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Literacy and Agency: The Case of Young Adults who Came to Sweden as Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Minors

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ABSTRACT
In this article, relations between agency and literacy are analysed focusing on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children’s literacies. A dialogic perspective on agency is used, with agency defined as dynamic, and with attention paid to the parameters time, culture, semiotic resources, and physical space and position. The material used for the analysis are interviews with five young adults. Interviews revealed the conflicting positions of the young persons in focus here, as agents acting to position themselves while simultaneously being in a vulnerable position. The social uses of written language resources outside school in this case turned out to be especially important for interaction with peers, relatives and acquaintances. The analysis also showed the importance of support for the development of multilingual literacies, and it identified restrictions at the social level that may be the result of monolingual literacy for the individual.

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Introduction
This article focuses on relations between agency and literacy, analysing how five young adults who arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors have used written language to negotiate their positions as socially recognized communicative participants. The number of unaccompanied minors, that is children under the age of 18 years who immigrated without a legal carer, has increased steadily in Sweden from 388 in 2004 to 35369 in 2015, according to official records.1 Research on unaccompanied minors in Sweden, such as Wallin and Ahlström (2005), Hessle (2009), Keselman (2009), Brunnberg and Darvishpour (2016), Celikaksoy and Wadensjö (2016) and Söderqvist (2017), has mainly focused on social and health issues. Popov and Sturesson (2015) studied teachers who they found not prepared to meet immigrant students’ needs, while the focus here is on the minors as subjects. Listening to some young adults who came as unaccompanied minors may provide us with knowledge and understanding that is important for education in general and literacy education specifically.

In literacy research, as in research on second language acquisition (SLA), there has been a shift in focus from an essentialist perspective on language learners to one that regards literacy and SLA as complex and socially embedded phenomena. Literacy and SLA are here treated as aspects of languaging, and as such as related to agency and to power relations (Canagarajah, 2013; Pennycook, 2001;
Literacy research that adopts a sociocultural approach, following the ideological model (Baynham, 1995; Besnier, 1995; Street, 1993), has put the focus on events and practices—that is, on actions and ideological constructs—in relation to written language. The concept literacy practices, which is commonly related to agency, will be used here to attend to how the individuals use written language to negotiate their positions in their socialization processes. Following Baynham (1995, p. 71), it is important to understand literacy as a form of social practice and to investigate the ways in which it interacts with ideologies and institutions to shape and define the possibilities and life paths of individuals. Agency is particularly relevant for the understanding of SLA and literacy (van Lier, 2008), while Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000, p. 169) even argue that “the ultimate attainment in second language learning relies on one’s agency”.

The use of agency, according to, for example Ahearn (2001) and Dufva and Aro (2015), allows for an analysis of individual and social aspects of literacy as well as a study of the individual as being active, complex and unique, situated in certain cultural and social contexts, which is particularly relevant in the case of the current group (Wedin, 2012). Thus the aim of this article is to analyse relations between literacy and agency through an analysis of the narratives of five young adults.

**Theory**

The theoretical base for this article is a framework of sociocultural theories including social power relations as a base for the analysis of relations between literacy and agency. This implies a view of agency as fluid and as developed in social interaction, and of literacy as a socioculturally situated phenomenon that includes written language.

**Agency as a Fluid and Diverse Phenomenon**

In an influential article on agency, Ahearn (2001) argues that the term agency should be carefully defined when used. She proposes a provisional definition for agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112), advocates a nuanced treatment of the term and distinguishes between different types of agency to highlight the complexity and ambiguity that are built into the term, proposing a diverse view of agency rather than a uniform understanding, as do Vitanova, Miller, Gao, and Deters (2015). As agency is strongly related to issues of power, it is always important to analyse who misses out on the opportunities that relate to agency and how these opportunities may be restored. Questions of agency are particularly interesting in relation to unaccompanied minors, as some may have earlier held positions that commonly relate to adulthood, such as being a soldier, the breadwinner of the family or the carer of siblings (Wedin, 2012), while being classified as an “unaccompanied minor” in Sweden means a position as a child with adults such as a trustee and social service personnel appointed for the unaccompanied minor’s well-being.

According to Vitanova et al. (2015), the notions of agency and self are usually perceived to be intertwined. Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) emphasize the interactional aspect of agency as relationships that are constantly constructed and renegotiated. In sociocultural theory, the mediated essence of agency is in focus, which means that agency is perceived as being developed in relation to social groups and as something intrinsically social (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). As sociocultural theory focuses on the complex interactions between, on the one hand, individuals and communities, and on the other hand, human cognition and experiences, it directs the focus onto the interdependent nature of agency.

