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Learning from Each Other: The Role of Siblings in Literacy Learning

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Abstract

Siblings play an important and reciprocal role in each other's literacy development. The younger sibling's exposure to the older sibling's literacy activities creates the opportunity for many shared literacy experiences. Gregory (2001) calls this bidirectional and reciprocal learning relationship a "synergy" where siblings act as adjuvants in each other's learning, i.e., older children 'teach' younger siblings at the same time develop their own learning.

This paper presents data from two contrasting pairs of siblings who display a very close relationship through shared activities as playmates. Close in age (one in Primary 2, the other in K2), the younger sibling is exposed to the academic and literacy activities of the older sibling, spurring his/her interest to participate in the same activities. Differences in the dynamics of the pairs' reciprocal relationship seem to be shaped by three factors: the parent's expectation of the level of involvement the older child plays in his/her younger sibling's literacy learning, the literacy competence of the older sibling, and the gender make-up of the sibling pair.

Differences such as these in the home literacy experience with siblings, it is argued, may impact differently on reading activities with peers in the classroom unless teachers embrace the different cultural resources that children take with them to school.

Keywords: Literacy, Learning, Siblings, Reciprocal relationship

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: THE ROLE OF SIBLINGS IN LITERACY LEARNING

Siblings play an important and reciprocal role in each other's literacy development. The younger sibling's exposure to the older sibling's literacy activities creates the opportunity for many shared literacy experiences. Gregory (2001) calls this bidirectional and reciprocal learning relationship a "synergy" where siblings act as adjuvants in each other's learning, i.e., older children 'teach' younger siblings at the same time develop their own learning.

Increasingly, researchers have looked beyond the role played by parents in the homes of young children to examine the role siblings play (Drury, 2004; Lenhart & Roskos, 2003; Volk & De Acosta, 2004; Williams, 2004), agreeing on the fact that older siblings play an important role in socializing younger siblings to classroom practices and imparting the value and importance of literacy.

More importantly, Lenhart and Roskos's (2003) case study of a sibling pair shows us how literacy learning between siblings are superior to those with other family members or peers. They identify three factors: opportunity, where abundance of shared time allows siblings to practice and clarify basic concepts about print and meaning more conveniently; the importance attached to literacy activities, the message a younger sibling derives from the effort he or she sees an older sibling making while teaching them; and motivated interest, simply described as a belief that what older siblings do, younger siblings can too.

In this paper, we present data from two contrasting pairs of siblings who display a very close relationship through shared activities as playmates. We outline the similarities in their early literacy experience with each other, but point out several factors that lead to differences in the dynamics of the reciprocal relationship in the respective sibling pairs.

Methodology and data collection

The two focal children presented in this paper are participants of a larger study on the literacy experiences of Malay children. One was recruited from a mosque-based kindergarten and the other from a PAP Community Foundation kindergarten. Teachers from each kindergarten were told to identify students who were showing an ability to read. The parents of these

children were then contacted and data collection began after an informed consent was given by the parents for their child to participate in the study.

Data was collected in various forms, amongst which were a semi-structured interview with the parents of the children, to obtain an inside perspective of their beliefs and values; visits to the homes after school 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; visits to their kindergartens, where interviews with the teachers were conducted and the classroom activities observed and recorded in the same manner as the home visits.

Naila and Sufiah¹

Naila, the younger sibling (5 years old at the start of observations and currently in Primary 1), and Sufiah, the older sibling (7 years old at the start of observations and currently in Primary 3), live with their graduate parents, 38-year old father Mr Shamsuddin (an Electrical and Instrument Specialist) and 36-year old mother Mdm Normah (an ex-teacher who is now a housewife), and younger brother Izwan (2 years old at the start of the observation and currently in Nursery) in a 5-room HDB flat in the western part of Singapore.

Naila and Sufiah spend much of their time together in their shared bedroom which contains several shelves filled with reading materials suitable for readers of a range of abilities: books for beginners such as “Now I can say these words”, Lady bird series suitable for kindergarteners and Roald Dahl’s books suitable for skilled young readers. These had been accumulated over the years since Sufiah was young and passed down to the younger siblings when the older siblings have outgrown the books. Besides reading together, the siblings enjoy spending time in an adjacent room called the “Orange room” where toys are stored and serve as props when they engage in play-acting. They also enjoy drawing and writing notes to family members, making use of the abundant supply of writing materials in the house. The two girls show an amazing ability to keep themselves occupied with fun-filled activities without needing much attention or intervention from their mother, who uses that opportunity to tend to her youngest boy. This encourages independence in the two girls, and Naila looks up to Sufiah for leadership and guidance while at the same time trying to measure up to her older sister’s abilities.

