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## 9. “ONE SIZE CAN’T FIT ALL”

*A Story of Malay Children Learning Literacy*

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of the educational achievement of Malay children in Singapore increases every year as the country braces itself for the challenges of a knowledge-based economy in a fast changing world. Malay children’s educational performance has been under close scrutiny over the past two decades, but only in recent years has there been a significant improvement. In 2004, 75% of the Malay cohort who had originally enrolled in Primary 1 went on to study at post-secondary institutions,<sup>1</sup> an improvement of over 32% compared to the 42.5% that were admitted in 1994. Against international benchmarks, Malay students in Primary 4 and Secondary 2 did as well as students from the top-performing European countries in the 2004 *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMMS) (“Malay students as good,” 2005).

Amidst these success stories lurk other developments that are equally significant. While the percentage of Malay students in a cohort going on to post-secondary education has risen, their enrolment in the more sought-after post-secondary institutions, the polytechnics and universities, pales in comparison with that of students of the other ethnic groups. The percentage point increase in Malays gaining admission to these institutions (1.3% in 1980, 28% in 1999) is smaller than that of Indians (4.3% in 1980, 37% in 1999) and even smaller than that of the Chinese (13% in 1980, 68% in 1999) (Mendaki, 2002). The gap is thus widening between Malays and the other ethnic groups in higher education (“Jurang kian luas,” 1990). The gap is wider if one were to note that Malay students continue to constitute a minuscule percentage of university enrolments (3.5% in 1990, 2.0% in 2000; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2001). A good number of Malay students who qualified for post-secondary education must have enrolled in pre-university programmes but not many performed well enough to earn a place at the university, or they had only qualified for the less prestigious institutes of technical education (ITE), a vocational route which provides pre-employment training to secondary school leavers.

Data from the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) at the National Institute of Education, Singapore has shown that scores in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) tend to fall with socio-economic status (SES).

But PSLE scores fall at a faster rate for Malay students than for Indian and Chinese students, suggesting that Malay students from families with low SES tend to perform worse than others with similar SES. That Malays have the lowest average monthly household income compared to the other groups (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2001), which means that a high percentage of them are in the low SES group. It is thus not unexpected that Malay children fall behind other children in reading achievement. In 2005, Malay students formed a high 30% of Primary 1 students in the Learning Support Programme, a remedial intervention programme designed to help students with difficulty reading in English (“Penguasaan Ingeris,” 2005). These demographic characteristics point to the vital need to understand how Malay children learn literacy and how this has implications for their schooling. Since the home environment plays such an important role in school achievement, the aim of this chapter is to describe some of the ways in which Malay families support their children in their literacy learning.

There have been attempts to explain the weak educational achievements of the Malay community. These explanations mainly attribute failure to poor supervision by Malay parents, lack of encouragement given to the children in their studies, parents’ preoccupation with material comforts rather than their children’s education, lack of academic interest by Malay youth, large numbers of children in Malay families, and parents not working hard enough to progress (see “Malays told,” 1966: Rahim, 1998). These deficit theories not only diagnose the problem as culturally based and primarily lying within the Malay community, they also construct the homes of Malay students as deficient and lacking in sufficient stimulation for academic success. Moreover, they mask the underlying issues of economic and power relations between mainstream and minority populations.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, other explanations point to SES, and less to ethnicity, as having an effect on educational attainment; and that the more socially privileged children are the ones more likely positioned to receive the kind of ongoing support which ensures high educational achievement (Khong, 2004; Leong, 1978).

Previous literature in emergent literacy has suggested that families are key sites where literacy and linguistic competence are constructed (Heath, 1983; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Volk & De Acosta, 2003). In this chapter I will describe the family environments of two young Malay children as they embark on their journey to becoming literate individuals. The description is based on a research project which aims to understand how children in English-knowing Malay families learn literacy within the context of their homes. It also hopes to shed some light on the beliefs and practices of the families, the complex ways in which they support their children’s literacy, and the ways children position themselves as learners.

The literature also suggests that young children’s emergent literacy learning may not always come in ways that are valued in schools. The present research has indeed raised questions about the readiness of schools to recognise and accommodate literacy practices beyond the standardised routines. I hope the description and the questions raised from the study will generate alternative explanations or extensions of previous theories of academic success and failure in Malay children.

## LITERACY AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROCESS

The development of the conceptual frame that underlies this study has been influenced by the works of people who have emphasised the contextual nature of literacy and the way literacy is embedded within particular socio-cultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). The socio-cultural context defines the goals of development and the circumstances in which the children’s development takes place. Interpretation of the literacy events that occur in children’s lives while they interact with adults or other children becomes meaningful when the goals of literacy in the context of the children’s appropriation of this cultural tool are understood. Ideas about literacy also cannot be separated meaningfully from the circumstances in which the literacy event occurs.

Children learn about literacy through their interactions with more experienced members of the culture (teachers, parents, more knowledgeable siblings, peers, extended family members and friends) in a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990). This means that their learning of literacy occurs in participation with, and is mediated by others in culturally valued activities. These activities are not only conducted by family members for instructional purposes, but are also routine arrangements (e.g., having a meal at a food centre, taking letters from the mailbox, or reading the newspapers) that are part of the family life. This perspective surfaces the inextricable link between culture and cognition through engagement in activities, tasks, or events (Vygotsky, 1978).

As a situated practice, literacy is patterned “by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 12). As a result, parents may value certain literacies more than others and may expect their children to learn the kind of literacy they perceive to be more prestigious. And since literacy is also “historically situated” (p. 13), we need to consider the history of the parents’ learning of literacy and how this shapes their own beliefs about literacy learning. Their conceptions of literacy learning may also change as they come in contact with new cultural practices and reflect on the differences between these and their experiences gained in other places.

## LITERACY PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE

Studies have shown that parents differ in their views of home practices that are conducive to literacy learning in young children. Often these depend on the forms of literacy the parents have been exposed to and the opportunities for formal education afforded by their SES (Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein, & Scher, 1994; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991). Parents from more privileged backgrounds have been found to value artefacts and events that are considered natural (e.g., paper, pencils, and reading to the child) and tend to present and model literacy as an enjoyable way to entertain oneself. In contrast, parents of low SES value the work and practice aspects of literacy (e.g., flash cards, letter practice, playing school) and explicit instruction.

Researchers have also identified family literacy practices that have been frequently linked with children's literacy development and school achievement skills. These include shared book reading (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994), the use of extended discourse (such as explanations and narratives), vocabulary that mothers use with their children (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002), activities involving letters and words (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000), and teaching of rhymes and nursery rhymes (Bryant, Bradley, Maclean, & Bell, 1989).

All the above are studies of families in the US, and much of the focus has been on the monolingual family. Less is known about family practices elsewhere (other than perhaps the UK and Australia) or those of bilingual families, and how the literacy events that occur in these families may affect later literacy development. Very few research studies have looked at families in multilingual Singapore to examine what parents believe about how children learn to read and write, what they do at home to nurture their children's literacy learning, and their ideas about, and attitudes towards, bilingualism (but see Khong, 2004; Sripathy, 1998). Biliteracy is particularly salient given that the primacy of English (vis-à-vis the "mother tongues" – Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and others), on the basis of its utility for science, technology and commerce, already has tremendous consequences for the dynamics of language use in Singapore at home, school and in the workplace.

In considering how these ideas might be used to affect change, I was reminded of the power the school has as an institution in validating certain forms of "cultural capital" while rejecting others (Bourdieu, 1977). The term "cultural capital" refers to the knowledge and modes of thought that characterise different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. This concept is helpful for thinking about "children's different particular histories within their families, the contrasting cultural resources and repertoires of practices that are available as part of everyday life and the particular dispositions and embodied ways of being which they acquire and take with them to school" (Comber, 2004, p. 115). When children's cultural capital is valued in school and given a high "exchange value", they open doors and give the children access to otherwise unattainable resources. While the primary aim of this study is to examine the home environment of Malay children, it is also an attempt to understand how they are positioned with respect to the curriculum by the time they get to school.

#### LITERACY EVENTS, LITERACY PRACTICES AND SOCIAL ROUTINES

In this study, I use *literacy events* as the primary unit of analysis. Literacy events are defined as activities where literacy has a role (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). These activities not only include written texts but oral references to written texts, and oral routines that are commonly used in classrooms. Thus any time a target child or anyone in the child's immediate environment directly uses any type of literacy technology (such as a book, pencil, newspaper, computer or mobile phone) or is in any other way engaged with written language, including participating in verbal interactions where some kind of written text is referred to as the focus of attention or even just as topic of talk, I will describe the event in detail. The focus

is on providing a description of the actions that takes place, the contexts in which the event arises and is played out. Within literacy events, I analyse literacy practices, that is, the actions people perform as a reflection of the ways in which they understand and value literacy (Volk & de Acosta, 2003).

