

## Understanding Literacy Constructions of Kindergarten Children: A Chinese Perspective

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### Abstract

Literacy is a growing field within applied linguistics, education and media studies. According to UNESCO (1957), “literacy is something which enabled you to follow our career path and do what society requires of you.” Literacy development cannot be separated with the societal and economic background and this paper is focused on the early childhood literacy construction of Chinese urban children from the angle of functional literacy, which helps to understand how a child’s early literacy can be constructed in order to help him/her to be functionally literate forward into adult life in the suited social context.

**Key words:** Functional literacy; Early childhood literacy

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The education and healthy development of children, especially only children, has become a topical issue in China. Since the introduction of the family planning program in early 1980s, Chinese people are experiencing the transition from the traditional big family pattern to new and varied modes of life. Meanwhile, with the

adoption of the open-door policy and the deepening of economic reform, people’s living conditions have been greatly improved and they can provide good material conditions for the family and better education opportunities to their children. Nowadays in metropolitan cities nuclear families are becoming more common, which are generally made up of one couple and one child. In this type of family pattern, either of the couple takes a full-time job and the only child is usually sent to kindergartens to be taken care of and to receive preschool education.

Going to schools creates a developmental transition during which new ways of learning and teaching take place. Children in their early-childhood settings both at home and schools form many understandings about the world they construct as they interact with family and community members. During this process, their formation of literacy skills might be a key element of childhood development. However, in the contemporary era, how do we define ‘literacy’? Can it be interpreted as the abilities to ‘read and write’ as we typically view? Do the reading and writing skills represent the overall literacy development in a child’s early childhood? What are the factors that will influence a child’s full potential and literacy construction during the course of their growing up? These intrigue questions are generating great interests in exploring Chinese children’s early childhood development; in China although parents pay great attention to their children’s education and healthy development but still have very vague ideas of how the next generation will develop to be literate in order to satisfy future societal needs. As a starting point, this study will examine the way how Chinese children’s early literacy develops in the home environment and school environment.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses around the theoretical framework underpinning this study whereas Section 3 shows how the study is conducted; finally, concluding remarks are presented in Section 4.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THIS STUDY

The theory underpinning this study is drawn from the functional literacy perspective, which Holme (2004) describes as “associated with that of education and training as adding value through training in basic skills” (p. 12). Under this viewpoint, education is now regarded as being connected with economic performance of both individuals and society, whose important role is to enhance the value in labour so that the population can be made more skilled and productive (Holme, 2004). According to Holme (2004), functional literacy consists of “some of the basic skills that the individual needs to fulfill their economic and social potential”, which builds the links between literacy in conjunction with education and economic development.

China is anticipating a healthier younger generation to shoulder the responsibility of building stronger economy for the country. In Chinese society, education on the next generation is a very important issue and policies also helped to “give early childhood a prominent place in the society’s educational and economic aspirations” (Corter, Janmohammed, Zhang & Bertrand, 2006). Under this social context new perspective to view the literacy constructions of young children in China is imperative.

Functional literacy suggests that literacy doesn’t mean to reach certain fixed level of competence before leaving primary school but includes a capacity to keep up with new technology in the future development and demanded literacy practices (Holme, 2004). In a literate society, an individual may “engage in many different literacies and the practices to which they give rise” (Holme, 2004, p.66). This view offers us opportunities to look at the development of early literacy embedded in social practices. The literacy practices perspective emphasizes “instances of reading and writing are always rooted in and shaped by historical, cultural and social contexts” (Manyak, 2004, p.130). An individual’s literacy construction and literacy practices must be based on these contexts and we need a full understanding towards the nature of practices. This study is based on the literacy practice perspective framework to look into a child’s literacy constructions through the observations on her practices in kindergarten classrooms as well as at home.

There have been abundant researches into the early childhood literacy in the Western world. Some examine the influences of parents’ literacy belief and habits on young children’s literacy development (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006 ); some analyze drawing as the way of understanding young children’s literacy development (Kendric & Mckay, 2004) and some explore the way linking home and school literacy (Feiler, 2005). However, research into literacy perspective on Chinese young children’s development seems to be inadequate despite the fact that both the country and families pay so much

attention on how to raise our next generation. Therefore this study which will investigate the early literacy practices of a preschooler.