Farid and Haliza

Farid, the younger sibling (6 years old at the start of observations and currently in Primary 1), and Haliza, the older sibling (8 years old at the start of observations and currently in Primary 3), live with their parents, 50-year old father Mr Zainal (a truck driver and part-time taxi driver) and 28-year old mother Mdm Fadilah (an Indonesian immigrant housewife), and their paternal grandmother, 90-year old Hajah Rogayah in a 4-room HDB flat in the eastern part of Singapore.

When asked about Farid's relationship with Haliza, Mdm Fadilah, who spends most of her free time doing housework thus leaving the two siblings with each other, laments in jest "*Kalau dah bermain, startlah dia gaduh*" (Whenever they play, they will start to fight). Indeed, in many visits to the home, Farid and Haliza can be heard arguing over whose turn it is to play on the computer, which VCD to watch and even what to play. Despite this apparent animosity, in his moments of solitude when Haliza goes for Qur'an recital classes or tuition, the unusually quiet atmosphere and subdued look on Farid's face, as well as his constant queries about when she would be coming home, sheds light as to how much he values the time they spend together. During one such scenario observed, Farid did not even play any games, insisting that he would wait for her, "*Bila Haliza balik kita boleh main bicycle*" [When Haliza comes back, we can play with the bicycle].

Unlike Naila and Sufiah whose home environment is rich with traditional literacy resources such as books, Farid and Haliza's collection of books are limited to those bought for use in the kindergarten classes. Much of their experience with literacy involves the popular culture such as TV shows, Hindi VCDs and computer games. Farid sees Haliza as a playmate and trusted companion, spending most of their time together playing: within their home, at the corridor outside or at nearby playgrounds.

Early exposure to the older sibling's academic and literacy activities

Given that both pairs of siblings are only two years apart in age, Naila and Farid are exposed to the academic and literacy activities of their respective older sisters early on in their lives, spurring their interest to participate in the same activities. Mdm Normah reported that Naila was always present and "absorbs" the exchanges when she reads to Sufiah:

*Excerpt 1:*²

“When Sufiah was in Nursery, *adik dia* [her sister (is)] around 2 years old. So *dia pun dengar cerita* [she is also listening to the story]. And then *dia pun* [she becomes] interested, and then *dia pun terhafal* [she memorizes it]. That's how she started reading lah... Naila would be eavesdropping, she will be around lah.”...
 “That's why it's easier to teach Naila. *I tak payah tunjuk ajar sangat* [I don't have to instruct her as much]. Because whenever I'm with Sufiah, she will be there also. So I find that she just absorbs *tau*. She's just sponging in.”

Mdm Fadilah recalled Farid's keenness to attend tuition just like Haliza after frequently accompanying Mdm Fadilah when she sends Haliza to tuition classes:

Excerpt 2:

“Farid kalau pasal belajar nak kena paksa, tapi kalau nampak kakak dia pergi tuition, dia pun nak tuition. ... Daripada K1 dah masukkan tuisyen, pasal dia complain, ‘Kakak boleh tuisyen, tapi kenapa adik tak tuisyen?’. Dia kata, ‘Kalau tak tuisyen, tak nak belajar’”.

[“Farid, when it comes to studying, needs to be forced, but if he sees his sister going for tuition, he would also want to go for tuition. ... I sent him for tuition from K1, because he complain(ed) ‘If sister can go for tuition, why can't I go for tuition?’. He said, ‘If I don't go for tuition I don't want to study’.”]

Even though both children similarly display keenness to participate in their older sibling's literacy experiences, differences in the dynamics of the pairs' reciprocal relationship during literacy learning exist. These differences seem to be shaped by three factors: the parent's expectation of the level of involvement the older child plays in her younger sibling's literacy learning, the literacy competence of the older sibling, and the gender make-up of the sibling pair.

Expectation placed on the older sibling by the parents

The parents in the two families differ in the level of involvement they expect from the older child in their younger siblings' literacy learning. In Naila's family, the presence of another younger sibling (Izwan) gives Sufiah the opportunity to take over Mdm Normah's role as teacher to Naila, and to share her literacy activities with her younger sister.

Excerpt 3:

Mukhlis: You said that they will read before they go to bed. Do they read alone or do you or your husband read with them?

