ilan also began looking for

teachers with Masters Degrees because they and members of the community wanted a higher-level education. Mrs. Bloch also voiced her feeling that the community was still in transition, and that many of the parents were ambivalent about sending their daughters to college. In her meeting with parents to discuss what they thought community members wanted to hear about a school, many of the mothers said, “basically, we want to hear you talk about college, but know we really don’t want it. We’re scared of the change.”

Mrs. Bloch mentioned that when she met with prospective parents and asked what they wanted ultimately for their daughters, “Many of the mothers talk about college, and you hear the father muttering under his breath, ‘she should just get married’.”

Mrs. Bloch also felt that the community’s move towards supporting women’s attendance of college was purely practical, the need to have a degree to make money. She felt that there was no inherent change of attitude towards the value of learning for learning’s sake, and that college attendance was not seen as being a step-up socially. While this sentiment was echoed by the majority of the participants, Cookie spoke about her love of learning and that she wanted to eventually get a master’s degree and become a teacher of math and science. She was passionate about knowledge, learning, and teaching, but felt that she was an anomaly in the community.

Cookie stressed her love of knowledge, and how that helped her develop as an individual, teacher, and mother, but other participants discussed the complications that might arise for women attending college. Rachel Abadie described how her friends’ daughters are becoming much more intellectually sophisticated than in previous generations and that the SY boys are not keeping up. These girls and their mothers were

concerned about finding someone on their intellectual level to marry. Dvora Friedman talked about two of her female students with graduate degrees who married outside of the community (Jewish, but not Syrian) because they found the SY men intellectually unsophisticated.

Mrs. Bloch described a scenario much more troubling to community leaders. When talking to other SY schools about college attendance, she found that while the administrators were proud that many of their female students were attending college, they felt that those unmarried girls who attended college out of town or even near Deal were losing many of their religious practices and their community culture. This supports the research done on students from specific ethnic backgrounds who feel the need to cut off ties with their communities in order to succeed in college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Rivas-Drake, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Mrs. Bloch explained that this was more of a concern in Deal, where the community and social scene were smaller. In Brooklyn, even if a girl was attending college, she was part of a social group that kept her involved in the community.

In order to keep their students in the community and simultaneously encourage them to go on to higher education, the faculty at Ilan encourages girls to attend Jewish female colleges and a matchmaker is on staff. In a January 15, 2012, article in *Community* magazine (see Appendix F) these colleges were described in a positive light and the benefits of attending them were highlighted. Marcelle and Rena each received master's degrees from one of these schools and Cookie is working on her BA through another one. All of them got married relatively early (either the 1st or 2nd year after high school), and met their husbands through some form of matchmaker, either a professional

matchmaker or a relative. These two structures allowed them to maintain both a level of insularity within the community and pursue higher education, a community goal that is becoming more commonplace today according to the daughters, the mothers, and Mrs. Bloch.

Based on this evidence it seems that the value the community places on education has shifted dramatically for men, and even more dramatically for women. As mentioned earlier, the change is depicted in the anonymous ad placed in the November, 2010 edition of *Image* magazine (see Appendix E) and in a conversation I had with Mazal Dueck. She said, “I spoke to a very wealthy man recently who barely graduated elementary school. He said that if you want to give your kids a gift then give them an education. Without it, they will not be successful in this world.”

It is clear that the umbrella of community has a powerful influence on women’s lives. It affects their religious literacy practices and their attitudes towards academic literacy, specifically related to schooling. It is also evident that the community is in the midst of a transition and literacy practices and events of many women are still looked at with some ambiguity. This ambiguity is portrayed in a *Dear Abby*-type letter in the *Community*. The author wrote Sita [*grandmother* in Arabic] for advice about helping her niece understand that college does not need to replace family (see Appendix G). Sita’s answer reveals the complexities of a community in transition. She wrote that it is possible to do both, and the niece needs role models from the community to help her understand that.

In order to see the real effect of the community's attitudes it is important to look more deeply at smaller units. The next section addresses this issue by looking at how literacy is related to family.

Literacy and Family

It is clear from the many vignettes, magazine articles, and statements that I encountered during the course of my interviews that family is at the center of life in the SY community. It is also clear that the woman is the "keeper of the family," the one who passes on traditions and makes sure that family members, both immediate and extended, are close. The importance of family is reflected in an *Image*, May 2012 article titled: "MDY is Proud to Celebrate What Really Matters: Our Mothers, Grandmothers, Aunts and Daughters," an article that described a 6th-grade girls' school event celebrating these positive relationships and role models (Shomer, 2012). The words in the title, *what really matters*, reflect the community's attitudes and expectations for its female members. All participants agreed with this assessment and were positive about their main roles as being wives and mothers.

Nanny stated that her family was her hobby. Granny Smith told me how she has been making Friday night dinner for her four children and their children over the past 20 years; and Rachel Cohen mentioned that although she felt Cookie was young and she knew that Cookie wanted to attend college, when the name of a "good boy" came up she was reluctant to pass it by. She said that people told her, "Let her try. One date. If it's her Nasib [intended], then it's her Nasib." She added, "Thank G-d, they have a beautiful family, and we're very happy, and she's still continuing her education, but she's just going about it in a different way."

“Marriage and family are the main focus in our community,” said Granny Smith, Cookie’s grandmother, “but she [Cookie] is going to school now. She can do both. She’ll do it.”

When discussing the role of literacy in a family’s life, specifically in relationship to the family, I received many different responses. Granny Smith told me that she was a big reader, but when she saw that reading was interfering with her parenting, she purposely put her reading aside. Mazal also explained that after she finished college her texts went into the basement. She did a lot of reading to her children, but her own reading was put on hold; however, she used to write vignettes about her children’s antics, and this, she stated, “made me feel like I was a chronicler of my kids’ history,” a part of being a dedicated mother.

The majority of the participants felt that the daughters’ homes were filled with more texts than their own, particularly religious texts, belonging to both husband and wife. Mazal believed that “my daughter’s life is more filled with books and literacy. Her husband’s Seforim [Jewish books] are all over her house. Her daughter’s books galore all over the house.”

Mawmaw pointed out the discrepancy between the generations when she told me that I should not bother coming to her house to take pictures because, “she didn’t even own a bookshelf.” Her daughter, Marcelle, however, had four bookshelves filled with her husband’s, her own, and her children’s books. Figure A is a photograph of Marcelle’s husband’s Jewish books and Figure B is a photograph of her own bookshelf.

Although this may be related to personalities and natures of families, as all of the Abadie generations had many different types of texts around the house and were all avid readers, Dvora Friedman, an English teacher at an SY coed school in Brooklyn for 21 years, believed that SYs generally “don’t have too many books at home.” When I asked her how she knew this, she replied, “we just tested my [10th grade] students’ reading level. Most are at reading level or below, and this is my honors class! I had 1 out of 55 tests as being above grade level.” Mrs. Friedman was able to give me quantitative numbers, and there can be many explanations for the testing results. Mrs. Friedman did add, “You know, it could just be because this is the internet generation having nothing to do with the Syrian culture.” Her general attitude, though, was that the SY community did not prioritize literacy.

Mrs. Bloch also seemed to believe that books and reading are not so much a part of SY family life, although she has definitely seen a change within the past few years. She described the interviews of girls applying to Ilan conducted the year of 2012. “Out of 35, five girls were avid readers. They knew books, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*. Their eyes lit up when they talked about reading. This is very different than in the past when only the geeks read.” This sentiment was echoed by Cookie, one of the daughters. She stated, “People don’t like to come out and say that they like to read because it’s viewed as nerdy, but I don’t care”.

Other than reading to children and helping with homework, I asked if literacy in any way helped create closer bonds within the family unit. The Abadies had some very interesting points. Granny Smith recalled a marriage retreat sponsored by a Jewish non-Syrian group that used writing as a tool to help spouses become closer. She remembered

this as a wonderful time and an incredible bonding experience. That experience led her to begin journaling on her own. Later, when her mother developed Alzheimer's, she encouraged her mother to write down her memories.