I have also included in the analysis social routines that lie outside the notion of literacy events defined above. These social routines clearly separate the family and home community from the domains of the school and other social institutions but make complete sense to the particular families and, importantly, could possibly lead to young children’s oral competence.<sup>3</sup> These routines include the playful construction of teasing in talk. These concepts, literacy events, literacy practices and social routines, reinforce the perspective of literacies as socially constructed and situated practices.

## METHOD

### *Setting*

Singapore is a small island-state with just over 4 million people of various ethnic groups – Chinese (77%), Malays (14%), Indians (8%), and others (1%). The state has a varied linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage. Almost all Malays profess Islam as their religion and they form the bulk of Muslims in Singapore. Malay is the national language, but Chinese, English, and Tamil also are official languages. English is the language of administration, is widely used in the professions and businesses, and is the primary language of the school. Along with the primacy of English, bilingualism thrives in Singapore due to the mother-tongue languages being made compulsory as a subject at primary and secondary levels. This policy is meant to safeguard Singaporeans’ competence in the mother tongue languages and their identification with the cultures that these languages represent.

Kindergartens in Singapore are private preschools that provide a structured 3-year education programme – Nursery and Kindergarten (K1 and K2) – for children aged 3–6. Kindergarten hours range from 3–4 hours each day and may include a lesson in a mother tongue language. Kindergartens are run by community foundations, religious bodies, or social and business organisations, and they have to be registered with the Ministry of Education (MOE). The fees charged by these kindergartens range from around S\$60 to a few hundred dollars a month. Parents may apply for a 75% government subsidy for their children’s kindergarten fees if they cannot afford them. This subsidy, known as the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS), is available at eligible non-profit kindergartens.

Schools, in contrast, are under the direct purview of MOE. The first high-stakes examination (the PSLE) arrives at the end of the first 6 years of school (Primary 6). But students begin to be streamed into different “ability groups” from the fifth year (Primary 5) on the basis of their abilities, types of intelligence and ways of learning. Every year, some 12% of students are identified as lagging “significantly behind the rest of their cohort despite remedial teaching”. They are differentiated from their peers, advised to take a less challenging or more extended course of study

known as EM3, and take a modified PSLE at the end of Primary 6. More than 50% of these students proceed on to a post-secondary education at the ITE while some 20% of them fail in their final EM3 mathematics examination (Shanmugaratnam, 2005). Malay students comprise 40% of the 1,300 drop-outs every year (“Mendaki going all out,” 2003).

About 86% of Singaporeans live in subsidised public housing, or the Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats. Nine out of 10 Singaporeans are home owners.

*Selection of the Participants*

The two target children, both of whom turned 5 during the year of observation, attended a kindergarten in the western part of Singapore. The kindergarten charges the lowest fee in the industry, and its student population is made up of children of all races. I sought the help of the kindergarten supervisor to identify Malay children from contrasting SES backgrounds using their mothers’ educational qualification as a criterion. The children should also have an older sibling.

The mothers were asked by the supervisor if they would be interested in participating in the project. Four students were shortlisted as potentially interested participants. My communication with the families began at this stage. Of the four, two finally agreed to let their child to be the focus of my research. One was a girl, Sanah Abdul Rashid,<sup>4</sup> whose mother has an ‘O’ level equivalent qualification. Another was a boy, Ikhsan Marzuki, whose mother holds an ‘A’ level certificate. Both mothers are housewives. The SES backgrounds of the families are summarized in Table 1.<sup>5</sup>

*Table 1. Type of dwelling, parent qualification and occupation*

<i>Target child (Year of birth)</i>	<i>HDB flat</i>	<i>Mother’s qualification</i>	<i>Mother’s occupation</i>	<i>Father’s qualification</i>	<i>Father’s occupation</i>
Sanah (1999)	3-room	M’sian SPM (≈ ‘O’ level)	Housewife	A levels	Managing operations of fast-food outlet
Ikhsan (1999)	4-room	‘A’ level	Housewife	A levels (with poly diploma)	Senior officer in fire service industry

The first meeting with the families was held in their respective homes with all the family members present. Other than to establish rapport, I used the first meeting to explain the project. I told them that I wanted to learn about what it was like to be a Malay child learning to read and write at home in modern 21<sup>st</sup> century Singapore. I was interested to find out about the activities their children engaged in at home and what the parents did with them that might have helped them learn how to read and write. I also told them that insights from the study will be shared with schools.

### *Data Collection*

To obtain an inside perspective of the participants’ beliefs and values, I conducted semi-structured interviews during 3 or 4 such visits to each family. Each interview lasted from 60–90 minutes. The areas especially considered in the interviews were family history, parents’ beliefs about literacy learning and instruction, attitudes towards bilingualism and school, and literacy practices. During the first interviews, the parents helped me draw up the family’s daily routines. I used this information to select literacy events for observation and taping for the subsequent visits.

During the visits, I observed the physical setting and the informal interaction between parents and children, since the interviews with the adults were usually conducted in the presence of the target children. These observations were recorded in field notes as well as with audio and video recorders. On some occasions, the parents were asked to carry out some of the everyday activities they had described in the interviews such as doing homework with the children or reading with them. Sometimes, these ‘performances’ took place outside of the visiting hours in which case the parents were asked to audio-tape these events themselves. I later played the tapes to the parent and asked him or her to explain and clarify the activities. Both the interactions and explanations were transcribed and later analysed. In total, I made between 8–10 visits to each of the families for between 2–5 hours at a time, after school and on weekends, between April–October 2004.

I also made limited visits to the children’s kindergarten to get a sense of how they carried themselves in school. This occurred halfway through the observation period. During the first visit to the kindergarten, I sat at the back of the class observing and audio- and video-taping the class proceedings from start to end. During the second visit, I interviewed the teachers who taught them. The interviews and some of the interactions were transcribed.

My relationship with the children and their families evolved over time. I am a Malay man in my early 40s with links with the Malay community through my voluntary work with community and religious organisations. Accompanying me on my visits was Noriha, my female research assistant. Noriha’s presence during the visits helped break down any psychological barrier between the mothers and me. It also offered the mothers an alternative ear, someone to whom to share their experiences, assuming that female-female talk may engender confidence in specific information exchange not particularly fluid in male-female talk. With Noriha and I both taking notes, the visiting arrangement ensured that I minimised loss of relevant information about the family.

In all the visits, other than the interview session, my role and that of Noriha’s constantly shifted between the position of observer and participant. There were occasions when Noriha would be talking with the mother as she cooked while I sat with the father keeping an eye on the children playing. At other times both of us stayed as observers while the mother helped the children with their homework. As the children and their siblings began to make more familial sense of me and Noriha, we were sometimes pulled into their activities as playmates or as teachers listening to them read.

*Analysis*

The analysis of the data began during the data collection phase. All the tapes were transcribed. For the interviews, the depth of the analysis ranged from reading over the previous interview and formulating new questions, to developing categories for themes or issues raised about parents' beliefs about literacy learning, bilingualism, school and literacy practices (e.g., what it means to read, kindergarten readiness, responsibility for literacy learning, ideas about play, perceptions of school, and attitudes toward bilingualism). For the observations and recording, my research assistant and I reviewed the field notes, cross-checked transcripts and recordings in order to note the use of or reference to oral or written literacy. Next, we identified literacy events and social routines in the transcripts.

Some of the literacy events were subjected to a moment-by-moment micro-analysis, where each utterance was examined within broader texts using contextual cues to assign an interpretation to each meaningful unit. The units could include a turn, clause, phrase or non-verbal cues (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005). The purpose was to describe cultural scenes from both an insider and outsider perspective by moving from the very concrete to the more interpretive stance in order to theorise about the nature of the families' culture and to make sense of their world. From this data, I generate hypothesis about the family's cultural worlds and about the children's textual experience and their social adaptability.

I begin a description of the children by painting a rough sketch of the kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the target children. I will then move on to discuss the children and their families within the context of their homes.

## THE CHILDREN AS LEARNERS IN SCHOOL

Sanah and Ikhsan are K1 classmates in a neighbourhood kindergarten. In class, they learn to read and write in both English and Malay. Sanah is described by her teachers as quiet, reserved, soft-spoken, well mannered but not confident. According to her English language teacher (ELT), Sanah is not fluent in English. She can comprehend the stories that are read to the class but cannot express herself when quizzed by the teacher. (ELT: "When I ask an open-ended question, she will just give one. So when I prompt her further, it will like, then she will just keep herself quiet.") However, she is able to read familiar words (like 'the', 'this') particularly those that feature in the phonics reader the teacher uses during shared book reading. In fact, the teacher noticed that Sanah enjoys "reading". She can be seen at the library corner reading the books she brings from home. She also prefers to play by herself during play time rather than interact with other children in constructive play. The teacher once reminded Sanah to speak to her classmates in English and not mix it with Malay, but this only made her talk less.

