THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR: A CASE STUDY OF WEEKEND AND WEEKDAY LITERACIES.[1]

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Abstract

Literacy is everyday social practice and is present in both secular and sacred spheres of life. Yet these two spheres are often, not meeting, nor integrating. This paper attempts to examine similarities and contrasts in these two differing contexts to enable a more connected narrative to inform educational practitioners. In the global cosmopolitan cityscape of Singapore as in many places elsewhere, sacred literacy often comprises the peripheral-weekend one; while secular literacy the mainstream-weekday one. This paper attempts to chart the "distance" that spans these two literacies in Primary 3 children aged 9 in Singapore and to discuss implications for curricular and pedagogic reforms in the context of the social-political and educational lives of Singaporeans. Our data includes classroom observations as well as pupil and teacher interviews.

KEYWORDS   literacy, religion, secular, sacred, children, education

Introduction

Where Muslim education in general is concerned, anthropologists and religious historians have already recounted the pedagogies that shaped it and the intellectual, moral and affective spiritual effects attributed to it (Brenner 2001, Boyle 2004, Omoniyi and Fishman 2006, Schmidt 2011,). In many parts of the world such as Sweden, there is an ongoing discussion about the way that Islam is perceived, understood and incorporated into life (Jenson, 2011).   Researchers have produced rich accounts of

elementary Islamic education using a wide range of methods such as interviews, questionnaire, participant observation, archival research; psychological experiment as well as fine-grained analysis of video (cf. Moore, 2008). Rosowsky (2006) has written a comprehensive account of liturgical literacy in the United Kingdom. In Singapore, Tan (2010) has written on civil religion, Goh (2009) has examined Christian religious identities and Lai (2009) has brought out a seminal volume on its religious landscape. Where madrasah education is concerned, there have also been recent studies on full-time weekday madrasah literacies in Singapore, for example Noor and Lai (2006), Alatas (2006), Saeed (2009) and Saeda (2010).   Such madrasahs are seen by Muslims as viable alternatives to the secular school system and its attendant ideologies. However, very little has been written about the its counterpart, the weekend madrasahs, which is attended by at least 40% of young people aged 5 to 24 in Singapore (MUIS 2007:51). [2]   These weekend schools take place outside school hours, usually on a Saturday or Sunday for a few hours each week. A Muslim child in Singapore would attend such a school for an average of two to four hours per week, and for an average of six years (Chee, 2006).

My study of weekend madrasahs aims to throw light on Muslims who are neither activist nor religiously visible and to contribute to a balanced response to the many volumes on activist Muslims, which are ostensibly "attractive" to researchers because of their visibility and activism (Otterbeck and Hallin, 2010). More specifically, I wish to compare the little known weekend "peripheral" literacies with the weekday "mainstream" literacies which many Muslim youths are exposed to. There are in many children's lives often two mutually independent systems, upholding mutually exclusive and usually contradictory educational philosophies which operate independently and which have by and large gone unnoticed.

Literacy practices may take place in or out of school. The child's association or exposure with these schools (as with members of the family and community) will of course be of great influence, not least because children have an extremely absorbent mind and are spontaneous learners. Where their education is concerned, there is usually the weekday "mainstream" school which is "secular" and the weekend "peripheral religious school which is "sacred". These literacies are usually kept apart, for they are entirely different in orientation, practice and status. Weekend literacies privilege special attention not least because parents are generally predisposed to sending their children to schools which they believe will enable them to imbibe the "right" moral values to stand them in good stead, something which they perceive is lacking in mainstream educational institutions.   While the literacies in the weekday school will ensure employment prospects of their children, the literacies in the weekend Christian, Buddhist or Hindu schools will give their children the "much-needed" norms and values. In my study, parents interviewed cite sacred literacies as offering a "safe" insulator in which their children may be protected from the influence of negative social values associated with drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, youth gangsterism and

consumerism. In attending a regular day school, a student inevitably imbibe a set of values and norms. In going to yet another school in the weekend, the student encounters yet another set of ideologies and one that at various points is likely to conflict with his or her prior acculturalisation and socialization.

