

Literacy as Situated Practice

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In this article, I examine the early literacy practices of a three-year-old Chinese girl in her family restaurant in an underprivileged community. Her literacy practices indicate that home contexts have a role in shaping emergent literacy. Her unique home literacy experiences, characterized by constructive, communal, and oral practices, are different from both school practices and those of middle-class Chinese immigrant families. Differences suggest a need for teachers to re-evaluate classroom practices to help minority children make the transition from their familiar world of home to the unfamiliar world of school.

Une Chinoise de trois ans de milieu défavorisé apprend à lire et à écrire dans le restaurant familial. Cet apprentissage repose sur des pratiques constructives, collectives et orales différant des méthodes utilisées à l'école comme de celles des familles d'immigrants chinois de classe moyenne. Ces différences donnent à penser que les enseignants devraient réévaluer les méthodes d'apprentissage à l'école afin d'aider les enfants des minorités à faire la transition entre leur milieu familial et un monde qui ne leur est pas familier, à savoir l'école.

The educational failure of minority children has become a national concern in both the United States and Canada. Many children from minority backgrounds are at risk because their literacy and educational failure is "progressive and cumulative" (Labov, 1995, p. 44). Recent drastic demographic change in schools due to the high influx of immigrants has exerted even higher pressure for the schools to resolve the increasingly widespread problems of minority students' failing school. Educators have attributed the widely documented low school performance of minority students to home-school mismatch (Ogbu, 1982; Osborne, 1996). Although some scholars have given empirical attention to the cultural disjunctures and linguistic differences between home and school language uses, the uncovering of contemporary children's home literacy lives is fairly recent. An even smaller number of studies have investigated minority family literacy practices. The few studies of the home literacy practices of racial minorities have focused on school-age children's experiences (e.g., Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Townsend & Fu, 1998; Valdés, 1996; Wan, 2000).

These studies of school-age minority children have unanimously uncovered the disturbing fact that their home literacy practices are different from school literacy practices, and children often experience a literacy shock when they go to school (Meek, 1992). According to emergent literacy theory, children begin their literacy experiences in infancy, and their development is continuous and ever-changing; children's early literacy experiences, such as their language socialization patterns at home and community, are important factors contributing to their early school success or failure (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). To better understand minority children's school performances, educators need to know their early literacy experiences in their daily living at home before formal schooling.

Ethnographic research on Chinese children's home literacy practices is especially lacking. The few studies in this area have looked only at successful, middle-class Chinese children from well-educated families. For example, Townsend and Fu (1998) described the joyful initiation into American literacy of a Chinese boy from an academic family; Wan (2000) explored the home storybook experience of a Chinese girl, Yuan, who was from a well-educated, middle-class family. Jiang (1997) reported the early biliteracy practices of a Chinese boy, Ty, whose father was pursuing a Ph.D. at university in the United States. These studies, though providing insights into Chinese children's learning experiences in a cross-cultural context, contribute to the stereotypes of Asian children as high achievers and Asian families as model minorities who are active supporters of children's reading and writing practices. This stereotype is dangerous because it promotes invisibility and disguises the social realities of many other children from different families and socio-cultural contexts (Lee, 1996). As McGee and Purcell-Gates (1997) have pointed out,

[the] home/community contexts are very different by virtue of their societal roles from the formal instructional contexts, and these differences have significant effects on the ways that emergent literacy plays out for individuals. (p. 311)

To understand individual children in their specific environments and to demystify the stereotypes of Asian children, I have explored in this study the early literacy experiences of a Chinese girl, Amy,¹ in her restaurant/home milieu before she started her formal schooling in a Canadian community. Unlike many Chinese children who have a private space at home (separate from school and workplace), Amy spent her time in her parents' family restaurant. Moreover, Amy's parents did not come to Canada seeking academic pursuits but as immigrants trying for economic betterment.

In this article I present an ethnographic picture of how Amy embarked on her journey to literacy, living on the margins of Canadian society. My goals were both to uncover the relationship between home environment and young minority children's early literacy development and to explore the pathways to early literacy of these preschool children. I posed two central questions: What is the nature of the home literacy environment of an immigrant family in Canada? Second, in what ways and contexts is the immigrant child socialized and initiated into literacy?

