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Emulating What's Valued: Family Practices in Literacy Learning

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**Abstract**

Children learn about literacy through their interactions with more experienced members of the culture (teachers, parents, siblings, peers, extended family members, etc.) in a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990). This means that their learning of literacy occurs in participation with and is mediated by others in culturally valued activities. Differences in what the members count as literacy and which literacy they consider worth transmitting to children affects the latter's literacy learning and their disposition to texts.

This paper presents data from two families with different approaches to literacy learning. In one family, the child is exposed to meaning-based activities in literacy instruction where the parents and other adult members engage in extended discourse around texts and encourage intertextual references. In another family, the child learns that literacy means learning the grammar of reading and writing (decoding, punctuation and intonation), a practice that appears to cohere with the family's devotion to learning to recite religious texts and perform religious rituals where meaning and comprehension are often relegated to a secondary activity.

The two children will enter school with fairly different cultural resources towards literacy learning, and their educational attainment will depend on how teachers make efficient use of these resources and design pedagogies that meet the needs of different children.

Keywords: Literacy, Learning, Family, Guided participation

## **EMULATING WHAT'S VALUED: FAMILY PRACTICES IN LITERACY LEARNING**

Children learn about literacy through their interactions with more experienced members of the culture (teachers, parents, siblings, peers, extended family members, etc.) in a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990). This means that their learning of literacy occurs in participation with and is mediated by others in culturally valued activities. These activities not only include those conducted for instructional purposes but also normal routines that are part of the family life (e.g., buying groceries, opening the letter box, reading the newspapers, etc.).

Differences in what the members count as literacy and which literacy they consider worth transmitting to children affects the latter's literacy learning and their disposition to texts. These form part of what Bourdieu (1977) calls 'cultural capital' which he deems as cultural goods such as knowledge and ways of thinking transmitted by different family practices. Comber (2004: 115) explains the concept of cultural capital as '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'.

In this paper, we present data from two families with different approaches to literacy learning. By exploring and highlighting the many literacies in the lives of our focal children and their families, we hope to show that these variations in practices and languages can be viewed as resources rather than obstacles to learning, and that children's adaptation to school can be better facilitated if schools recognise and incorporate into the learning process the rich and diverse cultural capital that these children have acquired at home.

### **Methodology and data collection**

The two focal children are participants of a larger study on the home literacy practices of Malay children. Both were selected from the same mosque-based kindergarten. The teachers were asked to identify a few children who, in their perception, were able to read at the end of their first kindergarten year. From the pool of students identified by the teachers, the two focal children were selected as they provide us with two families from contrasting socio-

economic background. The parents of the selected children were then contacted and their consent sought for their child to participate in the study. Data collection commenced thereafter.

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with parents and other significant adults in the focal children's life in order to learn the family's values and beliefs. During our visits to the home, significant literacy events and family interactions were documented in field notes and were audio- and video recorded. We also made limited visits to the kindergarten to observe and record classroom activities and to interview teachers on what they think are the focal children's character and strength.

### **Adam and his family<sup>1</sup>**

Adam (5 years old at the start of the observations and currently attending Primary 1 at a government school) is the eldest child of two. His mother, Mdm Nazura, in her early thirties, holds a doctorate in Food Science/ Technology. The nature of her job requires her to travel on average once a month. Adam's father, Mr Ikram, is an aircraft pilot with a commercial airline who is even more frequently away from home. Because of the parents' frequent travelling, the family, especially the children, spends a significant amount of time at the maternal grandparents' home. Adam's maternal grandmother is a housewife who holds a GCE A Level certificate, a relatively creditable achievement for a Malay woman of her era in the local context. Adam's younger sister, Maryam, is 3 years younger. Other occupants in the grandparents' home include Adam's grandfather and his two young uncles – a 20-year-old National Serviceman awaiting entrance to a local university, and a 16-year-old secondary school student.

Adam's grandparents frequently attend courses on child development and parenting during their younger years. His grandmother in particular subscribes to Glenn Doman's method of raising a child which places much emphasis on the practice of shared reading between parent and child. This has a strong influence on Mdm Nazura who also embraces the belief that parents should read to their children everyday. The children enjoy bedtime reading with Mdm Nazura for that is also a time when mother and child bond. Mr Ikram reads to the children too but they generally prefer to be read to by the mother, understandably so because the latter is more theatrical and animated when she reads to the children. However, Adam will go to his

father when it comes to reading about cars and aircrafts as the father is able to provide interesting information about such matters.