Dufva and Aro (2015) find the sociocultural theory to be biased towards systems and activities and as less suitable for understanding small, personal stories and affectional emotional aspects. They argue that the focus on socioculturally mediated agency is suitable for understanding how an individual makes use of cultural resources, gains power in a community or masters a means of mediation. Thus they follow Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) in arguing for learner interviews and narratives to make the individual’s personal perspectives and interpretative feelings and emotions
visible. As language learners are complex persons involved in real interactions that are important for their social lives, individual aspects such as emotions and experiences are important in the analysis of agency. Dufva and Aro (2015) argue that the dialogic perspective is one way to add the perspectives that they find not included through sociocultural perspectives, using Bakhtin’s chronotopical focus, which he created to make relations between time and space visible, on experiences to study how individuals construct space or occupy a certain place in time, and thus experience agency in their unique time–space coordinates. Thus they understand agency as being a dialogic process in which individuals negotiate space to position themselves in an ideological landscape (see also Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004).

Following this, agency is perceived to be more than free will such as in action theory (Ahearn, 2001) or consciousness and reflexivity such as in psychology (Vitanova et al., 2015), and agency, like literacy, is not something that an individual either has or does not have; it is a phenomenon that is negotiated in a dialogic process. Ahearn argues for distinguishing between different types of agency while recognizing that multiple types of agency may be exercised in any given action to gain “a more thorough understanding of the ‘complex and ambiguous agency’” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 130).

Block (2015) attempts to reverse the tendency that he finds in applied linguistics to neglect structure in studies on agency. He follows Bucholtz and Hall (2005) in arguing for a view of agency as the accomplishment of social action and proposes four parameters that may help us understand how agency relates to identity (Block, 2012, pp. 54–55): (1) the temporal/historic frame, (2) the cultural framing, (3) the assembling of semiotic resources in communication, and (4) the physical space and physical positioning. Although Block focuses on the social structure and everyday practices, I find these parameters relevant for the analysis in this case. By including the aspect of time, it becomes possible to relate events to “big” historical processes, such as globalization or north–south migration. Including culture allows for a recognition of the embeddedness and interdependence of acts of agency in past and present experiences. Attention to physical space and positioning includes micro-levels such as face-to-face phenomena and macro-levels such as position in a school, a city or a nation.

In this article, a dialogic perspective on agency will be used, with agency defined as dynamic and developed in an interplay between individual choices and actions and ideologically defined practices. This will be done by paying attention to the parameters time, culture, semiotic resources, and physical space and position—by using.

**Agency and Literacy**

The importance of agency for theories on language learning is highlighted by Duff and Doherty (2015), who claim that processes and outcomes of language learning may be better understood through the theorizing of agency and of language learners as agents, experiencers and beneficiaries. Relationships between agency and literacy may be perceived as directed both ways; people use written language resources in relation to agency, while their agency simultaneously influences how they develop their understanding of literacy. The individuals that are in focus in this article, five young men who arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors, had developed literacy skills in Swedish, their second language, while simultaneously using written repertoires to position themselves in their new ideological landscape. To analyse literacy among these young persons, it is important to understand their life situations as a whole, with their various affordances and learning opportunities, both inside and outside school, which implies a perception of literacy as being a social investment. To develop an understanding of the individual’s use and development of written language repertoires, it is necessary to go beyond what Dufva and Aro (2015) call the traditional school chronotope, such as what are commonly perceived as appropriate literacy activities in school contexts. In order to understand the interplay between agency and literacy, it is important to study the role of literacy in the negotiating of identities and in the creating of people’s social lives.
As we shall see, the five young men that are in focus here actively took part in building new lives in Sweden and positioned themselves through social interaction, and during this process, literacy played an important part. Following Ahearn (2001), self-socialization is here used for the process whereby we actively influence our own social development. Self-socialization is necessarily socioculturally mediated, and in today’s society with the use of self-directed online resources, the term becomes particularly relevant.

Learners should be treated as real persons engaged in real interactions that involve experiences, emotions, and values that characterize the particular situation and the relationships therein (Thibault, 2011). As learners bring their agency to bear on the affordances of their personal context and the resources available to them, they negotiate conditions for their life situations, both material and social, while positioning themselves and becoming positioned by others as acting individuals. Norton (2000) uses investment instead of motivation to illustrate how learners relate to their social environment and to others in their realities. This becomes relevant when exploring how writers (and speakers) negotiate social positions and power through discourses and is thus an aspect of learner agency. Following this, an analysis of literacy in relation to agency allows for an understanding of how environment, community, and dialogues intertwine with the individual’s unique experiences.

