Cultural Capital and Family Involvement in Children’s Literacy Learning

Mukhlis Abu Bakar
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Abstract: This paper presents findings from a study which explored the lived literacy experience of Malay families in Singapore. The research strategy was one of multiple case studies. The research approach was ethnographic and the data set reported in this paper includes the data collected from the field of two of the sites. Data analysis show that participant parents, regardless of their background, value their children’s educational success, want their children to do well in school, and correspondingly see themselves as supporting their children in one way or another. The evidence, however, demonstrates a variation in familial perspectives and needs and a considerable distinction in how families of different background define literacy and which literacy they consider worth transmitting to the children. These in turn affect the way they foster their children’s acquisition of literacy. The focal children from the two families thus come to school with particular cultural resources and repertoires of literacy practices that position them in particular ways with respect to the curriculum to which they have to adapt. These conclusions draw on Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital which explains how individual’s access to certain cultural signals (such as attitudes, preferences, tastes, and styles) either enables or limits their entry into high status social groups, organizations, or institutions such as schools. These views present an alternative to the cultural deficit thinking that blame students, their families, and their culture for their academic failure.

1. Introduction

In a previous article (Abu Bakar, 2007), I examined the literacy experience of two six-year old Malay children in Singapore, a girl and a boy, documenting and analysing their experiences within the context of the ‘activities, practices and ways of viewing the world’ of the children’s home cultures (Cazden, 2000: 254). It was an attempt to show the cultural differences between families in terms of the cultural resources and repertoires of literacy practices that their children acquire and come to school with, and how these differences position the children in particular ways with respect to the curriculum to which they have to adapt. The analysis was informed by ethnographic work such as Barton and Hamilton (1998), Gregory and Williams (200), Heath (1983), Rogoff (1995) and Vygotsky (1978), among others, who have all emphasised the contextual nature of literacy and the way literacy is embedded within particular sociocultural contexts.

The article was based on a larger research project that examined the home and school literacy practices of Malay and Chinese children of different socio-economic background (Abu Bakar, 2005; 2006). The impetus for the project was in part due to the continuing unequal literacy outcomes between Malay and Chinese students on the one hand, and between students of different socio-economic classes regardless of ethnic groups, on the other. The aim of the project was a modest one, to understand how English-knowing Malay and Chinese children learn literacy during the period before and after school entry and how this impact on their academic performance upon entering school.

While a cross analysis of ethnicity and class might yield interesting insights, in the present paper, the analysis is purposely limited to the analysis of class effect on cultural differences in Malay families. I take a look at two children, one of which is the same Malay girl described in the previous article who belongs to a family of low socio-
economic status (SES), and another Malay girl from a family of a higher SES. However, instead of comparing home cultures per se as they relate to literacy as I did in the previous article, I attempt here to examine cultural differences through the conceptual framework of cultural capital, i.e., how cultural differences arising from different SES translate into different cultural capital and how these may or may not find currency within the classroom setting.

2. Cultural capital

Growing evidence indicates the considerable influence of the social, cultural and learning experiences, attitudes and aspirations of the child’s home background on children’s academic development (for example, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Coleman, 1990, Lareau, 2003). A powerful theoretical concept that attempts to explain this impact is that of “cultural capital” which was introduced and developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

The term “cultural capital” refers to the knowledge and modes of thought that characterise different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. This concept is helpful for thinking about children’s different particular histories within their families, the contrasting cultural resources and repertoires of practices that are available as part of everyday life, and the particular dispositions and embodied ways of being which they acquire and take with them to school (Comber, 2004). When children’s cultural capital are valued in school and given a high “exchange value”, they open doors and give the children access to otherwise unattainable resources.

Indeed, Bourdieu (1977) maintains that schools reward upper-class cultural capital and actively depreciate that of the lower classes. Children of the affluent classes, who have acquired familiarity with bourgeois cultural forms at home, are seen to possess the means of appropriating similarly oriented school knowledge relatively easily. Working class kids, in contrast, find their unfamiliarity with these cultural forms to be a major obstacle to successful school performance (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2000). Moreover, the resistance of working class students to the imposition of abstract bourgeois forms of knowledge has resulted in their rejection of school and intellectual work. Many come to realize that schooling will not enable them to go much farther than they already have and that many career choices are beyond their reach (Willis, 1978).

