Chapter 2
Transmission and Development of Literacy Values and Practices: An Ethnographic Study of a Malay Family in Singapore

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Introduction

Sociocultural conceptions of literacy suggest that children learn culturally appropriate ways of using language and constructing meaning from texts in their early years at home. Children learn the meaning of print by being surrounded by it in their immediate environment, by their explorations in play and by understanding its role in their everyday lives (Taylor 1998). In these situations, literacy functions not as isolated events but as components of the social activities in their homes and communities; literacy is used for daily living, entertainment, religious, interpersonal and school-related purposes (Teale 1986). Children also learn about literacy through their interactions with more experienced members of the culture (parents, more knowledgeable siblings, peers, extended family members and friends) in a process of guided participation (Rogoff 1990). While traditional caregivers (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" (Gregory 2001). In some families, the more knowledgeable elder sibling is entrusted with the role of 'teacher' to the younger one. In others, siblings engage in mutual exploration and shared discovery. The older siblings, given their earlier exposure to school literacy, help bridge the gap between home and classroom domains.

Different social and cultural groups have been shown to participate in numerous and varied literacy events (Heath 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988), but perspectives about the nature, purpose and uses of literacy differ among them. For instance, in a study by Baker et al. (1996), middle-class families viewed literacy as

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a source of entertainment while lower-income families regarded it as a skill to be cultivated. Studies of Mexican immigrant families further showed that highly educated parents were perceptive of children's educational needs and provided them with different kinds of home literacy experiences that related to different kinds of skills (Rodriquez-Brown and Mulhern 1993; Sénéchal et al. 1998). And different communities have different beliefs about relating to texts and being a reader which lie behind children's and adults' everyday activities as shown by Heath (1983) in her study of three contrasting communities. Differences can also be seen in literacy-related discourse patterns with some adults engaging children in a style of conversing and questioning that differs markedly from traditional classroom discourse (Au 1993; Heath 1983; Michaels 1981; Philips 1972).

Behind much of the research mentioned above is a 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 in their community (Dyson 1999; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988). This may result in differential access to mainstream literacy practices (Allington 1994; Lensmire 1993) particularly in situations where teachers, less informed about literacy experiences other than their own, assume that these students can make home-school connections on their own (McCarthey 1994).

Indeed much interest in family literacy has been geared towards studying the implications of children's home practices for their experiences in school. A few studies have documented the influence from the opposite direction, that is, the impact of school literacy practices on what happens in the home (Goldenberg et al. 1992; Taylor 1998). Such studies are equally important because just as the simple transmission model of instruction may not work in a classroom, similarly, school learning experiences may not stream in seamlessly into the home. As Taylor (1998) has illustrated, school experiences are mediated in particular ways by family members: the "experiences of the parents, the experiences of brothers and sisters, and the child's own experiences form a filter through which learning at school must pass" (p. 17).

While research on the literacy learning of young children has been extensive, these are mostly of children living in Western societies, namely, the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia (Comber 2004; Heath 1983; Jackson 1993; Li 2002; Taylor 1998). The situation in Singapore is unusual given the country's complex and diverse racial, linguistic and cultural make-up. Its language-in-education policy which promotes the teaching and learning of two languages in schools (English and a mother tongue) is in stark contrast to the monolingual environment of many Western schools within which many of the existing studies are situated. The cultural ethos of the East such as others above self, discipline, and care and respect are also in some 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.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to engage in a detailed examination of some of the dynamic relationships involved in the transmission and development of literacy values and practices within the context of a Malay family in Singapore.

The Study

My perspective on literacy and culture originates from my own background as a Malay minority in Singapore and is mediated through my relationship with my family members and my community. I take the view that the life of an individual is enmeshed with the ongoing exchange with other family members who share similar knowledge, beliefs, morals and customs. Family milieu is a significant social and cultural context in which literacy is socialised, represented and transmitted; the family members' beliefs and values shape their literacy lives (Leslie and Korman 1989).