Theoretical background

In this study, the term "literacy" refers not so much to an autonomous set of skills, decontextualized from society and culture, without links to ideology, knowledge and power; but one intimately associated with ways of thinking; believing and valuing that is connected with group member shipping (Gee 2005). It is a literacy which is mastered by both overt and covert instructions as well as by apprenticeship and guided participation in social practices with teachers who have already mastered such literacies. Each instructional context has its own rules for socially interacting and sharing knowledge, what Heath (1983) has termed "literacy events" and "literacy practices".

In this study, literacy events includes an examination of which content is privileged and which is not, so that we may examine the construction of cultural knowledge, the type of knowledge considered primary or secondary, and its socio-cultural and educational implications. It also refers to participation in verbal interactions where some kind of written text is referred to as the focus of attention or even just as topics of talk. Here, textbooks become important clues since they introduce the child reader to cultural knowledge considered legitimated or valued (Curdt-Christiansen, 2008). Learning materials are not only vehicles for content teaching learning but are simultaneously involved in expressing or challenging particular kinds of relationships, value positions and identities. Literacy events also include an account of the medium of instruction not least because the way we experience the world is determined by our choice of language. Language is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies. Each language carries the particularities of its socio-cultural and historical contexts, cuts markers on the landscapes, whereby we habitually traverse.

In contrast," literacy practices" are the actions that surround the event and which unfold according to a repeated pattern, as for example, in the patterns of learning the genres of speaking, reading, of writing, and of behaviouring (Barton, 1994). It assumes that in learning to read and through reading itself, children acquire socio-culturally appropriate information, values and ways of thinking and doing that teachers normally assume children should have (Pike, 2006). Literacy events includes socially established rules or "patterned social acts" (Street, 2005) for verbalizing what pupils know from and about the written material. These activities include routine arrangements e.g. lining up in school, saying a prayer before the beginning of a lesson and reciting aloud (Street and Lefstein, 2006: 153). It includes the pedagogies or methodology which the teacher uses in teaching a subject matter. It also include classroom semiotics such as speech, gesture, and images.

It should be noted from the onset that literacy practices are not isolated discrete events or individually-based ones but instead are situated practices linked to something broader of a cultural and social kind (Barton & Hamilton: 2000). "Practices" are often historically embedded, constituted, and possess a durable dispositions to act in a certain way; what has been called the "habitus" by Bourdieu (1977) and/or 'figured world" (Holland et al 1988:52) where actors are assigned contacts and particular outcomes valued over others. This is the literacy with the capital "L" and entails the movement beyond the boundaries of written and verbal text, being concerned with the creation of a meaning through image, movement and layout (Siegel, 2006). It follows then that both weekend and weekday literacies are not neutral, since in every society there are dominant and non-dominant literacies. The mainstream "day" school derives from the most powerful dominating group in society which is keen to socialize the populace into mainstream ways of making meaning. In contrast, weekend literacies, especially those belonging to minority or ethnic groups, are often presented in the public eye as inadequate or failed attempts to match the "proper" literacy of the dominant culture. In such fashion, dominant literacies usually marginalize other varieties as a means to assert its own dominance to disguise its own class and cultural bias and be represented as the only literacy (Jewitt and Kress, 2003). Hence, in any study, it becomes pertinent to ask "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant and why (Mosley, 2010).

THE RESEARCH SITE

Both Class A and B are situated in Singapore, a modern city state comprising 5 million people of various ethnic groups - Chinese 77%, Malays 14%, Indians 8% and other s (1%) (Dept of Statistics, 2011). Singapore has a varied linguistic, cultural and religious heritage. There are four official languages – Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil. Religion is an essential ingredient in the lives of Singaporeans. For example, the well-known Inter-religious Council (IRO) is an officially recognized and supported non-governmental organization (NGO) as well as an active one which promotes activities such as the annual celebration of World Religion Day whereby representatives from the ten religions of Singapore come together to commemorate a day of diversity and tolerance in religious beliefs. In addition, for the Sikhs, Malays and Parsis of Singapore, religion is not just a source of spiritual, social and cultural nourishment but also a definition of their identity. For the Chinese, Indians and Malays, it is also a major part of their cultural life, as seen in their commemoration of various religious festivals, which are also public holidays. Almost all Malays profess Islam as their religion and they form the bulk of the Muslims in Singapore. Although Malay is Singapore's national language, English is the *defacto* working language and is used widely in the professions of business, politics and education.