By focusing on the home context of this family and considering it as a particular socio-cultural context for early literacy practices of the focal child, Amy, I sought to understand the pathways through which a child from a lower socio-economic level is introduced into literacy. Coming from a socio-constructivist perspective, I looked at literacy learning as situated practices that are specific to their socio-cultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). These situated practices require the participation and construction of language partners in the environment. I used the metaphor of "social dance" to refer to the interactive nature of these practices. Social dance, as an embedded practice, constitutes a form of meaning and action and involves interactions of individuals and group; through these interactions, the dance defines social relationships (Hanna, 1999). Novack (1990) posited that social dance is multi-voiced and flexible; it involves "an interplay of ideas, techniques, and institutions with the lives of the people involved in creating and watching it" (p. 13). Children's literacy dances involve the interplay of language, ideas, and learning and teaching techniques in their daily activities. The more capable adults and peers in their lives are their social dance partners, who are part of their contextual construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The performance stage of the children's early literacy social dance is their primary Discourse, that is, the sociocultural settings in which people are apprenticed early in life during their primary socialization (Gee, 1996). This stage constitutes a range of multiple contexts in which children are socialized in language and literacy practices.

Literacy as a social construction situated in specific contexts emphasizes the place of oral practice. Meek (1992) asserted that our understanding of literacy must begin with oral practice and its continuing presence in our lives. While most researchers of early/emergent literacy have focused on reading and writing practices, I view oracy as an important part of Amy's early literacy experiences. Children begin their literacy social dance with oral interaction with adults: they learn to know the language through appropriating the language of adults in their environment; they develop their consciousness of oral and written language and their sensitivity to

these language contexts simultaneously (Tannen, 1987). As Egan (1987) argued, all children, before they learn to read and write, depend on the spoken word for learning and communication. Therefore, a better understanding of oracy will provide a fuller sense of the cognitive tasks that children undertake during their transition from oracy to literacy.

METHOD

During September 1998 to May 1999, I visited the Ye family's restaurant, a two-storey building, once a week, with each visit being two to three hours. I used ethnography as the main research method (Fetterman, 1989), a process to study human interactions in social settings through the process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behaviour.

Amy spent her time with her parents and siblings downstairs in the restaurant from opening at 8:00 a.m. to close at 9:00 p.m. and went to their upstairs quarters to sleep after the restaurant closed. Therefore, I focused on the social setting of the restaurant as the context of Amy's home literacy and on Amy's social interactions with customers and her parents within this context. Because these people also spoke English as a second language and were from a lower socio-economic background, Amy's interactions with them made her literacy practices in this social context unique.

My role as researcher was that of a participant observer (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Sometimes I watched Amy from a distance as she played with the customers or talked with her parents. Sometimes I played with her, letting her scribble in my notebook. Besides these observations, I had informal conversations with her parents when they came in and out of their kitchen to serve the customers. These conversations were conducted in Chinese. Because this kind of informal chatting was very effective in communicating with the parents and finding out information and because of the busy schedule of the parents, I decided not to use formal semi-structured interviewing with them as I had used in other research projects. I took field notes of my observations and wrote a reflective journal. Data analysis in this study was concurrent with the data collection process. I used content analysis to examine field notes and reflexive journals, whereby I identified themes relating to the research questions and illustrated them using verbatim comments from the informal interviews. I also used structural analysis to identify patterns and themes in the discourse, events, and other activities in the restaurant setting (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 568). To better demonstrate the "true value of the original multiple realities," I used direct quotes to give emic voice to the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296).

EARLY LITERACY, SOCIAL DANCE, AND HOME CONTEXT

The Ye Family

Amy Ye, with long silky black hair always tied in a loose ponytail, was the eldest child in the Ye family. She and her brother and sister were born in Canada. Amy's family consisted of:

- Tim Ye, father, age 37, former salesperson, grade-12 education
- Sue Lin, mother, age 32, former soccer player, grade-8 education
- Amy Ye, daughter, age 2.5, entering preschool
- Lucy Ye, daughter, age 1.5
- Andy Ye, son, age 0.4

All Amy's family members had English and Chinese names, but they used English names in everyday life. Her parents, Tim and Sue, immigrated to western Canada in 1995. For a year Tim worked at three jobs, porter, dishwasher, and kitchen helper, to save enough money to start his own business, the family restaurant.