My goal was to uncover the relationship between family contexts, schooling and individual literacy in a Malay family in Singapore. The family lived in one of the larger Housing Development Board (HDB) flats[1] in a relatively new and predominantly low middle-class neighbourhood in the western part of Singapore. Two generations lived in the same flat – the parents (Shamsuddin and his wife Normah), two daughters (Naila and Sufiah) aged 6 and 8, and a son (Izwan) aged 3. (Pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.)

The research questions are:

(a) In what ways do the parents' beliefs and past experiences influence current literacy practices and attitudes to reading within the family?
(b) In what ways do the children's experiences of formal schooling influence current literacy practices and attitudes to reading within the family?

My understanding of the family's literacy practices and their meaning-making is influenced by the work of people who have emphasised the contextual nature of literacy and the way literacy is embedded within particular sociocultural contexts (Barton and Hamilton 2000; Rogoff 1990; Vygotsky 1978). The sociocultural 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.

[1] These are publicly governed and developed but often resident owned. About 85% of Singaporeans live in such flats. They are located in housing estates, which are self-contained satellite towns with schools, supermarkets, clinics, hawker centres, as well as sports and recreational facilities.

Method

I used ethnography to gain an understanding of the meaning of the literacy practices of the Singaporean Malay family. Ethnography studies human interactions in social settings through the process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behaviour (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). During a 2-year period, I visited the family's home twice every 2–3 months with each visit lasting 2–3 h, for a total of 20 visits. This was part of a larger study of eight families, each of which included a child in his/her last year in kindergarten at the start of the study. The aim was to document the lived literacy experience of these children as they moved from kindergarten to primary school. This chapter will take as its focus the literacy experience of the focal child in one family, Naila.

I drew upon several ethnographic methods of data collection such as interviewing, participant observation, field notes and artefact analysis to gather data. I used informal conversational interviewing throughout the study (Walcott 1994). This enabled me to obtain an inside perspective of the participants' beliefs and values and their own perceptions about their literacies and living. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed so that the transcripts could be used for analysis.

Other than the interviews, my role and that of my research assistant (RA) constantly shifted between the position of observer and participant. There were occasions when my RA 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 my RA, we were sometimes pulled into their activities as playmates or as teachers listening to them read. I kept descriptive field notes to record the literacy activities of the family and the nuances in the interactions among the family members.

Data analysis began as soon as the first set of transcribed data was available. My RA and I reviewed the field notes and cross-checked transcripts and recording. 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 language and literacy learning, school and literacy practices (e.g., what it means to read, school readiness, responsibility for literacy learning, ideas about play, perceptions of school and attitudes towards bilingualism). Selected literacy events were subjected to a moment-by-moment 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 et al. 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.

In the next section, I present a close-up look at the family in focus, highlighting the different aspects of the family's literacy practices and their transmission, followed by discussion and conclusion.

The Parents: Experiencing the Past, Working on the Future

I visited Naila and her family for the first time just before she turned six. The living area in their flat was spacious allowing her 32-year-old mother, Normah, to rearrange the furniture whenever she became tired of one arrangement. There would always be space that was free of any furniture where Naila and her siblings (sister Sufiah and brother Izwan) could play together either watching Harry Potter or some other movies, drawing, playing with their toys or play-acting. The children's play area also included the bedroom which Naila and Sufiah shared, the adjacent room that kept all their books and toys and the spacious lift landing just outside the entrance to their flat which was wide enough for them to ride their tricycles or play with the neighbours' children.

Naila's 36-year-old father, Shamsuddin, a polytechnic graduate in electronics engineering, had his own study corner complete with bookshelves, cabinets and a computer. He would study in this corner – usually when the children had gone to bed – for his correspondence degree programme. His wife had completed hers in applied psychology a few years earlier, so now it was his turn. They hoped that their continuing education would set an example for their children to follow. Both desired to see their children graduate with a degree ("a degree is the least they have to achieve"; "if we have a degree, they should have a degree or more"). Normah was a housewife at the time of the study but was previously a primary school teacher for 5 years. She stopped work when she started her degree programme. It was also during this time that she gave birth to her first daughter and the second 2 years later. Studying while raising two infants was hard – Normah suspended her study for a semester when Naila was born – but she eventually obtained the degree in 5 years.