On the other hand, the Malay language teacher (MLT) thinks Sanah is fluent and comfortable answering in Malay and sometimes even in a full sentence. (MLT: "*Sanah makan apa hari ni?*" [What did you eat today?]; Sanah: "*Saya makan*

*asam pedas*.” [I ate (rice with) hot sour (dish).]. However, the teacher notes that while Sanah is able to recognise and write the letters of the alphabet, she has difficulty recognising and spelling words, often needing some prompting. While Sanah may not be confident in academic matters, she is lovable and helpful. Whenever the teacher wants someone to help her carry things, Sanah will be one of the few to come forward. Without saying a word, she would indicate her intention by getting her hands on the objects (so that other children cannot get to them). She can be quietly stubborn, clinging on to the objects in the face of a challenge from other students.

In the case of Ikhsan, the Malay language teacher says he hardly speaks in Malay even though he can understand the language. When she asks him a question, he either remains quiet or answers in English. (MLT: “*Dia* more to English-speaking *punya* background *mungkin*.” [He comes from a dominantly English-speaking background, perhaps.]) Although he speaks very little Malay, he finds writing easy as most activities only require him to copy the words. But he is reluctant to participate in class activities. When coaxed to sing a Malay folk song, he would take a long time to start singing, and even then without the melody! Unlike Sanah, whom the teacher thinks is observant, attentive and enjoys singing, Ikhsan looks bored and would occasionally scratch the floor, or look down or away, or look at the teacher from the corner of his eyes.

The English teacher thinks Ikhsan is actually “bright”. He can read and is quite knowledgeable. (ELT: “We’re teaching a concept on sorting then he will like, he already has, you know, rough idea what is it about. That’s why I say he’s bright, like whenever I ask him a question he’ll be able to give the response.”) However, class activities such as shared book reading and music and movement do not interest him. On the other hand, at the reading corner, he can be seen taking out his own book about his favourite characters and sharing it with his friends. (ELT: “So he will, he will take out his book and share it with his friends, and okay ‘this is this’ he will share the character or the story line. That’s what he enjoys.”) But this is about the only time Ikhsan would interact with his classmates for he usually keeps to himself. His Malay language teacher attributes his use of English as a barrier to him interacting with his classmates, who are only starting to learn the language.

Between the two children, Sanah seems to enjoy kindergarten more. But she is afraid to use her “language” and prefers to stay in her shell. One wonders what might happen if Sanah found more courage to express herself using the linguistic resources that she brings with her to class. As for Ikhsan, although he is considered “bright” for demonstrating greater proficiency with basic literacy as a preschooler, he does not find the literate activities in school particularly exciting. His preference for English does not win him many friends, his interest in popular culture is not adequately fostered, and he cannot connect with the Malay language.

These scenes are not untypical of children entering kindergarten or school and they provide us with a glimpse of the struggles some children go through as they position themselves with respect to the standardised form of language and literacy, a point I will return to later. One should wonder if Ikhsan being “bright” or other

children being “fast learners” is a reference to their cognitive ability as much as it is to their being socialised in a family that has the economic, social and cultural resources to arm them with the tools to meet standardised literacy benchmarks. If so, children who are less socially privileged cannot then be said to be starting school on a level playing field, as this chapter will show. Let me now move on to a close-up look at these children within the context of their families.

#### SANAH AND HER FAMILY

I first visited Sanah in her home in March 2004, just two months after she started K1. The first interview with her family was held during this visit. Sanah lives with her 37-year-old father, Mr Rashid; her mother, 26-year-old Mdm Zaharah; and a brother, Saiful, who is a year older. Their home is a second-floor, 3-room HDB flat (2-bedroom apartment) in a neighbourhood just 5 minutes from a busy bus and train interchange.

Mr Rashid left junior college after completing his A-levels and worked in the financial sector soon after. He chose to work rather than move on to university because he believed that experience was what mattered in the working world (“experience is my teacher”). Leveraging on his good public relations skills, his company posted him to a number of cities, his last posting being Kuala Lumpur where he stayed the longest. It was also there that he left the company to set up a computer training centre for working adults. The 1998 economic crisis, however, brought his fledgling business to an end. He married Zaharah, a Malaysian, and returned to Singapore. At the time of the study, he was working in an American fast-food outlet in charge of operations.

Mr Rashid likes to chat and he jokes with almost everyone. He has opinions on a number of issues, including language and education. He values language as a cultural tool to connect with a community. He speaks fluent Singapore English<sup>6</sup> and Malay, and a little of Mandarin and other languages which he picked up while living overseas. Although he does his share of the household work and participates in his children’s lives, it is mostly concentrated outside the home (e.g., buying groceries, taking his son to the barber). He works shifts, which makes it difficult for him to play a bigger role in the children’s literacy development. But he is aware of his children’s abilities and considers himself a disciplinarian and the “principal” in the house. His wife turns to him when the children misbehave and some form of punitive measures is needed.

Mdm Zaharah was educated in Malaysia up to secondary school and speaks mainly Malay. She takes care of the home (e.g., doing the laundry, making meals) and monitors, feeds, and helps the children with their daily life tasks (e.g., helping them with their homework). She is aware of her limited education in English and sometimes wonders if she gives her children enough help in their literacy learning. The little English that she brought with her to Singapore is only enough to help her two growing children read simple storybooks. The children, exposed to English in their kindergarten, in turn also help their mother improve her English just as she helps them with their school work. Mdm Zaharah has a limited circle of friends,

mainly the mothers of her children’s classmates from whom she sometimes learns how to help her children learn.

Entertainment for the children includes a television, a VCD player, games, toys and books. They watch cartoons and Malay variety shows and they have in their collection some educational software (e.g., Clifford’s *Fun with Letters*) and children’s movies (e.g., *Stuart Little*, *Shrek*) that their father has bought for them. Books are aplenty in the children’s room, both assessment and storybooks (many belong to the *Sails Literacy Series* by Jill Eggleton, and Sangmin Lee’s *The Funny Adventures of Bongbong*). There are Aesop’s fables and books on morally good behaviour by local writers. A large number of these were bought cheap in a consignment from Malaysia supplied by Mr Rashid’s friend. The family has rarely bought books since but a neighbour has been lending them books which their own children have outgrown. Thus through their social network, Mr Rashid and Mdm Zaharah are able to provide texts for their children to read. But having others to decide which books to buy or inheriting books from others does not allow them to be selective about the quality of the texts and the kinds of texts that count.

Malay is the dominant language in the home but English, or more precisely street Singlish, is also used by the two siblings and between the siblings and their parents. No time is demarcated for English or Malay only, nor is there anyone to tell Sanah which language she can speak at any one time. There is thus no reason to censure herself from using English or from mixing both English and Malay at home. Sanah and her brother speak to their father in English and Malay, and more Malay than English to their mother. To outsiders like Noriha and me, Sanah seems to use English often. But if we were to switch to Malay, she would do likewise. When she hums or sings, they are mostly Malay songs; these are not limited to folk songs or children’s songs but also include pop songs associated with popular Malay singers of the day.

#### *Sanah the Expert Talker*

Sanah’s father has described how she was petrified about the idea of going to school after stepping into nursery for the first time. Her first days in kindergarten were traumatic for both parents and child. Sanah cried the moment her parents left her and the scene she created was like “the whole world collapse”. Within the security of her home, Sanah is quite the opposite of what she portrays outside; she is talkative, shows maturity in behaviour, loves to play act either alone or with her brother, and expresses and argues her point confidently. As in school, Sanah enjoys “reading” and listening to stories, though she is not able to read on her own yet, needing someone to mediate her reading. Occasionally, she would “read” aloud by herself but it is almost always from memory. In the event that memory fails her, she would launch off from the text and improvise with much gusto whatever bits of textual information she has retained.

Sanah is also inquisitive and not afraid of engaging with adults. Throughout the time that I was with the family, she would ask me and Noriha many questions. Had she been an author, she would have all the data needed to write our

biographies! We were investigated for the location of our homes, why I did not drive, why my elbow was bandaged (when I had tennis elbow). She wanted to know if Noriha's hair was long (Noriha always covered her hair), if her house was beautiful, whether she had an uncle, what she ate at home, whether she had a pet, which school she went to, and so forth. Below is a typical questioning sequence used by Sanah when she quizzed Noriha on her job:

*Excerpt 1*

1. Sanah: How come you have a camera ah, *Cik* [Miss] Noriha? How, how come you have a camera?
2. Noriha: Because I've got work to do.
3. Sanah: You work to do?
4. Noriha: Yes.
5. Sanah: Why you must write?
6. Noriha: I must write so that I know what I see.
7. Sanah: Ya. You must look at people ah?
8. Noriha: Yes, correct. Must look at people, must look carefully, then I can ... If I don't write wait I cannot remember...