Their restaurant was located on the west side of the city in a lower socio-economic neighbourhood. In this less advantaged neighbourhood, the Ye family was one of the few non-First Nations families. In this sense, they lived on the margin of the social landscape of the city. In the restaurant, they served coffee, hamburgers, and french fries, with the most expensive food being pork chops. The neighbouring houses appeared unattended, and along the sidewalk lay broken beer bottles and garbage. This area was reported to have a lot of crime including robberies, domestic violence, street fighting, and even murders. The restaurant was in a somewhat run-down building where some customers remained all day as if it were their living room, drinking coffee, chatting, and smoking. Occasionally, a girlfriend or boyfriend of a customer stormed in angrily, trying to get his or her partner to go home and take care of the children. They fought and cursed in front of the other people until one of them gave in. On "cheque day," Tim was busiest. He explained, "Cheque day is the day they get the social welfare cheques. Many of them come here to have a treat. They order hamburgers or french fries or pork chops and a pie for dessert."

Amy's parents found it hard to run a restaurant and raise three children. They could not afford a babysitter and tried to manage everything on their own. On a typical day, Tim and Sue took turns cooking and serving customers. Amy spent most of her time with the customers, her sister Lucy stayed happily in a box at the gate to the

kitchen, and her brother Andy slept in a car seat within Tim and Sue's sight. With a big sigh, Sue said, "We have no choice."

Neither Tim nor Sue could speak, read, or write English before coming to Canada. Working at different jobs, Tim had learned some functional English. He could speak a little but could not read or write. Sue took an English course sponsored by the Open Door Society, but the course was too short and did not help improve her English. She managed to learn some functional English with the customers. Sue wanted her children to have a good education to ensure their good life in Canada. She realized that because she was so busy with the restaurant, she had no time for parenting: "I feel guilty sometimes, too busy to teach Amy. Just have no time with three kids and restaurant. What can I do?"

Being the head of the house, Tim worked very hard to maintain the business. He barely had time to sit down and read: "I don't have time to read. Look at me, where can I find time with kids and work?" Very rarely did he read the local Chinese newspaper, which he could pick up from the supermarket. Since neither could read or write English, they relied on other people to help them with official letters or any written tasks for the restaurant. For example, during one of my visits, they asked me to translate two letters regarding their citizenship application. On occasion, they needed to write notices to the customers, a challenging task. One day when I was visiting, the toilet of the restaurant flooded and a plumber was repairing it. Since Tim and Sue did not know how to write a notice for the customers, I wrote it for them: "We are repairing the drains. Please do not use." Tim was very grateful. He said that if I had not been there that day, he would have had to ask one of the customers to write the note.

Amy's Literacy Dance with the Customers

Amy grew up with the restaurant's customers. Before she could talk and walk, Sue put her in a cardboard box beside the gate to the kitchen while she cooked and served customers. As Amy got older, she began to talk and run around the restaurant, socializing with the regular customers, getting to know them well.

Amy played cards with two young men in their twenties who Tim and Sue said were on mental disability subsidies and who met for two hours every day at the restaurant to play cards. The table at the back on the left side of the restaurant was their "booked" spot in the morning. The two young men enjoyed Amy's company and used the

cards to teach her numbers. Usually their game began with Amy picking some cards from the pile, and the two young customers asked her: "What have you got?" Or they told her: "It's four! Say four. That one is five. Say five." Amy repeated after them: "That's four, four. That's five, five." She put the card back on the table, picked out new cards, and started the game all over again. After several rounds, Amy asked one of the two men to pick some cards. This time she questioned them: "What have you got?" "It's thre-e-e. Say three." Sometimes, the two friends questioned her on colours: "What colour did you get?" "Red!" Amy answered. The game usually went on for a couple of hours.

The two customers also played a game-like routine with Amy. They created a sequential structure and asked Amy to fill in following their examples. They not only deliberately routinized the game, but also tried to model the language pattern for Amy. Their game went like this:

Customer: It's a three.

Customer: What's this?

Amy: Three!

Customer: Yes, it's a three!

Amy: It's a three.

Customer: This is a five.

Customer: What is this?