The motivation for continuing to learn was partly religious. Indeed, religion figured much in the parents' deliberations – choice of school, deciding what television programmes the children could watch, what books to buy, what type of stories should be discouraged and what languages the children should learn. They considered themselves successful professionals but with little knowledge of Islam. In some ways, they were disapproving of their own childhood (if not their parents' raising of them) as they reflected on the dismal amount of religious education they received other than learning to recite the Qur'an. Both made it a point to attend religious classes as regularly as they could "to make up for lost time". Shamsuddin in particular was fond of reading religious books. Whenever he learned something new (mostly pertaining to rules of behaviour), he would do a little "research" consulting his books to verify that what his *ustaz* (religious teacher) had taught him was indeed supported by verses in the Qur'an and the Hadith[2] and not something of the teacher's own creation.

Shamsuddin and Normah wanted their own children to grow up religiously better educated than they had been. This was in part the reason for enrolling the girls in a

[2] The 'Hadith' is the recorded and verified words and actions of Prophet Muhammad.

mosque kindergarten where the uniform covered their *aurat*[3] and where the literacy education included learning to read and recite Qur'anic verses and prayers in Arabic and learning about their faith. However, when it came to enrolling their eldest daughter in Primary 1, they found themselves in a dilemma. The idea of enrolling the girls in an Islamic school several kilometres away from their home which offered both secular and religious subjects and a uniform that allowed them to cover their *aurat* was put to the test. Enquiries from parents of existing and past students provided them with a negative impression of the school, chief among which was the perception that the teachers in the school were not adequately trained to nurture young learners. Worried that this would have an adverse effect on their children's learning, Shamsuddin and Normah decided to abandon the idea in favour of a 'normal' school located virtually opposite their home. It was a choice between '*aurat* and *ilmu* (knowledge)' as Shamsuddin put it:

> …so aurat or ilmu… ilmu… kita (we) sacrifice aurat sekejap (for the time being)… that's our decision… but it's very painful.

Shamsuddin once reminisced about his parents and adults not introducing him to books early when he was young and did not want that to happen to his children. He recalled:

> When I was small, I was not an avid reader because my background is not like that… my family background is not like that… only when I started reading on religion then I started reading more because I discovered the first *wahyu tuhan turunkan* (commandment sent down by God) is *iqra'* (read), it's not about *tauhid* (faith) or *fiqh* (Islamic law) …so moving from there on I started to discover reading so I started reading widely… religion.

Shamsuddin and Normah had made it a point to expose their children to books early, a variety of them, both borrowed and bought, from storybooks to information books, from the simple Ladybird series to the more complicated but rhythmically fun Dr Seuss. They also bought Malay books from across the causeway in Johor Bahru (Malaysia) but these tended to be religious, i.e., children stories on moral values and about the prophets and their companions. Shamsuddin bought books not only for his children but also for himself and his wife. The books would have been carefully considered and bought only after much thought and discussion with his wife. He explained:

> …but we can say that we buy quality books. We don't just grab. We will have… discussed with each other – should we buy this, what's the value for our children, and all that *lah*.[4]

Normah had this to say about her husband:

> …he doesn't think twice about buying. He will buy from the net, he will buy from the bookstore… *tak kisah lah* [it didn't matter]. And then we will borrow books from the library. So basically they have that kind of exposure, something he (Shamsuddin) didn't have.

[3] The parts of a woman's body other than the face and hands.

[4] *Lah* is one of the discourse particles in the informal or colloquial variety of Singapore English (Lim 2007). It may be used to convey the mood and attitude of the speaker (as used in this quote) or used with a request or command to indicate impatience (e.g., "Finish your homework *lah*") or to turn it into a plea (e.g., "Give me more time *lah*").