Granny Smith had 10 journals in which she wrote down everything that happened on that day, the people she saw, the menus she planned, and so forth. She kept these journals in her living room, and on a child's birthday, she read to him/her what happened on that day. The photograph in Figure 3 shows the text of one of Granny Smith's journals.

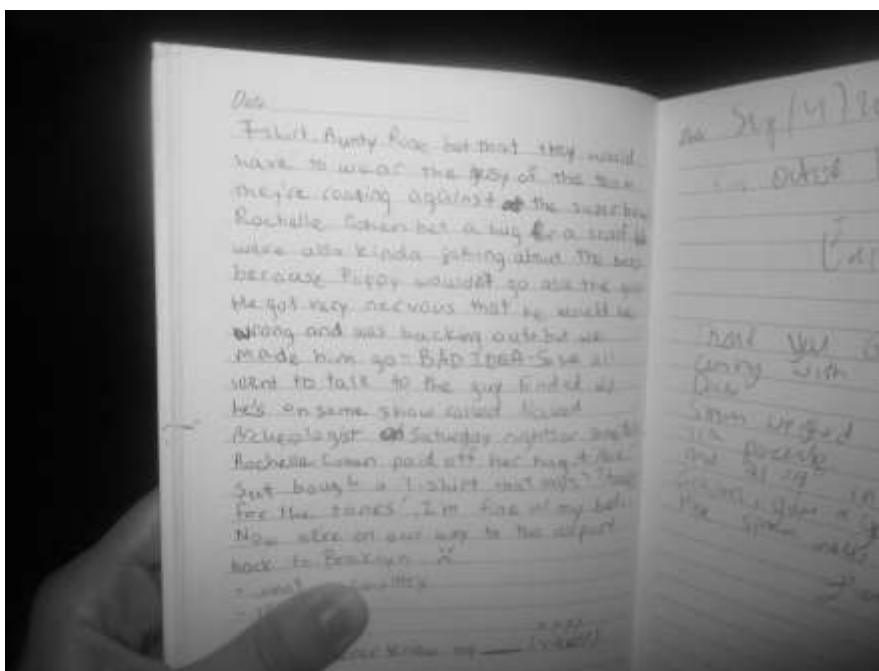


Figure 3. Granny Smith holding one of her precious journals.

In addition to these precious journals, Granny Smith showed me the various books that she keeps in her house for her grandchildren of various ages and the crafts incorporating writing that she bought to do with her children. Rachel, her daughter,

talked about how she reads and discusses books with her children. They both used literacy to promote discussion and bonding.

All of the daughters spoke in detail about reading to their children, specifically books that they remembered from their childhood. Marcelle described how she began reading to her daughter at age 2 and one half years because she was in graduate school and there was a lot of discussion in her classes about reading to children. The photograph in Figure E shows Marcelle reading to her daughter and my son during our interview. Her oldest daughter was not satisfied with the attention she was receiving from her mother, so we took a book break!



Figure 4. A sample of literacy crafts that Granny Smith did with her grandchildren. Her grandson's name, Abie, is written on the top paper.



Figure 5. Marcelle reading to her daughter and my son.

Marcelle does not remember her mother reading to her; she remembers a lot of television, but Mawmaw, her mother, claimed that is not a correct memory. She did read to her!

Cookie had a precise reading schedule for her 18-month-old. She also did her college work on the computer at set times in order to keep her household functioning smoothly. Daughters also discussed reading and learning Jewish texts with their husbands, but Rena said that that becomes less commonplace as the family grows.

In addition to the one-on-one literacy events in which the participants engaged, the grandmothers emphasized how the classes they attended built their Jewish and Hebrew knowledge, but also enabled them to communicate with their grandchildren about Jewish ideas and use Hebrew words that they might not have known otherwise.

This is an example of a communal literacy event that enabled members to engage in additional literacy events with family members.

All of the above data describes families that used literacy in different ways to build relationships and to bond with family members, core expectations and responsibilities of the SY woman. Women described various ways in which literacy was used as a tool to promote family relationships. Different families and different generations used literacy for this purpose.

The connections between female literacy and community, and female literacy and family, have now been explored. Generational changes within the context of a community and within the context of family were addressed. The following section brings literacy to the most personal level, as it explores how young SY women use literacy to define themselves. It is used to look specifically at the roles that community, family, and friends play in creating an individual's identity and the ways in which literacy interacts with these three constructs.

Literacy and Identity

"I do not think that reading and writing is a priority in our community. Manicures and pedicures are," said Granny. "Very few of us were into scholastics. We were more geared towards getting married and being a mommy. We didn't have role models [for a different lifestyle]."

"Everyone around us just did the same thing," echoed her daughter, Mawmaw, a representative of the mothers' generation.

"In our community, it's who are your parents, who are your grandparents, nobody cares if you went to college," stated Rena, a daughter in the youngest generation.

These sentiments were echoed by all of the participants as they described a community that is very social in nature and that has specific gender roles for its members. Failure to conform to these community codes meant separating in some way from the community. This concept, that identities are socially situated, was discussed by Gee (2008, p. 3) when he explained that individuals do not have one identity, but instead have several *Discourses*. He wrote,

big D Discourses, or ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort . . . are ways of being “people like us.”

They are “ways of being in the world”. . . . They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social history.

It is no surprise, then, that Mazal felt estranged from her peers because she was a woman who finished college in the early 1980s, a time when most women did not even attend college. The literacy events in which she participated were not part of the SY “being people like us” social scene.

Until now, the term literacy practice has been used to encompass both attitudes and events; it is imperative to now separate them and specify a difference between *literacy attitudes* and *literacy events*. While the three daughters, Marcelle, Rena, and Cookie all participated in the same literacy event of “doing college,” both Cookie and Rena felt different from their SY peers. Cookie stated that her generation is encouraged to go to college, but she feels that the majority of girls attending are doing it for practical reasons while part of her personal equation in attending is that she loves to learn. She

explained, “I don’t think my passion for education is typical for the Syrian world; I am the odd one out. Even my friends who are going to college, they’re not going for the same reasons that I am.” Her *literacy attitude* differed from the typical SY in that part of her reason for attending college was intellectual, not purely economic.

Rena explained she was not a student and college for her was a means to an end; however, she added, “even if I was the richest person in the world, I would go to college. It gives me more opportunities and it broadens my horizons”. When asked if this attitude was different from her peers’, she replied that the going to college did not separate her from her peers, but the result—a career—did. She explained, “Yes, I am different. I have a life outside of my house. My friends don’t have one.”

Literacy domains. Although my focus has been on religious and academic literacies and my participants had particular ways in which they felt these literacies pertained to them, it was fascinating to see how many of the participants used domain literacy in their lives, or literacy associated with a particular area or domain as explained in Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 7). Although the participants did not view these domain literacies as being part of who they were, I found that they revealed a great deal about the generations and the individuals.

Every generation had the popular Syrian cookbook printed at the time of their marriage and used the recipes to continue cooking traditional Syrian foods. Figure 6 is a photograph taken in Rachel Abadie’s house and shows *Deal Delights* and *Deal Delights II*, cookbooks that were put out when she was married but are now out of print. Poopa Dweck’s *Aromas of Aleppo* is a recently published cookbook that is popular among all generations. In addition to recipes, it contains historical information about the

community and its traditions. The photograph in Figure 7 was taken at Marcelle Dueck's house, and she told me that most of her friends have this cookbook.

This “cooking literacy” and owning specific cookbooks are part of the SY practice of “being like us” (Gee, 2008). Participants used these books to maintain the tradition of cooking ethnic SY food.



Figure 6. Mothers' and Grandmothers' standard cookbooks.