Amy: A five . . .

In the afternoon, Amy's playmates were another group of regular customers. Little Amy moved from table to table and talked with them. The customers were very affectionate with her. Sometimes they brought toys for her. Sometimes they taught her how to say A, B, C. At other times, she went to them and asked questions, "What's this?" And sometimes she even ventured to take their cups or plates to the kitchen and received lots of praise, "What a good girl!" When they left, she waved good-bye: "Be careful of the ice! See you later!"

Amy's Literacy Dance with the Researcher

I became Amy's playmate when I visited. Sometimes, she repeated with me the card games she played with the two regular customers. We would use some other objects in sight such as my pen and notebook, or things that lay on the counter where we played. Sometimes she took over my pen and notebook and started scribbling in it to imitate my note-taking. She liked to scribble in my notebook. Her parents wanted to buy a house and may have told her about their dream of having a separate house in a suburban area, so her favourite subject was houses. She drew some circles and told me what those circles stood for: "That is Amy's house. . . . That's Guofang's house. That's Mommy's house. That's Lucy's house. That's Andy's house." And every time she insisted that we take turns and wanted me to draw: "Draw Guofang's house. I want a house!" Sometimes her little scribbles became letters and numbers or funny faces: "That's a, d, g, b, and that's a funny face." Amy could identify quite a few letters she had learned from one of her favourite toys, an alphabet finder in which she found the different letters in a box and put them back in their original places. She enjoyed scribbling on a piece of paper the letters and numbers she had learned. During her drawing, she would sometimes proudly announce to me, "I going to George School!" And she told me seriously, "When I go to school, I tell my teacher the ABCs!"

Amy's Literacy Dance with her Parents

Unlike the customers and me, who had a lot of time to play with her, Amy's parents could talk to her only when they had a moment of rest between serving customers. Therefore, they often used direct instruction to teach Amy and taught her mainly how to behave appropriately and some new words. For example, during one of my visits Sue directly instructed Amy in English how to be polite to guests:

Sue: Amy, ask Guofang want a drink. Say "Would you like a drink, Guofang?"

Amy: D'you like a drink, Guofang?

Guofang: No, thank you.

Amy (to her mom): Guofang no drink.

In this home/restaurant space Amy was learning to be bilingual. She spoke English with the customers and Cantonese with her parents. I noted that Sue and Tim switched to Cantonese with Amy only to discipline her when she misbehaved because they wanted to save “face” and kept the discipline private so that others in the restaurant could not listen to it. For example, they used typical phrases, like “*Bu yiu la!*” (Don’t!) or “*Tang wha!*” (Listen!) when they wanted Amy to behave. However, I rarely heard Amy answer in Cantonese — most of the time, she spoke English to her parents. When I asked Sue about Amy’s Chinese language development, she was not very concerned. Her expectation was that as long as Amy could understand and speak Cantonese and they could communicate, it was fine. She realized that it would be difficult for her children to learn to read and write Chinese because they lived in an English environment, not a Chinese one. Sue was, therefore, more concerned with Amy’s ability in English (and French) when she went to school.

Amy’s parents taught Amy numbers and letters in English whenever they had a moment or two between serving or cooking for customers. Although they did not know much English themselves, they could read and write the English alphabet that was similar to Pinyin (the Chinese alphabetic spelling system). Tim was also able to write the simple menus — a necessity for changing the white menu board. Tim and Sue used whatever they had in the restaurant to teach her — beverage bottles, ice cream cones, snack packages, candies. Tim was usually very busy, in and out of the kitchen. When he came out to get something, and if Amy was following him, he usually stopped to capture the moment to teach her a few things. He liked to teach her the ABCs. One time when he got some Coke for a customer, he pointed out the letter C for Amy:

Tim: What is this?

Amy: Coke!

Tim: No, no, the letter. What is the letter?

Amy: B.

Tim: No, that’s C. Look, C, C. (*Traces the letter C.*) Here is another one. C. That’s the letter C. Say C.

Amy: C.

By the end of the data collection, Amy could identify most of the 26 letters, most of the colours, and some of the numbers.