She initiates the exchange by asking why Noriha needs the camera. Noriha's answer surprises her and she puts it back to her for confirmation (turn #3). Satisfied, she proceeds to another question (#5). This time she accepts Noriha's answer with an evaluative "ya" (#7) and extends the exchange by offering her own perspective of what Noriha must have been doing ("look at people"). Again this is put across as a questioning statement seeking confirmation, which she receives. This series of question-answer-evaluation sequences is unlike the initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) sequences typical of teacher talk, where the initiator asks known-information questions (Mehan, 1979). But it reveals Sanah's genuinely inquisitive nature through the use of very coherent and naturally executed information-seeking sequences. And this inquisitiveness is evident in many reading activities that take place in the home.

Sanah is quite observant. In her father's words, she absorbs "like a sponge" events that happen around her or the lack thereof, including who is reading at home. She was nonchalant when I asked her who she considered to be a good reader: "My mummy!" And when I asked, "what about your father?" she replied enthusiastically: "Father don't read, because he's sleeping, sleeping and sleeping."<sup>7</sup> Of course both parents read but it is limited to leafing through news-related items such as the newspaper, bulletins from the mosque and the town council, the occasional letter from the kindergarten, and the bills that come in every month – Mr Rashid has long abandoned his Jeffrey Archer and Tom Clancy novels. About the only literacy activity Sanah has learned to associate with reading is the ostensible activity of reading aloud picture books that she usually participates in with her mother, as I will illustrate shortly.

Pen-and-paper activities among the children are limited to doing homework. For Sanah, this means practice in writing the letters of the alphabet or drawing lines to match words in the workbooks. In contrast to her oral expressiveness, her expression of herself on paper is very limited; rarely does she draw or colour. Sanah’s linguistic development during this time is thus skewed towards oral discourse. She was already engaging adults in conversation on a regular basis from as young as age 3. This is grounded and sustained by the family’s shared form of pleasure; they are all capable of teasing and joking and general unkindness. Below is one example, an excerpt<sup>8</sup> of a conversation that took place over an afternoon snack.

*Excerpt 2*

	Transcript of talk	Translation of talk
1.	Mr Rashid: Alah, <i>sendiri takut</i> cat...	Yeah, you’re yourself afraid of cats...
2.	Sanah: Just now, at the, at the <i>kedai</i> I’m not scared.	Just now, at the shop, I was not scared.
3.	Mr Rashid: Why not scared?	Why weren’t you scared?
4.	Sanah: Because I very bigger already ah.	Because I’ve grown bigger.
5.	Mr Rashid: Oh you... Then last time...why, when you come back you <i>demam</i> . ((Laughs with Mdm Zaharah))	Oh you... Then the last time...why, when you came back you had fever. ((Laughs with Mdm Zaharah))
6.	Sanah: <i>Ya lah</i> ((feeling quite embarrassed))	<i>Ya lah</i> ((feeling quite embarrassed))
7.	Mr Rashid: Cat <i>bawah kereta pun takut</i> .	You were afraid even when the cat was under the car.
8.	Sanah: Just now, I, I just looking, have or not.	Just now, I looked to see if the cat was around.
9.	Mr Rashid: See, you just “shhh”, the cat will run away already.	See, you just “shhh”, the cat will run away.
10.	Sanah: Just now, I’m not scared with cat.	Just now, I was not afraid of cats.

In this excerpt, Mr Rashid teases Sanah for being afraid of cats. She defends herself by saying that she is already grown up and is no longer afraid of cats. When Mr Rashid mocks her again by reminding her of a past occasion when she displayed cowardice towards a cat, she pleads for understanding through a high-pitch admission “*Ya lah*”, and then counters by bringing up a recent incident in which she had shown no fear. Such frequent father-child bantering has serves as practice for conversational participation.

*Sanah the Budding Reader*

Through mother-child interaction, Sanah learns to read. The following is an excerpt of a reading event in which Sanah and Mdm Zaharah are reading storybooks in English. This event took place outside of my visit and was taped by Mdm Zaharah. The excerpt begins just before the 8th minute after the recording commenced, and Sanah and Mdm Zaharah are already into page 6 of a book entitled *Off to School*. The story is about the experience of a boy and his sister going to school for the first time, their mother and baby sibling sending them off and waving goodbye. The book has pictures on every page with a sentence or two at the bottom. Both Mdm Zaharah and Sanah sit side by side, the storybook in front of them.

*Excerpt 3*

		Transcript of reading/talk	Actual text & translation of talk
1/2.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“A smiling lady...”	“A smiling lady...”
3/4.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“talks to us.”	“talks to us.”
5/6.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“We stand and look and stare.”	“We stand and look and stare.”
7/8.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“We feel a little funny...”	“We feel a little funny...”
9/10.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“when mother <u>said</u> goodbye.”	“when mother <u>says</u> goodbye.”
11/12.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“ <u>Then</u> baby <u>wave</u> her hand...”	“ <u>The</u> baby <u>waves</u> her hand...”
13/14.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“and we wonder, ...”	“and we wonder, ...”
15/16.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	“ <u>we will</u> cry.”	“ <u>will we</u> cry?”
17.	Sanah:	<i>Kenapa baby dia dah nak nangis?</i>	Why does the baby want to cry?
18.	Mdm Zaharah:	No, brother and sister worry. They...	No, the brother and sister are worried. They...
19/20.	Mdm Zaharah & Sanah:	said...	said...
21.	Mdm Zaharah:	((Reading off from the text.)) “Then we wonder will we cry.”	((Reading off from the text.)) “Then we wonder will we cry.”
22.	Sanah:	((Looking at the pictures beside the text.)) <i>Siapa nak nangis?</i>	((Looking at the pictures beside the text.)) Who wants to cry?

- |     |              |   |  |
|-----|--------------|---|--|
| 23. | Mdm Zaharah: | Brother and sister <i>lah</i> .   | The brother and sister.  |
| 24. | Sanah:       | <i>Kenapa</i> brother <i>nya</i> sister...?   | Why the brother and sister...?   |
| 25. | Mdm Zaharah: | Because baby and mother cannot go in the class, you see.  | Because the baby and the mother cannot go in the class, you see.   |
| 26. | Sanah:       | Yes. ((Pointing towards the teacher character in the book.)) <i>Kenapa dia nak ibu dia? Dia tak suka gi sek...</i>                                    | Yes. ((Pointing towards the teacher character in the book.)) Why does he want his mother? He doesn't like to go to sch...                  |
| 27. | Mdm Zaharah: | ((Realising that Sanah has mistaken the teacher for the mother)) It's not mother. This is a teacher. ((Pointing to the teacher.)) See.                | ((Realising that Sanah has mistaken the teacher for the mother)) It's not the mother. This is a teacher. ((Pointing to the teacher.)) See. |
| 28. | Sanah:       | <i>Kenapa dia tak suka pergi.. Kenapa ibu dia tanya, ibu dia tanya tak boleh pergi seko.. ah tak boleh pergi tu apa tu</i> ((noise)) <i>sekolah</i> . | Why doesn't he like to go.. Why does his mother tell him he can't go to sch.. ah.. cannot go to.. what's that ((noise)) school.            |
| 29. | Mdm Zaharah: | No, <i>ibu dia tak cakap macam tu. Ibu dia suruh dia pergi sekolah</i> .  | No, the mother didn't say that. His mother told him to go to school.   |
| 30. | Sanah:       | <i>Tapi dia tak nak eh?</i>   | But he doesn't want?   |
| 31. | Mdm Zaharah: | <i>Bukan, dia good girl and good boy. (Mama) dia cakap, mama dengan adik tunggu dekat luar, ok?</i>   | No, she's a good girl and he's a good boy. The mother said that she and the baby will wait outside, ok?                                    |
| 32. | Sanah:       | <i>Dia cakap dengan siapa?</i>  | She spoke to who?  |
| 33. | Mdm Zaharah: | <i>Dia cakap dengan ah, inilah</i> ((pause)) <i>ah</i> brother and sister. OK, <i>kita baca lagi</i> .  | He spoke with ah, this ((pause)) brother and sister. OK, we continue reading.  |

In this excerpt, Mdm Zaharah constructs a strategy for scaffolding Sanah's developing literacy, a strategy described in the literature as the neurological impress method (Ekwall & Shanker, 1988). This involves the teacher and student reading the same text orally, with the teacher reading just ahead of the student in overlapping turns. They sit together, the teacher around the child, reading in his or her ear, sometimes pointing to the words. Mdm Zaharah's use of this strategy is not unique to this excerpt; it exemplifies all her reading sessions with Sanah.