Here as in many global cities, sacred literacy often comprises the peripheral-weekend one; while secular literacy the mainstream-weekday one. Many pupils are exposed regularly and intimately to these two literacies. This paper attempts to chart the "distance" that spans these two literacies and to discuss implications for curricular and pedagogic reforms in the context of the social-political and educational lives of Singaporeans. The methodology used in this research includes field notes, participant observation, instructional materials, audio and video tapes and interviews with teachers, parents and pupils. However in the preparation of this paper, data has only been drawn from the field notes, instructional materials and classroom observations.

My data involves classroom observations in one sacred (Muslim) classroom (hitherto called Class A) and one secular government-funded classroom (hitherto call Class B) of Primary 4 students aged 9-10. These two classes have been chosen to represent peripheral and mainstream literacies not least because they are situated within walking distance to each other and because they possess students in common. For example nine students from weekend Class A attend classes in weekday Class B. Indeed, many of the students belonging to both Class A and B are neighbors in the sense that they live in the same neighborhood, which is situated in one of Singapore's new towns and which is a relatively poor township, compared to others. Many children are observed walking with their backpacks to both Class A in the weekend and to Class B in the weekday.

Class A is situated in a void deck of a block of residential flats. This is the ground floor of a large block of residential apartments built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) of Singapore, which is often utilized for permanent facilities such as specialized schools, community clubs and to house "temporary" events such as weddings and funerals. This kind of subsidized public housing accommodates around 90% of all Singaporeans, 86% of whom own their homes (Dept. of Statistics, 2011). The madrasah which houses Class A opens all-day on Saturday and Sunday. It was founded in the 1980's by a group of private individuals with the objective of teaching neighborhood children the principles and practices of Islam, the faith of their parents. The school currently enrolls over 800 students, mostly Malay, and its average class size is between 25 to 35. It employs full-time teachers, most of whom are graduates from the day-madrasah in Singapore. Most, however, do not possess a teaching certification but through the years have gained teaching experience from practical practice. Teachers take Mondays and Tuesdays off in lieu of their weekend where they teach from 8 am to 6 pm. They spend Wednesday to Friday at the madrasah itself planning lessons, liaising with parents, marking, grading, and other administrative duties.

On the other hand, Class B is part of the Singapore school system, under the direct purview and funding of the Ministry of Education with the ultimate aim of developing the skills, characters and values which will enable citizen to do well in life and to take

Singapore forward in the 2lst century (MOE, 2011). The class size is between 30-40 per class and the school hours are from 7.30 am to 1 pm daily. Class B may be considered representative of a government-funded school. It has an enrollment of 2000 students, which in percentage-wise is representative of the multi-racial component of Singapore. It is equipped with modern facilitates such as a playing field, a gymnasium and other function rooms. The teachers here take Saturday and Sunday off and are also permanent staff but instead of graduating from the madrasah, they have graduated from secular colleges. All of them have teaching qualifications and are much better paid than the teachers of Class A.

In both classrooms, the acquisition of literacy is treasured. Both believe in the merits of functional literacy as expounded by UNESCO, that is, that literacy is linked to the enhancement of labour in that one's level of reading and writing allows one to follow one's chosen career path. However, their motivations informing such literacies differ. In Class A, literacy is emphasized not least because the first word revealed by the Prophet Mohammed is for example, the imperative "iqra" (read):"Proclaim (or Read) In the name of your Lord and Cherisher, Who created…"(96:1). Hence, verses are read aloud to accompany birth and death and in times of distress or joy. The Koran, as Islam's sacred book, is used most extensively in the liturgy in the mosques and in private devotions. In almost every sermons and religious talk, Quranic verses are quoted and explained. Chapters and verses from the Quran are used regularly in congregational and individual prayers and indeed, it is impossible for a Muslim to pray without reading the Quran's first chapter which is entitled "the Opening": "in the name of god, Most Merciful, Most compassionate, Praise be to God, Lord of all worlds, the Merciful, the compassionate, the King of the Day of Judgment. It is you we worship and it is from You we seek help….." In Class B, the practice of reading and writing is emphasized not least because literacy is central to the mastery of school subjects such a Science, Mathematics, language studies, and social studies and which in turn are crucial in acquiring employment in the global marketplace. Students are reminded daily of the importance of literacy through the pledge which they must say collectively at the start of each school day: "We the citizens of Singapore pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion to build a democratic society based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation. "