Method and Analysis

The material used in this article consists of interviews with five young adults. These interviews were a follow-up on an earlier ethnographically inspired longitudinal study where two of these young men were followed throughout their first three years in Sweden (see Wedin, 2012). For this study, a further three young men were included: they too had arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors. All five had arrived three to five years before the interviews were conducted, and were between the ages of 18 and 22, and were thus presumed to be able to understand what was involved by participating in a research study and to reflect on their own lives. To enable the establishment of a relation of trust between researcher and interviewee, the three additional men were chosen from among the friends of the two from the earlier study. The five participants will here be called Saleban, Hamid, Yosuf, Omar, and Abdimalik. Four of them spent their years as minors, which means until they became 18 years, in a group home. The fifth had been moved between different group homes and some foster homes. They were born in Afghanistan or Somalia, and for some of them, the journey to Sweden included spending extended time in different countries. Apart from Dari and Somali respectively, they also had varied oral and written language skills in Farsi, Arabic, French, and English when they arrived in Sweden.

The interviews will be understood as narratives that these five young men shared. Following a socio-narratological perspective (Frank, 2010), narratives and people are here viewed as mutually dependent. This means that the informant is positioned as the authority with regards to his own narrative and the researcher as having the will to understand and the ability to relate the narrative to other phenomena. The choice of these men is not representative for any group. However, they share some common experiences, which makes what they say relevant when creating knowledge about relations between literacy and agency, in the case of unaccompanied minors.

Interviews were conducted individually, in Swedish, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for the analysis. During the interviews, that lasted between one and two hours each, the participants were asked about their early literacy experiences: what they could remember about the use of written language in the environment where they grew up, how they used written language during the journey to Sweden and how they developed proficiency in reading and writing in Swedish. Through their narratives, they expressed their views on the role that literacy has had and will have for them today and in the future. Thus the analysis will create an understanding of literacy in life as an ongoing narrative, not as discrete events. Due to the sensitivity of the situation and the vulnerability of the individuals, information will here be presented in ways that make identification difficult. This means, for example, that the presentation of the results will be organized in such a way so as to avoid
the tracking of single participants through the whole text. Participants were carefully informed that information given could be published, while particular attention was paid to the omission of information provided in interviews that could make identification possible.

**Findings**

The literacy practices these young persons have been involved in have influenced their agency—in their home countries, during the journey and in Sweden—while simultaneously their agency has influenced their literacy practices. In the analysis, the parameters time, culture, semiotic resources were first paid attention to. This made different aspects of the relations between literacy and agency appear that will be used for the presentation of the findings. Their early literacy experiences were of particular significance for what happened later in life, and therefore these will be presented first as a background. A second aspect that stands out is the social role of literacy as an investment for the development of literacy skills, while the mediating role of literacy and relations between agency and mediators is a third aspect. A fourth aspect is how space, time, and language become connected through digital media as well as through social aspects of digital literacy, and finally an aspect of relationships between literacy and agency to reach personal goals will be presented.

**Early Literacy Experiences**

The opportunities to use literacy varied among these five young men. One claimed that he did not have an opportunity to learn to read and write until he came to Sweden, and also that he had not used literacy in any way he could remember. The other four developed basic literacy skills in the environment where they grew up, which included reading and writing in different languages. Four of them attended Qur’an schools when they were very young, but their individual experiences differed. Saleban claimed to have been very angry with the teacher, who hit them, and he said that he refused to go to school and that his parents then allowed him to stay at home. Yosuf said that he had only negative memories from his time in Qur’an school because it was “sloppy”. He said that the children used to fight a lot and that he dreamed of going to the “proper school”, something that he did not get a chance to do before he came to Sweden. He claimed not to have acquired any literacy skills during his time at the Qur’an school.

Omar and Abdimalik, on the other hand, claimed to have learned to read and write Arabic in the Qur’an school. Omar laughed as he recalled his time at that school, and he said that his memories were positive. He remembered that he had had a good time together with his friends who were his age. He said that he had liked the Qur’an school very much and that he could understand today why the teacher hit them²: “[…] I thought at that time that he was an evil person, but now that I’ve grown up I can understand”. He said that his teacher was the nicest among the teachers in the area and that sometimes parents criticized him for not being strict enough. Abdimalik remembered using a “loha”, a wooden plate, a stick and ink when writing. He also remembered that the teacher used to write on a board, pronouncing the sound and the words, and that the children were supposed to copy and repeat. He recalled how they started with single letters and that one of the first words that he learned was *asadun*, which is “lion” in Arabic. He also remembers that the first whole sentence they read was “surat alfaatiha” in the Qur’an and that he did not understand it then—he just memorized it.