With occasional prompts from her mother, Sanah can independently “read” a couple of words or phrases but only those she has committed to memory through repeated reading (e.g., “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let your hair down”).

In this excerpt between turns #1 and #16, Mdm Zaharah and Sanah are reading together, with Sanah a beat behind her mother as her mother points to the text. At that point (#17), Sanah asks her mother to explain the preceding turn which she does not quite understand, the turn containing the complex clause “we wonder, will we cry?” which Mdm Zaharah has misread as “we wonder, we will cry” (transposing “will” and “we”). This causes much semantic difficulty for Sanah. Even though she does not detect the misreading (as she is only echoing what Mdm Zaharah reads, mistakes and all), she detects the incoherency which the misreading creates. The restructured clause “wonder, we will cry” seems to foreground the meaning of the embedded clause “we will cry”, and this foregrounded meaning (someone will cry) puzzles Sanah as there was no prior clue in the text that someone will cry. And since babies are more likely to cry, she must have first attributed the crying to the baby but then realises that this does not make sense: Why should the baby cry when it is all about the brother and sister who are going to school? This leads her to ask “*Kenapa baby dia dah nak nangis?* [Why does the baby want to cry?]” (#17). To clarify, Mdm Zaharah reads the relevant part of the text again, this time correctly (#21). But she still does not realise the mistake she had made earlier and the difficulty it has caused Sanah who, on her part, is still fixated on the meaning that there is someone who will cry: If it isn’t the baby, who can it be? Thus the question: “*Siapa nak nangis?*” ([Who wants to cry?]) (#22).

Since Sanah’s struggle with the meaning created by the misreading is invisible to Mdm Zaharah, she cannot attend to Sanah’s question appropriately. Instead she assumes that Sanah is now on track and takes Sanah’s question at turn #22 to mean “Who said they wondered if they will cry?”. This also means that to Mdm Zaharah, Sanah is in effect asking a question for which she had earlier supplied the answer. Thus, Mdm Zaharah does not hide her exasperation as she replies with a voice that sounds annoyed, “Brother and sister~~lah~~” (#23), the particle “*lah*” carrying much of the emphasis. But Sanah is still pursuing a different track and persists in knowing why the brother and sister want to cry (#24). To this Mdm Zaharah provides an explanation – “Because baby and mother cannot go in the class” (#25) – that seems to cohere with both interpretive modes “will we cry” and “we will cry”. What is interesting is how the answer resonates in Sanah’s own memory of her own first day in school and how she struggled with stepping into class without her parents. She responds with an emphatic “Yes” as indication that she can identify with the imaginary characters whose actions and feelings she understands. For the next few turns, both mother and child continue to pursue the story on different tracks. Still on her “we will cry” mode, Sanah tries different lines of inquiry, dropping one question and adopting another to try to get on top of the story. To Sanah’s question at turn #28, Mdm Zaharah finally gives a reply which sets Sanah on a new trail towards resolving the ‘crisis’ (#29-33).

Sanah is paying close attention, comprehending the text, and is alert to the first incoherent turn. She persists in trying to clarify what does not make sense to her by

embarking on an information-clarifying routine (#17 to #33). In this episode, the literacy that Mdm Zaharah and Sanah co-construct draws on different sources and takes many forms. At turn #18, Mdm Zaharah does what a teacher would do by referring Sanah back to the text for the answer (“we wonder, will we cry”). At turn #27, Mdm Zaharah and Sanah utilise the pictorial representation to mediate a textual error. At turn #31 (also at turn #25, as described earlier), Mdm Zaharah fills in textual gaps with her own rendering of what the mother in the book could have said to her children as she comforted them on their first day at school (“*Dia good girl and good boy. Mama dia cakap, mama dengan adik tunggu dekat luar ....*” [She’s a good girl and he’s a good boy. The mother said that she and the baby will wait outside...]). This connects with Sanah’s own experience of starting school, making the story come alive for her. At the end of turn #33, Mdm Zaharah suggests that they move on by saying “*Kita baca lagi*” ([We continue reading]), an instruction a teacher might use to resume a reading activity. Finally, notice the use of a language other than English for the purpose of learning to read English texts. Sanah is learning to read with the support of a mother whose linguistic preference and reading ability she knows. Sanah, who is herself more fluent in Malay, uses this knowledge to best effect by asking for clarification of the English texts in Malay. But, as if conforming to school practice, Mdm Zaharah continues to mark the language specificity of the English learning session by sticking to the language. Thus for a stretch of eight turns (#17 to #18; #22 to #27), two languages work hand in hand – Malay carrying the questions, and English providing the answers. But eventually, Mdm Zaharah gives in to Sanah’s persistent questioning in Malay and switches to Malay till the end of the excerpt (#29 to #33). What Sanah has done (with participation from her mother) is to effectively “syncretise” (Volk & de Acosta, 2003) Malay and English texts, using what she knows about both languages to facilitate the development of her own literacy in English.

Observations of this and other reading sessions show Sanah demonstrating reading-like behaviour even as she has difficulty ‘reading’; she attends to texts like a reader – comprehending, evaluating and questioning the texts others read with her. Sanah’s development is facilitated by her mother, who provides her with the space to “venture”, occasionally inviting Sanah to connect her thoughts with the text (e.g., asking for an opinion or agreement) or relate the text to her own immediate experience. At the same time, Sanah also shows a preference for discussing the pictures, which her mother positively responds to. But when it is clear that Sanah is only interested in the pictures and not the text, which is what normally happens in many reading sessions, Mdm Zaharah will rein her in by invoking her to “look at the words” and telling her to “see the word if you want to read” much like what teachers would exhort students to do if they do not pay attention. All these different literacy practices combine to illustrate how Sanah and her mother together co-construct a home literacy that is both similar to yet different from the literacy valued in school. They co-construct a lesson that not only uses elements of school talk and actions, but also draws on the culture of homes by using Malay and a local dialect of English in the reading and learning of English

texts. There are also more opportunities for child talk than in the typical classroom; these opportunities are provided by the parent and taken by the child.

*Sanah Really Needed Only to Crack the Code...*

Sanah's need for someone to mediate her reading has caused much concern to her parents. They fear their daughter will not survive the normative models of assessment and that she will ruin her chance of succeeding in a system which they believe places a high premium on a single talent – the ability to read. Seeing that Sanah is inquisitive and full of imagination, it hurts them when she receives a low grade in the kindergarten's assessment of her performance for the year. Sanah is placed in the "red" group, which is the lowest of three groups, with yellow at the top and blue in between. Mr Rashid resents the standard assessment and the categorisation of children.

(If) you're talking about creativity, you're talking about all the ability to imagine, that kind of thing...she's ahead but that's not what they want. What they want is the ability to read because it's standard. By this time she should be able to read. If not, she'll belong to that group. I think...if you segregate people by colours and all these things, people understand, you know, colours.

Looking at his child, Mr Rashid does not see the failure but the hope of things changing. His way of constructing the child and supporting her is, to use Bourdieu, a form of cultural capital that will be useful for the social and future imaginaries that Singapore is aiming for. At the same time, Sanah has cultural capital in ways that are invisible to her parents. Inasmuch as they value and support her abilities, they do not see these as part of the repertory of skills associated with successful reading and which constitute important dimensions of literate practice. To them, learning to read means learning the sounds of the letters and putting them together, an understanding informed by how they themselves had learned to read. However, from the perspective of literacy requiring cracking of the code, making meaning, using texts and analysing texts (Freebody & Luke, 1990, cited in Comber, 2004), Sanah only needs to enhance her performance in cracking the code to measure up. In Bourdieu's terms, Sanah has developed a "disposition" towards literacy before she is able to acquire specific decoding and encoding practices. Schools will do well to provide children like her with direct instruction in areas of literacy where they require help most and, at the same time, recognise and foster the other dimensions of the child's literacy. Otherwise, a cycle of early literacy "failure" can produce risks that, without close parental monitoring and teacher intervention, can become personally damaging, something which Mr Rashid fears for his daughter.

