

CHINESE IMMIGRANTS: ACCESS TO FAMILY NETWORKS OF LITERACY

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GRANT: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LITERACY: THE INTERSECTING WORLDS OF CHINESE
IMMIGRANTS

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**In Memory
of**

**Mark and Laura,
young participants in this study**

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Chinese Immigrants: Access to Family Networks of Literacy
Linda Wason-Ellam

Canada is viewed as a land of unparalleled opportunity as families from around the globe have willingly immigrated to its bountiful shores to seek a better life. Immigration is a transformational process affecting both families and their children as they encounter multiple challenges in integrating into a new culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In Canadian society, the children of immigrants are integral to the social fabric of pluralistic schools but their experiences are not often understood. While many immigrant children succeed, others struggle to survive as they often do not have access to the literacy practiced in the unfamiliar academic spaces of Canadian schools and communities. Children of Chinese immigrants living their lives within the intersecting worlds of family and community networks come to school with diverse languages and literacy traditions. Upon entering multicultural schools, these learners usually do not have equal status with learners from the dominant culture. In school encounters, second generation Chinese immigrants become aware that school knowledge, unlike experiential knowledge, is a commodity, and that books written in English are valued as the repository of knowledge, while the culture and language of their parents and their multi-generational learning environments have little to contribute to the learning. Although these learners bring rich and varied experiences to the classroom, such as talking, drawing, music, experience with print, or storytelling, their reality is often devalued when schools fail to recognize, respect, and celebrate their diversity (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Although immigrant studies illuminating the literacy practices of families stand on the framework of others (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Guerra, 1998; Valdés, 1996; Gibson, 1988), what is absent in the literature

is a Canadian immigrant perspective. How can we understand why so many immigrant children do not learn what mainstream schools think they are teaching about literacy unless we get “inside” the learners literate lives to understand the world through their eyes? In this research study, I have gone beyond the statistics (Lamba, Mulder, & Wilkinson. 2000) and tried to understand the diversity of family literacy practices in two Chinese immigrant households by focusing on the “distances travelled” by their children who were ESL speakers learning to function within the family, the outside community, and in urban inner-city school settings. Critical to the research is an expanse of “lived time” or historicity (Hicks 2000) doing field work in the same urban school and neighborhoods where I have worked for many years so that I am able to question, understand, and interpret the issues of inequity surrounding language and literacy in schools while advocating for social changes.

DOING CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

Using a qualitative research design, I explored the diversity of family and community literacy as social practice in the two Chinese immigrant homes within their bi-cultural and bi-literacy contexts. Traditionally, literacy research has been “angled,” coming from a limited perspective using measurements that mask the multi-faceted aspects of learning. Literacy learning needs to be viewed through a wider aperture. It is invisible until it is translated into actions or words. A thrust towards qualitative inquiry does this. Since external representations reveal internal ones, learners show what they know and can do through their actions, the things they make, and through their talk. Like all acts, literacy occurs in a milieu. Observing learners standing four square in naturally occurring learning events, from a participant's perspective, gives insights to attitudes, attempts and

approximations as well as to alternative ways of learning and displaying knowledge. Thus, understanding literacy more fully requires a deeper analysis of the social, cultural, political and economic contexts in which it occurs.

To facilitate translation and rapport building, initially two graduate student translators from the People's Republic of China accompanied me at various times. Later, I went alone as I was able to negotiate the languages as both families work hard to help me understand the words that they wanted to share. Through explanatory narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988), which is a multilayered act of reality, I relate my understanding of three ESL children's varied yet contrasting literacy experiences-as-lived (Van Manen, 1996). Since narrative is a form of understanding meaning in peoples' lives, I find narrative may be the best style to offer glimpses of the multiple and discrepant realities of immigrant families and the life worlds of the focal children. Differences between the children and families are not anomalies so much as varied social and cultural experiences. Using a sociocultural lens, allowed me to see the children and families as cultural participants whose identities and perceptions reflect the nested contexts of ethnicity, literacy attainment, gender, and economic status. I was careful to bracket by not ascribing my interpretation of those observations as only my understanding of the world. I did not want to essentialize or make generalizations about both Chinese immigrant families, who I call the Chans and the Yeungs,¹ for I had only the privilege of a partial perspective, seeing them only in a snapshot of time. I wanted to make their sense of their literacy practices, not my sense based on what I perceived their world to be or should be like. By

describing bi-literacy in a natural setting, what and how it means, this study was guided by the following research question:

What are the social-cultural environments of literacy development and the possible occasions for languages in Chinese families?