Both Class A and B believe in the absolute necessity of receiving a good well rounded education. To do this, both are cognizant of pupils' goal to do well in the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination). Hence, both schools streamed their children to different classes according to age groups and cognitive abilities, help pupils in financial difficulties and organize parents' day in their efforts to fulfill visions and goals. Both utilize an array of tests and examinations to ensure that pupils read their textbooks and

take their lessons seriously.   There is a report card to fill in at the end of each semester for each pupil which must be duly signed by the parent concerned.   There are also prizes for top students with graduation certificates given at the end of each year for good attendance and school performance. Both schools also organize excursions or outings for their pupils as a balance from the weekly or daily routine of desk work.

The rest of this paper will elaborate further on the religious weekend vs. secular weekday literacies in view of its broader socio cultural educational implications through two sectional headings: literacy events and literacy practices.

DISCUSSION

Literacy events.

In this section we scan the list of subjects listed in the students' report card so that we may know which content is privileged and which is not. Subjects taught in Class A comprise mainly Islamic topics such as:

> *Iqra/Quran Reading* – Quranic literacy (Arabic)
>
> *Tauhid* - principles of Islam and God
>
> *aqidah* and *fiqh* –faith and practice
>
> *akhlaq* – character and life skills
>
> *sirah* and *tarikh* – social and civilization Islam
>
> *Surah* and *doa* – stories about the prophet and prayers

In contrast, subjects regarded important in Class B are:

> English and the second language ("mother tongue")
>
> Mathematics
>
> Science
>
> Social Studies
>
> Physical Education
>
> Moral/National Education

The above two sets of subjects are also supplemented by Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) and Community Involvement Programmes (CIP) in both classes. However,

Class B has a wider offering in both CCA and CIP as it has a bigger budget. One notes too that while the subjects in Class A all points ultimately to Moral education based on Islam, Class B's Moral/National Education is given only a perfunctory status since it is the only non-examinable subject in its list. It is also given the least weightage of 5% in comparison with English, Second language, Science and Mathematics which altogether take up over 70% of curricula time. It is also not inaccurate to note that the slot for Moral/National Education is ofen taken over by other subjects (MOE 2011).

Class A and B seat their pupils in front of a desk much like the typical classrooms. In both classrooms, walls are decorated with posters of pupils' work in their respective content areas. In the front of the classroom, above the teacher desk hung on the wall is the state flag. In Class A, a prayer or chant begins the lesson each morning but this is noticeably absent in Class B. . The relationship between God and human beings, so central in madrasah culture, is intellectually or socially irrelevant in mainstream schools. For Class A, education is about the recognition of God and it is only through this path that the achievements of discipline, greatness of mind and other virtues may be attained. On the contrary, Class B believes that it is only through a focusing on subjects of more direct economic relevance will there be the possible achievement of other virtues. The primary objective of Class A, pupils are to practice the 5 pillars of Islam for it is these pillars which will lay the foundation of their lives as Muslims. Class A therefore foreground the description of events and backdrops all their perception of the world through their understanding of Islam. For example, in writing about themselves, high achievers place emphasis on gratitude to God rather than on their own talents and achievements. Interjections in Arabic such as "As-Salamu Alaykum" (Peace be upon you), "al hamdu lillah" (Thanks be to god) "subhan allah (Glory to god) and "astagh-firullah" ("May god forgive us") are often heard. In contrast, Class B places the achievements more solidly on students' own efforts and grooms their student in being confident and discerning in judgment, able to think independently without a reliance on an elder or other-worldly entity. Instead, students should be self-directed and take responsibility for their own learning. Last but not least, Class B wants students to be a concerned citizens who areroo ted in Singapore while Class A wants students who are primarily Muslims and whose loyalty are in Islam, a creed which transmits nationhood. Correspondingly, while Class A's parents are enlisted to support their children through supervising them through the five principles of Islam, Class B's parents are enlisted to support their children in mastering English through a range of everyday activities such as reading together, playing simple language games, going to libraries or having a conversation on a familiar topic or favourite past-time.