Mdm Normah: Sometimes. Most times it's the two sisters. When I was only with the 2 of them, usually I would read to them. But when I had my third one it was difficult, because bed time would mean I have to *susu badan* [breastfeed] and you know it would be a struggle. So now *kakak adik dah besar sikit kan* [elder sister and younger sister are older (so)], they tend to read together.

.....

Mr Shamsuddin: *Kakak* (Sufiah) is very mature...

Macam teacher-teacher sikit [A bit like a teacher]. She tries to

Mdm Normah: take over my roles because she knows, sometimes during the day (I'm) very busy. *Dah hantar Naila pergi sekolah* [Not only do I have to send Naila to school], (I) have to come back and cook ... So she has that teacher role also lah.

Impressed with the ease with which Naila learns from Sufiah, Mdm Normah entrusts Sufiah with the role of "teacher", getting the occasional feedback about Naila's progress from Sufiah. Sufiah passes on what she learns to Naila, allowing Naila to acquire the literacy skills expected of a child Sufiah's age. Below, Mdm Normah shares how Sufiah taught Naila to read with expression, a skill expected of primary school children during oral examinations:

Excerpt 4:

"She does read with expressions because that's what Sufiah taught her. You know that Sufiah has this book, *I belikan dia lah*. [I bought for her lah]. It's actually meant for oral practice for P1 and 2. ... So Sufiah would train her how to read with expression. Sometimes I hear them talking by themselves *kat dalam bilik* [in their bedroom]. Then I *dengar* [hear] Sufiah say, "Ok. You must read with expression." And then, she will report back to me. "You know, Naila eh, she can talk about the picture you know, Ibu. She knows how to read with expression". Whatever I teach to Sufiah she will transfer back to the sister."

The situation is different in Farid's family. Being an immigrant from the Bawean Islands in Indonesia, and living in Singapore for a short 7 years, Mdm Fadilah has yet to acquire the ability to converse or understand the English language. She perceives herself incompetent, academically and culturally, to play a crucial part in her children's academic pursuit. Right from the beginning, the responsibility for her eldest child (Haliza)'s literacy learning was given to a tutor. Hence, when it came to Farid's turn in K1, Mdm Fadilah took the same route with him, sending him to the tutor whom she has now developed a trusted relationship with. Below, Mdm Fadilah shares her opinion regarding whether or not she can teach her children on her own:

Excerpt 5:

"Saya boleh nak mengajar dia tapi kata orang Indonesia dengan Singapore tak sama, bahasa pun tak sama. ... Kalau saya ajar tu kata orang bukan tak boleh. Baca Melayu tu saya bolehlah bantu-bantu sikit tapi Melayu pun saya masukkan jugalah tuition. Pasal nanti kalau saya ajar lain pulak, tak sama dia.... Pelajaran dia dengan saya tak sama, kan?... Kalau saya tak faham, saya hantar dengan yang ajar tuisyen. Pasal dia pun cakap, kalau tak faham suruh hantar pergi sana, suruh bertanya. Jadi saya kalau ada apa-apa yang saya tak faham pasal Bahasa English ke apa, saya hantar pergi sanalah ..."

[*"If I want to, I can, but Indonesians and Singaporeans speak differently, the language is also different. ... It's not that I can't teach them. I can help a bit when reading Malay, but even then I send him for tuition. Because if I were to teach him in a different way, it will not be the same as what he is taught (in school). ... His education is different from mine, isn't it? ... If I don't understand, I send (the children) to the tutor. Because she said, if I don't understand, send the children to her to ask. So if there are things I don't understand, like English for instance, I send them there..."*]

The gap left by Mdm Fadilah in teaching her children is filled in by the tutor, and the responsibility for Farid's literacy learning is lifted off Haliza. Hence, instead of seeing Haliza as the person he should look up to in his literacy forays, Farid sees his tutor as the figure of authority, a sentiment shared by Haliza. In this triadic relationship, Farid and Haliza take on the role of equal 'learners'. Hence, instances of interaction with traditional texts (books) and

popular literacies shared between Farid and Haliza show a pattern of mutual exploration and shared discovery, supervised by either their mother or tutor.

Literacy competence of the older sibling

The literacy competence of older siblings shape the nature of learning that takes place between them and their younger siblings. An older sibling who is competent would be able to scaffold her younger sibling's literacy learning confidently, whereas one who is not as competent would be more comfortable learning in collaboration with their younger siblings.