Adopting an ethnographic approach during a three year study, I “shadowed “ two Chinese immigrant families who live and work in an urban inner-city neighborhood on the edge of Chinatown. The families were living in a small prairie city in Saskatchewan, a place where the wind blows harshly and sometimes unsparingly. Both families came to Canada as family-assisted immigrants which means that they did not receive government support for housing, care, or maintenance. One family, the Chans, is an extended multi-generational family of thirty-five members with ten participating informants, four adults and six school-aged children. Although the parents, Peter and Kay Chan, immigrated to Canada over twenty years ago from Canton province to pursue economic opportunities, they were not bi-literate even though they own and operate a small successful “Chinese” restaurant. The other family, the Yeungs, were also restaurant owners who had three participating informants, two adult members, one preschool child, plus two young babies. Sam and Jenna Yeung arrived in Canada from Canton five years ago but unlike the Chans are on the cusp of participating in the discursive practices of the mainstream culture. Long restaurant hours and limited contact with others from the mainstream has been a bitter wind and diminished the opportunities for both families to learn to read and converse in English. Although owning a business may be an easier way to enter

into Canadian entrepreneurship, the city was small and the Chinese community (3,000 members in the city and environs) had an abundance of more “upscale” authentic Chinese restaurants. The competition for patrons was quite steep. There were 54 Chinese restaurants located near the core of a city with a population just more than 220,000. What became evident was that the Canadian way of doing business, of conducting interpersonal relationships and communications was confusing and alien for these families. Banking, paying taxes, school communication, or obtaining official documents was often an enormous difficulty because they never fully caught on to how different the rules were from China. Additionally, the families have encountered complex problems as they struggled to support their children’s school endeavours with little knowledge of the philosophy of Canadian education and the literacy practices that schools privilege.

Participant observation and in-depth conversations were the primary data-gathering techniques used with both families. As a white woman working in the social geography for many years (Wason-Ellam 2001, 2000, 1999a, 1997, 1996, 1995, 1993, 1992), I position myself in Haig-Brown's (1990) category of border-work, choosing to stay and work in society's margins in a supportive and bridging role. From this perspective, I attempted to understand the reality of the participants’ literacy experiences which required me to spend an extended interval of time on-site with the two families participating within their life world in their homes, businesses, and community. In the song, Colors of the Wind, lyricist Stephen Schwartz states that *“if you walk in the footsteps of strangers, you’ll*

learn things you never knew you never knew.” And that is what I did. In a variety of settings and encounters—home, business, shopping, hospital emergency rooms, libraries, school meetings, airports, restaurants, playgrounds, funerals, celebrations—I was walking alongside the participants while watching, listening, and querying as questions flowed into conversations and stories. Consciously, I was projecting myself into deeply textured experiences and perspectives quite different from my own. Intentionally I was trying on different points of view by “mapping,” using a dynamic charting of self-knowing and knowing of the world. In keeping with the emergent design of qualitative research, continually I asked myself:

What do the literacy practices of these immigrants look like? What happens to people who become alienated from their language and culture? What are the integral links between the home and community and other institutions?

At the same time, lingering in my thoughts were some of my own experiences when I lived in other cultures surrounding by a language and cultural ways unfamiliar to me. This reflexivity of understanding the many perspectives of the two families followed a recursive loop rather than a straight line as I continually added and adjusted pieces of their literacy trail as I tried to make sense of a world that was vastly different from the cosmos around me. In this sense, I considered myself a “researcher-as-bricoleur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical tools as were at hand to produce a pieced together, collage-like creation of literacy practices. My intention in this research report is to represent the images, understandings, and interpretations

of the here-and-now realities of the Chan and Yeung families.

What Counts as Literacy?

