Home and School: 
Children’s Lived Experience of Literacy*

Mukhlis Abu Bakar & Koh Guat Hua

Background

The proposed research forms the next phase of an ethnographic study on Singapore children’s literacy experience carried out by the principal investigator (first author). In the earlier study, currently on-going and entitled ‘Malay Children’s Lived Experience of Literacy’ (henceforth referred to as MCLEL), the focus is on Malay children. The study, started in January 2005, examines the literacy development of eight Malay children in and out of school in kindergarten and subsequently in primary one. As the research unfolds, the principal investigator becomes increasingly aware of the importance of undertaking a similar study on Chinese children given that no comparable study on these children has been done thus far. This, at the moment, is a regrettable gap, more so given the heavily socially stratified nature of this group.

Moreover, if the findings of the study on Malay children are to help redesign teacher education and effective interventions in schools, it makes sense to include, in our understanding of children’s literacy, an appreciation of the literacy experience of the dominant Chinese, particularly those from the low-income group. Also, as mentioned in the proposal of the MCLEL study, “the existence of three different ethnic groups speaking their respective ‘mother tongue’ languages and English may reveal important details that are significant in influencing the functions and meanings of literacy practices.”¹ Thus was born the idea of extending the research (with the second author as collaborator) to examine the literacy experience of Chinese children in the same age group, i.e., from the final year of kindergarten to the first year of primary school.

¹ This paper is adapted from the case for support section of a research proposal entitled: “Chinese Children’s Lived Experience of Literacy” submitted to the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice of the National Institute of Education in 2006. The proposal has since been awarded a grant to be used in conjunction with the earlier grant awarded to the Malay Children’s Lived Experience of Literacy (MCLEL) project. At the time of submitting this paper to e-Utama, both projects are in their final phase.

In the following section, we will review briefly some of the studies conducted in the area of literacy learning. We will first look at some of the studies conducted by local researchers on children’s literacy learning in Singapore. We then review studies conducted in children’s literacy learning outside Singapore. This is followed by a summary of the findings of the MCLEL study. The reviews of research conducted so far serve as an argument for the need to carry out longitudinal studies of children’s literacy in Singapore.

Literature on Literacy

Literacy “impinges” on the lives of people, including very young children, every day. Learning, including literacy learning, is situated in the everyday activities that adult and children engage in. This perspective, that literacy learning is a situated activity in contrast to the traditionally dominant model of literacy as an acquisition of neutral skills (see Street’s argument against the autonomous model of literacy), forms the basis of the proposed ethnographic study into the literacy learning of Chinese children in the kindergarten and primary one years. This should complement the existing study on Malay children’s literacy, the MCLEL study. Apart from this study, local research in this area has been neglected as the following review shows.

Earlier Research on Literacy Learning of Children in Singapore

In this proposal, the term “children” refers to those young people in primary school and below (up to the age of twelve) who are already capable of literacy learning. A literature search on studies done in Singapore in the last twenty years reveals little in terms of an understanding of the literacy learning of this group of people; research seems to show more interest in the language and literacy of students in secondary schools, which are not directly relevant to the proposed study.

Research that has children of the primary school age and below as their focus include those that look at the development of pre-school children’s learning of the Malay language and Chinese language. Kamsiah’s study (1997) compares a group

---


of Malay children’s ability in word knowledge as well as their verbal fluency in two languages (Malay and English). Ong (1988) studies the spoken Chinese vocabulary of pre-school children, Chuah (1988) on children’s cognition, while Ko (1988) on adults’ understanding of pre-school children. Most of these studies are predominantly predicated on an evaluation of children’s language skills.

Ong’s (1998) study of 120 pre-school children’s spoken Chinese vocabulary is of interest here. In his study, Ong showed the children pictures of four scenes—the supermarket, the seaside, the children’s playground, and a celebration at home—and invited them to talk about these pictures. Most of the children were able to express themselves competently and fluently during their interactions with the researchers, which prompted Ong to suggest that primary one teachers make creative use of what the children are already familiar with during their classroom interaction. There was also evidence of the children mixing Chinese and English during their conversation with the researchers but unfortunately there was no attempt to explain why or what that could reveal of the children’s home language experience.