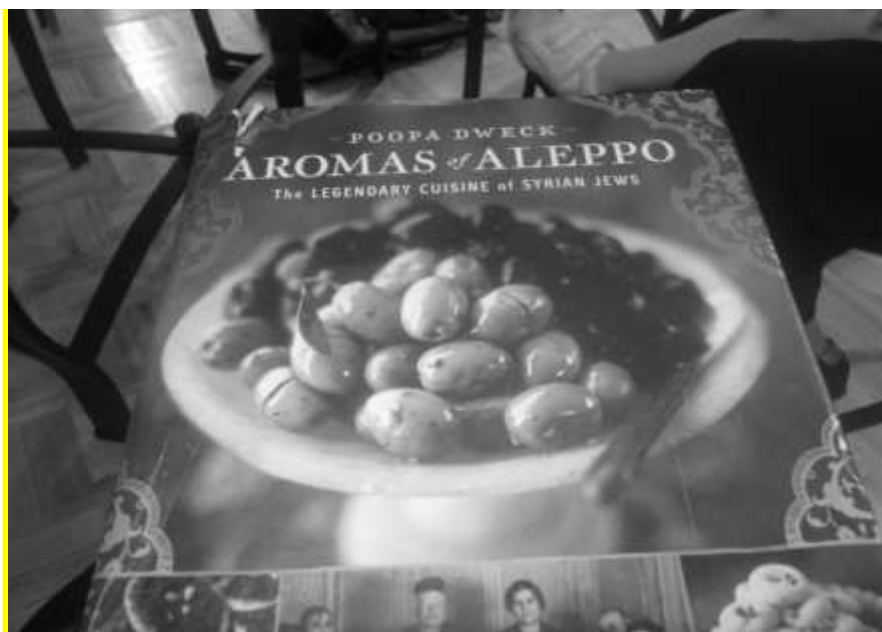


Figure 7. Daughters' standard cookbook.

Differences in generations. Just as the different generations owned different cookbooks, their perspectives on literacy and learning were different. Perhaps the most interesting part of this research was uncovering the different ways the generations thought about literacy. Granny Smith and Savta emphasized that once you know how to read, learning is everywhere. You do not need to sit in a class to learn. Traveling, meeting people, and doing things can provide you with as much learning as an academic education can. They also viewed cookbooks as part of their literate lives.

Mawmaw focused on what she called practical literacy, or literacy related to life skills. “You need to know how to read and write and how to balance a check book.” Mawmaw began a certified agriculturally approved and certified kosher cheese-making business 6 years ago in her basement. She now sells to 20 stores. She credited her drive and her success to her early years when she would help her father in his store over the summer, and if he did not need her, she would take a job ushering in the movie theatre.

She took bookkeeping in high school and felt that this “practical literacy” was essential for every woman. “What if something happened to your husband?” she told her friends.

The daughters, however, looked at learning as something very academic. They used the terms learning and literacy only in the context of something involving academic text. The dichotomy of the two generations can support the notion that academic literacy has become more present in the community, or it can just signify a different perspective stemming from maturity or from the era in which they were raised. I do not have data to support one theory more than the other.

Friendships. The example above describe young women who are forging identities vis-à-vis the community in which they are raised and the roles that the community has assigned to them. Literacy is a deciding force for their identity. Does higher literacy acquisition prevent individuals from being part of the Syrian “people like us” (Gee, 2008, p. 3) community? Both Cookie and Rena seemed to think that it did.

The concept of “being people like us” (Gee, 2008) has a direct connection to the concept of individuals’ identities being defined by the friends they keep. It is interesting to note that the majority of the participants felt that their friendships had nothing to do with levels of literacy attainment or college attendance. Rachel Abadie, a mother, described her group of four friends. “I have two best friends who graduated college. They happen to be my best friends. Then I have another friend who did not graduate college and the four of us are a nice group. I don’t see it [college attendance] as affecting our relationship at all. I don’t see it with our conversing, that those two are on a different level than us.”

Marcelle put it bluntly, “I have a wide range of friends. I don’t just cling to intelligent people. They range from stupid illiterates to intelligent friends who are social workers!” Cookie also told me that one of her best friends who recently got married is not continuing with her education and Cookie did not feel that it impacted their relationship at all.

It is interesting to note that when discussing friends the only woman who mentioned having friends outside of the community was Mazal. That is not to say that others did not, and because Rena went to an Ashkenaz seminary she definitely had friends outside of the community at one point. It just might not have come up over the course of the interviews.

The important point is that while women might feel like a community insider or outsider, based on literacy experiences, friendships do not seem to be affected by that. The women I interviewed discussed friendship as dependent on shared interests and values. Thus, there did not seem to be any complexity or difference when it came to literacy attainment and friendship.

The last section in this chapter is focused on identity, literacy, self-perception, and self-growth. As stated in the literature review, modern scholars look at identity as fluid and reactive to the context and the text of the moment. Thus, people have more than one identity (Alvermann, 2001; McCarthey & Moje, 2002). While all of the participants identified themselves as SY women or women who are part of the SY community, they also used other words to define themselves. Every participant, from every generation, stated that her primary role in life was to be a wife and a mother. The education,

schooling, and career attainment along with their other roles support this notion that identity is, indeed, fluid.

Identities, careers, and literacy skills. When I asked daughter participants if they felt that they would like a new friend to know about their college attendance and career, the answer was blatantly *yes*. All girls were proud of their literacy attainment and felt that it helped define who they were. Rena, Marcelle, and Cookie also described how they got a lot of self-satisfaction from their jobs, much of which utilized literacy. Marcelle particularly liked reading about disabilities and enjoyed undertaking evaluations and assessments that require writing. Rena discussed her work as her “passion” and described how she must document everything, so she is constantly writing. She also reads professional journals to further her knowledge. Cookie created her lesson plans very strategically. She planned every lesson by writing down exactly what she would say. It needed to be clear in her mind and clear on her paper before she would present a lesson.

All of the above examples reflect young women who are finding self-fulfillment in their careers and in the literacy practices that are part of them. Three of the mothers and grandmothers went to work later in life and enjoyed their work: Nanny worked for a bank; Granny Smith runs a camp with her husband; and Mawmaw founded a cheese business. With the exception of Mawmaw, however, I did not hear from them the same level of passion or description of literacy skills related to their jobs. Mawmaw was adamant about the necessity for women to get what she called “practical literacy skills,” or skills related to money, such as balancing a checkbook and creating a budget, but it

seemed that although the other women liked their jobs, excitement and passion were reserved for family life.

In addition to their careers, the daughters used the terms *wife* and *mother* to define themselves. As discussed in the previous section, there were many usages of literacy across the board that helped participants develop these parts of their identities. In addition to these roles that helped women identify themselves, I probed deeper to try to find in what other ways literacy was used as a tool for identity, and I came up with the concept of self-growth.

Self-growth. “Self-growth” in Orthodox Jewish terms is a combination of working on and developing refinement of character and closeness to G-d. Many of the participants viewed their class attendance as a means for self-growth and others discussed reading Jewish texts that inspire and promote reflection on an individual’s character and relationship to G-d. The majority of the participants discussed prayer in either Hebrew or English as a means to become close to G-d, and the daughters gave me names of specific books that they used for self-growth. One daughter, Cookie, described to me her regimented literacy practice that helped keep her focused on working on her character.

Most of my growth is realizing that I have a flaw. That’s half the problem. I take out a paper and write the trait on top of it. Then I write how I use that trait well and what I have to work on. I write the good to bring out my confidence. If I am able to bring out that trait in situation A, then I am able to bring out that trait in situation B. Then I look at the negatives and see which one is going to be the most feasible and I tackle that one first. I usually focus on one for a while. At

every beginning of the month, I look at the paper and see how I am doing. I used to do something like this in high school every night. I would write down four good things that I did and four bad things. On Rosh Hashana [the Jewish New Year] I would take it and see what the common denominator was and figure out my strengths and weaknesses and that's how I would grow.

Cookie used literacy not to define herself but to create herself as a person.

Although the other daughters only mentioned using books and Jewish texts for self-growth, it was clearly part of their culture and the way that they defined themselves—as religious people who were “growing.”