Literacy is a complex phenomena as no one definition will illuminate all literacies. Literacy is a cultural practice. According to Gee (1996), “literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve, talk, interaction, values, and beliefs (p. 41)” both in families and communities. Literacy is deeply embedded in the social processes of family life and is not some specific list of activities added to the family agenda to explicitly teach reading or writing (Taylor, 1983, pp. 92-93). Family life is a distinct domain that is quite different from school. Inherent in this view is the belief that the family is an educative community in which shared learning experiences occur that are embedded in the daily stream of activities. In home life, literacy is intricately woven into the every day world of families where the purposes, values, and the roles families take may differ from formal schooling. A family’s way of learning literacy is complexly structured and highly dependent upon on the cultures to which they belong, the languages they speak, and the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of their daily lives. As a social practice literacy enables one to use language to extend cultural meanings and knowledge about ideas and experiences which in North America translates into a passport to learning English, getting a good job, and becoming successful.

A Pocket Full of Research Tools

Within the field, I did not use a prepared shopping list of questions, rather, I generated formal and informal questions flowing from the natural course of conversations initiated between the family members and me. Conversational interviewing was intended to be egalitarian as it is meant to yield control to participants of the flow and content of the interview as they talked about topics important to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mishler, 1986). Conversation involves listening. I, as the researcher followed conversational leads introduced by family members. In this way, conversations similar to the mode of everyday interaction that communicated empathy, encouragement, and understanding allowed the respondents to feel what they are saying was acceptable and significant (Oakely, 1981). To critically understand literacy in the lived lives of the participants, I developed a list of family literacy materials such as calendars, schedules, newspapers, school notices, church literature, letters, books in both English and Chinese and the occasions for their use. I observed literacy as social practice in such activities as shopping, reading flyers, accessing yellow pages, filling in forms or paying bills as the families gained knowledge of Canadian cultural ways. In addition, I was interested in how technical literacy functioned in their lives as I took notice of the literacy routines in their business lives and homes such as entertainment media, banking, manual cash registers, calculators, and display telephones. Gathering jot notes in the field which was expanded soon after into reflective accounts, I used analytic memoing to sift through the layers of data to make intuitive and analytical insights. By analysing participant observation accounts, documents, and interviews the subsequent “thick description” became the

context of the families' social, culture and business worlds. I continually added ways to knowing about their world. Questions, curiosities, and arguments became the reasoning tools that helped me to read the experiences of other lives different from my own. As I penned my assumptions, ideas and values, I tried to separate my belief system from those I was studying. Gradually over time, an understanding began to emerge of the intersecting worlds of family, school, and community literacy practices in two Chinese immigrant households. Throughout the narrative, I use metaphor as a way of knowing to express the intensity of my references as I came to new discoveries and meanings. Rather than limit myself to the traditional expository forms of pinning my interpretations to a page, I am hopeful metaphor will awaken the readers' consciousness to issues raised throughout this study.

Immigrant Entrepreneurship: A Bitter Wind

Coming from a totalitarian state at the end of the Cultural Revolution to a democracy poses ideological adjustment for Chinese immigrants such as Kay and Peter Chan, Janine's parents. In contrast to collectivism, where the interests and welfare of the collective group are of greater importance than the interests and welfare of any individual, the Chans had to adjust to individualism and independent thinking where high value is placed on the well-being and free initiative of the individual. In Canada, entrepreneurial spirit, autonomy, and private ownership rather than government control are the normal approaches to everyday life and economic well-being. Expecting a land *"where a wind ever soft from the blue heaven blows"* (Goethe, 1912), their dreams quickly dimmed. In a capitalist economy, immigrant

families often endured hardships as their lack of higher education and English proficiency give them few skills that were immediately transportable to the Canadian culture. Although Kay attended English classes for new immigrants, she abandoned the training after less than a year to work two jobs for she needed to contribute to the family income of her parents and six younger siblings. At the time of her arrival in Canada, English classes sponsored by settlement agencies were reserved for family bread winners and, being a young teen, she was not eligible for these classes. In addition, her status as a family class immigrant meant that she felt pressured to find a way of supporting herself quickly to relieve relatives of the financial encumbrance of supporting her and the family. In reference to her decision, Kay's brother, Irving explains : *"We had no choice when we came. We had to work, zhuan qian (to make money) and to support the family."*