While Ong’s study presents an interesting facet of Chinese children’s language skills, it was not an attempt to understand their literacy learning nor was the data on language skills thoroughly analysed. Many questions leave unanswered, for example: “How is it that the children are able to speak fluently about those pictures they see?”, “How exactly do they speak about them”, “Did they speak from experience or from reading story books with similar materials they see in the pictures?”, “What literacy practices do they model after at home?”, “What language/s is/are dominant in the home?”, “What are the socio-economic backgrounds of the children’s family?”, etc. It might be worth noting that the study has not generated more research into pre-school children’s literacy learning since it was reported almost twenty years ago.

There have been a number of studies in the area of English language learning of children of primary school age. Cheah (1994) has made some inroad into the discourse on the functions and meanings of literacy practices in the context of life in an evolving multilingual society through her study of English literacy acquisition in the Singapore classroom. She notes that the neutral skills notion of literacy tend to have a stronger hold in the acquisition of English literacy in these classrooms. The ethno-

---


The graphic work of Sripathy is one of a rare few that has made a real contribution to the more socially and culturally sensitive perspective on language within the Singapore context.

In her study of storybook reading with preschool children in Indian and Malay families, Sripathy (1994) throws some light on how cultural conceptions of literacy can impinge on the reading of book in English and the established norms and ideology that Singapore parents (or even teachers) may subscribe to by virtue of their belonging to a particular culture. In Sripathy (1998), she investigates two pedagogic approaches practised in many primary classrooms today—Shared Book Reading (SBR) and Class Dictated Story (CDS)—which involve the process of negotiation and joint construction of meaning between teachers and pupils. These approaches contain cultural practices that are “situated within the lived experiences of white, middle-class families” which, she observes, are often quite incongruent with the cultural scripts of many Singaporeans, with the exception perhaps of affluent, professional, English-educated middle-class parents who are more exposed to white, middle-class parenting approaches.

The other studies on Singapore children’s learning of English language in the primary school are more skills-related and these include Gu, Hu and Zhang (2005), Koh (2002), and Tan (1997). Gu, Hu and Zhang (2005) investigate the learning strategies of two groups of primary school pupils, one from primary one and another from Primary 3, during English Language lessons. Koh (2002) and Tan (1997) are both intervention studies in the teaching and learning of expository writing in primary schools.

The proposed study on Chinese children’s lived experience of literacy aims to find out about the kinds of literacy engagement Chinese children in Singapore today experience both at home and in the kindergarten and primary school, and the socio-cultural factors that shape their literacy learning. An ethnographic study like this should throw some light on the kind of adult support the children get at home and in school and also the kind of environment conducive to literacy learning, in both Chinese and English. And, following Sripathy (1998), it would be interesting to surface the congruence and incongruence between the literacy practices in the school (kindergarten and primary one) and the literacy practices in the homes of the Chinese children through an examination of the cultural scripts that Chinese children bring with them from home and compare them with the cultural scripts that they encounter through the practices in the school.

Research on Literacy Learning of Children Outside Singapore

In comparison to research carried out in Singapore, ethnographic studies in the area of literacy learning in young children elsewhere have been extensive, among these include Heath (1983), Taylor (1983), Jackson (1993), and Li (2002). Many of the studies focus on the literacy learning of young children from pre-school to the early years of the primary school. Behind much of these studies is the suggestion that models of literacy which operate in schools are rather specialised in comparison with its range of uses in people’s everyday lives, and that in fact for some children the

---

purposes and meanings which are attached to literacy in school may conflict with those they experience at home or in their community.

Heath (1983) traces the literacy learning of young children of both the White and Black working class communities in the United States before and after they enter school. She then considers the impact of their home literacy practices on their school experience through a comparative study of these children’s performance with the children of the townspeople who have the advantage of growing up in environments that prepare them for school. Taylor (1983) studies the literacy development of a group of children who are considered successful learners of reading and writing from six White middle-class families whose literacy activities are very much embedded in the day-to-day interactions within each of these families. Jackson (1993) traces the extent and variety of exposure of children to literacy in the communities outside the classroom and suggests that teachers “build on children’s existing understandings and experiences, especially when the classroom contains bilingual children.”