Conclusion

The identity of an SY young woman still focuses on marriage and family but it has begun to broaden and include aspects of self that are related to career and self-growth. Much of this is due to the greater value placed upon literacy, a community shift which seems to have begun within the last ten to fifteen years. Before this point, literacy, both academic and religious, was not seen as relevant to the lives of community females. As discussed by Mazal, if a woman attended college it was extraordinary and often caused alienation. Now academic literacy is appreciated and it is normal for girls to attend college. High schools are becoming more academic (by offering A.P. and higher-level classes) and there seems to be a greater appreciation of literacy as described by Penny Bloch.

Religious literacy has also become more a part of the female community member's *Discourse*. There is a plethora of Judaic classes offered to adult women and the schools are producing graduates who are fluent in reading Hebrew and who

appreciate learning Jewish studies on their own. Women are using their literacy tools for self-growth in spiritual endeavors and career enhancement, something that was absent during the young adult stage of the mother and grandmother generation.

The attitudes towards the above literacy shift are varied. Many, like Rena, are excited to have a career out of the home and to use literacy with their children like Marcelle and Cookie. Mrs. Bloch, principal at Ilan High School, agreed that the younger generations is more comfortable with the literacy shift. She noted that among her 10th-grade students, approximately 50% were oldest children, and she felt that those parents wanted higher academics for their children and had expectations that their children will attend college. She felt that these parents had more of an understanding of the academic world and, therefore, had greater aspirations for their daughters in terms of college attendance.

It is clear, though, from many of the participants that there is ambiguity and even fear about this shift and how this shift will impact the religion and culture of the community. Rachel Abadie and Dvora Friedman discussed this in regards to single women who found SY men unsophisticated. Even though Penny Bloch described situations where the younger generation seemed to be college oriented, she also discussed the fear and ambivalence that some parents and schools administrators had about what the literacy shift would do to the community's values and culture.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion and Implications

This research has direct implications for the SY community and communities in general. It adds a unique perspective to the field of sociocultural literacy; however, before discussing these implications it is necessary to posit the limitations inherent in my dissertation.

Researcher Limitations

During the interviewing process, I found my participants to be introspective and calculating with respect to their answers to my questions. Even though I was not part of their community, I felt that my participants were open and honest. I did not feel that my outsider status colored the answers of my participants, as it did not seem like anyone tried to hide the negativities that they perceived in their SY community. In some instances, I did go back to participants to ensure the veracity of what I thought I understood. While Rena and Marcelle had one understanding of what adolescent SY enjoyed learning, I made sure to ask Cookie what she thought, and she had a different explanation that I included in my findings. In another situation, I had Rena clarify for me the reason that she attended college because there seemed to be contradictions in her statements.

I also gave the manuscript to an involved community member who reviewed and commented on my findings. I reviewed my research with her, and we discussed what areas she thought needed to be described more in order to create a correct picture of the community. I made some changes based on her comments. I cannot be certain; however, that the data received was not modified by the fact that I was an outsider looking in.

It is important that researchers reveal their biases so that readers can more accurately assess various aspects of the study and view the data objectively. When I first began researching this community in 2007, I believe that I perceived myself as more literate and therefore *better* than my participants. I believed the SY community was superficial and materialistic and an appreciation for literacy, specifically academic literacy, was almost nonexistent.

I feel that I have matured since those initial studies. I have grown to appreciate the beauty and tradition of the SY community, and although I perceive the negative aspects of their way of life, I do not feel that I look at them more negatively than the drawbacks in my own community. In doing this research, I have tried to keep my thoughts and my writing as unbiased as possible. My peer reviewer did not feel that this paper was written from a biased point of view, nor did she identify any sentences that could be perceived as biased, however; it is impossible that my thoughts and analyses are purely objective. I have, therefore, revealed to the reader my initial prejudices that might have colored the data.

Study Limitations

In addition to the fact that I was an outsider, this study was not ethnographic. The information collected from interviews came from just 12 people and though I went into homes and had spent over six years teaching in a community school, I have not spent an extended time period living in the community and my research cannot be viewed as an all-encompassing view of the community.

My case study is also limited because the three daughters in this study led very homogeneous lives as they attended the same high school, and they all had husbands in

Kollel. Although their parents and grandparents had diverse life experiences and backgrounds, it is possible that the daughter's data is relevant only to their segment of the community. I did not compare their information to others of their generation, so it is hard to know.

Nonetheless, this intergenerational case study with a bounded system (Creswell, 1998, p. 66) enabled the attainment of a more accurate description of the literacy shift that happened over time. I checked data received from daughters with school administrators and community publications. I also used literature about the SY community (Sutton, 1979, 1988; Zenner, 2000) to check the descriptions of the older participants because memories can be exaggerated or inaccurate. In the film that I attended about the history of the community, many older community members were interviewed, and I used that information either to begin gathering data (as was the case with Shirley Cohen) or to check the grandmothers' data.

Gee and Discourse

The literacy practices of the SY community have been discussed in this study. What is interesting to note, though, is that while these community attitudes towards literacy seem to have governed the majority of members' lives, there are families whose expectations seem to defy or are less aligned with the traditional model. Gee (2008, pp. 155- 159) described the possibility of this paradox when he used the terms, *primary Discourse* and *secondary Discourse*. A child's primary Discourse is learned initially at home. Looking at the Abadie family, we see a line of women who have valued literacy and learning. The grandmother kept journals, the mother was an avid reader, and the daughter is an avid reader and writer who aspired to using her talents to be a teacher. It is

clear that Cookie, the daughter, imbibed from her household a positive message about the connections between women and literacy.

Rena, the daughter in the Dueck family, also had a clear model of her mother attending college while Rena was in school, and she followed in her mother's ways and earned a MSW. Although her grandmother did not study past the eighth grade, she was very practically supportive with childcare and encouragement while her daughter and granddaughter attended college. Both Cookie's and Rena's primary Discourses promoted the value of academics and literacy. Why, then, do these women discuss feelings of alienation, of not fitting in, or of going against the crowd, if their families have had models of very literate women with positive attitudes towards literacy?

The answer to that lies in Gee's concept of secondary Discourses, which "are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their early socialization" (Gee, 2008, p. 168). As members of such a tight knit community, which some girls have described as akin to "living in a bubble," it is impossible for women to deny the expectations of literacy and the attitudes towards literacy for women that have been handed down to them both overtly and covertly.

In both of the above situations, Gee described these attitudes not as "taught," but rather as "acquired by 'enculturation' (apprenticeship) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (Gee, 2008, pp. 170-171). Thus, even though family plays a large role in learning, school and community are omnipresent and constantly influencing the family's lifestyle and attitudes towards literacy.

The specific Discourses that are acquired create the big D/Discourse identity kit or the way that we enact ourselves as specific recognizable beings (Gee 2005, 2008). Thus, if we were to say that all of the participants used their literacy practices to enact specific ways of being an SY female, we would have to specify that part of the SY Discourse until recently has been solely focused on family and community. As Mawmaw said, “How smart do you have to be to vacuum and stuff cabbage?” and as Mazal stated, “As a community, we have never seen education as a high value.”

Thus, when those who appreciated literacy like Cookie or who pursued college at a time when it was almost unacceptable, like Mazal, those women did not feel like they were a part of the SY Discourse. How are these secondary Discourses promulgated? How do families learn these secondary Discourses?

Literacy and power structures. The answer to that lies in the power structure or institutions set up and led by community leaders that inform the citizens. These power structures make some literacies more dominant than others (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7).

In the beginning of the twentieth century until 1946, when Magen David Yeshiva Elementary was established, the community did not see a need for a community institution to educate its children, either male or female. Until that time, the majority of the children went to public school (Sutton, 1979). According to Nanny, Granny Smith, and the elites, even after Magen David was established many of the girls still attended public school because it was not a priority for women to have a Jewish education and learn to read Hebrew. If there was money for tuition, it went to the boys. There were no religious adult education classes for women, either. This left women with a deficit in

their religious knowledge. It seems then that Magen David was opened in 1946 to covet the basics- to insure that the children, particularly the boys, would be able to participate in religious practices and rituals.