The concept of “cultural capital” assumes that the fundamental role of educational institutions is the distribution of knowledge to students, but some students are more able to acquire it because of cultural gifts based on their SES, race, or gender position (Apple, 1995). For instance, Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) found that black and lower SES students receive less educational return for their level of cultural capital than do white and higher SES students, probably because of micro-political evaluative processes at the school and classroom levels. Lareau and Horvat (1999) also observe that groups may differ in their ability or their opportunity to activate these resources in different settings. These support Bourdieu’s (1997) theory that the cultural capital transmitted by families to their offspring is reproduced by the hegemonic nature of the official curriculum and the education system. One way to alleviate these inequities, as argued by Giroux (1998), is for teachers to construct curricula that draw upon the cultural resources that students bring with them to school.

The scope of this paper is limited in that it takes a concerted effort at analysing the kinds of cultural capital that children from contrasting SES acquires at home as well as the complex reading of how these different cultural capital may be recognised or ignored in the classroom, or specifically, how a Malay child of socially disadvantaged parents become educationally disadvantaged, and vice-versa. But it makes no attempt at this
time to explore the basic criteria of the curriculum, nor focus on the teacher’s role, as mediator and interpreter of the curriculum, and its subsequent bearing on the class reproduction process.

3. Research Setting and Methodology

3.1 Setting and participants

Malays comprise the biggest minority group (14% of the total population) with the Chinese being the dominant community (77%) and the Indians the smallest (8%). Singapore’s bilingual policy refers to language competence in English and one of the officially recognized mother tongues, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. In practice, English is the primary medium of instruction in the schools while the mother tongue languages are taught and learned as a subject. Malay is the dominant household language among the majority of the Malays with a small but increasing number of Malay families where English is the more significantly used language.

The larger research project set out to provide a longitudinal study of the home and school literacy experiences of 8 Malay children and 8 Chinese children from age 4 to 7 attending different kindergartens, and primary schools, in Singapore. The children were selected with the help of their kindergarten teachers to represent different parental familiarity with education and experiences of literacy, using the mothers’ educational qualification as a working indicator.

The first focal child presented in this paper is Sanah whose mother, Mdm Zaharah, was educated in Malaysia up to the SPM level. She moved to Singapore after getting married to Mr Rashid, a Singaporean, and became a housewife. The second focal child is Naila whose mother, Mdm Normah, was a graduate teacher who became a full-time housewife after giving birth to her first child. Sanah’s father has an ‘A’ level qualification and Naila’s father, Mr Shamsuddin, has a polytechnic diploma. At the time of the research, Mr Shamsuddin was studying part-time for a degree in engineering. Both children were born in the same year.

During her kindergarten years, Sanah attended one of several centres run by a well-funded community foundation. Naila, on the other hand, attended a kindergarten run by a mosque which charges slightly higher fees than the kindergarten attended by Sanah. After kindergarten, both children proceeded to a neighbourhood primary school in their respective neighbourhoods. Both had older siblings: Sanah, a brother, Saiful, who was a year older; Naila, a sister, Sufiah, who was two years older.

Incidentally, the mothers’ different educational qualification corresponded with the size of family dwelling. The socio-economic backgrounds of the families are summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target child (Year of Birth)</th>
<th>HDB flat</th>
<th>Mother’s qualification</th>
<th>Mother’s occupation</th>
<th>Father’s qualification</th>
<th>Father’s occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanah (1999)</td>
<td>3-room</td>
<td>M’sian SPM (≈ O level)</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>A level</td>
<td>Operations Manager at a fast food outlet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Methodology and data collection

The study draws upon ethnographic research traditions as utilized by others in the field of literacy and education which have all emphasized the contextual nature of literacy and the way literacy is embedded within particular sociocultural contexts. In studying the home and school interpretations of literacy, I draw upon several methods of data collection. These include: (1) semi-structured interviews with the parents of the children to obtain an inside perspective of their beliefs and values; (2) visits to the home over the years before or after kindergarten and on weekends where the physical setting and the informal interaction between parents and children were observed, audio and video recorded, as well as described in detail in field notes; and (3) visits to their kindergarten and primary school classrooms where interviews with the teachers were conducted and the classroom activities observed and recorded in the same manner as the home visits.