Thus, out of the four who went to Qur’an school, three claimed to have achieved early literacy skills in Arabic while one claimed not to have learned anything. Saleban and Abdimalik also had an opportunity to go to mainstream school, but Saleban estimates that he spent only one and a half years there as he fell severely ill, and when he returned after about half a year of absence, the

²The interviews have been translated into English from Swedish, and translations were made to represent the content. Minor deviations from standard Swedish and affirmations from the interviewer, such as mm/yes, are not represented. Only minimum punctuation is used.
teaching was too difficult for him. The lessons were taught both in Somali and English, and English became particularly difficult when he returned, so he dropped out. Abdimalik, on the other hand, estimates that he finished grade eight in his home country, although he began when he was 10. He had been taught at home by a relative, so in initial testing he was placed in grade five. This means that he may have spent about four years in school.

Since all five young men grew up under difficult conditions, with war and instability, home-schooling was important, and four said that they had developed literacy skills in their homes. Saleban, Abdimalik, and Omar had close relatives in the home who arranged formal teaching, gathering the children in the family and in some cases also including children from the neighbourhood. One young man was taught by an older brother who had been to school, one by an uncle who was a teacher but who could not work in a school due to the instability in the region, and one had an uncle in Paris who taught him French when he came to visit. Hamid, who did not join any school, claimed that it was due to his own driving force that he learned to read and write. When he saw that the time for starting school had passed, he asked his parents to teach him, particularly his father. His father was interested in political matters and history, and there were newspapers and books in his home, so these became his first reading materials. He also recalled how he specifically asked his parents to show him how to write letters, that is to say, personal written messages, and to teach him the difference between formal and informal letters. He had read a storybook in which a character wrote a letter to his parents, and that is what prompted this request.

The literacy practices that these young men had been involved in as children included different languages. In Qur’an school, literacy was in Arabic, and for those from Somalia, literacy in school was both in Somali and in English. In these cases, copying and memorizing seem to have been dominant literacy practices. At home, some reading and writing in Dari/Farsi (in Afghanistan) and French (in Somalia) was also practised. Saleban, who left school early, particularly liked to go online and search for historical information in French. Yosuf, who claimed not to have learned how to read and write in Qur’an school, further claimed not to have attended a regular school and not to have learned any reading and writing at home. He said that as his family was very poor, he had had to leave home in Afghanistan at the age of eight and go to Iran. He made his living first by collecting and selling recyclable waste and slowly worked his way up to become a street vendor. After a few years, he had advanced to become a seller of scarves and was able to send money to his mother so that she and his younger sisters could join him. As a quite successful seller, he became skilled in handling money, but he claimed that he never understood letters. Schooling was never considered an option for Yosuf, but after a few years he took off for Europe. He made his way through Europe in different ways—one of them was by hanging under long-distance lorries. When asked how he was able to find his way, he replied that he had watched football in Iran and thus he wanted to go to England. He knew the flags from the countries where the teams came from, and thus he chose lorries with those flags. The journey included great hardships, and after some years he ended up in Sweden. He said that it was only when he began school in Sweden that he first learned to read and write. However, during the interview he remembered that he had understood the difference between Arabic and what he called European writing in Iran, through the number plates on the cars that were in both scripts.

Only two of the five young men mentioned using computers, mobiles or the internet before coming to Sweden. Omar took an evening course in his teens where some computers were available, and Saleban said that he liked to spend time at a relative’s internet café. He then used the French he had been taught by his uncle to go out on the Internet to search for information about history and culture, two subjects he found interesting.

The time–space aspects of literacy and agency become visible in these narratives. The instable situation characterizing their childhood affected how they learned to read and write, who helped them, what context it took place in and what language was used. In their narratives, their own agency in relation to literacy stands out, such as when requesting help from parents, when using earlier
language competence in French to find the desired information on the Internet and when refusing to attend Qur’an school. In the contexts where they grew up, literacy was present and all five were exposed to literacy one way or another, while their opportunities to develop literacy skills varied due to the circumstances.

The Social Role of Literacy When Developing Literacy Skills in Swedish

In their narratives about their first years in Sweden, the role of agency is highlighted when it comes to developing literacy skills in relation to school demands. Coming to Sweden meant that many of the young men’s earlier language skills became devalued and that they needed to develop Swedish as a second language, including Swedish literacy, for a variety of purposes. They all initially spent a number of months at a refugee camp before being placed in a municipality. Schooling should, according to Swedish law, begin at once, and minor immigrants and refugees have the legal right both to education in their mother tongue and to study support through their mother tongue. They remembered receiving some form of schooling while in refugee camps, but all claimed that it was only when they arrived in their municipality that mainstream schooling first started. They were initially placed in an introductory class, and after some time, gradually, they were included in mainstream classes. Four of them did not receive any mother tongue education or study support in their mother tongue at all during their first years in Sweden.