When it was time to marry, Kay returned to China to meet a husband. In turn, she sponsored her new husband, Peter who spoke no English, when he immigrated to Canada. Life in Canada was harsh as English literacy assumes a credential status; upon it depend the vertical and horizontal exchanges of the means of a livelihood in a literate society (Stuckey, 1991). Without marketable English and vocational training in a secondary school (in China), the option for immigrants who came earlier narrows. A bit of the *Gam Saan* folklore (The Gold Mountain Theory that Canada was a land of limitless opportunity) which carried an optimism for a good life quickly faded. After several years working in a variety of menial jobs such as washing dishes, cooking, and working in a sewing factory, Kay and Peter's thrift and efforts were rewarded when they bought their own small Chinese restaurant in

the heart of Chinatown. In a few years, their industry paid off as they purchased the larger restaurant across the street specializing in a myriad of freshly prepared ethnic dishes. Purchasing a satellite dish to offer Chinese television to customers transformed the restaurant to a “Cultural Sanctuary,” as friends gathered in the evenings to visit, watched television programs from Hong Kong or Taiwan broadcasted in Mandarin. Although Cantonese was the oral dialect of these speakers, they swiftly translated the dubbed lines appearing at the bottom of the TV screen that were in Mandarin characters. Immigrant families like themselves who once gathered to share laughter, camaraderie, gossip, and food within the realm of local social relations in their Canton village were now allied through a multidimensional social space in Canada in what Guerra (1998) calls a transnational community striving to maintain their cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and business ties to China. Within this community composed of a multitude of concrete worlds is a common dialect (Bakhtin, 1981) which was sutured to their past world in China with its social beliefs and values. It was evident that there is a strong allegiance and attachment to the Chinese homeland. As I watched and listened to the repeated interactions between and among members within this social network, it seemed that their past eclipsed the present.

By creating their own employment, the Chans as a “dual-worker family” scraped by in a labour-intensive establishment centrally located in a small Chinese business community that occupies less than two city blocks. As a modern Chinatown, it was “more of a commercial district marketing ethnic goods and services than a cultural community (Li, 1998, p. 115).” To maintain a profit margin,

all family members contributed some way to the family business. The Chans hired no employees. While Peter maintained the kitchen 365 days a year, Kay greeted customers 14 hours a day, served foods, ordered speciality items from suppliers (fish, duck and beef), tallied receipts, and kept the detailed business accounts. Regularly, the Chan children had assigned tasks such as food preparation, vacuuming, cleaning, setting tables, taking take-out telephone orders, planning route maps for deliveries, making bank deposits, writing checks, negotiating COD orders, filing tax receipts, and sometimes waiting on customers on weekend evenings and Sundays. Family exploitation was a way of surviving financially (Wong & Ng, 1998). Like Valdés (1996) who studied Mexican-American families, I saw family life as a resource, a social network that people can turn to when the winds blow and cut right to the core. Although the Chans were striving for economic security, in reality they were “walled in” by a larger chain of a tightly knit extended kinship and community network who spoke the same Chinese dialect. Although language promoted a shared solidarity and mutuality it “blocked off” pathways to their social independence and flexibility in the society. After school the Chans and their first cousins, Laura and Lily, were “barricaded” in their three-family, intergenerational home (grandparents in addition to the two daughters with their families), a building reconverted from commercial use. Located a few residential streets away from Chinatown, the home was a world apart from their immediate neighbours for they dwelt in a run-down inner city district real estate which was cheap, nestled just footsteps away from bingo halls, saloons, pawn shops, and alcohol and drug treatment centres. It was not exactly an area where threads of community can be

knitted and strengthened for it was a site of drug transactions, felonies, homicides, and domestic violence. The children and cousins watched Chinese videos on three of the five family televisions, day-after-day, while awaiting the late return of the parents after restaurant closing hours. For these reasons, the family maintained an “outsider position” in Canadian society.

Between Three Languages: Negotiating the Research

Throughout this study, participant observations have occurred in a variety of settings as I experienced a kaleidoscope of impressions of the unfolding layers of family living reflecting, refracting, creating ever-changing images of reality combining symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, patterns, transmutations, and angles. Participant observation required me to “be there” in the home environment and the community establishing a working relationship with the members of the “family and kinship network” and community members. The Chans and the Yeungs like most Chinese immigrants in the city spoke the Cantonese dialect while reading the national dialect, Mandarin. Since neither I nor the graduate-student translators spoke the lingua franca, negotiations which were oral and gestured communication fluctuating between English or Mandarin characters written on a paper napkin. Field visits became a complex dialogic and situated activity (Bakhtin, 1981) like a four-way, party line as I tried to find a common ground and ways to make the meanings clear to everyone.