Living amidst adults and young adults, Adam grows up with the necessary attention that he needs for his developing literacy. The parents, grandparents and uncles ensured that the two children in the family are given ample opportunity to explore the world around them, by answering to their questions and satisfying their curiosity.

### **Hayati and her family**

Hayati (6 years old at the start of the observations and currently attending Primary 1 at a local private Islamic school) is the youngest child of two. Her mother, Mdm Faseha, 43, has up to Secondary 2 education. She makes and sells traditional cakes and pastries from home to add to the family's income. Hayati's father, Mr Zaim, 42, is an Interior Design diploma holder. Prior to embarking on his fledgling delivery business, he worked freelance as an interior designer. The eldest child in the family, Faiz, is currently attending Primary 6 at a government school.

Faiz attended the same mosque-based kindergarten as Hayati when he was in preschool. The kindergarten has an active parent support group. During the years when Faiz was in kindergarten, Mdm Faseha began to involve herself with the parent support group. The group held regular seminars and workshops for parents on parenting and child development which Mdm Faseha frequently attended. From these sessions, Mdm Faseha realised the importance of teaching children to read from a young age and that the ability to recognise printed words would largely facilitate children's learning. She regretted not knowing this earlier and attributed Faiz's average achievement in school to her failure to start him early on his literacy learning. Not to repeat the same 'mistake', Mdm Faseha began to teach Hayati to read when she was still a toddler reading storybooks with her everyday. This practice still continues. Mr Zaim plays a very limited role on the children's literacy learning.

### **Adam and his family: *Meaning-based approaches to literacy instruction***

Adam is exposed to meaning-based approaches to literacy instruction where his parents and other adult extended family members tend to engage in extended discourse around text and encourage intertextual references. The family members often entertain his queries and his exploration beyond the immediate text. This enables him to imagine "possible worlds,

worlds beyond the mundanities of here and now” (Bruner, 1984:196). Bedtime reading is a regular event and the children look forward to this at the end of each day. The informal setting, where the children will often lean on their mother on a cosy sofa bed in their bedroom, facilitates the mother-child interactions with a text.

The following excerpt is a representative example of bedtime reading that Mdm Nazura and Adam frequently engage in. Extending beyond merely reading the text, the mother narrates, paraphrases and provides further explanations after almost every sentence she reads (turns #5, #13, #15).

*Excerpt 1:*<sup>2</sup>

	<u>Transcript of reading/talk</u>	<u>Actual printed text</u>
1 Mdm Nazura:	“In most species of anglerfish, the male doesn't have the special fish-catching fin.” You know that light? ((Referring to the picture beside the text)).	“In most species of anglerfish, the male doesn't have the special fish-catching fin.”
2 Adam:	Which is male?	
3 Mdm Nazura:	Male is a boy. Ok?	
4 Adam:	Why the boy don't have?	
5 Mdm Nazura:	It has to rely on the female to find food because the females are the ones that look for food.	
6 Adam:	Why?	
7 Mdm Nazura:	Ah! You listen.	
8 Adam:	Mummy I saw on Nemo, I think the one that have, the, the that one is the girl.	
9 Mdm Nazura:	You mean the one with the light? Yeah of course! According to this book, only the females have that light, isn't it?	
10 Adam:	Yeah	

- 11 Mdm Nazura: Ok. "The male bites the female's body and hangs on to it for the rest of his life." "The male bites the female's body and hangs onto it for the rest of his life."
- 12 Adam: Why?
- 13 Mdm Nazura: That's how he eats. "If the male does not find a female to hang to, he will die in a few months." "If the male does not find a female to hang to, he will die in a few months." You know why, coz the female needs the sperm from the male. And in the dark, dark ocean, how can you find another fish, it's so difficult right?
- 14 Adam: Yeah
- 15 Mdm Nazura: So the male needs food from the female. So they both need something from each other. Right?
- 16 Adam: Yeah
- 17 Mdm Nazura: So that's why, the male hangs on to the female
- 18 Adam: Hmm.
- .....
- 19 Mdm Nazura: ... In the animal kingdom right, a lot of times, not all the time, a lot of times...
- 20 Adam: Some ants...
- 21 Mdm Nazura: Yeah a lot of the times the male needs help from the female.
- 22 Adam: Sometimes the ant, the girl needs food from the boy
- 23 Mdm Nazura: The female. The female...
- 24 Adam: Yeah.
- 25 Mdm Nazura: needs food from the? Male. Ok.