Yosuf’s initial experiences of schooling in Sweden differ from those of the others. He claims that he did not know how to read or write when he arrived in Sweden, and he said that he “was placed in a group for those who know nothing”. This is notable, as he had actually taken care of himself since the age of eight and managed to take himself all the way to Sweden. However, he is also the one who most strongly stressed his own competence in the interview, saying that he succeeded quickly: “in fact it went very well for me; I shocked myself, and the teacher […] was shocked”. He studied hard and after two years he was admitted to upper secondary school. However, he was never given any mother tongue education, and thus he did not learn to read or write in his mother tongue, which uses Arabic script.

Literacy was also used outside school from the beginning in Sweden. The asylum process includes official literacies—for example, filling in forms and reading documents such as the records from the initial interrogation. Also, everyday life entailed official forms of literacy, such as those related to applying for an identity card and accessing health services and social services. In these literacies, help from mediators, such as health and social services personnel, trustees and lawyers, was important. Many of these literacies were of importance for the young men’s future, and in some cases they took the initiative to influence their outcomes by urging someone, often a Swedish adult in an official position, to help with reading or writing. One of the young men explained how he had asked his trustee to request records from his initial police interview and explain them to him in full. He discovered some things he wanted to change and made sure that this was done, with the help of the trustee, the lawyer and an interpreter.

The narratives showed the importance these young men placed on developing literacy skills in Swedish. Their ambitions regarding schooling and literacy are expressed as high and in particular Saleban and Hamid mentioned having explicit goals with their literacy, which implies a need to develop suitable competence. Saleban explained how he had not been very motivated to learn in the Qur’an school or in the mainstream school in his home country, but how in Sweden he was highly motivated because, as he said: “here you have a future and you have to learn Swedish to become included in Swedish society” while in Somalia “there was nothing there to motivate you […] even if you were motivated to read, what could you do when there’s war there?” As a child he had spent a lot of time at home with his mother due to his illness, and he referred to his mother when explaining his eagerness to study in Sweden:

You know I was often at home, you know, there in Somalia. I was in contact with my mother all the time; I sat close to her, I was close to my mother and I listened to what she said and I was the only one that she trusted, me,
I didn’t lie to her I always told the truth then … I remember, you know, when I was going to move—when I was about to fly away. Then she said to me: “Now you will be alone” [...] she said: “Don’t forget that you have a future and you have to manage on your own because you have a future. Yes, you have a big chance now you have to, you know, take care of yourself.”

He also said that because he had always been at home with his mother, coming to Sweden meant a chance for him to socialize with friends, and that this has helped him learn Swedish. For Hamid too, language learning and studying were important for socialization, but unlike Saleban, his focus was on those he had lost, his parents and siblings. By applying for an identity card and passport, by searching on social media and by travelling, and also by studying and working hard to make money, he managed to find and reunite with his lost relatives.

Through the narratives it becomes obvious that literacy in Sweden was about more than developing the literacy skills necessary for schooling. That literacy is a social investment becomes clear when considering social aspects of the literacy practices the individuals engaged in, and also the importance literacy played in the struggle for life, search for lost relatives, socialization with friends and handling of official matters. The time–space aspects make visible the devaluation of earlier linguistic skills as well as the relevance of literacy in relation to loved ones that one is separated from. The devaluation of earlier skills becomes visible through Yosuf’s description of himself as someone who did not know anything at the start of school.

**Literacy Mediators and Agency**

The mediating role played by those who are more skilled is highlighted in sociocultural theory (Street, 1993, p. 2001). The young men in this study have both served as mediators and been helped by mediators. Hamid and Omar explicitly mentioned how they had acted as literacy mediators during childhood for others who did not know how to read or write. Omar, who had learned to read Somali in his home, read newspapers for his friends, who were particularly interested in sports results. He also acted as a mediator when friends wanted to send or receive love letters. He described how he used to take advantage of his skills by consciously changing the message. If a boy wanted him to write to a girl, for example, he could change the message to make a fool of the boy, and when somebody received a letter and asked him to read it, he would sometimes read it out loud for all to hear if the girl had written that she did not love the boy. Hamid, who lived in a smaller village, helped other villagers with both reading and writing. Although he was a child, adults would ask him to write or read letters for them. He did not remember much about the content, other than that it was usually about family matters or finances. He recognized that this was quite a powerful role for a child: “Yes, it is very important that you know in such a society where not everybody has opportunities [to learn]. Yet even though you know little it is still worth a lot, but in Sweden if you know little it is nothing because everyone knows.”