Early in the study, I wrote in my reflective journal about visits with Kay and Helen the grandmother, who had previously been a teacher in China and still

anchors that role within the family circle. Translating my thoughts and images, my words were:

Our field visits are becoming a complex dialogical community as I try to find a common ground and ways to make the meanings clear to every one. Linda speaking, Iris, the graduate student translating simultaneously in Mandarin often in the written code to Kay, and she translating in turn to Helen, the grandmother, and then in reverse. It is similar to a four-way party line with each woman anxious to take a turn sharing. Often, our intergenerational group manages a two hour conversation. We talk about the restaurant and later our conversation navigates towards talk about family, children, and schooling. The messages are articulate, on track, and responsive to the on-going topic. Sitting at the restaurant between the women, each is seeing the mirror of differing culture. Linda reflecting the Western culture, Helen, the keeper of the old ways, and Kay evoking lived memories of the traditional Chinese family and Iris, the graduate student, saw herself moving in and out of all four worlds.

Bakhtin argues that dialogue is a practice dominated by heteroglossia (multiple voices) for when we speak, we mix different social languages as we tried to make connections drawn from our own worlds. Often I stopped at either restaurant on my way home from classes to sip tea, chat, and listen to Kay Chan or Jenna Yeung. As women, we articulated commonalities or what Bakhtin (1981) calls socially shared meaning (p.293). For Bakhtin, the word . . . "exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own." (p. 293-94). Both Kay and Jenna initially stated that they agreed to be a participant in the study as they wanted to practice English with me. *"I learn my English,"* says Kay, *"I want to talk better so my children proud of me."* Talk we did as our relationships grew and both Kay and Jenna latched onto words and phrases they heard uttered and made

them their own. What did these meetings mean to the women? In the time we spent together, both women displayed agency in the communication of her own worlds. Eventually, they and their family learned more English because participation in the study meant that at last they had a close relationship with an English dialogical partner, me. I was conduit to the Canadian culture.

As a post-modern approach to research, ethnography is not so much a matter of ultimately achieving a coherent integration among the many perspectives, as one of being intellectually versatile or theoretically eclectic. It is a matter of being able to handle several ways of seeing as a series of differing views rather than reducing all views to a single correct one. Ethnography is dialogical as it refers to both the procedure and the product of the research. It is rich in entanglements as it attempts to render layers of cultural performance. While traditional research genres erase the voices of the participants, ethnography allows the possibilities of telling the tales of others. Since tape recording was too intrusive, there were many late nights penning my thoughts as I worked with my jotted notes recorded on the site. I wrote critical questions in the margins of these notes for my ethnographic eye was looking for both families' literacy trail, not always easily chronicled. As I fitted puzzle fragments into a unified portrait, I was mindful that the words I would write had to always ring true for the participants.

Family Literacies: Assembling a New Life:

Irving, Kay's brother, spoke better English so he became the self-appointed family historian and communicator. He compared the cultural worlds when East met West in this way. *"In China, everything is done for you, while in Canada, you get a box, and you have to assemble (the contents) yourself."* Both Kay (a grade 14 graduate) and Peter (attended school through grade 11) were schooled in the Cultural Revolution and vestiges of that thinking, the role of government, still permeated their life. They believe that it was up to the teacher to force children to learn through rote memorization and hours of homework. Following the Confucian tradition that purpose, hard work and effort pay off, the Chans surrounded their children with a Chinese environment at home, but did not know how to ensure that the children had the necessary tools for integrating in the Canadian society--learning English language or exposure to the mainstream cultural knowledge. *"School teaches my children,"* reasoned Kay, *"that is why we send children to school."*

What does literacy look like in the Chan Family when only Chinese is spoken in the home? The Chans read newspapers, calendars, and magazines written in Chinese, ate Chinese cuisine, viewed Chinese soap operas from Beijing, watched the national-international news on the Chinese Television channel from Toronto while local news was learned by word of mouth from the Chinese customers (Figure 1).