The nature of learning between Naila and Sufiah takes that of a scaffolding nature. As described above, Sufiah, who is a competent reader and student, passes on her knowledge to Naila by scaffolding her literacy pursuits in terms of giving her spelling tests, introducing books she reads to Naila, and teaching her new words she learnt. All these activities benefits Naila such that she is showing a higher literacy competence (almost at the level where Sufiah is currently) than that displayed by Sufiah at Naila's age.

In Naila's early reading experiences, Sufiah will be sitting by her side, correcting her mistakes, just like what Mdm Normah does with her:

Excerpt 6:

	<u>Transcript of reading/talk</u>	<u>Actual printed text</u>
Naila:	"Horse's hiccups. Horse had the hiccups. Stand on your head like this, said Pig." Rolly polly Pig. ((Naila commenting on the size of the pig)). "So horse" ((paused))	Horse's hiccups. Horse had the hiccups. "Stand on your head like this," said Pig. So Horse
Sufiah:	"stood."	stood on his head, but
Naila:	"stood on his head but he still had hiccups."	he still had the
Mdm Normah:	"had the..."	hiccups.
Naila:	"had the hiccups." <i>Ni apa?</i> [What's this?]	"Hold your breath like
Sufiah:	"Hold your breath like this..."	this," said Sheep.
Naila:	"Hold your breath like this, said Sheep. So horse ((paused))"	So Horse held his
Sufiah:	"held..."	breath, but he still had

Naila: “held his bre-a-th” the hiccups.

Sufiah: “breath.”

Naila: “breath but he still had hiccups.”

Sufiah: “the!”

Naila: “the hiccups!”

Sufiah: “the the the!”

Naila: “the the the!!”

Sufiah’s interest in books fuels Naila’s interest as well. In the excerpt below, Naila’s curiosity regarding the books Sufiah has read led to her incessant questioning about the nature of its content. Although she has yet to read the books, Naila tries to keep on par with the discussion by invoking what she knows of the story from the popular media (the movie adaptation) or from Sufiah’s previous description of the stories.

Excerpt 7:

Naila: *Kakak...* [Sister]

Sufiah: What?

Naila: All of the books *kelakar* [funny] eh? Roald Dahl.

Sajlia: *Kelakar?* [Funny?] It's fun to read.

Naila: It's fun to read but Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, we see very funny. ((Laughs))

Naila: *Kakak* [Sister], all of the Roald Dahl books funny or not?

Sufiah: Funny... There's something (of each genre), some funny, some scary, some sad, some happy!

Sajlia: Mmm. It's a mixture.

Sufiah: He's very clever you know? He go and make the title very, very boring first. When you open up the book, you have to go and read and read and read. Very interesting.

Naila: *At first kan, kita orang tengok the movie very boring right? Show the house very boring macam gitu, and then suddenly!!!* [At first, right, we watch the movie very boring right? Show the house like very boring, and then suddenly!!!] Wah! Chocolate factory.

Unlike Sufiah, who is confident of her own abilities in ‘teaching’ Naila, Haliza is less competent. Farid’s teachers report that he has achieved a competency level higher than that achieved by Haliza at his age. As such, Haliza often took the backseat, allowing Farid to lead in games and correct her in her reading. Although Haliza’s level of reading is higher than that of Farid currently, Haliza does not instruct her brother with the same confidence displayed by Sufiah towards Naila. Haliza and Farid show a more collaborative learning approach, where they correct each other’s mistakes and look to each other when in doubt.

In the excerpt below, Haliza corrects Farid when he makes a mistake while reading. However, Farid doesn’t accept her readily, questioning her when she corrected him wrongly:

Excerpt 8:

<u>Transcript of reading/talk</u>	<u>Actual printed text</u>
Farid: “I spy, something that sss ((pause))...”	“I spy something that
Farid & Haliza: “start.”	starts with m ,” said
Farid: “with <m> ((pause))...”	Tom.
Haliza: “said.”	
Farid: “said Tom...”	
Haliza: “It is mountain!”	“Is it mountain?” said
Farid: <i>Apa?</i> [What?]	Grandpa.
Haliza: “Is it mountain?”	
Farid: “Its..”	
Farid & Haliza: “It”	
Farid: “mountain? said Grandpa.”	

When it is Haliza’s turn to read, Farid was quick to try and help her with words she does not know, even though he himself does not know for sure and is using his sight vocabulary to guess the words:

Excerpt 9:

<u>Transcript of reading/talk</u>	<u>Actual printed text</u>
Haliza: “My dad...” ((pause))	My dad likes to swim.
Farid & Haliza: “likes”	

Haliza: “to swim!”