Also here time–space aspects of relations between agency and literacy become visible. In their home countries, Hamid’s and Omar’s quite limited literacy skills had given them roles connected to power, which was not the case in Sweden, where demands concerning literacy skills are very high. When they came to Sweden they in turn received help through mediators who had mastered the types of literacy that were needed, particularly in the asylum process and in education. These mediators helped them to claim voice through literacy, for example, in the asylum process and during their first weeks and months in Sweden by helping them to write official letters and filling in different forms. The young men also highlighted the important roles played by individuals in their development of literacy skills in school. They mentioned, for example, individual teachers and personnel in the group home as having been particularly important and as having given advice about how to learn, such as by repeatedly practising reading and writing.

Power relations become visible when literacy practices that gave a boy in Afghanistan the powerful role of literacy mediator were not valued in Sweden at times when he himself needed literacy mediators to apply for asylum and to argue for what he found important in his new life.
**Connecting Space, Time, and Language Through Digital Media**

The importance of digital media for social interaction becomes visible in these narratives. Digital media soon became important for these young persons, mainly through mobiles and computers. They found texting on mobiles particularly convenient when communicating with Swedish speakers: expressing oneself in a second language takes time at first, and it is less expensive to text than to talk on the phone. The Internet was used to connect on social media, and also to search for news, films and music connected with their home countries. The Internet became particularly important as they used computers in the group home. Surfing on the Internet, the boys not only listened to music, films, news, and other messages related to their earlier lives, but they also created social relations and networks. Apart from Yosuf, who had not learned to use Arabic script, they created different ways to find missing relatives and friends, and to create groups with whom to share information and to arrange social activities. These interactions took place in different languages, mainly the languages of their homes, Dari/Farsi and Somali respectively, and Swedish, but some of them also used Arabic, French, and English to a greater or lesser extent. As is common to literacy on social media, this included the use of mixing language varieties, abbreviations, symbols, and diverse language resources related to what may in a simplified way be called “chat language”. This makes the parameter of semiotic resources visible as well as the complexity of literacy as a phenomenon.

That cultural parameters are important for literacy practices is also revealed by the narratives. The use of written language for social purposes was something new to the boys. They did not remember much social use of written language from their earlier lives, apart from occasional letters between families concerning issues such as deaths or weddings. In Sweden it was mainly through digital media, texting on mobiles or surfing the Internet on computers that written language took on social importance. In school they learned to use written Swedish in typical school practices while they learned most of the skills they needed for using the Internet from peers. Omar describes how he learned to use digital media from his friends at the group home:

O: I saw friends who were there every night where we lived in X-town. It was two hours. There were quite few of us, 15 people.
Å: You were allowed to sit two hours.
O: After two hours somebody else comes for two hours, then somebody else will come. You have to write your name and what time you’re going to sit and such things and I was there and I didn’t know anything the first time and it was YouTube that I could use the first time, YouTube, and I listened to music but when I sat there all the others came and they look: “—You are dull! What are you doing?” “—I’m listening to music.” And then I created an e-mail address and we became friends and we could chat and then after a few days I could chat with five or six people and then I saw everybody sitting there using Facebook and such things: “—But what is this?” “—Well it’s sort of” “—Yes I want to use this” and they helped me to create an account on Facebook and from then on I sat there every day and it was so fun to sit there and two hours became very little you think that you have not been sitting for one hour and quickly two hours run out and finally I understood how to use these […]

The young men quickly developed different patterns of Internet use. Some used the Internet to find old friends or lost relatives. They also used e-mail, but to a lesser extent. By contacting people and asking about those who were missing, they created webs of contacts, exchanging telephone numbers, e-mail addresses and names on diverse Internet accounts. This was done by everybody except for Yosuf, who had to rely on Swedish on the Internet and in other forms of written communication and thus was excluded from digital communication where other languages dominated. Some of them entered what they called “love sites” where they chatted with girls. Hamid, who could read Farsi with Arabic script when he arrived in Sweden, soon translated his skills in Latin alphabet to Farsi, which enabled him to chat with Farsi-speaking girls using the keyboards with Latin alphabet, thus combining his earlier literacy skills with his new ones. After a while, he and the others became skilled at using Google Translate and the copy-and-paste function to use the Arabic alphabet. Thus, the literacy practices related to digital media not only involved many languages but also different alphabets.
Abdimalik, who has two siblings in another part of the country and his mother and smaller siblings in Ethiopia, used digital media to communicate with them and also to connect with lost friends: “They are in North America; they are in the Middle East; they are in Africa North Africa.” He said that he had started to look for them using Hotmail but then changed to using MSN and Facebook. He was a member of a group on Facebook with school friends from his former hometown where they exchanged information about old teachers and friends. He had recently learned that one of his teachers had passed away. He described how, together with his present classmates, he was now a member of both a Facebook group and a mobile group. They used the Facebook group for sharing information about homework and group work, and the mobile group for quick messages, such as to ask about a test date or to let the group know if somebody was ill.