Li’s (2002) subjects of study are children of four immigrant Chinese families who encounter difficulties in school because of the different kinds of cultural capital these children bring with them to school.

These and other studies have produced interesting insights into various aspects of family literacy practices. For instance, parental views of home practices that are conducive to literacy learning in young children often seem to depend on the forms of literacy the parents have been exposed to and the opportunities for formal education afforded by their socio-economic status (SES). These studies have also established in some detail the family literacy practices that are frequently linked with children’s literacy development and school achievement skills. These include shared book reading, use of extended discourse (such as explanations and narratives), vocabulary that mothers use with their children, activities involving letters and words, and teaching of rhymes and nursery rhymes, among others.

Much of the focus of the above studies, however, has been on the monolingual family. In a multilingual situation where people have access to a number of different literacies in different languages and scripts, the different literacy choices people make may be shaped by their social conditions, cultural experience and personal histories. The work of Saxena on a Punjabi Sikh family in Southall, England, and that

---

of Volk and de Costa\textsuperscript{18} on three Puerto Rican families living in a Midwestern city in the US, to name a few, testify to the complex literacy lives of non-mainstream bilingual families.

While research on the literacy learning of young children has been extensive, these are mostly of children living in western societies, namely the US, the UK and Australia. Moreover, while much can be learnt from these studies, the situation in Singapore is unique in terms of her complex and diverse racial, linguistic and cultural makeup of the society. Her policy on bilingualism which promotes the teaching and learning of two languages in schools (English and a Mother-Tongue language) is in stark contrast to the monolingual environment of many western schools within which the foreign studies, even of bilingual families, cited above are situated. The cultural ethos of the East such as others above self, discipline, and care and respect are in many ways different from the individualism and independent thought relished in the West. Even as Singapore sees the Western model as the road to success, these traditional values are very much entrenched in both the public and private domains of society. There is thus a strong sense of urgency for more ethnographic studies in literacy learning of young children to be carried out here.

The MCLEL Study

The brief literature review above reveals an enormous void in local research on literacy learning of preschool and primary school children in Singapore, be it in the Mother Tongue languages or English language. A breakthrough in the local research efforts, Mukhlis’s current work,\textsuperscript{19} serves as the first steps towards filling this gap. Initial analyses of the home data show a number of interesting findings some of which are presented below.

On the matter of literacy beliefs and practices, Malay parents’ self-perceived competency seems to be an indicative factor in the type of guidance that children receive for their literacy development.\textsuperscript{20} While the higher-educated parents take on the role/responsibility as tutor to their children, lower-educated parents place confidence in trusted and more knowledgeable external sources to help their children (private tutors, commercially-produced revision worksheets, or workshops organised by the children’s kindergarten). What is counted as literacy and worth transmitting to the children also varies between families both in terms of the reading techniques that they employ (phonics or whole-word reading) and the nature of


\textsuperscript{20}Mukhlis, “Learning to Read and Write,” p. 10-11.
literacy experience that they communicate to the children (reading as ability to decode, as a meaning-making activity, or both).

There are also differences in the language practices that the children use and model after. While many families see the need to balance between the use of Malay and English in the home, those who see themselves as insufficiently competent in English use Malay as the dominant home language. Where English is used, in some families, it is Singapore English (or Singlish) that dominates and the variety of English that children bring to school with. Also, a common practice in many of these families is chatting and bantering.

The study reveals important but different roles played by different family members in the children’s literacy development. While traditional care-givers (including parents and other adult members of the family) are usually seen to be the ones to guide and give attention to the children as they embark on reading, writing and drawing, siblings too ‘teach’ each other (usually through play) through what is referred to in the literature as ‘reciprocal learning’. In some families, the more knowledgeable elder sibling is entrusted with the role of ‘teacher’ to the younger one. In other families, siblings engage in mutual exploration and shared discovery, particularly if the elder sibling is struggling with her own school literacy. In many cases, the older siblings, given their earlier exposure to school literacy, help bridge the gap between home and classroom domains.