4. Home as a Cultural Site

4.1 Sanah’s Literacy Experience

4.1.1 Reading Practices

During the time when I knew Sanah, she was not reading on her own yet, needing someone, usually her mother, to mediate her reading. She was still struggling to recognize words when she started school, her ability was limited to reading aloud familiar words like ‘the’ and ‘this’. This immediately put her at a disadvantage as lessons in Primary 1 already assume a level of reading ability that goes beyond recognizing those words. However, observing Sanah at home revealed a persona who enjoyed ‘reading’ and listening to stories including those on the television. Those words and phrases that she could ‘read’ aloud were almost always from memory. For instance, she had committed to memory certain stretches of texts from Rappunzel through repeated reading. During guided reading with her mother, she often became excited when they reached the parts where she could repeat what she had memorized and say them aloud with much relish (e.g., “Rappunzel, Rappunzel, let your hair down!”).

In the event that memory failed her, particularly when she was asked to read on her own, she would launch off from the text and improvise the story with whatever bits of textual information that she remembered. Sanah’s fascination with stories was evident when she laughed at a funny version of Rappunzel on Sesame Street (dubbed in Malay) shown on a Malaysian television channel. Deviating from the original story which Sanah was familiar with, this version showed a Rappunzel revealing a bald head when a long wig was pulled from her head. Thus even though she could not read, she had an interest in oral texts or texts that are read from print. She was aware of what texts could offer; a window to a world beyond her immediate domestic existence.

Sanah’s disposition towards literacy is more evident in reading sessions with her mother. Mdm Zaharah often scaffolded Sanah’s developing literacy using a strategy described in the literature as the neurological impress method (Ekwall & Shanker, 1988). Mother and daughter would read the same text orally, with the mother reading just ahead of the daughter in overlapping turns. They sat together, Mdm Zaharah reading in Sanah’s ear, sometimes pointing to the words. Mdm Zaharah, while not making much headway in helping her daughter overcome her struggle with the code breaking aspects of literate practice, encouraged her participation in the understanding of, and interaction with, written texts – providing her with the space to ‘venture’, inviting her to connect her thoughts with the text (e.g., asking for her opinion or agreement) or to respond to the text
in relation to her own experience (e.g., asking what she did or experienced in similar situations).

Thus one could argue that even though Sanah had difficulty ‘reading’, she has the capacity to absorb stories and be absorbed by them. Crucially, she demonstrated reading-like behaviour in that she attended to texts like a reader – comprehending, evaluating, and questioning the texts others read with her. From the perspective of literacy requiring cracking the code, making meaning, using texts and analysing texts (Freebody & Luke, 1990), Sanah only needed to enhance her performance in cracking the code to measure up. In Bourdieu’s terms, Sanah had developed a ‘disposition’ towards literacy before she was able to acquire specific decoding and encoding practices. However, in school, at least in the first two years of school, what is demanded of a reader, and with which one would be recognised as one, are primarily the decoding skills. Sanah’s strengths thus could be invisible to the school during most of her early school years.

4.1.2 Literacy Materials and Popular Culture

Despite Sanah’s own peculiar regard for what books held for her (along with other transmission channels such as the television), it remained that books were significant in her young life. This was supported by the availability of plenty of books in her home, both assessment and story books, a number of these being the “Sails Literacy Series” by Jill Eggleton, and Sangmin Lee’s series “The Funny Adventures of Bongbong”. There were also Aesop’s Fables and some books on morally good behaviour by local writers.

Other than books, entertainment for Sanah and her brother at home included a television, a VCD player, radio, games and toys. They watched children’s programs such as cartoons and Sesame Street (both the English original and the Malay version), and Malay variety shows on television. They had a handful of educational software (e.g., educational songs, Clifford’s Fun with Letters) and children’s movies (e.g., Stuart Little, Shrek) that the father occasionally bought for them to keep them occupied.

It is interesting to note that except for the electronic materials, the books were bought cheap in one consignment from Malaysia supplied by Mr Rashid’s friend and this was the only instance in which the family bought books. Their other source of reading materials was through a neighbour who lent them books after their own children had outgrown them. Thus through their social network, Mr Rashid and Mdm Zaharah were able to provide books for their children to read. Leaving it to someone else to decide which books to buy or inheriting books from others obviated the need for the parents to be selective about the quality of the texts and the kinds of texts that count. That partly explains why they rarely resorted to borrowing books from the library for then they would have to exercise selection which Mdm Zaharah in particular has little confidence in, leaving it mostly to the children to choose the books themselves.