The young men used different social websites, such as Tagget, High Five and Google Chrome, and followed football leagues on the Internet. Omar and Yosuf, who played football, were also members of a Facebook group together with their friends with whom they played football, and they used this group to arrange where and when to meet to play.

Through the focus on time–space parameters, socio-semiotic factors in particular are made visible here. The use of digital media that was fairly new to these young men soon became important for social interaction and then earlier linguistic resources became relevant. This becomes particularly clear when Yosuf, who had not learned to read or write in his earlier languages, had to rely on Swedish in his digital literacy practices, which restricted his opportunities to interact socially through digital media with his friends.

Literacy and Agency to Reach Personal Goals

The importance that these five young men attach to literacy and school success becomes clear in their narratives. After three to five years in Sweden, Hamid and Omar had passed upper secondary school and at the time of the interviews were looking for jobs, while Yosuf and Saleban had just entered upper secondary school. Abdimalik planned to pursue university studies and had decided to remain in upper secondary school for one extra year to improve his grades. All five stressed the importance of learning Swedish well and of developing a high level of literacy skills. They explained that they had to study so much harder than their Swedish-born classmates and that reading and writing took so much longer for them as second-language learners. Hamid described how a writing task that his classmates could finish in a few hours or a day would take him two or three days, and while his classmates could postpone their work, he had to start well in advance to be able to finish: “I sit more, I think more than they do, struggle more.” He claimed that this was both because of the Swedish language and because he did not go to school before.

All of the young men said that they had received help from their teachers, who explained clearly and provided them with good examples, but still, the time constraint was mentioned several times. Omar, who liked history and claimed to be able to memorize facts and learn details, referred to a test as an example of a case when time constraints caused him to fail:

When there was a text, you did not get extended time to finish at home. Worst was history. […] You are expected to write about how Hitler came to power. I needed more time. I had not finished when the teacher said: “Omar time is up.” History was fun for me, but I can’t write fast, I have to look for words because I can’t use the same word [all the time].

Hamid, who developed a political interest in his home, took an interest in political work in Sweden also. When elections were held, he listened to the presentations given by different political parties at school and then chose one that he found corresponded with his own views and joined their youth league. He was engaged in the local league and participated in courses, meetings and other arrangements at the district and national levels. During this time, he participated in literacy activities that are common in political work, such as writing agendas, minutes and various types of applications, annual reports and reports on different events. He also engaged in writing letters to the press and he was particularly proud that one of the bills, which he wrote together with two Swedish friends, passed.
the district board and was sent to the party’s national conference. Thus he was involved in different
types of official literacy practices both as an individual and in collaboration with others. After some
time, however, he stopped doing that type of work. One of the reasons that he gave for this was that it
was difficult to work together with Swedes of the same age, as he found them a bit immature. Another
reason was that he needed to work hard after school to earn money to help his family.

Here the importance of time becomes particularly apparent, both that it takes a long time to
develop literacy skills such as fluency and accuracy, as well as that reading and writing in a second
language takes time. Time constraints become visible when time limitations prevented Omar from
demonstrating his knowledge and the time demands expressed by Hamid. The case of Hamid also
makes visible the importance literacy may have on reaching one’s goals, in his case ideological goals
for social change.

Discussion

These five young men’s individual narratives point to varied types of relations between literacy and
agency. What the participants say gives us a picture of how they perceive the role of literacy in their
lives, and of agency in relation to their literacy. The dialogic view of agency, following Ahearn (2001)
and Dufva and Aro (2015) in combination with Block’s parameters (2015); time, culture, semiotic
resources and space, makes different aspects of relations between literacy and agency appear. The
reciprocity in how these young men use written language in relation to agency, while agency simultaneoulsy influences their literacy practices, becomes clear. Agency in the form of refusing to attend
Qur’an school, using French in the search for information on the internet, and taking steps to alter
the report from the police interview are examples of how the agency of individuals affects their lit-
eracy practices as well as their development in terms of literacy skills. Simultaneously, the opportu-
nities they have had to develop literacy have been crucial for their agency.