Farid: “to swimming.”

Haliza: “My dad like...”

My dad likes to sail.

Farid: //“to”//

Haliza: //“to ss”// ((Haliza points to a word she doesn't know))

Haliza: “*sili*. To”

Farid: “seal!”

Sajlia: //“sail.”//

Haliza: //“seal.”//

Haliza: “sail...”

Gender make-up of the sibling pair

Farid displays a more dominant role in the sibling relationship, reversing the ‘older equals more dominant’ pattern seen between Naila and Sufiah, who are both girls. Besides the fact that unlike Sufiah, Haliza is not as competent academically, Farid’s dominance might be influenced by his gender. Farid is more aggressive and confident, displaying his higher general intelligence than Haliza proudly.

Farid’s dominance is displayed not only in play but also during literacy activities (e.g. chiding Haliza for choosing “baby books”). During a visit to the library, Farid was seen instructing Haliza how to use the check-out machine to borrow books when he realizes that she was unsure of how to do it.

In the excerpt below, Mdm Fadilah shows her disbelief at Haliza’s inability to perform a simple Math sum, leading her to tease her by saying that even Farid would know how to do it. Farid picks up on this and joins his mother in teasing Haliza:

Excerpt 10:

Sajlia: 5 minus 0 *boleh tak* [can or not]?

Haliza: *Tak leh. Eh boleh, boleh.* ((Haliza stretches out 5 fingers on her right hand, looking at it)) *Tekan* ((pressing one finger down)), *tekan* ((pressing another finger down)), *tekan* ((pressing down her third

finger)), *ah. Tak tahu!!* [Cannot. Eh can, can. Press, press, press ah. I don't know!!]

Sajlia: *Jangan cakap tak tahu lah... 5 minus 0 berapa?* [Don't say you don't know lah... What is 5 minus 0?]

Haliza: Ah?

Mdm Fadilah: *Tanya* [Ask] Farid.

Haliza: Eh *apa?* [what?] 5? 5 ah.

Farid: *Apa ibu?* [What is it, mother?]

Mdm Fadilah: *Kakak tak tahu. 5 minus 0 kakak tak tahu.* [Sister doesn't know. Sister doesn't know 5 minus 0.]

Farid: 5 lah!

...

Farid: 5 minus? 5 minus..

Farid: //Zero?//

Mdm Fadilah: //Zero.//

Mdm Fadilah: //Kakak tak tahu [Sister doesn't know].//

Farid: //5..//

Mdm Fadilah: *Kakak tak tahu* [Sister doesn't know]!

Farid: 5 ah!

Mdm Fadilah: *Ya* [Yes], *Kakak tak tahu* [Sister doesn't know]!

...

Farid: *Mana? Ni 5 minus 0. Alah 5 aje! Tak tahu 5?* [Where? This is 5 minus 0. Ah, it's 5 lah! You don't know 5?]

Because he gets away with being dominant over an older person, and the reinforcement he gets from Mdm Fadilah who believes that the younger brother is better than his older sister academically, Farid learns that he need not feel inferior to an older person in his academic and literacy pursuit, as well as in his social forays.

Implications for educators

Older siblings play an important role in bridging the gap between home and classroom practices. By introducing school literacies into the home, they expose their younger siblings to classroom practices (albeit unintentionally). However, each pair of siblings have different

experiences and each child will enter school with varying levels of literacy competency and readiness for classroom practices.

The different experiences with their siblings at home form readers and learners of different characters. For example, a child like Naila might carry with her the expectation that her literacy experiences will be similarly scaffolded in the school by her teachers as it is when she's at home with her older sibling. A child like Farid on the other hand would be more comfortable in literacy practices where he can assert himself and volunteer answers independently, without much supervision from teachers or friends.

Thus, teachers need to take into account the different cultural resources children acquire at home, either as older or younger siblings, and encourage the merging of classroom and home practices, such as the "Storymates" program (Fox & Wright, 1997) which encourages sharing and discussion of reading with peers in the class and siblings in the home. Just like Naila and Farid, the motivation of having a sibling to share their literacy experiences with, and exploiting the abundance of shared time between siblings to practice and clarify the link between print and meaning helped Fox & Wright's (1997) American elementary school children improve their reading and comprehension. Furthermore, given that these elementary school children were initially having difficulty with reading, the synergy between siblings have been shown to benefit children who are already able to read as well as those who are not yet readers.

Author Note

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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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