Although she had many opportunities to learn oral English in the restaurant, Amy seldom had access to book reading. Her parents were unable to share reading with her, and she did not have any books or videos or a TV to watch. Amy shared with her siblings a few broken toys that she stored in a cardboard box. She seldom went outside the restaurant or played with other children except with some children the customers brought to the restaurant. Her parents did not have time to take her to the park, the library, or the zoo. During one of my visits in the spring, she longed to go to play in a nearby park. With her parents' permission, we went to the park, and I watched her experimenting with some of the play apparatus, which she experienced for the first time.

Amy's First Dance with School

Almost three years old at the time of the study, Amy was anxious to go to school and keen to learn all the letters of the English alphabet. Her mother had checked with other Chinese friends and found out that the closest school had many problems and served mainly a disadvantaged population. Also, the school did not have French immersion programs. In Sue's opinion, they were living in a bilingual country, and it was crucial for her children's future to learn the two official languages (English and French). She did not want to send Amy to the neighbourhood school and had asked for more information from other Chinese friends. She found another school with a better reputation and better programs. Although it was farther from where they lived and it was inconvenient to take Amy to that school, they believed they could manage just as they had managed other difficulties in their lives.

In their first encounter with the school, they experienced confusion and problems in communicating. It was frustrating for Amy's parents. Sue phoned the school asking for information and was promised a return call. After waiting for a month, Sue phoned again and was referred to an administrator in charge. The administrator's secretary promised to phone back, but after a month there was still no phone call. Without knowing how the school system worked in Canada, they almost gave up and thought the school did not want their daughter. Finally, with help, they got a registration form for the school and learned that it was too early to register for the fall term. This information was a relief for them. With help, Sue and Tim filled in the form, paid the first month's fee, and were then sure

that Amy would be able to attend the desired school.

Although Amy would not start preschool until September 1999, Sue and Tim were already worried about her studies. They were not sure how Amy would cope with school, and they could not help her with schoolwork because they themselves did not read or write English. Nor would they have much time for her because they had to work at the restaurant and take care of the other two children. For them, sending children to school meant a new worry in their lives, but they were positive and full of hope. Sue told me her expectations for Amy: "I hope she will go to university someday, just like you."

THE MEANING OF AMY'S LITERACY DANCES IN HER HOME CONTEXT

Children in a literate society grow up with literacy as an integral part of their personal, familial, and social histories (Goodman, 1986, p. 1). Amy Ye's early literacy experiences, characterized by rich oral practices, intentional use of environmental print, and other available resources, are of paramount importance in her initiation into literacy in her home/restaurant in a marginalized neighbourhood. Amy's home literacy environment reflects her particular socio-cultural context. Her literacy dances within this context suggest a distinctive way of literacy practices. Her literacy learning is not just an individual or familial matter, but a constructive endeavour that involves everything within that context.

Hallet (1999) explained that young children "learn about literacy through literacy encounters in their everyday lives, particularly when there is active engagement with someone more skilled than themselves" (p. 60). Amy's experience with literacy in her family restaurant is a socio-cultural process actively constructed and negotiated between her and the adults around her, who included the customers, the researcher, and her parents. This community of adults scaffolded Amy's learning with their own literacy capacities. Amy's parents, who were struggling to learn English language and literacy, tried to teach her whatever they could and whenever they could. But mostly, Amy learned literacies such as the basic numbers and colours from the more fluent customers, even though they themselves spoke English as a second language. As researcher, I am familiar with reading and writing practices and also provided Amy with some reading and writing opportunities. In this sense, the people who gathered in the small family restaurant became a community of practice for Amy's literacy acquisition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This community of practice included

both old-timers (e.g., parents and regular customers) and newcomers (e.g., the researcher and some irregular customers) who had engaged in specific, local, and different forms of literacy dances with Amy (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Amy's interactive literacy dances in her home milieu differed in many ways from mainstream family practices documented in the existing literature. Studies of mainstream family literacy practices conclude that children's exposure to print, especially literary texts, is crucial for their early literacy development since the accessibility of print has a marked effect on children's attitude to reading (Kuby, Goodstadt-Killoran, Aldridge, & Kirkland, 1999). Both the quantity and the quality of literacy material is important (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Amy did not have the quantity nor the quality of the literary materials evidenced in mainstream homes but was surrounded by functional print, such as print on soda cans and cigarette packages, but not literary texts such as storybooks.