4.1.3 Language Practices

Malay was the dominant language in Sanah’s home but English, or more appropriately Singlish, was also used by the siblings and between the siblings and their parents. Sanah and her brother spoke to each other and to their father in English and Malay, and more Malay than English to their mother. When she hummed or sang which happened quite often, they were mostly Malay songs. With outsiders like me and my research assistant, Sanah seemed comfortable in English when she was playful but preferred Malay when the conversations took on a more serious tone such as during an interview.
Her parents spoke Malay to each other because of her mother’s limited knowledge of English.

In practice, both adults and children switched between English and Malay, each language mediating and informing the other. However, Malay as the more dominant language in the household has an added function — as a medium for interrogating English texts. Sanah, who learned to read with the support of a mother who was clearly tilted towards Malay, was herself more fluent in Malay. She was aware of her mother’s greater facility with the language and often used it to best effect by asking in Malay whenever she needed her to clarify parts of the English texts that she did not understand.

Thus, the Malay language stayed rooted in Sanah’s family even as English began to flourish when the children started kindergarten. It is instructive to note that since the family had no Standard English speaker as a role model (her father speaking mostly Singlish than English), Singlish was the more dominant variety whenever English was spoken. However, this did not take away from the fact that Sanah was already a fluent native speaker of Malay which, in her case, would be the most efficient language to use in the learning of conceptual and academic knowledge (Cummins, 1996). She would benefit most from a school curriculum, whether pertaining to English, Maths or Science, that incorporates her home language and culture. Unfortunately, in Singapore schools, English is the sole language of instruction for all subjects except for the teaching of the respective mother tongue languages.

4.1.4 Communicative Practices

Hand in hand with Sanah’s facility with language was her communicative skill. As young as three, Sanah was already engaging adults in conversation on a regular basis. Throughout the time I was with the family, she had asked me and my research assistant many questions through a set of mostly coherent and naturally executed information-seeking sequences — if she had been a researcher, she would have all the data needed to write our autobiographies! Her communicative ability was grounded and sustained by the family’s shared form of pleasure; they were all capable of teasing and joking and general unkindness. Once over an afternoon snack, in a mixture of Singlish and Malay, Mr Rashid teased Sanah for being afraid of cats. Similarly in Singlish and Malay, Sanah quickly defended herself by saying that she was already grown up and was no longer afraid of cats. When Mr Rashid mocked her again by reminding her of a past occasion when she acted cowardly towards a cat, she pleaded for understanding through a high pitch admission “Ya lah” and then countered by bringing up a recent incident in which she had shown no fear.

In this family, popular culture could end up either as a passive activity, a babysitter taking the place of the mother who was otherwise busy doing her chores, or as a trigger for family banter, particularly if Mr Rashid watched with them. For example while watching Shrek, there was an instance in the story when the character Shrek seemed to have made a sound likened to someone passing wind. Mr Rashid purposely attributed it to Sanah who at once recognised it to be a prank and played along by protesting and passing the blame to her brother who in turn also protested.

Such frequent father-child bantering had served as practice for conversational participation and oral expressiveness. In fact, Sanah’s linguistic development before school was biased towards oral discourse; she rarely expressed herself on paper — these were limited to finishing homework such as writing the alphabets or drawing lines to match words in the workbooks.
If one is prepared to excuse the kinds of language used in her oral communication, it is not difficult to see that Sanah had strength in oral language which was a valid resource for literacy learning ‘no matter how “non-standard” in vocabulary or syntax that language may seem to the teacher’ (Cazden, 2000: 252). However, it would take a sensitive and knowledgeable teacher to recognise Sanah’s resources which are so clear at home.

4.2 Naila’s Literacy Experience

4.2.1 Reading Practices

In stark contrast with Sanah, Naila had achieved a credible facility with the decoding aspects of reading. She was not only a competent reader but also a critic of storybook characters (e.g., calling Sleeping Beauty ‘tak ada [has no] brain’ for getting her finger pricked). This enabled her mother to focus with greater ease and effect on the meaning and purpose of written texts and of the particular modes of thinking that these normally involved. Once, at some point, while Naila was reading to her mother a story about a birthday party, Mdm Normah took the opportunity to start a conversation by asking her what her favourite birthday present was. This triggered a recall from memory and the sharing of experiences not only by Naila but also her sister who was listening to her 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. Over and above these, Mdm Normah also often ventured into the explicit teaching of concepts and the introduction of new information.