It was not until the community began to acknowledge that it was important for female children and adults to pursue religious literacy that the community's priorities shifted and it became important for women to read Hebrew and learn about Judaism. This seems to have begun in the late 1960s when more girls began to attend Magen David. Magen David opened a high school in 1990; until then, boys and girls who wanted to continue their Jewish education went to Ashkenaz schools. It was not until the early 1980s that the more religious opened up separate schools for boys and girls (Sutton, 1988).

It is imperative to note that while these institutions were creating the physical secondary Discourse for their members by creating schools and providing education, they were only encouraging academic *literacy events* and not *literacy practices*! Although *literacy practice* was used as an overall term earlier in this dissertation report, events and practices are being separated here to illustrate an important point. In all other studies about communities and literacy (e.g., Heath, 1983; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Sarroub, 2005) the students were attending schools that were not sponsored by their communities and therefore it was not difficult to accept that there was a clash between home and school literacy. In this study, however, the schools were part of the community, and as described by the participants these were standard places of academic learning where they were taught academic skills.

Why, then, did the academic schooling not lead to a greater ambition for higher learning or, in some cases, invoke a disinterest in academic literacy? The *literacy practices* of the community, specifically the attitudes and messages that the students received from the top layer, did not place a premium on education. Early in the history of the community, both secular and Hebrew studies were not of value to women. Girls attended public school but were not encouraged to go on to any higher education. Even when Magen David was opened, the priority was Jewish education of boys. There was not even an SY high school for either gender until the 1990s.

My interviews with Penny Bloch, administrator at Ilan and Chedvy Peer, teacher and school counselor at Hillel, the co-ed SY school in Deal, reveal schools that are teaching Jewish studies, and are also directly encouraging students to go to college. Just recently (Summer, 2013), Mrs. Bloch called to ask me if I knew of a good college counselor because she felt that their current counselor was not effective enough in encouraging post high-school studies and getting the students into good colleges. The number of AP courses provided at Ilan has also grown in the past eight years.

Chedvy Peer also felt that the initial shift towards literacy and post high-school education occurred around eight years ago when her school became more college oriented and hired a new principal. She said that now Hillel has a special academic writing class in 9th grade, in addition to their regular English classes. College guidance begins in tenth grade when the counselor meets with the student and parents. Before this time, guidance was limited to 12th grade. What is interesting to note is that in her eyes, the school does not differentiate between the boys and the girls when it comes to college guidance. Both genders are encouraged to take higher-level classes and to attend college.

However, 8 or 10 years is not a long time. Until recently, attitudes towards literacy for women at the secondary discourse level were that literacy was not a priority. Although no participants said that they ever received this message directly from teachers or principals (except for Granny Smith in the 1940s when she was distracting the boys), they all knew and felt it, either because of comments from others, as Mazal described, or from general popular behavior as both Rachel Abadie and her mother explained as part of the reason they dropped out of college.

It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that even in one very homogeneous community, literacy practices and literacy events do not necessarily align, and if a shift is to be made, greater alignment will be needed. This re-alignment is evident in the high schools that are encouraging their students to attend college and by the daughter participants who did not feel that they were fighting a battle to go to college.

Although the SY community might be a model where the literacy events and literacy practices were not aligned purposely because of the cultural expectations of its members, it seems probable that other communities are unaware that events and practices are not aligned and are not, therefore, capitalizing on and developing their members' literacy skills.

In my Orthodox community in Passaic, New Jersey, for example, we want our students to learn research skills, which will enable them to conduct higher-level research in higher education, but at the same time, we do not support the use of the internet. Although we are encouraging a literacy event, the literacy practice or attitude is actually paradoxical. Students are receiving mixed messages or are not developing the skills we

want them to develop. In order to solve this dilemma a realization of the inconsistencies of our practices and events must be acknowledged and rectified.

Literacy and the people. Another interesting point that emerged from this research is that it is not only the power structures that evoke change; it is also the members of the community. Literacy shifts can be initiated bottom-up, not only top-down. Mazal related passionately about the plethora of classes related to religious literacy, “The community wants it more; the Rabbis want it more; the women want it more; it’s coming from the people.” Her last statement, “that it is coming from the people,” was supported by many of the participants, who described how these classes enabled them to learn things that they never knew, and for certain participants, such as Granny Smith, Nanny, and Mawmaw, to develop closer relationships with their children and grandchildren because they could participate in similar literacy events.

Literacy and social practices. The community and its power structures are not impenetrable castles. The outside society has infiltrated into the community and cultural ideas have caused shifts in the literacy development of women. As stated in the findings, in addition to religious literacies, academic literacies have gained importance for young SY women. This is directly connected to Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) statement that “literacy practices are embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (p. 7). This cultural connection is reflected in the fact that many women are attending college because of the new Kollel lifestyle that has become more popular in the community. According to Mrs. Bloch, the Syrian community is branching out in many directions and the Kollel movement has become part of many of the very religious SY’s lives.

It is enlightening to see that many of the schools, particularly the one that I taught in, Ilan, are accepting the social change and addressing it by providing students with skills and knowledge that enables them to pursue higher education. A tight-knit community that has particular ways of doing things can resist the changes being brought to its ways of life. In this instance, a model has been found of a community that is addressing societal changes and working with them.

Literacy and history. In addition to the social and cultural values embedded in literacy, there is also the fact that literacy practices are historically situated (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7). This was seen in the explanations that women gave about why girls other than those adopting the Kollel lifestyle were attending college. All of the participants mentioned that the recession has made two incomes necessary. They also discussed how the community, which began in the early 1900s, has grown so large that it cannot afford to live on the traditional family business and must look elsewhere for income. Families are recognizing this and are reacting by encouraging their children to immerse themselves more in academic literacy and pursue further education in college.

Cookie explained to me, though, that although the school(s) might be making strides in changing their literacy practices, the traditional SY approach to women and literacy is still clearly present. She noted particularly how people connect higher education to *having to make a living*. “People look at the women who are supporting their husbands in Kollel and think, OK, they chose that lifestyle. But if a woman goes to work because her husband is not making enough, it’s like ‘hazitah’ [poor thing], she has to work.”

Cookie's comments revealed that literacy shifts take time to reach a community. They also showed that although changing literacy events might be easy because schools can teach and require them, literacy practices or perspectives are deeply entrenched and require more time to change. It makes sense for a community that is actively changing its literacy practices to address these attitudes overtly. Although women might be able to advance their literacy skills, their identities and their feelings about themselves are greatly influenced by the secondary literacy attitudes of the community as discussed by Mazal and Cookie. Research cited in Chapter III also emphasizes the need for community and family to be supportive of the student and her lifestyle in order that the student is comfortable and successful as a student (Dennis et al., 2005; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Implications

The implications of the above analysis are clear for both the SY community and any other community undergoing either a planned literacy shift or one that happens because of societal, historical, and economic changes.

Implications for theory. My study adds to the canon of sociocultural literacy as it studies a community whose literacy practices were never studied before. Additionally, I believe that my study adds a new and unique layer to the study of sociocultural literacy as I have described a community where until recently greater literacy skills did not mean more prestige or greater social acceptance in the community, in fact, for many members, specifically for the females, greater literacy skills led to alienation. The rich businessmen who had the power and prestige often were not even literate as described by Nanny and

Mazal. *I did not find another example of a community with exact literacy attitudes in my research.*

Mazal discussed how she was looked down upon as being unfeminine because of her college attendance. Although Cookie didn't mind that people think that she is different because of her intellectual bent, she does feel that people in the community look at her as strange.

My study also shows that there are many different catalysts for shifts in literacy practices. Although much of what the participants discussed was tied to money and the economy, there were other factors. Specifically, when it came to religious literacies, participants discussed the *wanting to know* as coming mainly from the people. I think this can be seen as a model of what a community can do to effect change of any kind from the bottom up.