Amy's home literacy experiences also differed from other Chinese middle-class families documented in research. For example, her experiences sharply contrast with the home literacy environment of a four-year-old Chinese girl, Yuan, from an academic family in the USA:

She had a loving family that valued reading and writing. She had a print rich environment in both Chinese and English. Her contacts with written language were a spontaneous and natural part of her life as the languages spoken to her at home. She was surrounded by children's books, writing implements, and writing materials. She had adults around her who were willing to model and guide her in literacy activities in natural and meaningful settings. Her family members read aloud to her daily. (Wan, 2000, p. 404)

Amy's home, however, was a different world, although her parents had high expectations and intentions for her. There was not a range of children's books or writing implements and materials lying around. Amy's parents did not read aloud or practise shared reading with her because they themselves did not read or write English. If we follow the checklist derived from mainstream or middle-class Chinese family practices, we can easily conclude that Amy would be an at-risk child in school.

However, my observations of Amy indicate that she was immersed in a rich oral environment, where the adults around her actively participated in her literacy dances. The adults used the print media available in the restaurant such as cards and Coke cans. This finding supports Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines's (1988) conclusion that physical environment does not determine what the families can do with literacy. In their study of the Shay Avenue families, for example, they found that the children from these

families were practising literacy in many different ways, even though they were living in urban poverty.

These different literacy practices are associated with different domains of life, and some domains of literacy become more dominant, visible, and influential than others (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). There are different patterns of socialization into these domains of literacy, but not all children are socialized into the dominant discourse:

Children from some language socialization backgrounds will know these forms of discourse better than other forms such as dialogue or other types of language uses which do not sustain focus on either a single topic or incorporate questions about the form and future direction of a narrative. (Heath, 1986, p. 169)

In this sense, Amy's socialization to early literacy practices occurred in a marginal domain where her family was a minority among a disadvantaged group. Her oral practices were not the dominant way to literacy, which are through storybook reading and associated writing practices.

Situated in her socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts, Amy was socialized into a non-dominant discourse. Her early literacy experiences raises an important issue regarding the schooling of marginalized children like her. Because many children from non-mainstream cultures may be socialized in different domains of literacy practices because of their particular life circumstances, these children's literacy practices may be different from the dominant literacy norms such as school literacy (Purcell-Gates, 1996). To become literate in school literacy, they have to learn the school's conventions for speaking, reading, and writing, which are based on the dominant Western ideology (Meek, 1992). Thus, if children like Amy are socialized in non-school literacy practices at home before school, they will have to learn a completely different set of literacy practices to be successful school learners.

UNDERSTANDING AMY'S LITERACY DANCE BEYOND THE FAMILY RESTAURANT

Amy's literacy dances at her family restaurant pose a challenge for today's schools where many children like Amy are from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. The literacy dance of each child (such as Amy) is unique and complex. Schools with their different practices do not necessarily accommodate these unique dances. Rather, they often impose school-like practices that may or may not fit any particular child's dance.

In her three-year longitudinal study of six focal minority children in kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2 in a Canadian context, Toohey (2000) noted that ranking practices within the schools start as early as kindergarten classrooms, and the differential "ranking" practices re/produce "success and failure for the children" (p. 75). These ranking practices include (a) academic competence based on standard tests on a set of school tasks and procedures; (b) physical presentation/competence such as size; (c) behavioural competence, which mainly concerns children's compliance with teacher's directives; (d) social competence, social relations with others; and (e) language proficiency. Toohey (2000) further discovered that by the time the children entered grade 1, the concept of learning as an individual matter was well established: "Children sit in their own desks, use their own materials, do their own work and use their own words" (p. 92).