Popular culture is an important non-traditional literacy tool in many of the homes studied. But the importance varies in terms of the amount, variety and sources in which popular culture is allowed into the homes (TV, movies, computer games, internet, radio, etc) and the ends for which they are used. Popular culture can function either as a babysitter in place of the mother who is busy in the kitchen, as a form of entertainment, or as a supplement to traditional literacy texts. In the case of the latter, watching a movie version of a children novel may fuel interest in reading the printed text.

Lastly, the focal children emerge as active participants in their literacy learning; they are not passive learners. In fact, they make informed choices of which text and artifacts they encounter and how they interact with them. They can also be keen critics of the texts and artifacts they interact with as in the case of one child who considers Sleeping Beauty stupid for allowing her fingers to be pricked.

What is emerging from the data is that children have access to different opportunities for language and literacy learning at home which will make a difference to what they are able to take up and make use of at school. Upon entering primary school, these children will find themselves positioned differently with respect to the curriculum to which they have to adapt. Initial analyses of the interaction between the home and the school show that the school and the classroom as cultural sites are not easy and flexible places for many of these children to see themselves in, be they from high or low SES.

21 Sajlia & Mukhlis, “Learning from Each Other”.
24 Ibid, p. 25.
Bilingualism in Singapore refers to language competence in English and one of the officially recognized ‘mother tongues’—Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. Despite this bilingual policy, English remains the more crucial language to learn given that it is the working language of the country and the language through which education is received. In schools, children are not only expected to speak English but the acceptable variety, i.e., Standard English. There is little recognition of children whose bilingualism is yet to emerge, not to mention the availability of programmes to support those who are essentially still a ‘mother-tongue’ monolingual.\(^\text{25}\) In many of the classrooms observed, what essentially counts as reading is English. Those who enter school without an adequate command of the language (or who speak only Singlish) will thus find themselves at an immediate disadvantage. Such is the case with Sanah, a child fluent in Malay who has yet to figure out how to decode the text. By regarding her as a competent bilingual who is in need of special help in reading and spelling in English, the school is missing the crucial fact that she is one who is grappling with a second language. The interaction pattern of her mother reading with her at home that shows her to be an adventurous learner is lost as does her confidence in engaging actively in class talk. In contrast, for children who have English, what they bring into the classroom will be precisely what is expected of them in the classroom.

The data also question the common assumption that children from high SES will step into a Singapore school without any literacy difficulties.\(^\text{26}\) On the contrary, there is just as much, albeit different, cultural adjustments that need to take place for a child from a high SES as is a child from a low social class background. Adam, an inquisitive English speaker who has been immersed in a middle class home environment that encourages questioning and independent thinking and open one-to-one dialogue with adults, finds it difficult to adjust to the classroom routine of taking turns to speak, working together in a group, doing worksheets and sitting for tests. These, coupled with the one-to-one dialogue that is missing in his classroom and his generally ‘divergent’ nature as a learner,\(^\text{27}\) contribute to him being labelled as a ‘trouble-maker’. As this proposal is written, Adam is still struggling to understand what counts as learning in the classroom.

Both the home and the classroom data and the interaction between the two seem to suggest that different capital or resources could not entirely explain why children could or could not situate themselves successfully in their classrooms. There is a need to understand the complex intermeshing of home and school experiences, discourses and expectations. For teachers, they need to know what is going on in the home in order to have respect for the children as individuals and to recognise the different resources that these children bring to school in order to help them adapt to, and succeed in, early school literacy.

**Rationale for Proposed Study**

Other than the MCLEL study which has its focus on the Malay children, there is a complete lack in research on the literacy development in and out of school of


children from the “mainstream” ethnic group—the Chinese, who make up more than 75 percent of the population in Singapore—as the review above shows. An ethnographic study on the literacy development of Chinese children should thus add another significant dimension to the understanding of literacy experiences of Singapore children.