Indeed, other than buying books, both parents had made library visits part of the family routine. Once in 2 weeks after the girls returned from their respective kindergarten/school, Normah would walk with them to the nearby neighbourhood library. On some Saturdays, Shamsuddin would drive the whole family to their favourite library in the eastern part of Singapore. This was usually a detour from their almost weekly ritual travelling to the east to visit Normah's parents.

The Parents: Enculturating Children in Literacy Practices

By virtue of Shamsuddin's greater exposure to Islamic teachings, he took on the responsibility of teaching his children to read the Qur'anic text, one of the family's daily routine.[5] Every weekday, the period after the dusk prayer was set aside for this purpose. The girls at this stage were not reading the actual Qur'an but a set of reading practice in the form of small thin books that contained phrases found in the Qur'an. These phrases were grouped in terms of their rhyming features. The books were graded ranging from the simpler two-syllable phrases to the more complicated clauses. Children usually progress to reading the Qur'an only after they have successfully mastered this reading practice. Beginning with Sufiah and then Naila, the girls took turns to take their place in their bedroom away from the distraction of the television in the living room. Both father and daughter sat on the bed cross-legged facing each other with the book resting on a pillow between them.

As the girls recited the texts, Shamsuddin listened. Both girls were able to recognise the Arabic consonants and the vowels. They could put together the sounds into syllables and articulate the phrases phonetically. Occasionally, Shamsuddin discussed differences between Malay and Arabic sounds with them sharpening their metalinguistic skills in the process (Robertson 2002). Shamsuddin would pamper them with praise (e.g., "Good!") particularly at the end of every successfully recited phrase. If they made mistakes in pronunciation and other phonological errors, he would correct them, and if need be, articulate the problem syllables himself. Shamsuddin's teaching thus involved phonic recognition and memory learned through recitation and a lot of encouragement. Sufiah was closer to finishing the preparatory books before moving on to reciting the actual Qur'anic texts. But Naila had made such rapid progress that it was only a matter of time before she would catch up on her sister.

Given Normah's previous training and experience as a teacher, she was the adult responsible for helping the girls with their homework and facilitating their general literacy pursuits. In the excerpt below, Normah was helping Naila do a worksheet on

[5] One practice among Muslims is to learn to read the Qur'an. For non-Arabic speaking Muslims, this may amount to no more than reciting the texts without understanding the meaning. Any understanding of what one 'reads' has to come from a religious teacher or the translations (cf. Gregory and Williams 2000). A common belief among Muslims is that one still earns a reward from Allah even if one is only reciting the Qur'an.

food which Naila brought back from her kindergarten. It involved cutting out the pictures of different types of food and pasting them in the boxes corresponding to either 'healthy' or 'junk' food.

1.	Normah:	What must we put down here?
2.	Naila:	Healthy food.
3.	Normah:	And here?
4.	Naila:	Junk food.
5.	Normah:	Junk food.
…	…	
6.	Normah:	…What pictures must we put under healthy foods?
7.	Naila:	Don't know.
8.	Normah:	Which one? Look at the picture. Which one? Which food must we put in this box? What's that? (Pointing to a picture of apples.)
9.	Naila:	Carrots. Apples.
10.	Normah:	Apples.
11.	Naila:	Rice?
12.	Normah:	Rice and? Look at that.
13.	Naila:	Fish.
14.	Normah:	Anymore? Anymore healthy food?
15.	Naila:	Burger?
16.	Normah:	Ah? Burger? Burger in healthy food? You sure? Burger should be in…
17.	Naila:	Junks.
18.	Normah:	Junk. Junk food. OK, what else besides the burger?
…	…	
19.	Normah:	Carrots give you what?
20.	Naila:	Give you?
21.	Normah:	Vitamins or carbohydrates?
22.	Naila:	Vitamins.
23.	Normah:	How about rice? Does it give you fats, carbohydrates or vitamins? Which one?
24.	Naila:	Carbohydrates.
25.	Normah:	Carbohydrates makes you strong, gives you energy. How about apples? Apples give you?
26.	Naila:	Vitamins.
27.	Normah:	Vitamins. OK, clever girl.