In the above excerpt, Adam is given room to clarify his doubts (#2, #12). He is also provided with the opportunity to relate what is being read to his own experience, such as a movie he has watched (#8) and an object that he finds familiar (#22). Mdm Nazura not only reads; she adds information not particularly evident in the original text as is the case about reproduction. It was a conversation which makes reading fun for Adam. Such interactions enable him to be an active participant but within the bounds of a respectful parent-child interaction and to engage in real and imaginary worlds beyond his immediate environment.

**Adam and his family:** *Making meaning of cultural and religious practices*

Making sense of texts within its contexts also underpins much of the family's practice of transmitting religious values and beliefs. Coercion takes a back seat in favour of mutual understanding, reflective thinking, and to some extent reasoned argument. Through dialogues on the meaning and functions of religious practices, the adult family members ensure that the child understands the rationale for the specific religious rituals that the family performs.

The following representative excerpt depicts an instance when Mdm Nazura discussed with Adam the concepts of '*halal*' and '*haram*' (food permitted to be consumed or otherwise in Islam) (#1-20) and the significance of *Ramadhan* (the fasting month) (#21-52).

*Excerpt 2:*

Transcript of talk

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 1 Adam:       | What's <i>obat</i> [medicine]?... What is <i>obat</i> [medicine]?  |
| 2 Mdm Nazura: | <i>Apa</i> [What]? What do you mean what is <i>obat</i> [medicine]?<br>Adam <i>nak makan obat kan</i> [You are going to take the<br>medicine right]? |
| 3 Adam:       | But what is <i>obat</i> [medicine]?  |
| 4 Mdm Nazura: | What is <i>obat</i> [medicine]! E-eh! <i>Obat</i> [medicine] is, poison,<br>how's that?  |
| 5 Adam:       | ((Screams))  |
| 6 Mdm Nazura: | No of course not. What is <i>obat</i> [medicine]?  |
| 7 Adam:       | Beer!  |
| 8 Mdm Nazura: | <i>Tengok lah</i> [See!]. What's, what's <i>obat</i> [medicine]?   |



- 9 Azma: ((Laughs))
- 10 Adam: It's beer!
- 11 Mdm Nazura: Trying to be funny eh?
- 12 Adam: It's like Carlsberg.
- 13 Azma: Wah! You know Carlberg ah!
- 14 Mdm Nazura: Who told you about Carlsberg?
- 15 Adam: Advertisement.
- 16 Mdm Nazura: Advertisement. Is it ok to drink Carlsberg?
- 17 Adam: ((OMR makes a disgusting sound, imitating vomiting))
- 18 Mdm Nazura: What do you call that? *Halal* [permissible]?
- 19 Adam: *Haram* [Prohibited].
- 20 Mdm Nazura: Yes.
- .....
- 21 Mdm Nazura: What do people do during *Ramadhan*?
- 22 Adam: Eat cakes!
- 23 Mdm Nazura: That's *Hari Raya* [Malay/ Muslim festival]. *Ramadhan*.  
Before *Hari Raya*.
- 24 Adam: Don't know.
- .....
- 25 Mdm Nazura: .... Last year, I know you all didn't drink during the class.  
Everybody didn't bring drinks, and nobody drank water  
during, during the session
- 26 Adam: Why?
- 27 Mdm Nazura: Because it's *Ramadhan*
- 28 Adam: Why cannot drink?
- 29 Mdm Nazura: *Ramadhan* you cannot eat or drink in the daytime
- 30 Adam: Huh?!
- 31 Mdm Nazura: Yes!
- 32 Adam: ((inaudible))
- 33 Mdm Nazura: At all! Cannot drink at all!
- 34 Adam: But, so long until night time! It's so thirsty after that!
- 35 Mdm Nazura: Yeah. But we have to do this for Allah right?
- 36 Maryam: Mummy, *sakit* [pain]! ((Maryam tries to get attention))

- 37 Mdm Nazura: *Apa yang sakit saying* [What's painful my dear]?
- 38 Adam: But kids?
- 39 Mdm Nazura: Kids? Kids maybe half the day.
- 40 Adam: Oh
- 41 Mdm Nazura: Ok? Maybe you can drink, err drink water half of the day.
- 42 Adam: No!
- 43 Mdm Nazura: The first half you don't eat or drink
- 44 Adam: Eat! For breakfast! ((pause))
- 45 Mdm Nazura: OK, we, we'll think about this, ya? But I know in school, they won't, nobody will be eating or drinking. There will be no snack corner. Or snack time.
- .....
- 46 Adam: I don't want to *puasa* [fast], I don't want!
- 47 Mdm Nazura: Eh? Ok. It's not, it's not so easy for small children, maybe you can do it slowly.
- 48 Maryam: Can you, can you make a house? ((Trying to get Mdm Nazura's attention again.))
- 49 Adam: No!
- 50 Mdm Nazura: Like Mummy, I *puasa* [fast] when I was in Primary One, I think.
- 51 Maryam: Can you, make a house?
- 52 Mdm Nazura: So you have another year.