Following Toohey's (2000) observations, it is apparent that Amy's interactive literacy dances in her home milieu, which are constructive, communal, oral practices, are different from the school literacy practices which are based on written texts, tests, and individualized practices. These differences between home and school literacy dances in Amy's "learning trajectories" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 36) are also evident in many other Canadian research studies. Scollon and Scollon (1981), for example, found that mainstream Canadian language use differs from the language of Athabaskans in northern Canada in such aspects as explicitness, rational internal structure, and fictionalization. Similarly, Crago (1992) documented that the discourses taught by non-Inuit, second-language teachers are incongruent with the discourse features of young Inuit children and their caregivers in their communities. These incongruities between the two domains consist of differences in practices of talk, forms of discourses, responses to early vocalization, and what is considered appropriate language behaviour. These differences require minority students to "face the challenge of mastering the *unfamiliar*, while their more successful peers practice the *familiar*" (Murphy & Dudley-Marling, 2000, p. 381). The transition from home to school discourses can be difficult and challenging for students from communities with literacy practices that are different from the mainstream. Gallas, et al. (1996) have pointed out,

For those children whose home-based ways of talking are not similar to school based ways of talking, or for whom the rules of language are not clear, moving into the multiple discourses that school presents will be more difficult. (p. 610)

Often, schools fail to help minority children master the unfamiliar because they fail to recognize those marginal practices that are outside

their social and cultural web, and teachers in the classroom often do not have sufficient understanding of non-mainstream students (Osborne, 1996). After reviewing the existing body of literature, Corson (1992) concluded that many studies have confirmed the prevalence of inappropriate, interactional contexts in classrooms and schools for minority children, especially when the distance between the teacher's culture and the child's is great. Minority children begin school at a disadvantaged position because of differences in home literacy practices. If these inappropriate classroom practices remain unchanged, minority children's literacy development (such as Amy's) will continue to be placed in a disadvantaged position. The differences between the home and school literacy dances thus become borders of literacy that many minority children like Amy have to learn to cross to achieve academic success in school.

Amy's literacy dances suggest a few school practices that facilitate minority children's border crossing. First, text, test-based classroom instruction does not work for minority students like her. Rather, these children need more culturally relevant, communicative interaction with ample peer-scaffolded oral literacy activities in early grades. Second, they need more one-on-one child and adult learning situations (Wells, 1986). They also benefit from a learning environment where the participation of community members (such as the customers) is valued (Ellis & Small-McGinley, 1998). Most importantly, these minority children need an academically demanding pedagogy to operate successfully in mainstream society (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Particularly, what they need most is to be familiarized with the mainstream text, test-based literacy discourses and linguistic experiences from early on to survive in the dominant literacy practices. Wells (1989) warned teachers of the danger of the well-intentioned emphasis on spoken language for the sake of harmonizing with students' home culture because this very practice may at the same time deny the children's opportunities for access to written language:

[Even] after several years in school, when they [the linguistically disadvantaged children] have started to be taught to read and write, they may still be considered unable to cope with activities which involve sustained reading and writing and continue to be given oral language activities to "prepare" them for the encounters with written text that remain for ever in the future. (p. 253)

Minority children need to receive a balanced approach to literacy instruction in which teachers foster both familiar literacy traditions (such as one-to-one oral interactions) and unfamiliar literacy practices (such as sustained reading and writing activities).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have uncovered the social realities of a three-year-old Chinese girl from a lower socio-economic home in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Canada. Amy's lived literacy experiences in her family restaurant illuminate another pathway to becoming literate in this diverse society. Though I have put her on centre stage in this paper, her interactive literacy dance in reality is far from being at the centre stage — it is a marginal practice compared to dominant, school-literacy practices.

Children like Amy who are socialized into the non-dominant discourses of literacy often encounter school-home discontinuities (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Ogbu, 1982). To overcome these discontinuities, such children need special help to make the transition from their familiar world of home into the unfamiliar world of school. To do so, educators need to understand the lived realities of these children are to know their needs and meet this challenge. As Kyle (2000) suggested, “[C]hildren’s needs cannot be addressed outside of the context of their particular family and community settings” (p. 23).

Amy's home literacy practices also suggest an urgent need to demystify the stereotype stigma of Asian families as model minorities. Even within one ethnic group, there are many different lived realities and literacy contexts that shape qualitatively different literacy experiences. Amy's literacy context and experiences, for example, are distinctly different from those of other Chinese children. Therefore, it is necessary to situate the children in their particular socio-cultural and socio-economic circumstances and understand them in relation to these contexts. Only by so doing can educators understand how learning can be mediated by the myriad of forces in children's lives and in society, and how they can change to make a difference.

NOTE

1. I have used pseudonyms throughout this article to ensure anonymity of the participants.

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