Normah employed a pseudo Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) (Mehan 1979) sequence throughout this excerpt to scaffold Naila's learning about the nutritional value of food. Through this school-based technique, she facilitated Naila's learning by first checking on her understanding of the instruction in the worksheet (turns 1–5). Next, when Naila appeared to have difficulty naming a food to be placed in the 'healthy' column, Normah coaxed her into giving an answer by pointing to the

picture of the likely candidates (apples and carrots) (turn 8). At turn 12, when Naila correctly named another food (i.e., rice) on her own, Normah extended this successful turn by asking Naila for another food that came with rice (i.e., fish). On the other hand, at turn 16, when Naila offered a wrong answer (burger), she asked Naila to reconsider and then almost gave away the answer by suggesting indirectly the other category to which "burger" belonged ("Burger in healthy food? You sure?…"). Notice that Naila's responses were not always in the form of statements. Uncertain of her own answers sometimes, Naila produced four of them ("rice", "burger", "sweets" and "lollipops") with a rising intonation, effectively starting new IRE sequences that overlapped with Normah's own. Normah treated this strategy as an instance of Naila trying out cautiously what she knew. And she knew best not to give these 'guesses' more attention than necessary; instead she affirmed Naila's 'question' answers by repeating them. Normah's last IRE sequence ended with an explicit comment of encouragement ("clever girl", turn 27).

Beginning with turn 19, Normah helped Naila explicate the reasons behind the answers by eliciting from Naila the nutritional value of healthy food. But she proceeded with this elicitation in a way that presented a problem for Naila who appeared clueless about the meaning of an otherwise common phrase, "give you", used by Normah ("Carrots give you what?"). Naila's knowledge of the use of the phrase was apparently limited to one that meant 'offer' and not 'produce' which was the meaning intended by Normah. Naila thus sought clarification by repeating the phrase after her mother ("Give you?", turn 20). But Normah unpacked the problem for her daughter not by explaining the contextual meaning of the phrase but by asking her to choose between two possible answers ("Vitamins or carbohydrates", turn 21). Naila had to figure out on her own the other meaning of the phrase by evaluating the connection between the question and the answers it accepts. Given the flawless performance that followed, Naila appeared to have understood. There were thus multiple facets to Naila's learning within this single activity: the categorisation of food, the basis for the categorisation and the metalanguage used in such discourses. Naila received extensive support and encouragement from her teacher mother not only in negotiating the demands of the curriculum but also in developing and displaying her cognitive ability, the kind of support which in the classroom would have been less accommodating and personal than what she experienced at home.

On other occasions when Naila was reading with her mother, the latter would introduce a related topic and then take the child away from the text to talk about everyday life. For instance, Naila was reading to her mother a story about a birthday party. At some point in the reading, Normah took the opportunity to start a conversation by asking Naila what her favourite birthday present was. This triggered a recall from memory and the sharing of experiences not only by Naila but also Sufiah who was listening to Naila reading. The printed text thus became an object for eliciting discussion and memory recall. From the children's perspective, they were learning that looking at books also meant getting the opportunity to talk about their own life, learn new things and make meaning from them (Heath 1983).

The Siblings: Trialling the Old, Apprenticing the Young

Academically, Naila progressed a little faster than her sister. Normah said that Naila could manipulate her literacy and numeracy skills with more ease than her sister at her age. She attributed this to the ways with which she and her husband dealt with Naila which were quite different from how they raised Sufiah. While they doted over Sufiah when she was younger, often trying to do too much with her and then regretting the distress they had caused her, in the case of Naila, they stood back and allowed her more room for mistakes and to express herself. Consequently, Naila grew up without the pressure to do things 'right' even though she still depended on her mother's help and needed to be encouraged to do what she knew.