In essence, the Singapore mainstream school is a pragmatic one, embedded with basically "materialist" values such as competitiveness, independence and self-interest. Singapore textbooks (as with textbooks from other global economies) portray a world of

global consumerism related indirectly to clothing, grooming, music, communication technology (notably the mobile phone) and entertainment. The backdrop of culture is urbanization, formal education, wider adult literacy, mass-media and communication technology, new methods of production, the industrialization of agriculture, and a growing sense of national, regional and world-community membership. Mainstream culture is also embedded with a heavy dose of popular culture, which is driven by countries such as America, Britain and Europe and which includes music, film, literature and sports. Oppositional images such as these exist not least because while the aim of the weekend school is to construct a Muslim (religious) identity, that of the mainstream school is to construct a Singaporean (national) identity. While the madrasah concentrates on the inculcation of virtues such as modesty as seen through more conservative Muslim attire, courtesy as seen through the use of respectful language, respect for all and especially for the teacher and the guest; day school tend to prize other kinds of virtues more, for example, assertiveness, independence, initiative, and creativity (Chew, 2006). In contrast, Class A stresses more of the "softer" virtues such as piety, humility and service. Not surprisingly, there is a more competitive and conversely less nurturing spirit in Class B. Class A's teachers are observed to be much gentler in manner than those of Class B.

The languages used in these two classrooms are also pointers to differing ideologies not least beaus language is both a mirror of traditionalism and modernization, and often in the effort to master a language, pupils themselves are greatly influenced by it (Ooi, 2007). The medium of instruction in Class A is Malay while that in Class B is English. The second language of Class A is Arabic while the second language of Class B is the student's mother tongue, (usually Malay, Mandarin or Tamil). From the following example of everyday greetings in English and Jawi, one may gleaned the indexical identities which these two scripts connote:

Good day (سلامت سجهترا)

What is your name? (سياڤكهٔ نام اندا)

Do you speak Malay? : (بوليهكه اندا برتوتور دالم بهاس ملايو)

The contrasting orthography above shows that language is not just a recording device but also a tool of symbolic, psychological significance which helps in the creation, shaping and maintenance of identities. Scripts may be said to display a kind of emblematic identity displays", that is, language becomes objects—words—that indexes a certain identity. In writing, such objects become icons of various worldviews and values. For example, Roman letters indirectly came to symbolize the West and greater accessibility to modernization and westernization while Islamic letters came to symbolize the East and religiosity. The world and the word" (Freire and Marced, 1987) involves not just the script but also the subtle socio-cultural historical knowledge

associated with the script Prayers expressed in Arabic in Class A can only accentuate such a view.

Literacy Practices

"Literacy practices" focuses on the actions surrounding the presentation of the content and are usually discerned through classroom processes which are in reality "rituals" of management. This is akin to Bernstein (1990) "visible" and "invisible" pedagogies. For example, in both classes, before the beginning of each lesson, there is a roll call as to who is present or absent in class. Attendance records and other information on the child background are kept. Children who were absent the previous week would have to bring along excuse chits or a letters from their parents explaining their absence. Such procedures indicate that lessons are taken "seriously" and that pupils' presence in class counts.

In both classes, there were some attempts at group work but generally the teacher sits and speaks from behind the desks. The pupils will then listen, take out their exercise or textbook and either refer to them or make notes as the teacher goes along. After the explanation by the teacher on some topic or other, there usually is a follow-up activity such as writing, or filling in the blanks. The same text might be read a second time by the teacher, depending on students' comprehension. In general, the teacher does not encourage questions or discussions from the pupil perhaps because there was a lot to cover. Periodically, the teacher will resort to the use of stories from the textbook and after the retelling of the story; oral or written questions normally follow, mostly as a means of testing comprehension. In brief, pedagogical practice is focused mainly on teacher talk and seat work.

One difference is the greater prevalence of group work in Class B, not least because there is in existence in Singapore day schools, a multi-literacies pedagogy aimed to design innovative learning environments that aimed to engage all students in an expanded range of literary practices, including imaginative and cognitively demanding integration of texts. In many madrasahs however, it is still very much print-based due to their relatively smaller budget, poorly paid, often untrained teachers.