Implications for schools. The most important idea is that while literacy events can be physically altered, the more entrenched literacy practices or attitudes must be addressed in order for the new literacy events to be of value, and in order that the members of the community be able to keep their identities as part of the community intact while they are joining in this community shift. The discomfort expressed by Mazal, and in some cases, Rena and Cookie, was because part of their identities seemed at odds with the community's literacy expectations for its women. If *events* are to be changed so must *attitudes*. This can be done through effective school and family communication or with community publications and gatherings. Educators who value the constructive theory of education and want to teach curricula that support and affect the whole child can also use the data from this study to tweak curricula so that issues of

identity can be addressed in high school, preparing for the college experience, or in college, helping students understand themselves and their identity struggles.

Students will also need more help if attending higher education, and it might be necessary for the school or community agencies to continue college guidance throughout the college years. Rachel Abadie of the mother generation discussed being placed in a remedial reading class that tainted her college experience and influenced her decision to quit college when she became engaged. She stated that if she had a more positive college experience, she might have stayed. A community and/or school that sends first generation students to college needs to continue support throughout the time of college attendance. This stance is supported by the information provided in Chapter III, under the section discussing the experiences of first generation college attendees.

Implications for the SY community. I anticipate that the information garnered from my project can help the community understand the changes that are occurring and provide recommendations of support for the young women who are dealing with these changes. I am hoping that my findings can be used for pre-college preparation at the high school level for this particular population and that they will be able to give the community at-large a greater understanding of the college experience, the identity work transpiring in such an academically literate rich environment, and an awareness of the conflicts and connections between literacy and culture.

Future Research

This study has examined a literacy shift occurring in the SY community. Another study involving a greater number of participants specifically from a wider range of religious levels within the community will provide more in-depth data of how this shift is

affecting the entire community. In addition, it would be important to study the fourth generation who are coming into school with parents who have already “shifted their literacy perspective” and see the ramifications of such a strong change within the community. I would love to find a community whose literacy practices including both events and attitudes are similar to the SY and examine any literacy shifts there. I would also be interested in doing a cross-cultural study of students of an SY and an Ashkenaz school and examine differences in primary Discourses and how these affect literacy attainment.

Conclusion

What effects these shifting literacy practices will have on the community are hard to predict. Mazal, a marriage therapist, already feels that there are more divorces. “Since women have started to get educated, the divorce rates have gone up. Since the women are more sophisticated to begin with, now that they are more educated, they are not satisfied with being second class citizens.”

Mrs. Friedman and Rachel Abadie discussed SY girls becoming more sophisticated than SY boys because the girls are attending college while many of the boys are still going straight into family businesses. Both participants discussed the girls’ issues with dating SY boys who were not of their academic caliber; two of Mrs. Friedman’s students married Ashkenaz boys because of this.

Many of the mothers and grandmothers felt that, in general, the girls are not getting married as early as they once did. They felt that it was partly because many of the women from earlier generations married their “high school sweethearts,” which is not acceptable in the religious section of the community, but they also felt that college was

playing a role in the delay. Chedvy Peer, a counselor at Hillel, a co-ed school in Deal, concurred with the fact that girls were getting married later but related it to college attendance, as Hillel is a school where there is nothing the matter with having a “high school sweetheart.” The participants were unclear, though, whether girls were not getting married so that they could attend college, or if because they were attending college they were not getting married as quickly. It would seem from my data that it is because of the latter, but I cannot generalize.

This shift of attending college after high school has other ramifications for the community as discussed by Mrs. Bloch.

The president of the board was upset that we weren’t getting more kids into good colleges, so we called other schools to find out what was going on there. Hillel, a co-ed school in Deal said that about 5% go to prestigious colleges, 10% go to decent colleges like Monmouth or Rutgers, 5% work for their fathers, and the rest attend community colleges, but they are concerned because the social scene in Deal is so weak (as opposed to Brooklyn) that the girls who are attending college are losing the religion and values that we want them to have. So they are not sure that college is a good thing. They are feeling bad. What is the point of sending them off?

This is clearly a community concern. Mrs. Bloch says that the model her school follows is one that enables the girls to pursue post-high school education and at the same time continue to stay part of the community. They encourage many of the girls to complete college quickly, either online or in a Jewish college program that allows them to finish school quickly, and remain in a Jewish setting. They also have alumni events,

but most important they connect their students to a matchmaker. That means the girls know that there is someone looking out for them and working to help them find a mate, which is still the most important thing of all. As Granny Smith stated, “the main focus is still on family and getting married. We want to be sure that they are married and they are settled and everything is good.” These statements reflect the feelings of community members that more literacy acquisition can be a double-edged sword.

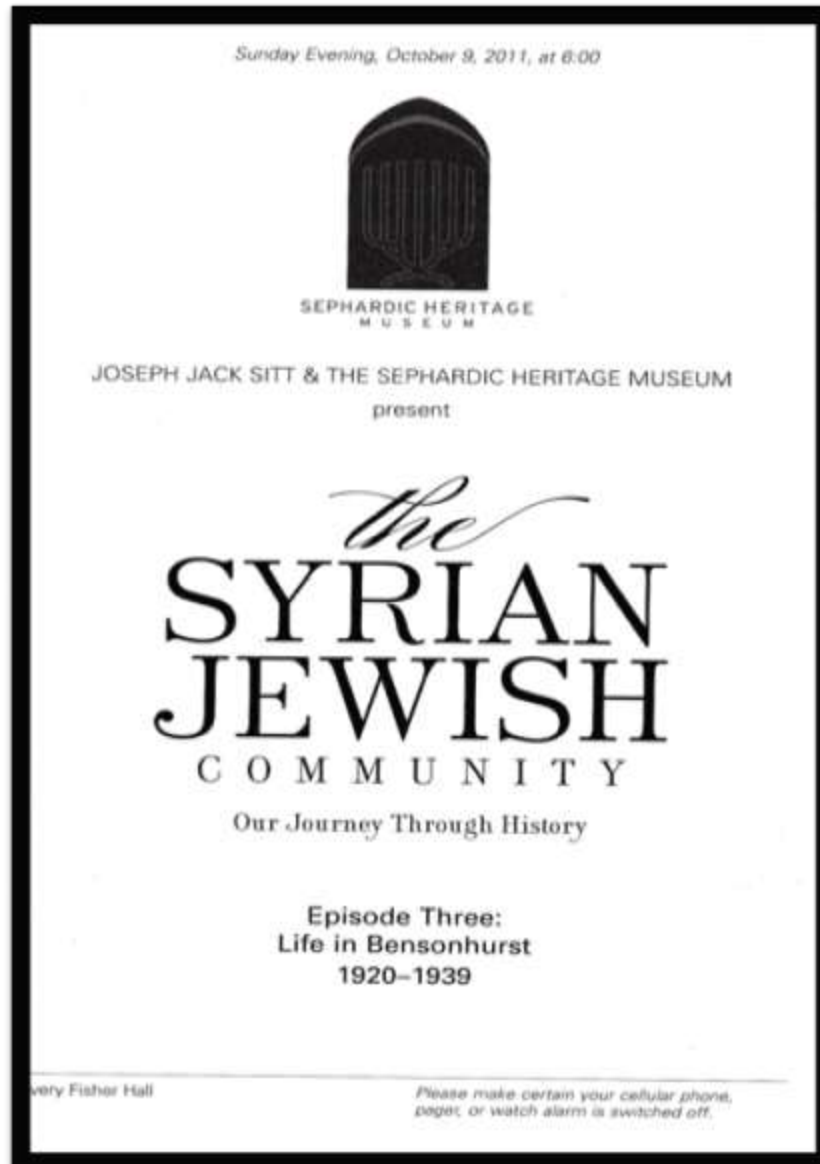
At the same time, the grandmothers and mothers were proud of their daughters and wanted them to move on to higher education. The daughters I interviewed were able to maintain the balance between academic literacy and SY life because they were so steeped in religious literacy first in school and then in their Kollel lifestyles. When asked if they wanted a new friend to know that they were college educated, they all replied in the affirmative, though they said that it would be secondary to their roles as wives and mothers. Unlike their mothers, they do not have to hide the fact that they went to college and they could also participate in the community’s religious life as individuals who follow the Hebrew prayers in Synagogue, as teachers in schools and as teachers of their own children. The image of the SY woman has changed from being a housewife divorced from academic and religious literacy with limited choices, to a woman who has empowered herself and her family by using academic and religious literacy in all aspects of her life. Nonetheless, I believe that the intrinsic conflict between modernity and tradition will always be present. The photograph in Figure 8 depicts this quandary. There is a computer in the middle, and there is a Hebrew prayer book right next to it. These two literacy artifacts represent the dichotomy of being a young, modern SY female.