CHINESE PRINT	
<p>WORKPLACE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lists Menus Calendars Pop Magazines Tv- Hong Kong-Taiwan Channels Tv-Toronto Chinese Station <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weather Canadian News Letters Accounts Books <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Romance Novels Bible Newspapers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Toronto Chinese News Free Chinese Press Labels Notes 	<p>HOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calendars Telephone Lists Notes Newspapers Labels Cards Books Magazines Encyclopedia Britannica Dictionary-2 Volumes
ORAL CHINESE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conversations Videos Music Telephone Television <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soap Opera News Movies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conversations Videos Music Telephone

Figure 1. The Chans: Access to Chinese Literacy in the Workplace and Home

When entering the Chan's home, the only visible English in the kitchen, except for some labelling on food packages, was the school newsletter firmly tacked on the bulletin board. The "news" or text was folded over so that only "the no school days" were highlighted with a blue felt marker (Figure 2).

ENGLISH PRINT	
<p>WORKPLACE</p> <p>Numeracy</p> <p>Bills</p> <p>Labels</p> <p>Business Assoc</p> <p>Business Notebook</p> <p>Menus</p> <p>Advertisements</p> <p>Dictionary</p> <p>Telephone Directory</p>	<p>HOME</p> <p>Numeracy</p> <p>Bills</p> <p>Labels</p> <p>Telephone Directory</p> <p>Some Children's Books</p> <p>Posters</p> <p>Nintendo</p> <p>Books</p> <p>Encyclopedia Britannica</p> <p>Dictionary-4 Volumes</p> <p>Great Books-</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Tolstoy, Newton, Aristotle, Freud</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Rabelais, Swift, Pascal, Adam</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Smith, Virgil, Shakespeare,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Augustine, Karl Marx, Homer,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Descartes, St. Thomas Aquinas,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Machivelli, Milton, Melville,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Einstein, Swift.</p> <p>Medical/Health Guide, Flyers</p> <p>Children's TV</p>
ORAL ENGLISH	
<p>Greetings</p> <p>Food Orders</p> <p>Telephone Orders</p>	<p>Videos</p> <p>Children's TV</p>

Figure 2.The Chans: Access to English Literacy in the Workplace and Home

Although Kay like Peter had expectations for her children to be successful, she made few endeavours to teach the children “the achievement literacy” that schools value and make visible that is how to become a reader and writer. She expressed displeasure and frustration: *“I do not how to help my children. That is what the teachers do.”* Kay appeared to be like other parents (Taylor, 1983) who

work “within memories” of the past, for in traditional Chinese schools there is a set script for learning. In such a paradigm, the Chinese teacher’s role is an agent of knowledge which is transmitted to students via a lecture format. In contrast, Canadian teachers guide learners to interpret meaning for themselves and engage in reflective interaction through experiential learning. Kay was unaware that in recent years there has been a rapid restructuring of Chinese schools which provided alternative pedagogies for teaching and learning in order to meet the demands of an expanding socialist market economy (Lin & Ross, 1998). Not understanding Western pedagogy, Kay believed that the Canadian schools were lax, did not teach her children, and did not assign sufficient which in her view was based on rote learning. *“My children just listen to stories or go on field trips. They have no homework.”* In Canada, a capitalist society, a transmission model does not function as well as a transactional pedagogy. What makes transactional learning more appealing is that it is grounded in critical thinking, generating possibilities, analysing, and weighing alternatives---a way to “make it” in a global society. Unfortunately, all too often, many like Kay did not value the things we value for transactional learning is a major shift in educational thinking. Contrary to other studies of Chinese North American families (Lu, 1999, Chao, 1996; Siu, 1994; Peng & Wright, 1994; Sung, 1987) which describe families that take no chances with the school failing to teach their children, or of Chinese families (Lin & Qinghai, 1995) who place home-school pressures on children to learn by rote or recitation, I realized that there is little time invested in home teaching and literacy activities in the Chan household. Over time, I understood the reasons.