IKHSAN AND HIS FAMILY

My first visit to Ikhsan's home also took place in March 2004. His is also a family of four comprising the father, 36-year-old Mr Marzuki; the mother, 35-year-old Mdm Zaiton; an elder brother, 9-year old Ahmad, and Ikhsan himself. They live in

a 4-room (3-bedroom) HDB flat on the eighth floor of an apartment block in the same neighbourhood as Sanah. Mr Marzuki owns a car which he uses to commute to work and for family outings. Like Mr Rashid, Mr Marzuki also did his A levels but he went on to spend another year at a polytechnic for a professional fire engineering qualification. He has worked for a petrochemical company for 7 years and has climbed a few grades as a safety officer. His professional experience provides him with opportunities to do freelance work which earns him extra income. He has his eye on a safety engineer position for which he has to earn a degree in health and safety environment, something he hopes to pursue in the near future. Both Mr Marzuki and Mdm Zaiton studied in the same junior college and have known each other since then. Mdm Zaiton had previously worked as an accounts clerk before deciding to ‘retire’ a year after she gave birth to her first son, Ahmad. That was when he began to fall sick while in the care of a childcare centre. Mr Marzuki reads books but these tend to be related to his work, such as books about fire safety; he sometimes consults a journal for this purpose. Mdm Zaiton subscribes to the *Readers’ Digest*.

Mdm Zaiton’s parents live in close proximity (just three floors below them) which makes it convenient for her sons to meet their older cousins. Among themselves, the cousins all speak English, using Malay only to respond to their grandparents (they sometimes need their grandparents’ utterances to be translated into English by another adult before responding). This preference for speaking English has been picked up by Mdm Zaiton’s children and is further reinforced as she and her husband had made a conscious decision to use English as their home language. They sent the children to a Montessori programme early, where they learned to read English through phonics. They believe that English is the key to “getting their children on” in mainstream Singapore society – being able to speak the language well is an important preparation for their eventual success in school. They are confident that their sons will pick up Malay later when they begin school. They observed this with Ahmad who, despite going through kindergarten entirely without Malay (as it offered only Mandarin as a mother tongue language), had learned the language “very fast” when he was in Primary 1. They think that Ikhsan, whose own kindergarten has exposed him to Malay, will also be able to do likewise, if not better. Nevertheless Mdm Zaiton’s mother once remarked that Ahmad speaks Malay like “*orang Cina masuk Melayu*” (a Chinese who has just learned Malay), seeing how Ahmad’s choice of formal sentence structures and ways of pronunciation that lacked the rich cultural nuances important for everyday informal communication.

#### *Ikhsan and His Experience of Reading, Writing and Drawing*

Mr Marzuki is a serious man who has hopes of his children going to university or at least the polytechnic. He has prepared himself financially for this and is willing to spend on books and other educational materials if this means giving his children the head start they need to do well in school. He believes in the graded reading that book series provides. Other than the phonics readers, Mr Marzuki had

bought other readers for the boys, including a complete collection of Ladybird's *Read It Yourself* series containing all-time favourite fairytales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Three Little Pigs". Mr Marzuki makes it a point to see that Ikhsan is able to read the lower level books before letting him move on to the next level. Another series is *Help Me Be Good* by Grolier Enterprises, which narrates stories about children misbehaving and the consequences they face. The forms of negative behaviour which the books highlight range from being careless and being mean, to lying and showing off. These books would meet with approval from teachers even if some of them are not available in the children's kindergarten bookshelves (see Luke, 1992), in line with Mr Marzuki's desire to facilitate his children's entry into school. The boys also have a large collection of stories on CD which Ikhsan loves. The family used to visit the library but stopped when the boys proved to be too playful and unable to keep still, as the parents fear this might inconvenience other library users.

Despite having books at their disposal, the boys are not too keen on reading them, particularly Ahmad, preferring instead to play, an occupation of the boys that I will illustrate later. Ikhsan is a little keener but the parents say he will not have anyone read to him. They think that this is fine for they are satisfied that the 2 years Ikhsan spent at the Montessori school learning to read through phonics has paid dividends – Ikhsan can already read! He reads at his own time, sometimes reading the books aloud but most of the time reading silently. The only time I spotted him reading with someone on his own accord was when he played *Sesame Street's* "Elmo Through the Looking Glass" on VCD. This is a story-based adventure of Elmo searching for a little red monster and in it is a stretch of text read slowly by a narrator which Ikhsan faithfully followed, sometimes a beat faster than the narrator. Only on rare occasions did I get a chance to see him read to his parents; when this happens, there is usually little interaction around the text other than the parents correcting his pronunciation, grammar and pace. An attempt by Ikhsan to know "why mice are always small?" while reading *Town Mouse and Country Mouse* to his mother is met with no more than an affirmation of the question.

To Mr Marzuki and Mdm Zaiton, acquiring literacy is a business of decoding the sounds of words and the ability to read with proper intonation and pace by being faithful to the textual symbols such as commas and periods. They are proud of the fact that Ikhsan can read and pronounce English words better than his cousins or their friend's children, and they help Ikhsan enhance these skills whenever an opportunity presents itself. Thus be it in reading or writing, both parents would urge Ikhsan to refer to what he has learned through phonics to pronounce or spell a word ("You know phonics, right?"), or they would correct his reading by asserting that he observes the comma and the period ("When it's full stop, you pause!") The father's view, in particular, is that reading is a serious job that the child must work to master. Once, Ikhsan attempted to write his cousin's name, Matin, below a picture of a fish he had drawn. He wrote "Matn". This invented spelling did not escape the eyes of Mr Marzuki who immediately asked Ikhsan to summon his knowledge of letter-sound relationship. He told him to

think of the letter that represents the sound /i/ and gave hints by uttering similarly rhymed syllables (e.g., “/ami/” for “/ati/”). Ikhsan made several guesses and eventually got it right. In another instance, as in the excerpt below, Mr Marzuki and the boys are surfing the Net and Ikhsan is saying aloud some words he sees while scrolling down the screen until he stumbles on a word from a distant culture that he has trouble pronouncing. Again Mr Marzuki insists that Ikhsan applies what he knows. In the end it is Ahmad who solves the “puzzle”:

*Excerpt 4*

1. Mr Marzuki: How you pronounce? Huh? How you pronounce?
2. Ikhsan: I don't know.
3. Mr Marzuki: Why you don't know? You know right? Phonics *kan* [right]? How you pronounce?
4. Ahmad: *Pua...Maga siva.* ((a name from New Zealand))
5. Mr Marzuki: Yes.
6. Ikhsan: Ahh! ((protesting that his brother got it right first))

When Ikhsan is at home without his brother, Mdm Zaiton prefers to just leave him alone to entertain himself, checking only when she thinks he is tired or needs a drink. At meal times, just before setting off for the kindergarten, Mdm Zaiton would bring out a bowl of rice and join Ikhsan in the living room to feed him. Sitting on the sofa, she would turn on the television to the children’s channel (if Ikhsan has not already done so), call him over, scoop a spoonful of rice and put it straight into his mouth. In between taking spoonfuls from his mother, Ikhsan would move around and continue playing. This scene is repeated every weekday morning. It is during this time that Mdm Zaiton would engage Ikhsan in talk, drawing his attention away from his toys to what is going on on the television screen.

Whenever Mr Marzuki is at home, he too would keep an eye on Ikhsan, interrupting only if there is anything to correct. One evening, while Ikhsan was drawing a picture of a “luo han” fish in the living room, Mr Marzuki came by and sat next to him. He took a look at the drawing and asked why the tail-end of the fish was so big. Ikhsan listened to his father explain how he should draw starting with the tail and how he should move his hand in order to get the shape right, illustrating his explanation with a hand movement. He then dutifully followed and produced a fish that looked flatter than the first. Next, Mr Marzuki reminded Ikhsan that fish have scales and showed him how to draw them. Finally, he instructed Ikhsan to write his name using a colour pencil. In this event, as in the previous book reading and writing events, it is apparent that Mr Marzuki does not hide his preferences for how Ikhsan should read, write or draw. Sometimes Ikhsan resists but most of the time he would do what he is told, particularly if he has a vested interest in the activity. This drawing task particularly makes evident the strategy Mr Marzuki uses. He performs the task himself to illustrate how it should

be done but laces it with a running verbal commentary on what he is doing, translating for his son the sequence of steps so he can do it too.

Ikhsan will read with an adult if his investment in the act gives him some pleasure. One morning, while I was sitting on the sofa scribbling some notes, he came to sit next to me with a big family photo album on his lap. It was one of those photo albums that the family kept of Ikhsan from his birth till he was a few weeks old. Mdm Zaiton had decorated it with small drawings or cut-outs of Ikhsan's favourite superheroes and added voice to the pictures by inserting captions (e.g., "I can't wait for my first outing...Hooray...", "Watch out!!! Here comes my Turbo Rangers, vroom!", "I want my *ibu* [mother], I want my *ibu*"). Mdm Zaiton told me that the album provided the family with many happy moments together, the children amused by the stories that the parents narrate about the photographs in the album. Ikhsan loved going through the album over and over again. And so, with the album on his lap, Ikhsan walked me through the album, haltingly but eagerly reading the many captions that his mother had written, stumbling over an unfamiliar word or two (e.g., "salute" became "shoot"). At some points in the reading, he retold the stories that he remembered being told, or reached back to his past experience of other related contexts.

