
Title	Home literacy practices in Singaporean families: Case studies of Indian families
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Introduction

Home literacy practices are seen as a 'microsocial system of constructive and co-constructive processes (Leseman de jong (1998), on how literacy is organised in daily living changes according to and are dependent on socio-cultural factors Teale,1998), how parental perceptions of the importance of literacy artifacts and events/ experiences in preschoolers' literacy development. Sripathy's Singapore study (1998) looked at 'cultural scripts' and the need for teachers to be sensitized to pedagogic approaches and V.Saravanan (1999) (bilingual children's language choices in multilingual Singapore).

This study investigates the literacy practices of families in Singapore. Literacy is conceived as a socio-cultural phenomenon as it is developed in the cultural context of the home. As the home is a fertile ground for literacy practices this study provides an understanding on how home and interpersonal interaction primarily among parents and children adds to literacy practices amongst Singaporean families. The study is based on a detailed qualitative study of four Indian families.

Education becomes the main motivation of the home literacy practices

The parents in the study wanted the best for their children, including "more involvement with books, reading and learning activities than when they were growing up" in a competitive system" in Singapore. The determination of the parents in the study to be as involved in their children's development stemmed from experiences of their past experiences as well as the aspirations they hold for their children.

From a description of the parents' own home backgrounds, it was revealed that they did not grow in homes that were highly supportive of literate activities. They came from families with low incomes which necessitated the fulfillment of the basic necessities in life, a traditional outlook in the provision of education for boys than girls or simply a lack of parental awareness on ways to facilitate the literacy development of their children. Both Nora (Family B) and Divya (Family D) lamented that their mothers, who came from India, did not want them to be highly educated because they felt their daughters need to only know how to cook and keep the house so as to prepare them for a married life. Nora (Family B), greatly affected by the unequal treatment between the girls and the boys in her family, was determined to treat her children equally. Aravind (Family A) recalled how he had to pick up odd jobs after school hours to help supplement his family income. On the other hand, Sasi (Family C) and Deenath (Family D) recollected days of carefree youth when their parents did not enforce the importance of education to them or reprove them for bad grades.

All the parents acknowledged that they had to struggle their way up to where they were now. The consequences of their low income economic backgrounds and cultural perceptions

Almost all the parents felt that being members of a minority community in Singapore more than necessitated the acquisition of education.

Education would equalise their position vis-à-vis the dominant group in society and help them to step out,

permanently, from their disadvantaged positions in life. The parents in this study felt very fortunate to be living in a meritocratic society in Singapore and felt greater the value education held for them. Hence, their fervour in focusing the literacy development of their children almost revealed an eagerness to do with their children what their parents had not done with them or what they themselves had failed to do with their lives. These motivations for the acquisition of education primarily influenced the direction of the literacy development of the children in these homes. There emerged a perception whereby parents felt that whatever they did with their children with regards to their learning activities at home, apart from helping to nurture them into individuals of sound moral values, should also more than adequately prepare them for school to achieve academic excellence.

When school based literacy tasks become home literacy practices

School type literacies predominated and at times dictated many of the practices introduced to the children in the four households. Literacy is seen in a narrow context that "school-based literacy typically refers to the comprehension and production of written texts that are used in school". In reality this type of literacy is more encompassing focusing on verbal and non-verbal communication and ways of learning. There is an added dimension to this basic feature of school type literacy practice in Singapore.

This is the "examination –oriented literacy that is closely linked to the demands of formal examinations" identified by Cheah (1998:295) in her study of a Primary 5 Singapore classroom. The education system in Singapore streamlines pupils at various stages of their primary and secondary school lives. Students in primary school are streamlined into EM1, EM2, EM3 or the ME3, where a "move from the EM1 stream to the ME3 stream is a move from the most valued to the least valued stream (James, 1998: 110).

With a system that seeks to streamline pupils into 'desirable' and 'non-desirable' streams, parents find it highly imperative to ensure that their children are well prepared right from day one of entrance into formal school. Parents in Singapore have become increasingly involved in their children's school learning tasks, performance in national examinations, and the schools their children are admitted into within a competitive meritocratic environment.

Sripathy (1998) who investigated the use and occurrence of talk in two types of reading programmes in a primary school had also explored the types of activities and talk that families engaged in the home. She discovered that the patterns of parent-child talk, observed during home visits and other sources, centred on clarifying school homework or answering questions pertaining to school and that talk centering on feelings, interests, likes and dislikes was not a common occurrence unless parents encouraged it (Sripathy, 1998:535). The parents in this study had as their primary aim the importance of preparing their children for school from the time they were prepared to enter mainstream education.

This would be labeled as "perceived notions" as these parents are not trained in the pedagogical practices of our educational system but gather the demands of the system based on network webbed by their own past experiences within the system, their interaction with informal literature from books, and magazines, talks or seminars on preparing for the education of children and their communication on this subject with parents of school going children.

In addition, home literacy practices assumed an added dimension in the practices of the families. They extended such literacy practices beyond the home in the form of tuition and enrichment classes. These were largely supplementary and supportive of home literacy practices. This orientation stemmed from an overwhelming concern with achievement in school based task.

The discussion of these home literacy practices will largely centre on the interactions parents had with their oldest offspring. This is because during meetings with the parents, they tended to focus largely on the literacy development of their eldest for as first time parents with relatively fewer commitments, they were most eager to put into practice the aspirations they held for their young families.

In addition, mothers emerged as the predominant literacy practitioner in these homes by virtue of the longer hours they spent with their children as well as because both husband and wife in the family had designed for themselves specific domestic roles.