Sufiah was mature, perceptive and very considerate by her mother's standard. Not only would she baby-sit her younger brother when Normah was busy attending to the household chores, she would also tell off Naila if she was being unreasonably demanding towards her mother ("Do you know that *ibu* (mum) is tired? You shouldn't …"). She tended to care for her younger siblings as a teacher would. This seemed to have rubbed off on Naila who in turn was protective over her younger brother, Izwan, often giving in to him when both wanted the same book or toy and playing school with him. Led by Sufiah, both girls had become responsible children; Normah did not have to struggle much in getting them to clean up their own mess.

Both girls shared similar interests, drawing much pleasure from playing games together, painting, play-acting, chatting, reading and watching popular movies (Harry Potter, Shrek, Barney, etc.) on DVDs. The girls spoke English with a 'Barney' accent, were equally competent in Malay and were able to switch from one language to another with ease. Their good facility with languages enabled them to follow stories in movies and memorise long stretches of talk. When I caught them acting out some scenes from the Harry Potter movie, their speech was clear both in grammar and intonation. Normah played a part in helping them remember the storyline and encouraging their extended dramatisation of the scenes.

While Sufiah acquired her literacy through the direct involvement of Normah, Naila acquired hers from her older sister as much as from her mother. Sufiah had taken on some of her mother's role, though not her responsibility, in scaffolding Naila's literacy. For instance, Normah used to read to both girls before they went to sleep. When Izwan was born, she found it difficult to continue the routine. So she entrusted Sufiah to read with her sister which was hardly a task. Naila, like her, was already a competent reader who was also already a critic of storybook characters (e.g., referring to Sleeping Beauty as someone who "*tak ada* [has no] brain" for getting her finger pricked). The account that follows offers further glimpses of how Sufiah provided Naila with a familiar and unthreatening relationship to practise her emerging skills as well as knowledge about what it meant to be a member of their particular culture.

Sufiah was instrumental in teaching Naila to read with expression, a skill she acquired in school. On one of the self-recorded tape, Sufiah read a Malay text to

Naila very expressively. She then questioned Naila's comprehension of the text and praised her answer as if she was a teacher, a practice she had observed in school and put to good use on Naila. A typical question and answer session went as follows:

Sufiah: OK, now answer. If you don't know, I will read you again because this a short test. Number 1: '*Di manakah ketam itu tinggal*?'[6] [Where does the crab live?] *Dia punya* crab *tinggal kat mana*? [The crab lives where? (a more colloquial rendition)]
Naila: *Lobang*. [Hole]
Sufiah: *Pandai*! [Clever!]

Indeed, Sufiah appeared to imitate her teacher's pedagogic style when encouraging Naila to perform a literacy task. For instance, after having persuaded Naila to spell a list of words such as 'cat' and 'mat', and upon seeing her spell them correctly, Sufiah would remark: "Oh, so clever. You know, *Ibu* (calling her mother), she can spell all these words". Notice also that in the excerpt above, Sufiah not only appropriated her teacher's style; she also added her own signature by rephrasing the question in standard Malay to a nonacademic, colloquial variety that was more familiar to her younger sister. Sufiah thus illustrated what other researchers have highlighted about the role of schoolgoing older siblings in mediating the literacy of their younger siblings (Gregory and Williams 2003; Weisner 1989). Sufiah's school life became a part of the climate in which Naila grew. It became part of family life that shaped Naila's life in ways Sufiah had missed (cf. Taylor 1998). Normah spoke of Naila being present, observing, listening and participating in the school-related literacy activities of her older sister.