Family events were also recorded on video, another source of pleasure for Ikhsan and a trigger for talk. On one occasion, Ikhsan selected a CD containing a recording of his family's trip to Australia when he was younger. He slipped the disc in the player and played it for me, interspersing my viewing with his own commentary of what happened during the trip.

### *Ikhsan in a World of Play and Virtual Reality*

Mr Marzuki is also serious in his belief that fun and play are forms of learning. In response to the boys' disposition to indulge in play, he has created for them a home that serves their playful instinct. The living room and their bedrooms have become a playground where building blocks, coloured pens and paper, balls and stuffed toys, toy trucks and weapons, and action figure toys of all kinds – astronauts, dinosaurs, mutants and transformers – are there to please every child's fantasy. Their television is linked to the VCD player – they have a large collection of educational CDs – and the computer in their room is connected to the broadband extending their playground into the virtual world. Hanging from the bedroom ceiling are toy planes and helicopters which fly in circles by a click of a button. On the walls are posters of Spiderman and of the solar system, and two picture frames that hold the boys' individual birthday photos and information relating to their birth. Bookshelves store their books and their father's. In the kitchen are note pads and souvenir magnets stuck on the fridge, and in the living room are picture frames lined neatly on the side table reminding the boys of their holiday trips abroad.

Often when the boys are together, they would engage in continuous play, building paper planes, playing imaginative games with the toys (such as Power Rangers), drawing and colouring their favourite superheroes and putting on their suits, playing video or card games, or just kicking around. Their many play tools

provide them with many opportunities to pretend play. With a soccer ball they pretend to play in a team, both boys drawing on what they knew of soccer from television and video games, Ahmad particularly reliving his experience of playing soccer with his friends at school. With play dough and toy kitchen tools on hand, they imagine themselves as kitchen staff in a restaurant. They appropriate materials from the popular food culture (e.g., McDonald’s Chicken McNuggets, Swensen’s Volvano ice-cream), and situate themselves beyond the walls of their home by putting themselves into roles of individuals they see working on the other side of the counter in a real restaurant (see Excerpt 5).

*Excerpt 5*

1. Ikhsan: I’m making ice-cream
2. Ahmad: I’m making rainbow sausage.
3. Noriha: So, is this a restaurant?
4. Ikhsan & Ahmad: Yap. ((both boys reply at the same time))
5. Noriha: What’s the name of the restaurant?
6. Ikhsan: *Kopitiam* ((a local eating place))
- .. ..
7. Ahmad: *Adik* [younger brother], what’s this? ((pointing to Ikhsan’s sculpture))
8. Ikhsan: Chicken McNugget, colour cake.
- .. ..
9. Ahmad: I want to make Volcano ice-cream.

Mr Marzuki’s facility with the computer helps to extend his children’s play into the virtual world. He surfs the Net with them, visiting Web sites of their favourite popular characters. The children affirm their knowledge of these characters by pointing to the characters and calling out their names as they appear on the screen, an activity Bruner calls “ritual naming” (Ninio & Bruner, 1978), typified in Excerpt 6.

*Excerpt 6*

1. Mr Marzuki: What's this?
2. Ahmad: Ahhmm, Dino saurus or .. what ah? Forgot.
3. Ikhsan: I think this will be Trynosaurus. Yah.
4. Ahmad: Trynosaurus Rex.
5. Ikhsan: Pteradon
6. Mr Marzuki: What Pteradon?
7. Ahmad: Logoraptus
8. Ikhsan: Overraptus.
9. Ahmad: Tenosaurus. This one is Overraptus also *ah*.
10. Ikhsan: Overraptus also *leh*.
- ... ..
11. Ikhsan: Already print Michael, Donatello already print.

Just before the start of this excerpt, father and sons had visited the Ninja Turtles Web site, and each son had chosen to print outline drawings of their favourite urban adolescent turtles. While the printer is at work, they visit the dinosaur Web site. The excerpt above begins with Mr Marzuki asking them for the name of the dinosaur that appears on the screen. As it turns out, this is a trigger that starts the boys rattling out the names of the dinosaurs as each dinosaur figure comes into view. They are enthusiastic in a shared interest and are supportive of one another, Ahmad adding a detail (#4) when Ikhsan identifies a particular dinosaur (#3), and Ikhsan confirming (#10) when Ahmad identifies a dinosaur first (#9). Even Mr Marzuki's interjection at turn #6 ("What Pteradon?") fails to disrupt this ritual. The excerpt ends with Ikhsan announcing the successful printing of their Ninja Turtles.

The naming of objects by the boys reflects their ability to identify the attributes of the dinosaurs and to differentiate between them. Although this skill is not explicit in this excerpt, in an event immediately preceding this when the boys are naming the Ninja Turtles, Ikhsan recognises the different turtles by looking at the letter of the alphabet inscribed on the buckle of the turtle's belt ("R" stands for Raphael, "D" for Donatello, etc.). Ahmad is a step ahead; he looks at the turtle's action, a useful strategy when the buckle is hidden from view. Thus Michaelangelo gives himself away if he appears holding a pizza aloft as the boys know him as "the guy who always steal pizzas". This whole activity of asking "what" questions and identifying and naming objects has close resemblance to the kind of requests for display activity that occur in the classroom (Wells, 1985), the only difference in this instance being the association of the materials with popular culture, which schools rarely consider as suitable for learning.

Some of the children's interest began because of an interest by the adult. Mr Marzuki is a fan of Formula One races and English football, and has been following the races and matches on television. This caught on with the children, particularly Ahmad, who in turn made their father buy Formula One and English Premier League PlayStation computer games which they play together. Such games involve reading instructions and typing in names but they are not literacy-based activities in the same way as reading books are. Ikhsan knows the race drivers and their cars so well that he can read off the computer screen the names of drivers (e.g., McClaren, Jordan, Eddy Irvine) and their cars (e.g., Jaguar, Ferrari, Toyota). In one instance, he announced: "This is Mika" as he pointed to a car with the word "Mika" on it. Ikhsan has also gained some conceptual knowledge of geography from the national flags associated with the native countries of the drivers. He would click on the Singapore flag whenever he registers to play declaring proudly: "I come from Singapore". The boys' appropriation of the sports media is also evident in their oral expressions. I spotted Ikhsan enacting a running commentary of a race, borrowing textual features of commentaries of broadcasters, including depictions of a problem ("Ferrari getting in trouble", "and it's turning round and round") and stylish concluding remarks ("one car, one out"). Thus Ikhsan's oral discourse not only contains appropriations of varied forms of content

from the sports media but also communicative practices used in the media. Such appropriation also situates him geographically.

Ikhsan may be a little young to get too excited about soccer but he is not to be left out of the excitement of watching a soccer match. He joins his brother in calling David Beckham their favourite soccer player and Manchester United their favourite soccer team. Their preference for a particular soccer player and team indexes their identities as fans and as participants in contemporary soccer culture, which is heavily mediated by television (see Dyson, 2003). The excitement becomes somewhat tensed when the boys have to decide who gets to take the name “Man U” when they play each other on the PlayStation. But common purpose normally prevails (with either one giving in) and Mr Marzuki hardly has to mediate. When the excitement seems to wane, such as when Ikhsan is losing (which happens often), Mr Marzuki would lift Ikhsan onto his lap and help him with the control, thus rescuing the match from an abrupt end. Such activities bond Mr Marzuki with his sons and endear him to them; he becomes to them a third member in their ever fun playground.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this chapter is to highlight some of the “official” and “unofficial” literacies in the lives of Malay children and their families. They offer a glimpse of an alternative approach towards understanding the complex literacy lives of Malay children, and bring to task the notions of cognitive or language deficit that previously may have prevailed in accounting for the failure of Malay children in school tests. I do not claim that the portrait I have drawn here of resourceful parents and children applies to all Malay families, but it does represent an important step in viewing Malay families in a different light, as constructors of their own cultures rather than as units limited in literacy resources and merely reactive to the literacy practices set by schools. This portrait also serves as a point of reference from which to convince educators of the need to recognise as valid literacy practices that take place outside school and to see students and their families differently in order to have an impact on their literacy development.