Figure 8. The old versus the new

APPENDIX A

Page from “The Syrian Jewish Community: Episode Three” Playbill



APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Personal Literacy Practices

1. In what ways do you use literacy (reading, writing) during leisure time?
2. In what ways does your family use literacy (reading, writing) during leisure time?
3. What types of literacy materials are in your home? When and how are they utilized?
(Books, newspapers, magazines, computer text, religious books)
4. In what ways do you use literacy for personal growth?
5. In what ways do you use literacy in day-to-day life? (communicating, shopping)
6. Is there any passion that you have in which literacy is used?
7. Do you think personal literacy practices have shifted from the previous generations to this one? If so, why?
8. In what ways do you use literacy to define/describe who you are?

Academic Literacy Practices at Home

1. How do you do your homework at home?
2. When and how does your family discuss your school literacy work?
3. In what context do you use the computer for school?
4. How do you do research at home?
5. Describe your homework routine when you were younger until now.
6. What role do your parents have in your schoolwork?
7. Do you think parents' involvement in schoolwork has changed from the past generation to this one? Explain.
8. Besides for technological advancements, do you think ways of doing homework have changed over the generations? Explain.

Literacy Practices Related to Peers

1. How is literacy involved in your relationships?(writing letters, reading together, doing schoolwork together, discussing books)
2. When and for what reason do you use text messaging or other types of writing?
3. Do you think that the use of literacy to relate to peers has changed from the previous generations to this one? Explain.
4. In what ways do you think different levels of literacy attainment affect friendships?

Literacy Values

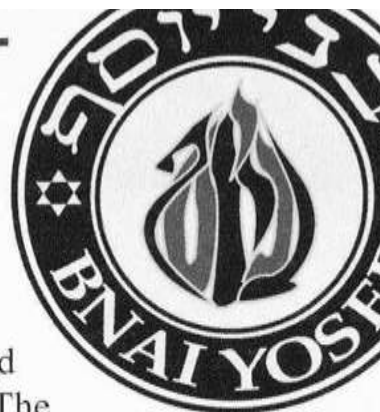
1. What do you feel about the value of literacy in a person's life?
2. How do you view literacy as being part of your life now? How do you see literacy as being part of your life in the future?
3. What role does literacy play in your community?
4. What role does literacy play in your religious practices?
5. What do you think the community values or does not value about literacy?
6. Do you think the community values have changed over time? Explain.
7. How do you think the concept of girls going to college is viewed by the community?
8. Do you think that the perspective on girls going to college has changed over time? Explain.
9. If you think that more girls are going to college- how do you think this impacts the community lifestyle?
10. How do you feel about attending college (or not attending college)? In what ways do you think it impacts your identity as a Syrian Jewish young adult?

APPENDIX D

List of Winter Classes at Yad Yosef, 2011

Women's Classes Underway at Bnai Yosef

The new 5772 schedule of women's classes has already begun at the Bnai Yosef Ladies Learning Center. The wide variety of speakers, times and topics enable ladies of varying ages and interests to find just the type of class they are looking for. The free classes are appropriate for post-high school girls and beyond, and are delivered at Congregation Bnai Yosef, 1616 Ocean Parkway (corner of Avenue P) in Brooklyn.



Day	Time	Speaker
Monday	8:45 pm	Mrs. Naomi Sutton
Monday	9:00 pm	Mrs. Grace Boiangui
Tuesday	2:00 pm	Rabbi Haim Dahan
Tuesday	9:00 pm	Mrs. Monique Mezrachi
Wednesday	9:00 pm	Reb. Vitale Kalmanowitz
Thursday	8:00 pm	Mrs. Stella Tawil
Thursday	9:00 pm	Mrs. Nina (Chemtob) Marciano
Sat. Night	9:00 pm	Mrs. Jackie Bitton

Reprinted with permission from *Community Magazine* – the most widely circulated

Sephardic monthly.

APPENDIX E

Anonymous Paid Advertisement

Spend Wisely

Catering for 1,000 of your "closest friends"
4 years of tuition

40 supersized centerpieces
1 year of tuition

1 sushi and sashimi table
New textbooks for an entire grade

A wedding cake that no one will eat
1 SAT prep course

*Putting your children's education first and
having a small wedding that your guests will actually want to attend*

Priceless

IMAGE

In 2009, the average cost of a wedding in the United States was \$30,860.

Paid advertisement

Published in *Image* magazine, November 2010

APPENDIX F

Article on Jewish Women's College Program

I

-FEATURE STORIES-

ASK SITO
 COMMUNITY CHEST
 IT HAPPENED TO ME
 IT'S YOUR BUSINESS
 KASHRUT ALERTS
 LEGACY OF LEADERS
 LETTERS
 LIFE IN THE BIG CITY
 MABROUKS
 RECIPES
 RIDDLES & TRIVIA
 THE CROCS KIDS
 THE LIGHTER SIDE
 THE SHAATRA FILES
 TO JUNIOR'S HEALTH
 TO YOUR HEALTH
 TOP 10 JEWISH LAWS

Past Articles:

COLLEGE WITHOUT THE COMPROMISE: ORTHODOX FRIENDLY COLLEGE PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN

By: Chaya Steinman



For the many observant Jews seeking to pursue a degree – without putting their spiritual wellbeing at risk – the number of colleges and universities that cater to the needs of the Orthodox populace has increased in recent years. These schools schedule their classes around the Jewish calendar, offer separate male and female programs and provide kosher food options. Some programs even include a Jewish studies component to complement the vocational degree.

Most famous among these institutions of higher education in the New York metropolitan area, are Yeshiva University and Touro College. But beyond these large academies, there are several smaller schools that are offering a familiar and comfortable atmosphere for the observant Jewish young woman who wishes to obtain a top-quality college education. These programs enable Jewish pre- and post-graduate students to pursue a degree without compromising their religious values or academic standards.

Sara Schenirer Institute for Special Education: Accelerated Degree with No Short-Cuts

Conveniently located in the heart of Boro Park, Sara Schenirer Institute for Special Education has been providing a quality teaching degree in Elementary Education and Special Education and producing wonderful teachers for the past 28 years. For young women interested in pursuing a career in education, Sara Schenirer offers an outstanding program in which students obtain a Bachelors degree in Behavioral Science and a Masters degree in Elementary Education/Special Education in a mere two years from an acclaimed university. In this accelerated program, the students are usually awarded 30 credits for their

studies in seminary, receive another 30-36 credits through course work, and meet the other requirements through College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests and correspondence courses. There are alternative options available for those students who have not attended seminary. Best of all, although college degrees are never inexpensive, through a variety of financial aid grants and other options, the program is relatively affordable.

During the two years of intensive study, the students receive personalized guidance and instruction from the professional staff to navigate through the program, and while there are about 300 girls in attendance at any given time, the teachers know each girl by name. In order to enable them to gain hands-on experience in working with children with special needs, they are also granted access to a reading remediation clinic run by the Institute for children in the community. The beauty of this program is that while it is fast paced – requiring only one-third of the time of a comparable bachelors and masters degree – there are no short-cuts in the path to scholarship. The students receive a well-rounded education, and are required to take core courses in the sciences and humanities. The Institute for Special Education offers a real college experience for serious and motivated girls, and is able to speed up the process by trimming less relevant activities and minimizing wasted time. The majority of their students even maintain full-time jobs while attending school.

Graduates of the Institute for Special Education routinely go on to high level jobs, as the college has established an excellent reputation for producing outstanding teachers. Additionally, students who wish to pursue other careers or to supplement their education with degrees in other fields, such as social work or physical therapy are readily accepted to top-notch universities, with Sara Schenirer's well-recognized Behavioral Science degree under their belt. Moreover, in addition to the potentially lucrative certifications in Early Childhood, General Education up to Sixth Grade, and Students with Disabilities, is the added option of certifying to teach bilingual students.