Reading in the "schooled" way

The families in my study began the process of family literacy predominantly through the active interaction with print materials through reading from the time their children were still in their cribs. It is significant because reading also represented the first step towards school type literacy practices in these families. Although parent-child storybook interaction episodes were not observed in this study, parents recalled asking their children questions pertaining to the story they read to them. They reported engaging in "question-answer-feedback" sequence, a typical pattern of classroom learning and a common feature of storybook reading in middle class families— training in ways of responding to this pattern begins very early in the labeling activities of mainstream parents and children.

No doubt it "assured that young Singaporeans will be adequately prepared for school literacy and that the transition between home and school literacy practices will be relatively painless" but "the duplication of school-type literacy practices into the home also means that children are no longer exposed to a range of literacy practices. Instead there will be a steady convergence of practices in line with the academic practices characteristic of schools. This is particularly unhealthy when the overwhelming emphasis of direct instruction at home is on successfully completing mock examination papers. However, this convergence to school literacy practices emerged as a strong feature in the home literacy practices of the four families in study.

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A prenatal headstart for the first born

The specific orientation to the active interaction with print was conceptualized during the prenatal experiences of the mothers in my study. All four mothers, during their pregnancies of their first born, wanted to equip themselves with the "right" parenting skills to give the latter a head start in areas of social, psychological and emotional support. Some attempted to hothouse their babies like reading to them while they were pregnant although mothers did not elaborate on these practices during my conversations with them.

The scores of local magazines, like the *Young Parents*, *Motherhood* magazines, at news stands on child rearing practices served as their staple diet while they were pregnant. Divya (Family D) and Sona (Family C) switched from reading fashion and wedding magazines to reading books on pregnancy, childbirth, parenting and children's education. Asha (Family A) subscribed to these magazines while Nora's (Family B) husband stocked her with a similar range of materials. These sources of information gave them a glimpse to what they were to anticipate with the arrival of their children.

All the mothers in this study were unanimous in their conviction of gaining as much of such information to make not only an early but the "right" start with their little ones.

Literacy from the Crib

Reading aloud featured to be the earliest and most popular literacy pursuit these four Indian families initiated in their homes upon the arrival of their babies. The children in my study were aged few months to three years old when their parents began reading aloud, daily, to them. Asha (Family A) read to Arun very regularly, "everytime she had time", even whilst she was at her housework for he would "pester her to read to him". Similarly, Nora (Family B) would obligingly read to her eldest child the "same book again and again and ended up buying a collection".

In addition, storybook reading gives children an opportunity to have a warm and supportive interaction with their parents.

The parents in the study believed in the value of reading to and with their children from their readings in magazines or discussions with other parents. Most of the parents had personally benefited from reading a wide range of books during their growing and adult years and were eager to extend the positive influences of reading books to their children, convinced that "storybook reading has an extremely facilitative effect on children's emergent literacy abilities"

The parents in the study were convinced that introducing books to their children by reading aloud to them will generate the children's interest in books and enhance their vocabulary and pronunciation, gradually developing their language proficiency particularly in the English Language. They were willing to model positive literacy behaviour and events to their children, even if these were ones they were not accustomed to, like for instance, bedtime story reading.

Bedtime story reading – a "learned" Western culture

Although local studies by Sripathy (1998) view bedtime reading as a Western middle-class practice and as not within the cultural experience of Asians respectively, the tradition of storytelling is an integral facet of the rich oral tradition of Indian families. Indian mothers often narrated stories from folklore and religious epics during their daily interactions with their children, during play, mealtime or bedtime, to impart moral values to their children. The Indian parents in the study may have similarly adopted the practice of telling stories but the form such a practice assumed and the motivation behind it differed greatly from the traditional practice of telling stories in the Indian culture. Firstly, it involved active interaction with print materials with the use of books and secondly, themes explored were not from the folklore or religious epics in Indian literature but on Western folklore and fairytales from the world of Enid Blyton, and Grimms brothers. They read largely from books written by Western writers and local authors for the simple reason that these were easily available in our libraries and bookshops. Secondly, parents recognised the value of bedtime reading as opportunities to introduce children to print and as practice sessions for reading, The imparting of moral values rarely was the primary motive of these reading sessions. Hence, this Western practice of bedtime reading was found to be actively simulated in the four families for its intrinsic value in increasing literacy development, mainly for reading acquisition.

Although the mothers, the frequent readers in the families in my study, were often busy with housework or their professional careers, they never failed to depart from their bedtime reading ritual to their children. Many of parent-child interactions took place at any time of the day and a favourite was reading at bedtime. For instance, Asha (Family A) read to Arun every night, a "must" bedtime ritual, till he was four to five years old when he could read on his own. The children, as they became independent readers, also cultivated this habit of reading before going to bed. It was a habit they had begun to enjoy from their bedtime sessions with their parents as well as a behaviour that they modeled after their parents

Whether it was a book in the native tongue or the language of the school, English Language, solitary reading or reading during parent-child interaction, reading sessions were viewed as "lessons" in literacy in the families in my study, largely because of their functional

value.

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Reading with a purpose

Similar to Spreadbury's (1992:2-3) study of 26 Brisbane preschool parents, the "functionality" of these reading aloud sessions in the families in my study predominated the other reasons of fostering a close bond, a quiet time or reading for pleasure in view of giving their children a "good start at school". The parents in my study viewed these sessions as opportunities to expand their children's vocabulary, thereby, developing their linguistic fluency in both English, and Tamil, their mother tongue, as well as impart new information. This is further evidence that the home literacy practices in these families were mainly geared towards their perceptions of school type literacy practices.

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