What is clear from this study is that the two target children have access to different opportunities for literacy learning at home, which position them differently with respect to the curriculum to which they have to adapt. Already, a sneak peek into their behaviour in kindergarten has shown some of these early tensions. Sanah is taking what she can from what is on offer at her kindergarten even as she is censured for not using Standard English. Ikhsan is not inclined to take up all of what the kindergarten has to offer, selecting only those that will allow him to engage in his own imaginary world of Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers, and dismissing those he has no interest in such as speaking Malay. Both children have little opportunity to make use of the cultural and linguistic resources they have with them; most of these remain hidden in their “virtual school bags” (Thomson, 2002).

The apparent gap between the curriculum and the child's engagement may find an explanation in the ways with which the child is accustomed to doing literacy at home. Families differ in what they count as literacy and which literacy they consider worth transmitting to the children. The two families employ both phonics- and meaning-based approaches to literacy instruction, but they differ in the emphasis they place on these approaches. Mr Marzuki tends to emphasise the mechanics of reading and writing – the recognition and naming of letters, the decoding of words according to phonics principles, the motor skills of writing and drawing, and the rules of spelling and punctuation – much like what happens in the classroom. Mdm Zaharah, frustrated with her inability to get far with the code breaking aspects of literate practice, appears to focus on the content and purpose of written texts and of the particular modes of thinking that these normally involve. Her efforts are augmented by the tutorial practice in oral argumentation within the context of banter provided by Mr Rashid.

There are also considerable differences between the two families in the language practices the children use and model after. The Marzuki family almost exclusively closes its doors on Malay, allowing it space only when the children begin school. Both parents prefer to speak to each other in English; in front of the boys they make it a point to speak only English. The boys understand Malay more than they can speak it, and so use English to communicate with each other and with their parents. They have fallen, as it were, into what Gregory and Williams (2000) call the “net of ‘subtractive bilingualism’” (replacing the first language)<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, the Malay language stays rooted in the Rashid family even as English flourishes from the time the children start kindergarten. The parents speak Malay to each other but the children are encouraged to speak English at home to each other and to their parents. In practice, the children switch from one language to another, blending school-learning practices with those they get from home. Note that since both families have no educated English speaker as a role model, Singlish is the more dominant variety. However, since the boys in the Marzuki family have the privilege of phonics instruction, their pronunciation (not necessarily the other grammar components) tends to approximate to Standard English.

There is a strong influence of school in the homes, none more visible than the type of print materials for literacy learning. Safe in the knowledge that the books the children read are the kinds used in classroom teaching, library visits do not become part of the families' routines. But the families differ in how they interact around books, how they obtain them, and the availability of books in different languages. They keep far more books in English than in Malay. Sanah and her brother possess a few Malay storybooks but none appear to exist in Ikhsan's collection.

The families also differ in the amount, variety and sources of popular culture that they allow into the homes and the ends for which they are used. Popular culture may end up as a babysitter taking the place of the mothers who are otherwise busy doing household chores, a provider of entertainment, a supplement to traditional literacy texts, or a combination of all three. Popular culture also impacts on the children differently, particularly with regard to stimulating their

interest in printed texts; Sanah is fascinated with Sesame Street’s version of Rappunzel while Ikhsan develops a notable preference for games and toys.

As noted earlier, Ikhsan’s access to supplementary educational resources and capital is considerably more than Sanah’s. Despite this difference, one common element emerges. The texts and contexts provided in the home and which the two children draw upon are disparate, consisting of school- and home-related as well as parts of popular culture. This textual repertoire for reading, which includes both the “official” and “unofficial” texts, creates what Luke calls “a pattern of mutually reinforcing intertextual references” (1992, p. 39), with characters who appear on television, in the movies, on the Internet, and as toys.

The children are all growing up in households where literacy is constituted as desirable; they spend a lot of extended time at home on out-of-school, literacy-related practices. They are more active participants at home than they were in literacy events with the teacher in the kindergarten. And in their own unique ways, they have acquired a disposition for reading as pleasure, either on their own or with an adult.

In the case of Sanah, she enjoys listening to stories read to her, and she has an inquiring approach to print. In fact, her engagement and learning from books as a preschooler can be considered quite sustained. Moreover, she is communicatively competent. Two factors seem to set her back – her struggle with the decoding of texts and her repertoire of street Singlish – but these do not nullify what she can already do and what she can do with instruction. This means that in school, teachers will have to find ways to reposition her as an active learner who is capable of design, agency and critique. Coupled with considerable parental encouragement and continued belief, Sanah should overcome her initial struggles and bring to play her meaning-making strategies that are highly rewarded at the upper primary levels. It would be unfortunate, however, if her future achievement is merely attributed to her growing maturity or a particular remedial intervention, for it ignores and leaves unexamined the inequalities produced by existing practices in and out of school.

In the case of Ikhsan, while his mastery of phonics and knowledge of concepts have earned him some status in class, he has little opportunity to make a useful connection with the schooling process. His constant and active movements at home contrasted with the many hours of being still and listening in the kindergarten, and his captivation with popular culture has found little use in the classroom. Ikhsan will have to adapt his habitus to the discipline of the classroom world, just as the school has to provide a viable incentive for him to do so. Teachers will have to re-offer literate practices that are palatable and in tune with his individual person. Ikhsan’s use of print in video games, his fascination with print in the family album, and his knowledge of his favourite characters are valid entry points into school literacy which teachers can exploit.

How Sanah’s and Ikhsan’s literacies will develop as they traverse the school system is hard to tell. Senechal and LeFevre (2002) have found that children whose parents reported teaching literacy skills often but did not read storybooks frequently performed better than their peers in spelling, decoding, and alphabet

knowledge until the end of Primary 1. However by Primary 3, they declined dramatically in their reading performance. Comber (2004), on the other hand, describes a child who had early struggles with the decoding of words, but his parents helped inculcate in him an interest in general knowledge, a wide vocabulary, and an inquiring approach to the natural world. After he mastered the code-breaking aspects of literate practice through teacher encouragement and direct teaching, he was able to use his complex meaning-making strategies in significant ways.

The eventual paths Sanah and Ikhsan will take will depend on their teachers' willingness and capacity to open themselves to learning about who their charges are and how they operate so that appropriate pedagogical redesigns can be administered early. As Kamler and Comber (2005) remind us, the problems children encounter should not just be "attributed to the individual but [be] seen in relationship to the structure and design of the teacher's curriculum and pedagogy" (p. 9). This echoes what Heath (1983) has suggested more than two decades ago: that schools, rather than families, need to change to accommodate differences in the use of literacy.

In closing, understanding home literacy practices is important as a reminder that school is just one domain in peoples' lives and that school literacy practices may need to be set within this wider context (Dyson, 1999; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). An understanding of the literacies that children like Sanah and Ikhsan acquire at home offers opportunities for teachers to build on what children know and to explore the potential value of appropriating practices and knowledge from other contexts in children's lives as resources for school learning.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These include the institutes of technical education, junior colleges and pre-university centres, polytechnics and universities.
- <sup>2</sup> In Singapore, "mainstream" culture in the sense of hegemonic culture is Chinese-generated and Chinese-dominated (see Barr & Low, 2005) by virtue of the community's overwhelming presence in various sectors of the society.
- <sup>3</sup> These oral routines are what James Gee (1996) might refer to as 'discourse' with a lowercase *d* which he defines as "any stretch of language (spoken, written, signed) which 'hangs together' to make sense to some community of people who use that language" (p. 103).

- <sup>4</sup> All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.
- <sup>5</sup> Altogether three children participated in the pilot project, the third from another kindergarten. Due to space limitations in the present article, this third child is not discussed here. See Abu Bakar (2005) for a full report of the project.
- <sup>6</sup> The English that is spoken in many households is typically that of Singapore English, a local variety that has borrowed elements in vocabulary and grammar from the other local languages, namely Chinese dialects and Malay.
- <sup>7</sup> Mr Rashid worked irregular hours, sometimes till past midnight, and thus needed to sleep during the day.
- <sup>8</sup> In Excerpts 2 and 3, where extensive Malay or unintelligible English are used, they are translated in entirety and placed in a separate column on the far right. The transcript notations are as follows:
- Cik* Malay words are represented in italics.
- [Miss] Square brackets enclose translations of isolated Malay words/phrases.
- ((Laugh)) Double parentheses enclose transcriber comments.
- “Yes” Quotation marks enclose texts being read.
- ... .. Indicates some turns are skipped.
- <sup>9</sup> I am ambivalent towards the suggestion that the boys’ first language is English on the basis of the extensive exposure they have had to the language since young, at the expense of Malay; I count on the parents’ native language as indicative of the boys’ “mother tongue”, however unsatisfactory this may be.

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