The findings from this proposed study will also enable a comparative study to be done on the literacy practices of children from the two biggest ethnic groups in Singapore—Malay and Chinese children. The different ethnicity could potentially yield different literacy practices and literacy events that take place around these two groups of children at home and in school. At the same time, children from similar socio-economic background irrespective of their ethnic identity might potentially share similarities in their literacy experiences. An awareness of the differences and similarities in the children’s literacy learning in and out of school could then be used to investigate the inter-relatedness and the interdependencies in literacy learning between home and school of each of the ethnic groups as well as the two ethnic groups considered as a whole. This will form a valuable body of research whose findings will inform future intervention programs of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education.

Proposed Study: “Chinese Children’s Lived Experience of Literacy”

As indicated in the title, the study will focus on the literacy learning and development of a small group of about eight Chinese children in and out of school. The subject selected for this study will come from socio-economic groups similar to those in the MCLEL study to facilitate subsequent cross-ethnic group comparisons of home and school literacy practices.

This study embraces the theoretical understanding of literacy as a social activity. Bernstein’s discussion on the differences between horizontal and vertical discourses suggests that there is an essential difference between the literacies used in informal contexts outside of school (horizontal discourse) and those used in the school context (vertical discourse); hence the problem of transferring one kind of literacy into another context. Both literacy events and literacy practices will form the two basic units of analysis from which the researchers hope to arrive at some answers to the research questions raised in the following section.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study is: In what ways is literacy in the school and home inter-related and interdependent? In order to answer this main research question, answers to the following sub-questions will be needed:

1. What literacy practices do Chinese children engage in at home and at school when they are in kindergarten and in primary one?

2. What similarities and differences are there in these literacy practices between home and school?

Research Program, Sampling and Methodology

As mentioned above, the Chinese children for this study will be selected based on a similar set of criteria used in the MCLEL study, namely, the mother’s educational qualifications. The first group will comprise children whose mothers have received at least a post-secondary academic education (GCE ‘A’ level), or higher (polytechnic or university degree). The second group will comprise children whose mothers have received formal education in the secondary school or below. Although not entirely indicative of a family’s socio-economic status, a mothers’ qualification is assumed to reflect a certain level of familiarity or exposure with literacy practices deemed appropriate for school. And given that mothers usually are the parent who spends more time with the children and the one who oversees their literacy development at home, as is the case of the Malay families in the MCLEL study, their interaction with the children may have a significant influence on the latter’s literacy development.

Over an intensive 18-month period (from June 2006 to November 2007), the principal investigator and his collaborator, aided by one full-time and one part-time research assistants, will engage in a detailed study of literacy events co-constructed by eight bilingual Chinese kindergarten children and their network of adults and other children in their homes and in the community who support their developing literacy. The principal investigator and the collaborator will spend a further six months analysing the data obtained and undertake follow-up visits if necessary.

Participant Selection

Eight bilingual Chinese kindergarten children who will turn six in 2006 (i.e., they are in K2) will be selected from different bilingual kindergarten centres. As explained above, the educational background of the mothers will form the main criterion in the selection. Families from different social groups may provide different resources and support to their children and their home experiences with literacy, as the study on the Malay children seems to suggest. As with the MCLEL study, the occupation of the mothers will include not just housewives but also those holding jobs.

Having attended kindergarten, the children selected would already have been exposed to texts although they might not yet be able to read independently. This is consistent with one of the aims of the study, i.e., to understand the quality of environment and interaction with adults that Chinese children experience around printed texts both at home and in kindergarten before they enter primary school irrespective of the level of their reading competence. Studies have shown that even children who fail to learn to read have an extensive knowledge about written language.

---

Data Collection

The basic approach is to make observations in the homes or the homes of relatives and grandparents who support the children’s developing literacy and preserve them in detailed field notes and audio and video records. Each child will be observed at least once every two months for between two and five hours at a time, before and after class and on weekends, between June 2006 and November 2007. Observations will also be made in the kindergarten classroom at least twice between July and October 2006. In all the settings, data will be collected on reading and writing activities as well as oral interactions that make reference to both oral and written texts. When the children enter primary one in January 2007, the classroom observations will shift to the school. Arrangements will be made to observe the children in the classroom between five to six days in each of terms 1, 2 and 3 (January to September 2007).