In the above excerpt, Mdm Nazura plays with Adam around the word '*obat*' (medicine) jokingly telling him it is poison (#4). Adam plays along saying it is beer instead (#7). This starts an exchange about '*halal*' and '*haram*' with Mdm Nazura employing the school based initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) sequence to secure Adam's agreement that beer is a prohibited drink (#16-20). Mdm Nazura has a more trying time convincing him about why he needs to fast. To assure him that fasting is something doable, she suggests that kids like him can fast for half a day (#39). When he protests (#46), Mdm Nazura empathises with the fact that he is a child and reminds him that he 'can do it slowly' (#47), and that he still has a year before he can attempt a full fast (#52). It is a negotiation that is illustrative of the way Mdm Nazura imparts religious values to her children, the very same way her parents taught her.

**Hayati and her family:** *Competence in the mechanics of reading*

In Hayati's family, literacy instruction tends to emphasise the surface features of text: oral display, correct pronunciation, and observation of grammatical rules including punctuation. In part this reflects the parents' own beliefs about reading. Knowing that Hayati is already able to recognise words, Mdm Faseha focuses on improving Hayati's decoding skills.

The following excerpt is a representative example of a shared/guided reading session involving Hayati and Mdm Faseha. The excerpt begins with Hayati reading the wrong part of the text prompting Mdm Faseha to rein her in. Mdm Faseha then begins to read, with Hayati a beat after her. At several points in the interaction, Mdm Faseha allows Hayati to continue on her own but this usually lasts a few seconds before Mdm Faseha dominates again.

*Excerpt 3:*

	<u>Transcript of reading/talk</u>	<u>Actual printed text</u>
1 Hayati:	“Ya Rasulallah” ((pause 1.5sec)). “sesungguh-nya”	““Ya Rasulallah, sesungguhnya..” [‘O
2 Mdm Faseha:	<i>Sini! Sini!</i> [Here! Here!] ((Pointing to where Hayati is supposed to read)). ((inaudible)). “Setelah setedar, setelah tersedar dari mimpi, saya lantas bangun. Maka saya dapati tangan kanan saya ini telah terbakar sedemikian rupa.” Next? “Kalau begitu? Kalau begitu, ceritakanlah” ((pause)) ((inaudible))	Prophet, verily..’] ““Setelah tersedar daripada mimpi, saya lantas bangun. Maka saya dapati tangan kanan saya ini telah terbakar sedemikian rupa.” [‘After I awoke from the dream, I got up. I found my hands burnt as in the dream.’]
3 Faiz:	((inaudible))	
4/5 Mdm Faseha & Hayati	“kepada saya”	““Kalau begitu, ceritakanlah kepada saya
6 Hayati	<i>err</i> , “me-nge-nai”	mengenai mimpi kamu
7 Mdm Faseha	“mengenai”	itu,’ perintah Rasulallah
8 Hayati	“mengenai mimpi kamu itu,”	s.a.w.” [‘In that case, tell

	((pause)) “perintah Rasulullah SWS” ((pause))	me about your dream,’ the Prophet instructed.]
9/10 Mdm Faseha & Hayati	“Maka...”	“Maka gadis itu bercerita bahawa pada malam itu dia bermimpi seolah-olah hari kiamat telah tiba.”
11 Hayati	“gadis...”	
12 Mdm Faseha	“Maka gadis itu bercerita...”	
13 Hayati	“bahawa pada malam dunia”((pause))	[So the young lady narrated that on that night, she dreamed as though the Day of Judgment had come.]
14 Mdm Faseha	“pada malam itu”	
15 Hayati	“pada malam itu”	
16 Mdm Faseha	“dia bermimpi”	
17 Hayati	((inaudible))	
18 Mdm Faseha	“seolah-olah hari kiamat telah tiba”	
19 Hayati	“seulah-ulah”	
20 Mdm Faseha	“seolah-olah”	
21 Hayati	“olah-olah”	
22 Mdm Faseha	“hari kiamat”	
23 Hayati	“hari kiamat” ((pause)) “telah” ((pause)) “telah..?”	
24 Mdm Faseha	<i>Telah apa</i> [what happened]?	Dunia bergoncang dan gunung-gunung berterbangan. Keadaan itu tidak pernah dilihat sebelumnya.
25 Hayati	“telah tiba... dunia...”	
26 Mdm Faseha	Fullstop. <i>Adik jangan main baca terus aje eh!</i> [You don’t just continue reading!] ((pause)) “Dunia bergoncang dan gunung-ganang berterbangan. Keadaan itu tidak pernah dilihat sebelumnya.” <i>Adik sambung</i> [You continue].	[The earth shook and the mountains thrown around. This situation has never been witnessed before.]