Naila and her sister were also exposed to the recitation of the Qur’an at home. Both girls could recognise the Arabic consonants and the vowel signs and could articulate phonetically these letters when they are placed in syllables and phrases. Their father who normally tutored them would pamper them with praises (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. What was also significant during these reciting sessions was the father’s high expectation of discipline from his daughters who not only responded well to his instructions but did so with much respect. These different experiences with reading should prepare them well for school.

4.2.2 Literacy Materials and Popular Culture

Mr Shamsuddin once reminisced about not being introduced to books early when he was young and did not want that to happen to his children. He and Mdm Normah had made it a point to expose their children to books early, a variety of them, both borrowed and bought, from story books to informative 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 but these tended to be religious, i.e., children stories on moral values and about the prophets and their companions. Mr 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.

Other than buying books, both parents had made library visits part of the family routine. Once in two weeks after Naila returned from her kindergarten, Mdm Normah would walk with her to the nearby neighbourhood library. On some Saturdays, Mr Shamsuddin would drive the whole family to their favourite library in the east of
Singapore. This was usually a detour from their almost weekly ritual travelling to the east to visit Mdm Normah’s parents.

Naila’s family also kept numerous VCDs and DVDs of movies such as JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series, Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events, Roald Dahl’s Charlie and the Chocolate Factory as well as CS Lewis’ The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The family would watch the movies together, and the children as well as the parents could often be heard discussing the story-line and mouthing out the dialogues to their favorite scenes. In this family, the non-traditional sources of literacy such as movies were complementary to traditional sources of literacy such as books. Watching movie-adaptations of books inspired and motivated the children as well as the parents to explore the novels itself. This interplay of influence was also inherent in the children’s symbolic play where both movies and books become rich sources of inspiration for the children to tap on while engaging in play.

4.2.3 Language Practices

Naila and her sister 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 memorised long stretches of talk. When I caught them acting out some scenes from the Harry Potter movie (the whole family was into Harry Potter, books and DVDs and all), the scripts came out clear both in grammar and intonation.

There was also the blending of two languages in the family’s language practices, a strategy that we have seen also used by Sanah. For instance, while reading a picture book on ‘Shapes and Sizes’, Naila code-switched into Malay when asking her mother for the name of the objects she was not familiar with, illustrating a functional use for the mother tongue within an interactive English discourse – Malay provided a convenient language to use when there was a need to step outside the immediate discourse to clarify parts of texts one does not not understand.

Unlike Sanah and her brother, however, Naila and her sister appeared to be the more effective bilinguals and, judging by her mother’s fluency in English and which served as a ready model for the girls to emulate, their oral English were relatively closer to that of the Standard used in school.

4.2.4 Writing Activities

Naila was already into writing letters of the alphabet and starting to write individual words at the start of the study. Her elder sister, on the other hand, 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, and she too would want to write just like her sister. They made cards and flags, and frequently wrote messages or love letters to their parents. The ease with which the girls had access to books, papers and writing implements, both at home and at their maternal grandparents’ home, supported their interest in pen and paper activities. Through these activities, Naila had learned that writing has a cultural and social function; she had learned to be a ‘text user’ (Freebody & Luke, 1990) that should prepare her well for school.

Writing within the context of doing homework in the presence of her mother also brought out other, and multiple, facets to Naila’s learning. For instance within a single activity of classifying types of food, Mdm Normah helped Naila learn about the categorisation of food, the basis for the categorisation, and the metalanguage used in such discourses. Naila thus received extensive support and encouragement from her
mother, both in negotiating the demands of the curriculum and also in developing and displaying her cognitive ability.

4.3 Cultural Capital as Viewed by the Parents

4.3.1 Sanah’s Parents
Sanah’s parents had feared that their daughter would not survive the normative models of assessment and that she would ruin her chance of succeeding in a system which they believed placed a high premium on a single talent – the ability to read. Seeing that Sanah was inquisitive and full of imagination, it hurt them when she received a low grade in the kindergarten’s assessment of her performance for the year. Sanah was placed in the “red” group, which was the lowest of three groups, with yellow at the top and blue in between. Mr Rashid resented the standard assessment and the categorisation of children.

(If) you’re talking about creativity, you’re talking about all the ability to imagine, that kind of thing…she’s ahead but that’s not what they want. What they want is the ability to read because it’s standard. By this time she should be able to read. If not, she’ll belong to that group. I think…if you segregate people by colours and all these things, people understand, you know, colours.