## 3. THE STUDY

### 3.1 Participant

The present study zooms in to the urban kindergarten children who are on the transition from pre-school to primary school. The participant is a little girl who’s aged 6 and in level 3 of kindergarten. She will be in primary school in the coming September.

### 3.2 Method

This study is a qualitative case study which adopts the methods of observation and telephone interviews. Observation is “the act or practice of noting and recording facts and events as they happen” (Montgomery, 2002, p.36). To get the authentic data for identifying her literacy practices from the daily activities in kindergarten, observations on the spot are very useful. Interviews help in learning about the teachers’ and parent’s views about the child’s development from their perspective and supplementing for the information that may have missed from observation.

Being invited to teach English in this kindergarten gave me an opportunity to get along with these kids and make a close-up observation on the classroom, thus I get the first-hand information about how the school teachers conduct the classes activities. Besides, I interviewed the mother three times and 2 teachers once individually through telephones and made detailed notes on their talk concerning the participant’s daily activities.

### 3.3 Case profile

Jiajia is living in Xi’an, a modern city in the north-west part of China and capital city of Shaanxi province. Her mother is a teacher in a science-oriented university and father a sales manager who works for an electronic appliances company. Jiajia is the only child of the nuclear family and the second child in the third generation of the big family which consists of grandparents, an aunt and a brother. She has received great attention from both the small and big family and been well taken care of since her birth. Jiajia was given picture books to read (or play) when she was only 8-month-old and since Mother finds she feels happy when reading the pictures, kids books and magazines are given to her from time to time; Jiajia wants story telling at bed-time every night and this habit was formed when she was about one year old and Mother had to coax her to sleep. Cradle songs, classic poems till stories accompany Jiajia and Mother’s bedtime. Jiajia began to speak at 14 months old and her mother tongue is Putonghua.

She attended a nursery at the age of two and half since both the parents are busy and have to struggle very

hard for their career development. And from the age of 3 and half till now she follows the systematic preschool education in a kindergarten attached to the provincial government. This kindergarten enjoys good reputation because in China public especially government-sponsored kindergartens are believed to be better and trustworthy than the private-owned ones. Kindergarten education is divided into three levels and Jiajia learns Chinese, maths, society, music, arts and physics, which are regular curriculum based on the “Regulations on Kindergarten Work” issued by Ministry of Education of China.

### 3.4 Findings & discussion

Data analysis shows Jiajia’s various literacy practices in school literacy environment together with her home environment. The following main observations have been made.

#### 3.4.1 Literacy of reading and writing

Jiajia demonstrates good practice of oracy and reading skills. Jiajia was exposed to books at a very early age and learning to read continued throughout the preschool years. In her case Mother’s belief has a great influence in forming her literacy skills of reading. Mother, since well educated and engaging in education herself, has her own understanding about cultivating her kid’s abilities from different aspects. She paid attention to antenatal training, talked to the infant frequently, gave books to her very early and read books together with the girl. Jiajia’s home literacy practices provide background for her print literacy practice. In kindergarten her print knowledge has been reinforced by the required courses. In grade 3 of kindergarten, she begins to write Chinese characters from strokes and Pinyin, which embarks her on a tradition of Chinese written text and through reading this she becomes “socialised to be adult members of the nation and identify with its rich history and culture” ( Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999, preface).

#### 3.4.2 Literacy in English

Jiajia is sent to learn English in Aston English school from a year ago, which is intended for young children. A series of *Aston English Book* is adopted as the teaching material and the teaching method is quite westernised which emphasises on playing and interaction. Jiajia enjoys having classes every Wednesday evening because she can play with pals in the class and the foreign teacher George does various games with them. Jiajia now can talk with teacher in simple English sentences; name animals and daily life thing, and identify colours in English. English is not required course in kindergarten curriculum and bilingual education is not really implemented, but knowledge of English may be considered predictable literacy skill given the foreseeable trend of globalisation.

#### 3.4.3 Visual literacy

Jiajia is learning visual literacy from the daily classroom activities. In one class the teacher posted on the

blackboard various signs, including the five interlaced rings of Olympic, traffic signs, symbols for different banks and Red Cross for hospitals, etc. Children were encouraged to point out any symbol they know and to explain to the whole class. Jiajia pointed out two signs, one being symbol of Merchandise Bank and the other the traffic sign of left turn. Children shared with each other what they can recognise and then the teacher asked each to design a symbol for their class. Jiajia drew a symbol of a water cock with dripping water and a cross on it, which showed her wish that the class will stop wasting water. While Jiajia decodes these signs, she understands more than pictures she sees with eyes and her reading is realised as visual signs.