In the above excerpt, Mdm Faseha reads together with Hayati with an intonation that the mother considers appropriate for the text – occasionally she corrects Hayati’s pronunciation (#7, #20) and reminds her of the need to observe the punctuations such as the period (#26). In

this and other reading events, there is minimal discourse around what is being read and what the topic is at hand.

**Hayati and her family:** *Exposure to cultural and religious routines and rituals*

There is some parallel in the way the parents conduct literacy activities and advocate religious rituals. Just as reading correctly is important, the correct display of religious rituals such as the daily prayer is also crucial. For the prayer, this involves performing them at appropriate times of the day, memorising and reciting the relevant texts, and getting the body movements right. Often this is carried out together with Mdm Faseha who leads the prayer. As with literacy learning, the parents also expect the children to emulate them in the way they perform their religious obligations which, other than prayer, include fasting. In both academic and religious literacy, expectation is sometimes sufficient motivation.

During our visits to their home, Hayati and her brother never seem to miss their daily obligatory prayers. Their mother will remind them to leave whatever activities they are engaged in to ensure that they perform their prayers within a specified time. The prayer text that the children recite is in Arabic, a language the children have little knowledge of. But they have been taught to decode, repeat aloud, memorise and recite these texts, a rote learning method that by most counts implies passivity but in the case of Hayati and her brother, this practice provided them with an induction into literacy. This does not imply that meaning and comprehension are entirely irrelevant in the household; they are simply overshadowed by a stronger belief that oral recitation, repetition, and memorisation are important literacy practices that will make it possible for the family members to participate as a valued member of a wider religious community.

**Discussion and conclusion**

For the two focal children, the home has shaped their learning. In both cases there are interested and caring adults in the home, 'literacy brokers' or 'guiding lights' (Padmore, 1994) who encourage them, provided them with books and materials, and scaffold their learning. However, their routes to becoming literate are differently fashioned by the different beliefs of the adult members of the family of what counts as literacy and what literacy practices are deemed valuable and worth transmitting to the children. Such beliefs and practices transcends the academic and into the religious sphere. Children thus bring with

them to school different resources and learning practices, different cultural capital that will have little or more currency depending on the extent it lends itself to exchange.

A child like Hayati who is exposed to the traditional methods of memorisation, recitation and decoding and a generally phonics-first approach to literacy will be comfortable with a learning environment in which such approaches are dominant. However, she may not adapt with ease in settings that emphasise questioning, individual pleasure, and constructing meaning. Conversely, a child like Adam who grows up in a family whose transformational perspective on literacy favours meaning-making strategies and personal interpretation and pleasure will thrive in situations which are rich in dialogue and open discussion. But he may find it a pain if all he needs to do is to copy, repeat and memorise. A sneak into their behaviour in kindergarten and primary one classroom seems to support this.

Teachers will have to acknowledge that there are methods of literacy instruction that do not fit exactly with the kinds of literacies privileged in the school but which are nevertheless valid. They will have to recognise the value of incorporating into the learning process, and integrating into the curriculum, children's different resources and experiences in a way that allows the latter to traverse between home and school literacy with ease. Children have individual strengths that teachers can build upon to increase comprehension and interest in learning which in turn will have a significant impact on their educational achievement.

### *Author Note*

We owe much to the families who worked with us to create a collaboration based on mutual respect. We are also thankful to the kindergarten supervisors and teachers whose help led us to the families. This work was supported by grants from the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice of the National Institute of Education, NTU (CRP 26/03 MAB and CRP 19/04 MAB).

### *Endnotes*

1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
2. Transcription conventions: //double slashes// = overlapping speech; ((double parentheses)) = authors' comments; [square brackets] = English translation.

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