Besides being a worthy academic institution, Sara Schenirer is also a safe and comfortable environment for Orthodox women. In addition to scheduling around the Jewish calendar, the nature of the accelerated program speaks to the needs of the Orthodox community where marriage and family life often make it difficult for young mothers to devote themselves to demanding college courses. Therefore, the Institute designed their program to cater to young women in the short window of time before marriage when they have time to focus exclusively on school.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this program is that all secular subjects are taught in conformance with Torah values. For example, although a degree in Behavioral Science requires psychology courses, and several topics covered in most modern psychology curricula run contrary to Torah *hashkafot* and might offend the modesty of an Orthodox Jew, the Sara Schenirer curriculum overcomes this challenge. After consultations with Torah authorities, the psychology lessons are prepared in such a way that students receive all of the relevant information, with a focus on what's pertinent to a teacher and mother, without delving into those unseemly aspects that, for their purposes, would not even be useful.

Three years ago, the Institute for Special Education extended its bachelors and masters degree program to include an adult education component. This unique program, geared for women ages 25 and up, allows women who are balancing family obligations and jobs to return to college. The premise of the adult education classes is that an Orthodox woman can receive a rewarding degree in a religious, professional and supportive environment tailored to accommodate her busy lifestyle.

Courses are offered in the mornings for women who are free while their children are in school, and also in the evenings for those who prefer nighttime classes. There are extended breaks around the *hagim*, recognizing the fact that busy mothers do not have time to study and take tests while also preparing for the holiday. Moreover, because students have a multitude of options available to them, they are encouraged to complete the courses at their own pace. The Institute also accommodates their older students by accepting all transfer credits from seminaries and other colleges, regardless of when they were acquired. It's all about flexibility.

Sara Schenirer's adult education track assuages the difficulties faced by women going back to school after many years. For those unfamiliar with internet classes or uncomfortable in a classroom setting, the student body provides peer support and comfort, and the women form relationships as they help one another succeed. An interesting advantage of adult education is that many of the students have years of experience as mothers and uncertified teachers, and their veteran perspectives enhance the classes immensely. This popular

program has graduated numerous students, all of whom are currently employed in the fields of their choice.

BYA-Maalot NY: College and Seminary Combined

For girls who wish to continue attending Torah classes after completing school, while also earning a college degree, BYA-Maalot is an attractive option. BYA-Maalot offers a college education that melds a practical degree program with accredited Torah classes.

Maalot was established in Jerusalem as a branch of Neve Yerushalayim in 1984 and now boasts campuses and college programs worldwide. They provide a warm Bet Yaakov environment, enabling young women to earn credits toward a college degree without forsaking their spiritual growth. The faculty is composed of educators of the highest caliber, their graduates have a proven track record of excellence, and nine out of ten have gained acceptance to their graduate program of choice.

Maalot partners with Thomas Edison State College and Excelsior State College of New York to provide a wide array of quality degree and specialization choices. Students can obtain a Bachelors of Arts degree as well as Bachelors of Science degrees in business administration, applied science and technology, human service and nursing. There is also the option for Associate degrees in management, applied science and technology, natural science and mathematics, and science in public and social services. Furthermore, they also offer approved specializations in humanities, natural sciences, psychology, history, economics, liberal studies, social sciences, sociology, mathematics, and computer science.

For added flexibility, Maalot provides both a full-day and a half-day track. Moreover, New York State Residents who qualify can receive up to \$5,000 in financial aid.

Thomas Edison: "Your Degree Anytime, Anywhere"

Thomas Edison State College offers one of the most flexible college degree programs in the country. A degree can be earned through online classes, examinations, prior learning assessment, and transfer credits. Though it was established for the general public, it may seem that Hashem created Thomas Edison's remarkable program especially for Jews. Motivated students can receive a recognized degree on their own schedule and in a way that is most convenient for them.

For independent learners, or for those who are good test takers, credits can be earned by demonstrating college-level knowledge and skills through examinations. Thomas Edison provides study materials and credits can be earned without a classroom, teacher or assignments. Those who have the requisite knowledge and experience under their belt, can participate in the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) program where students demonstrate mastery of a subject that has been learned outside the classroom. PLA is a course-based process that pairs students with a mentor who is an expert in the field, and together they create an electronic portfolio that displays the student's proficiency. Thomas Edison also offers online classes in over 100 areas of study. Plus, they have an extremely generous policy for accepting transfer credits, which means that they honor most yeshiva and seminary credits. By combining previous credits, proficiency tests and online courses, even the busiest students can earn a degree.

The Other Options

Of course, the college programs described here are not the only ones of their kind. With Hashem's help, programs that cater to men and an analysis of larger Jewish colleges and Universities will be the subject of future articles.

It should also be noted that not everyone agrees that a college degree is necessary or even particularly helpful for those who are simply looking to maximize their lifetime earnings. At the other extreme are those who feel that an on campus experience, in particular, is the ideal way to train our youth to successfully compete in the changing market place. What's your opinion? Please share your insights and college experiences with us.

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APPENDIX G

Dear Sito Letter

-FEATURE STORIES-
 ASK SITO
 COMMUNITY CHEST
 INSIGHTS INTO EDUCATION
 IT'S YOUR BUSINESS
 KASHRUT ALERTS
 LETTERS
 LIFE IN THE BIG CITY
 MABROUKS
 MASHIAH REVEALED
 RECIPES
 RIDDLES & TRIVIA
 THE CROCS KIDS
 THE INTERNATIONAL
 COMMUNITY
 THE LIGHTER SIDE
 THE SHAAATRA FILES
 TO JUNIOR'S HEALTH
 TO YOUR HEALTH
 TOP 10 JEWISH LAWS

Past Articles:



COLLEGE BEFORE MARRIAGE

By: Sito

Dear Sito,

I'm worried that my niece is making a bad decision that could affect her for the rest of her life. She is an eligible 18-year-old girl who is not taking dating seriously. Instead, she insists on finishing college and establishing a career before even considering settling down. While I don't have any problems with her ambitions (I went to college and worked), I do think that it's silly to dismiss the idea of marriage for the next five to six years. In spite of the painful reality, she will not accept that a 24-year-old career girl will have a harder time getting dates than an 18 to 19-year-old college student. How can I help her become more open-minded?

An Advising Aunt

Dear Advising Aunt,

It seems to me that your niece may actually be quite open-minded, but not in the way which you feel comfortable.

In my day, the women of our community were, with few exceptions, committed to work hard in the home and gained complete gratification from the efforts expended on behalf of their family. Most of the women who did join the workforce at that time, did so before they had children – when it did not interfere with their primary objective, which was centered around family and the community. In this era, open-mindedness can describe women who feel they have a real contribution to make to the larger society, to educate themselves and work outside the home. Additionally, in these tough economic times, it may makes sense for some to seriously pursue a career, as opposed to just a job, in order to contribute in a significant way to the family income and derive personal fulfillment. As a modern young woman, your niece may be caught in the trap of believing that she must choose either a career track or a marriage path during her early adult years.

But these two endeavors are not necessarily mutually exclusive for a girl just finishing high school. Although it is difficult to get an education and build a career while raising a family, it is far from impossible and it may be even more fulfilling than the alternatives, on many levels. However, before you try to convince your niece to do things your way, you may want to consider the consequences of trying to pressure someone into doing what you think is right for them. If you do succeed, over time she may regret the decision and come to resent you, neither of which are probably in your plan.

So instead of trying to convince your niece about anything, just help her to make a more informed decision. You can start by encouraging your niece to talk to several of the many successful career women in our community who are also extremely dedicated to their families. Try the Angel Fund for possible references. Then let your niece ask her own questions about building a career and starting a family. Though I can't predict what specific advice they might offer, I would venture to say that your niece will be encouraged to leave all her options open.

All the best,

Sito

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