#### 3.4.4 Participation in cultural literacy

Jiajia reads aloud *Three Character Classic* every morning in the kindergarten following her teacher. It’s interesting to find that Jiajia can almost read the whole book of *Three-Character Classic*, which consists of more than 1,000 Chinese characters. In fact she cannot recognise most of the isolated Chinese characters but she can recite it fluently with her finger pointing the characters one by one. *Three-Character Classic* is child initiation teaching material in Chinese feudal society. It consists of *Books of Hundred Surnames*, *Thousand Character Classic*, *Younger Brother Cuckoo* and *Confucian Analects*, which include Chinese tradition education, history, astronomy, geography, ethics and the morals as well as some folklore. Three-character rhyme is exquisite and easy to learn by heart, so within 3-4 months Jiajia can read aloud the book with confidence. It’s debatable whether to integrate *Three-Character Classic* in kindergarten curriculum, but some educator argue that it trains the children to the classical Chinese literature esthetic sense and the national studies, as Chinese nation culture promotion, must be put in the education (*Guangming Daily*, 2007). Ingulsrud and Allen (2003) stated that learning literacy involves not only reading and writing but also learning the “national identity” (cited by Iinuma, M, 2003, p.124). Following Iinuma (2003), in China children’s acquisition of literacy means they shall inherit the cultural legacy of the literacy tradition. Reading Chinese classics definitely demonstrates children’s early practice of traditional culture.

#### 3.4.5 Participation in literacy event

Jiajia likes drawing. She often outlines something and fills the vacancy with color pens. Recently she keeps drawing *Fuwa*, which are the symbols of Beijing Olympic 2008. In fact she has been informed quite a lot of knowledge regarding the forthcoming Olympics in class. Jiajia can tell exactly the colors of the five interlaced rings; she knows about torch relay and some sports events and she can identify the Olympic Motto. She is especially interested in *Fuwa*- the official mascots and can tell what the mascots represent respectively. In February she attended a competition of artistic calligraphy and

photography conducted in Beijing and sent her participant work- "Beijing, cheer up!" She was awarded the gold medal. This story shows that Beijing Olympics has entered into kindergartens and children like Jiajia are actively involved in the literacy event of learning Olympic knowledge. Kindergarten children are not only learning the fixed knowledge of reading or writing but influenced and eventually participate in the social practices.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings through the analysis of Jiajia's case demonstrate her different aspects of literacy practices, which reflect how a Chinese child forms her literacies at her very first stage. The first two points of findings show how a mother's understanding of literacy strongly influences a child's literate behaviours. Jiajia's basic literacy skills of reading and writing are prepared before schooling; literacy of a foreign language-English is developing together with the practice of using her mother tongue. From the home literacy environment Mother's awareness to foster her to be more functionally literate is important.

Her developing perception of literacy can be observed further in schools environment. Through the kindergarten curriculum, literacy practices of reading, writing and counting are developed systematically. According to Holme (2004), once children have grasped those basic skills, they acquire the key to the "mode of enquiry" and other learning possibilities will happen (p. 67). Although we argue that literacy entails more than skills of reading and writing, it's essential to master those basic skills. From the perspective of functional literacy, most important observations are some other literacy practices: visual literacy is practiced and has achieved good effects; learning Chinese classics in the early stage greatly cultivates the cultural aspects of literacy; participating in literacy event concerning the social issues reflects the importance of social context on an individual development.

Following a more recent set of definitions included in UNESCO documents, a person is functionally literate by engaging "in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group or community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development" (Bhola, 1994, p.29). This definition provides insight in understanding how a child's early literacy can be constructed in order to help him/her to be functionally literate forward into adult life in the suited social context.

This study is still quite insufficient in providing in-depth understanding of a child's literacy development under Chinese cultural and social context and the data collected might be limited to form a whole picture of a child's literacy practices, but it serves the objective of arousing people's awareness to investigate into the literacy constructions of the next generation and to have a better understanding of the meaning of literacy from a functional perspective.

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