The ease with which the girls had access to books, papers and writing implements both at home and at their maternal grandparents' home enabled them to engage in many pen and paper activities. Naila was already capable of writing letters of the alphabet and was starting to write individual words at the start of the study. Sufiah on the other hand, having started school, could already write complete sentences often in the form of short messages. Whenever Sufiah asked her father for a sheet of paper, Naila would do likewise as she would want to write just like her sister. Normah explained:

> …they like to write. They like to make cards *lah*, make flags *lah*, write me love letters, give *ayah* [their dad] *itulah* [that], *inilah* [this], *sampai tak ada tempat* [until there isn't any more space] you know. There's this empty box that we put everything in there…*banyak sangat* [too many] paper *sampai* [until] I have to threaten them 'if I see one more paper I'm going to throw it away'… because *kadang-kadang* [sometimes] (I) can't cope with the mess.

Through the writing activities with her sister, Naila had learned that writing has a cultural and social function; she had learned to be a "text user" (Freebody and Luke 1990). Before long, she too began to write within the context of a meaningful situation. On one weekend when the girls spent the day at their grandparents' home, Sufiah was noisily singing away with two of her cousins. Naila was irritated and

[6] Items in quotation marks are the texts read from the book.

shouted at them to stop. But she felt bad afterwards and went to a corner to pen a letter of apology to her sister, a simple "I am sorry *kakak* (elder sister). I said 'stop' to you". Her writing did not always turn out perfect however. There were other occasions when she invented her own spelling such as writing the letters 'happy' in the wrong order. These emergent constructions (words and messages) were clearly influenced by the social context of the home in which literacy was practised (Sulzby and Teale 1991).

The Parents: Mediating School Influence on Children

Even though Naila's early literacy experiences had prepared her well for Primary 1 as compared to some other children (cf. Abu Bakar 2007), it was still an unsettling experience for her. New schedules, new rules and new work were a part of the school situation with which the Primary 1 student had to contend, quite different from what she had experienced at kindergarten. While it was a new experience for Naila, it was a familiar experience for Shamsuddin and Normah. It had happened to them in their own childhoods and more recently through the experiences of their eldest daughter, Sufiah.

Mediating Sufiah's early experience in school 2 years earlier had prepared Shamsuddin and Normah better in easing Naila into her first year in school. They remembered how they used to read stories to Sufiah for her to enjoy and not pushed her towards academic activities. But the pressure came when Sufiah started Primary 1 – which was then that they had to modify the way they transmitted literacy styles and values to their children. They started going to the library more frequently and borrowing books that they thought were similar to the ones Sufiah were exposed to at school. They also began to complement a new genre of literacy materials with those that Sufiah brought home from school – worksheets that provide practice on basic aspects of literacy such as shapes of the letters of the alphabet and spelling – which grew more sophisticated as Sufiah moved to Primary 2 and beyond. Naila did not escape the intrusion of these new texts and had her first taste of assessment books even while she was still in kindergarten. Other school-related activities were also brought home such as word games which Shamsuddin and Normah made part of the family activities though not in a regular way. Fortunately, Sufiah was motivated to learn, and her parents were determined to help her while they continued to downplay the competition at school.

Sometimes difficult situations that Sufiah encountered with her parents benefited the younger sibling. On one occasion when Sufiah was in Primary 1, Normah scolded her over the handwriting homework she did. Naila was then in kindergarten. Seeing this scared her enough to not want to go to Primary 1 as evident in the following excerpt. That made Normah realise that she had to show more compassion when dealing with Naila.

Naila: I don't want to go to Primary 1 *lah*.
Normah: Why?
Naila: *Nanti Ibu marah. Naila tak pandai tulis tau. Naila tak tahu*. [You'll get angry with me. I don't know how to write. I don't know.]

In mediating Naila's early experiences of school, Shamsuddin and Normah worked to minimise the distress Naila sometimes found herself in. At the beginning of Naila's first term, Normah had been quite concerned because Naila disliked the teacher. She called her teacher "a dragon" because the latter looked very fierce and did not appear friendly with the children. Shamsuddin had to remind Normah not to let Naila know she was upset because it would confuse her.