Going by his own experience, Mr Rashid believed that one does not need qualifications to go far. He left junior college after completing his “A” levels and worked in the financial sector soon after. He chose to work rather than move on to university because he believed that experience was what mattered in the working world (“experience is my teacher”). Leveraging on his good public relations skills, his company posted him to a number of cities, his last posting being Kuala Lumpur where he stayed the longest. It was also there that he left the company to set up a computer training centre for working adults. The 1998 economic crisis, however, brought his fledgling business to an end. At the time of the study, he worked in an American fast-food outlet in charge of operations.

And so, looking at his child, Mr Rashid did not see the failure but the hope of things changing. His way of constructing the child and supporting her was, to use Bourdieu, a form of cultural capital that would be useful for the social and future imaginaries that Singapore is aiming for. At the same time, Sanah had cultural capital in ways that were invisible to her parents (and likely the teachers too). Inasmuch as they valued and supported her abilities, they did not see these as part of the repertory of skills associated with successful reading and which constituted important dimensions of literate practice. To them, learning to read meant learning the sounds of the letters and putting them together, an understanding informed by how they themselves had learned to read.

4.3.2 Naila’s Parents
At the time of the study, Mr Shamsuddin was enrolled in a degree program in engineering with an Australian university via distance learning. His wife had completed hers in Applied Psychology a few years earlier from the same university. They hoped that their continuing education would set a good 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”).
The motivation for continuing to learn was partly religious. Mr Shamsuddin and Mdm Normah were conscious of their religious obligation and were intent on raising a family that was built on Islamic principles. They considered themselves professionals whose knowledge of Islam was not up to scratch. They were thus set on ensuring that their own children grew up religiously better educated than them. This was in part the reason for enrolling their girls in a mosque kindergarten where they got to wear attire that covered their hair, and where the literacy education included learning to read and reciting Qur'anic verses and prayers in Arabic and learning about their faith.

Both Mr Shamsuddin and Mdm Normah made it a point to attend religious classes as regularly as they could ‘to make up for lost time’. Mr Shamsuddin in particular was fond of reading religious books written by both local and regional writers in Malay as well as those in English by western Muslim scholars. 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 actions and sayings of the Prophet and not something of the teacher’s own creation.

4.4 Final Remarks

These two case studies provide potent evidence of differences in home cultures and how difficult it is for some children to match the advantages of other children who go to school with the linguistic and cultural capital that allows them to adjust more quickly to literacy learning as an institutional practice or receive the kind of ongoing support that allows them to catch up. Clearly some children have access to different opportunities for literacy learning and play at home which make a difference to what they are able to take up and make use of at school. Naila had access to considerable family resources by virtue of her parents having access to dominant educational discourses. Naila’s engagement and learning from books as a preschooler thus was already more sustained, satisfying, and a part of who she was than Sanah’s experiences with books. Sanah had yet to learn to crack the alphabetic code and was dependent on her mother as a mediator but at least she already attended to texts like a reader. Other children, who might be equally late to crack the code, might not find ways of connecting to text-based forms of pleasure, learning and work like Sanah had. It may be that catching up on the literacy ladder is a privilege reserved for the already advantaged.

Schooling, and with it school forms of literate practices, enter children’s lives at different points in a family’s development, parents’ employment and further education; educational agenda have to compete with other priorities and material realities impacting on the child’s livelihood. Some families have greater economic, social and cultural resources available to them for addressing these demands. The point is that all is not equal as these girls and their families work towards helping them catch up with their peers and to meet standardised literacy benchmarks. Ultimately students’ cultural capital, evolving dispositions and their existing material circumstances impact hugely on the extent to which they can put literacy to work in their own lives, which impacts upon their investments in the labour of learning to be literate.

In closing, understanding home literacy practices is important as a reminder that school is just one domain in peoples’ lives and that school literacy practices may need to be set within this wider context (Dyson, 1999; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). An understanding of the literacies that children like Sanah and Naila acquire at home is invaluable as a basis which teachers can build on what children know and can appropriate practices and knowledge as resources for school learning from other contexts in children’s lives (Giroux, 1998). Otherwise, some children will continue to get...
resources (academic and cultural capital) from school (however limited and arbitrary that may be) while others leave school with a diagnostic record of failure reinforcing the social classes to which they belong.

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