In the learning of second languages, Class A emphasizes accuracy, while Class B is more concerned with oracy and fluency. Class B wishes its language learning to be supported by engaging and interactive lessons leveraging on project work, speech and drama and oral presentation. Here, the main difference is perhaps to be felt in pedagogical practice. In Class A, the teaching of Arabic is through something akin to the phonic method, often without the accompanying use of any picture, syntactic, semantic or contextual clues. This is characteristic of traditional pedagogies in elementary religious education associated with Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism,

Hinduism and Judaism. There is a stress on learning, usually by rote, of the Quran through extensive imitation, repetition and memorization, often without full explanation of the literal meaning of the text. Such recitation of the sacred text, with or without comprehension, is regarded as an act of piety, discipline, cultural preservation and personal transformation

While Class A aims to teach accurate recitation in the reading class, Class B emphasizes silent meaning and comprehension. Methodologies such as drills, practice and rote learning so much utilized in Class A are frowned upon in Class B and have disappeared almost completely from their learning materials. Instead, Class B aims to build on young learner's ability to guess and predict unfamiliar words within stories based on culturally-loaded expectations. It believes that pupils who will excel in reading are those who will read widely during their weekend in the community libraries so that they may acquire the skill of guessing and predicting. While one of the gurus of mainstream reading classes, Frank Smith (2004) reminds practitioners that exclusive attention to the phonic dimension of reading, as observed in Class A is literally "barking at print"; yet it must be said that millions of children, together with their supportive parents and teachers, participate in an alternative literacy, such as that of Class A, and do not perceive their practice to be "meaningless".

Clothing is a powerful symbol in all areas of life as clothes do tell a message. Female teachers in both Class A and B realize that they should avoid wearing anything tight, low cut, or generally sexy.[3] Both also wear comfortable shoes since they are on their feet all day. Closely related to such semiotic behavior is the need for both groups of teachers to underscore school as serious business, not a place to casually hang out. School, at its best, is preparation for life and for the discipline of work and both groups of teachers are careful to model this discipline on a daily basis. This helps demonstrate to their children the serious and professional approach to one's job. What is different is that in Class A, both teachers and students are adorned with the *hijab* (Muslim head-dress) . The uniform which the children wear is a brown loose tunic from neck to foot with a matching head covering for the girls. This is also the garment for the female teachers. Muslim boys are dressed in short brown top and brown long trousers and must come to school with a *songkok (hat).* In the mainstream school however, both boys and girls do not have the distinctive headgear. Both also dress in identical shirts except that the boys are in shorts while the girls are in skirts. Hence, their lower legs and lower arms are exposed. Semiotically, these are very powerful visual images and also emblemic of opposing ideologies.

CONCLUSION

To teach well is to understand the cultural background of one's students. Religion is an integral part of culture, and often underlies the formation of cultural values and practices (Parekh, 2006). Effective teaching can only take place when one is able to bridge the gap between what students learn in school and their out-of-school experiences, in brief,

between weekday and weekend schools, between the sacred and the secular. Yet, probably as a result of prejudice or inertia, there has been a general reluctance for such "connected learning" to take place (Teo, 2008). This study proposes the importance of bridging these two oppositional literacies which exists in the lives of many pupils and which inevitably forces them to come to grips with conflicting identities, a negotiation process which remains unstable even after graduation from school.

The literacies that surround a child both in the weekend and the weekday is worthy of study, not least because children have a range of literacy practices that are often not recognized or valued by both peripheral and mainstream practitioners (Nixon and Comber 2006, Muklis 2007). It is a truism that the majority of mainstream teachers have little knowledge about peripheral literacy. The Muslim child is therefore disadvantaged since most mainstream teachers are unaware of the cultural resources that that child brings to school, and even if they are aware of the child's unique resource, they do not recognize or appreciate its value. For example, memorization is a technique that is unnamed and currently outside the boundaries of mainstream English teaching, perhaps even despised. Neither is it given a pedagogical status in the English class unlike in mathematics where the importance of "mental" skills is also emphasized. Obviously then, different cultural capital which children bring to a classroom has different sociocultural-linguistic values and only some of them are ranked with privileges and power. For example, rote learning is discounted in mainstream school, although it may have some benefits, Wagner (1983:87) cites evidence from work he has done with the Morocco Literacy Project which suggests that prior memorization is a help to reading acquisition in Arabic. He also cites work by Chomsky which suggests that being able to orally recite passages before having to decode them helped children who normally had trouble with reading fluency.