The varying role of literacy mediators (Street, 1993, p. 2001) is important for agency. During
childhood, adults in their environment played different roles in their early development of literacy
skills. The relatives of Abdimalik and Omar who arranged for literacy education in their homes, and
the parents who answered Hamid’s questions and who created a literacy environment that included
books, newspapers and letters, constituted important mediators for their literacy development. Also
Saleban’s uncle who taught him French became a literacy mediator, and enabled Saleban’s search for
information on the internet. The mediating roles that Hamid and Omar had are also examples of
agency. The significance of competent literacy mediators for the ability to claim voice in important
matters becomes particularly clear in the initial asylum process, where minors may be very active and
take many initiatives, while still having to rely on others, mainly adult Swedes.

This makes the devaluation of language skills, which is a result of mobility, visible, similar to what
was found by Blommaert, Creve, and Willaert (2006) (see also Blommaert, 2008, 2010). Here, the
mediating role that Hamid could hold in relation to adults becomes of no value in the Swedish con-
text and the devaluing of Yosuf’s interactive skills becomes visible when he characterizes himself as
someone who did not know anything, as well as the devaluing of Omar’s history skills through lit-
eracy in the test situation.

Another aspect of relations between literacy and agency is the variation and diversity in literacy
practices that the young men are involved in. Features of their lives include linguistic diversity (spo-
ken or written), a variety of ways of developing their literacy skills, a diversity of motives to use lit-
eracy and a diversity of literacy practices. Although none of the young men can be said to have had
access to extended formal education before coming to Sweden, they had all had contact with written
language in different ways. Those who had had the opportunity to develop basic literacy skills before
coming to Sweden are today multiliterate, which means that their literacy practices include different
languages, different scripts and varied literacy practices. When the importance of digital media for
social networking is considered, it becomes clear that Yosuf’s opportunities to socialize through digi-
tal media became restricted as he had to rely on Swedish. It may be noted that he is the only one
among these five young men who claimed not to have had any contact whatsoever with his lost relatives, such as his mother and younger siblings. Thus variation in cultural experiences and semiotic resources, such as different orthographies and written norms, play significant roles for how relations between literacy and agency develop.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the strong desire among these young adults to develop at a personal level and to influence their own opportunities through active involvement in their future. This becomes particularly clear from what they said about their time in Sweden, and especially from what Yosuf and Hamid said, these two having struggled exceptionally hard to get here on their own. What they say about travelling from Afghanistan, with and without the help of smugglers, gives the impression that they are extremely motivated when it comes to influencing their lives and also that there are very capable. This has apparently also influenced their literacy skills: in the case of Hamid, who got his parents to teach him, and in the case of Yosuf, who in a short time developed enough literacy skills to be admitted into upper secondary school.

The analysis has also made apparent the importance of literacy for developing social networks through digital media, particularly the internet. The use of diverse languages and scripts made it possible for Hamid to interact with people and to travel to find his lost parents and siblings. It was also through social media that Abdimalik was able to reconstruct the social network from his former school and interact with his new classmates outside school.

**Conclusion**

The use of agency as dynamic and developed in interplay between individuals and the discourses they are inscribed in and inscribe themselves in (Ahearn, 2001; Dufva & Aro, 2015) has made visible processes that have a bearing on literacy and education, such as the importance of literacy as a tool for social investment and for positioning oneself in a new setting. Using agency, as a dialogic process in which individuals negotiate space to position themselves and as negotiated in the creation of social lives, revealed the conflicting positions that may be connected to the young people in focus here, as agents acting to position themselves while simultaneously being in a vulnerable position. This became particularly apparent through the asylum process, where they act to receive asylum but have to rely on literacy mediators mastering the literacy practices included in this process. The dialogic perspective on agency (Block, 2015; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004; Thibault, 2011) made it possible to relate literacy practices as they emerged both to agency and to access, which both relate to questions of power, equal opportunities for education and democratic rights.

Using Block’s parameters (2015) as a lens enables us to view the local in relation to the global, relating what happens on the individual level to processes such as global trends and information flow. The social uses of literacy outside school in this case turned out to be especially important for interaction with peers, relatives and acquaintances, while restrictions at the social level that may be the result of monolingual literacy for the individual were identified. This unveils the devaluation of linguistic skills that may be the result of mobility (Blommaert, 2010), while highlighting the social relevance of literacy (Street 1993) which affects how relations between agency and literacy develop.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**