In the MCLEL study, primary one classroom observation began only from the third month of the child starting school to allow him/her to settle in and the teachers to get a handle of the class before researchers get into the picture. It dawned on the principal investigator that this ‘settling-in’ time in fact could have been the most interesting period to observe as it would reveal the first ‘clash’ as it were between home and school practice some of which could have been ‘resolved’, and thus lost, by the time the researchers start their observation two months later. For the proposed study, attempts will be made to seek the school principals’ approval early so that observation can begin as soon as the child steps into school. Throughout the three terms, the children will still be observed in their homes though not as frequently.

Following the work of Volk and de Costa (2003), interviews will be conducted with the parents at the beginning of the study to draw network maps detailing the people who had interacted with the children in literacy events within the last year. The parents will also be encouraged to maintain a diary/journal to document their children’s daily routines and activities over a period of time. We anticipate that the times and places that are most fruitful for observations of Chinese children may not be identical with those of Malay children. The journal, together with the maps, will be used to select literacy events for observation and recording. As was the case with the MCLEL study, the observations will be complemented occasionally with the parents’ own record of their children’s activities and their interaction with them in a literacy event. Towards the end of the observation period, the parents’ literacy histories and their explanations of how and why they support the children’s developing literacy will be explored.

In this study, ‘literacy events’ are defined as activities where literacy has a role. Any time a target child or anyone in the child’s immediate environment directly uses any type of literacy technology (such as a book, a pencil, a newspaper or the internet) 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, the observer 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. ‘Literacy practices’ are the actions people do as a reflection of the ways in which they understand and value literacy. Taken

---

31 Barton and Hamilton, *Local Literacies*, p. 11.
together, these concepts, literacy events and literacy practices, reinforce the perspective on literacies as socially constructed and situated practices.

Data Analysis

Field notes and diaries/journals kept by the parents will be reviewed and tapes transcribed. Notes will be made of the activities that occurred in each day’s taping as well as the use of, or reference to, oral or written literacy. Literacy events will be identified; for each event, the participants, the literacy task and text involved, the language(s) used, and the duration, will be noted. Particular attention will be paid to participants’ actions, level of interest and engagement, and their related personal, familial and cultural beliefs and understanding of literacy.

The outcome of this study will be as follows:

a) an extensive discussion document about young Chinese children’s experience of language and literacy in the home and in school;

b) a conceptualisation about the literacy practices of these children and their families;

c) a framework for bridging the gap in home-school partnership that addresses the need for schools to provide stimulating environments that are responsive to the search for meaning by the children and extend the contexts they provide for the development and practice of literary skills.

Concluding Remarks

Upon the conclusion of the project, the findings of the proposed study will be combined with those of the MCLEL study to make cross-ethnic comparison in order to find answers to the following questions:

1. What similarities and differences are there in the literacy practices the Malay and Chinese children engage in both at home and in school?

2. What similarities and differences are there in the literacy practices of the Malay and Chinese children across socio-economic groups.

Answers to the above questions form only a fraction of the potential contributions. This proposed study should also contribute to an understanding of the pedagogic potential of the “funds of knowledge”32 of local children which teachers can harness to build classroom instructions that would facilitate effective and efficient learning among children.

In addition, the findings of the study could also raise educators’ awareness of the myths related to children’s success in literacy learning. For example, Gregory (2000) raised four myths that seem to underpin beliefs about children’s success in learning to read: those related to the economic home background of the children, the kind of parental involvement, the similarity between home and school language, and

the method of teaching. The English Language, the language imported from the west, may be widely used in Singapore, but the various ethnic groups that go to make up the population in Singapore and using the language are culturally Asian. Practices that have been regarded as natural in the dominant western society may not necessarily be culturally harmonious with the practices of the Singaporean society today. Literacy practices that have been a natural growth out of the unique society that Singapore has evolved into, but dissimilar to the literacy practices of the west, may be just as effective, if not more, in facilitating literacy learning among young children. The study would have even more significance if such awareness can be created among those in the education community.

Bibliography


---


Li, G. ‘East is East, West is West’?: Home Literacy, Culture and Schooling. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.