Mediating Naila's school experience also involved helping her come to terms with the values the parents cherished which sometimes clashed with those that she encountered in school. Normah and Shamsuddin explained:

Normah: We are always communicating with them (the children)… I have to know what kinds of input they are getting; I have to know what kinds of things adults are telling them, and we have to tell them if it's right or not… Once she had a teacher asking her 'do you watch *Cinta Bollywood* [Bollywood Love (a television drama series)]?'… I said 'why?'… 'I (Naila) don't know'. She (Naila) actually came to me and she was not happy with me… 'I (Naila) was the only one who didn't put up my hand'. You know, it was strange *lah* for her as if she was the odd one there… so I said (to Naila) 'Good what'. [A colloquial way of saying 'Isn't that good?']
Shamsuddin: We had to tell her that…
Normah: At that age you don't need to watch that…
Shamsuddin: Tell her the values…
Normah: So I think it's useful to know what your child is up to… what kinds of things adults tell them coz teachers are human beings… they are not perfect… you know for rapport sake *kadang-kadang* [sometimes] they (teachers) *tanya* [asked (if the children had watched the drama)], so I have to know, and we have to say something back… we are always on the talking mode so that we know what's going on in their lives.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated some of the dynamic relationships involved in the transmission and development of literacy values and practices in a Malay family in Singapore. There are multiple ways in which the parents' beliefs and past experiences influence current literacy practices and attitudes to reading with the family. Normah conserved practices from her own childhood, but her husband Shamsuddin made conscious changes. Interactions between parents, between parents and the children, and between the home and the school all contributed to the nature of

reading and writing practices in this home. It is also evident that in this family, literacy practices continually change as the children act and react in sharing literate experiences throughout their development.

When instructing Naila on literacy, Normah focussed on the meaning and purpose of written texts and of the particular modes of thinking that these normally involved but with ease and effect and ventured into the explicit teaching of concepts and introduction of new information. Her eldest daughter helped facilitate an appreciation for the cultural and social functions of writing while her husband drilled in the child the value of recitation and memorisation.

Naila's access to supplementary educational resources and capital was considerable. The texts and contexts provided in the home and which Naila drew upon were disparate consisting of school and home-related sources as well as those of popular culture. The family made trips to the library even as they purchased books. They had the economic capital to buy the resources they needed and knew where to get them. They also had the cultural capital to know what to get. This textual repertoire for reading which includes both the 'official' and 'unofficial' texts created what Luke calls "a pattern of mutually reinforcing intertextual references" (1992, p. 39), with characters who appeared on television, in movies, through the Internet and as toys.

Naila was growing up in a household where literacy was constituted as desirable. She spent a lot of extended time at home on both out-of-school and school literacy-related practices. She had extensive exposure to the content of books and ways of learning from books as well as considerable practice in interaction situations that taught her how to learn to read and to read to learn. The almost 'school-like' manner in which her teacher mother (and even her sister through her earlier experience in school) negotiated printed texts with her had enculturated her into ways of behaving that should allow her to use oral and written language in literacy events with ease and bring her knowledge to bear in school-acceptable ways. In other words, Naila had opportunities to make use of the rich cultural and linguistic resources she had in her "virtual school bag" (Thomson 2002).

Shamsuddin and Normah played a crucial role in mediating the impact of school on both Naila and Sufiah in culturally appropriate ways. Their mediation of their children's school experiences was influenced by their personal histories, religion and occupation and by their experience of mediating the impact of school on their older child. As Taylor noted, "the sum total of [a family's] literate experiences comes into play in the mediation of a child's learning to read and write in school" (1998, p. 17).

In conclusion, this chapter stresses the importance of knowing more about children's home literacies, both in order to get a broader picture of their competencies and practices and to remind ourselves that school is just one domain in peoples' lives and that school literacy practices need to be set within this wider context. The chapter has demonstrated the school-type literacy values and practices of a middle-class Malay family, but much more, it also describes a subtle integration of children's literacy learning with the social organisation of family relationships and family histories. Children do not just acquire language and literacy skills; they learn

different ways of relating to texts and of being a reader and writer through participation in social practices and the pursuit of social relations.

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