Here I am reminded of the term "cultural capital's (Bourdieu, 1977) which refers to the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. This concept is helpful for thinking about children's contrasting cultural resources and repertoires of practices that are available as part of their everyday life and the particular dispositions and embodied ways of being which they acquire and take with them to school' (Comber, 2004). When children's cultural capital are valued in school and given a high 'exchange value', they will open doors and give the children access to otherwise unattainable resources. Keeping this in mind, future research should explore the voices of learners from different religious, linguistic and social classes.

This attention to the cultural capital of children is all the more significant bearing in mind Malay children's underachievement vis-à-vis the other ethnic groups in Singapore (Muklis, 2007). Malay students have been found to be academically behind Indian and Chinese students, as seen in their PSLE scores (Ibid.). In view of the fact that previous

literature in emergent literacy has suggested that families are key sites where literacy and linguistic competence are constructed e.g. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) and Volk and de Acosta (2003), there have been attempts to explain their weak educational achievements through reasons such as poor supervision by Malay parents, lack of academic interest by Malay youth, large numbers of children in Malay families and low-social economic status (cf. Saeda 2010, Muklis 2007, Aman et al 2007)

Notwithstanding the important influence of the family in academic achievement, this study has raised questions about the readiness of schools to recognize and accommodate literacy practices in the religious domain.   For example, it is not well known that a possible reason for the lower academic achievements of Malay is that they have a heavier linguistic burden than the Indian or Chinese children since many of them have to memorize Arabic. The Malay child has to learn on the average three languages – when the population in Singapore is fast becoming monolingual as a result of globalization (Chew, 2009). While the constellation of "bi-ness" affords children unique access to literacy resource, it also presents them, their teachers and families, with unique challenges with respect to their literary achievements. In this case, conflict as well as complementariness in the intersections of multiple/different values and beliefs and differing educational contexts of socialization are experienced (Li 2006).

In the domain of home and religion, the overall pattern that has emerged is that the Malays in Singapore use English the least, unlike the Indians and Chinese who use relatively more English (Vaish, 2008).   Since English is the medium of instruction in day schools and is the *defacto* working language of Singapore, this puts Malay children at a relative disadvantage. Vaish (2008) found that many Malay children endeavor to studied Arabic outside of school, many as early as Primary, although it has little relevance to their daily lives. Usually, the study in Arabic is through the medium of Malay, as seen in this study. The choice to learn Arabic despite the heavy language-learning load in the Singapore school system, points to heavier cognitive load for pupils since this leaves less time for the learning of other subjects.[4]

While the mainstream must take the peripheral in mind where educational effectiveness is to be maximized, the peripheral should also make a similar effort. Peripheral practitioners need to adapt to the secular world as well not least because globalization has postulated a new age where critical thinking and communication skills become crucial. The traditional top-down relationship of state to citizen is being replaced by multiple layers of self-governing community from the local to national and global levels (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009). This means that religious classrooms which concentrate on the individual and personal salvation to the point of neglecting social problems, which concentrates on otherworldly concerns at the expense of problems of life and which focuses on dogmas and practices at the expense of universal values may no longer be as viable as before in a fast-changing world.   It would certainly be a healthy compromise if the gap between the peripheral and the mainstream be narrowed if only to lessen the conflictual and oppositional identities which children face weekly.

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[2] Singapore encourages the moral development of children as a way to combat the encroachment of "undesirable" foreign values that come with the capitalist development and modernization in Singapore.

[3] There is one male teacher for six female teaches in Class B. As for Class A, male teachers are non-existent for the simple reason that the salary offered is too low to attract them (Interview with principal of School A).

[4] In addition, most Malay children also came from homes where parents did not normally use the elaborated code when speaking to their children. Many parents spoke Bazaar Malay, an easy-going informal style which sometimes lacked accuracy and grammatical order. While such informality is the norm in intimate relationships, standard Malay becomes harder to master.