LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE
A preliminary report on the cultural practices of literacy of Malay families
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Purpose/Research Question
The aim of this research is to understand how children in English-knowing Malay families learn literacy within the context of their homes; how the families organise themselves around literacy, their beliefs and practices; the ways in which they support their children’s literacy development; and the ways children position themselves as learners.

Background
Given the general educational underachievement of Malay children, there is a need to understand how they come to be literate individuals and how such information can be incorporated in the redesigning of pedagogy to improve their educational attainment.

Participants
Three 5-year-old kindergarten children were selected from two kindergartens in the western part of Singapore. They came from contrasting socioeconomic backgrounds based on the mothers’ educational qualifications.

Research Methodology/Design
Visits were made to the children’s homes over an 8-month period to interview the family members and to observe the children interacting with their siblings and adults in literacy-related events. For the interviews, the analysis ranged from reading over the previous interview and formulating new questions to developing categories for themes or issues raised. For the observations, we reviewed the field notes, cross-checked transcripts and recording to note the use of or reference to oral or written literacy, and identified literacy events. Literacy events were subjected to a moment-by-moment microanalysis in order to obtain both an insider and outsider perspective of the cultural scenes.

Findings/Results
The families differ in what they count as literacy and which literacy they consider worth transmitting to the children. There were considerable differences in the language practices that the children modelled after. There was a strong influence of school in the homes, none more visible than the type of print materials for literacy learning. The families also differ in the amount, variety and sources of popular culture they allowed into their homes. What is clear from this study is that the three children have access to different opportunities for literacy learning at home which will make a difference to what they will be able to take up and make use of at school. By the time the target children get
to school, they will be positioned differently with respect to the curriculum to which they have to adapt. The instructional problem then becomes one where: "one size cannot fit all".

**Conclusion**

The portrait drawn here of resourceful parents and children is an important step in viewing families as constructors of their own cultures rather than as units limited in literacy resources. This portrait serves as a reminder for educators to recognise as valid literacy practices that take place outside of school and to see students and their families differently in order to have an impact on their literacy development.

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