Like other ethnic minority families (Billingsley, 1992), Chinese parents see education as a valued avenue for economic advancement and social mobility. Both families in this study wanted their children “*to get a good job.*” In the former studies, the researchers found that Chinese parents contribute to their children’s academic achievement by monitoring school performance and activities that enhance or diminish performance. Monitoring may include explicit or implicit rules regarding homework, reading, and other school-related activities. When it comes to their children’s education, parents were assertive and resourceful “...some parents studied their children’s textbooks so that they can coach their children better” according to Lin and Chen (1988, p. 152). Education like other socially powerful institutions tends to support dominant or academic literacy practices. These dominant practices can be seen as part of whole discourse formation, institutionalised configurations of power and knowledge which are embodied in social relationships. To monitor or generate homework demands that the parents are familiar with school literacies and the content something that Kay or Peter were not. As a response to the desire to survive in a new society that has created a complicated system of social and economic demands for the family, it was Kay who assumed the responsibility of preparing her children for economic independence in what Lave and Wenger (1999) call situated learning. In situated learning, acquiring knowledge is viewed as a social process influenced by the interactions with others and placed within a context that resembles the literacy practice environment. In contrast, the local school viewed literacy as a set of taught skills rather than as practices that emerge and change over time and context. A skills approach to

literacy is problematic in its static nature, while a social practice approach allows for the flexibility necessary to deal with change. The Chan children had access to the workplace or vernacular literacies required to manage a successful restaurant, i.e., banking, billing records, paying invoices, shopping from suppliers, scanning flyers for specials, mapping deliveries or tallying meal checks. Vernacular literacies which exist in people's everyday lives are less visible, less influential, and less supported (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 10), which means that restaurant literacy, which was based upon their cultural capital, does not fit into the high status of school literacy (Bourdieu, 1977), the capital and language codes of the dominant culture.

Although, Kay did not embrace a "getting-ahead" ideology about supervising her children's school career (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) she has taught them numbers and simple math either through drill or through playing card games. However, Kay did not read "school type literature" to them, a status code of the dominant culture, in either English or Chinese. Although her children had access to a small collection of children's books, she did not mediate literacy for them with storybook reading activities. Researchers believe that early book-reading routines experienced between parent and child enhance children's vocabularies provide children with knowledge of language in and talk about books, expose children to print and literacy conventions (Teale & Sulzby, 1999; Snow & Ninio, 1986), and stimulate metalinguistics awareness (Wells, 1986) all of which complements interactions that take place in a literacy classroom. Kay and Peter Chan were waiting for reading homework where the children could learn step-by-step. The reading books that the children brought home from school were too

difficult, contained no direct instructions, and left the parents floundering. Instead, if the Chan children had questions about homework assignments, they called their first cousin, Mark, who lived in a “small town” and travelled to the city to attend classes at a technical institute. Mark helped his cousins with homework over the telephone giving them advice about doing research reports, math computations, or writing papers. As a twenty-year old, Mark was the family’s “conduit” to mainstream ways and the link to the families’ future².

THE LANDSCAPE OF SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

Janine: Living Against the Wind

When the telephone rang late one afternoon in the family restaurant, 15 year old Janine Chan answers the call because her English is far clearer than her mother’s. A Canadian customer wants a “Chinese take-out” presumably from reading the full page menu in the local Yellow Page ad. She repeats the selection aloud as her mother attentively listens to each item. Responding in a business tone, Janine writes down the order (customers can order by numbers), records the address, and totals the bill for the customer with the help of her mother who has mentally calculated the sum including the GST (Government Sales Tax) and LCT (Local city tax). After giving the customer an approximate delivery time, Janine turns to a City Map that is tacked to the wall. She looks for the street address on the map index and then matches the code to the locator coordinates. Additionally she makes note of the main routes. In Chinese she tells her father the site of the delivery and later she will go with him to make that connection.

If one did not know Janine Chan, it would appear that she was a competent young Chinese teenager who was a part-time helper in the family business. Nothing

could be farther from reality. Janine has been labelled by the school district as having minimal academic competence and enrolled in a Life Skills Program at the local High School because she was deemed to be not literate while in grade four. Thus, the high school has charted her program which includes Drawing and Crafts, Physical Education, Home Economics, Consumer Education (which is learning to read want ads and newspaper advertisements), and Work Study. At the time, Janine's Work Study assignment was in the school cafeteria where she served hot lunch to her teenage peers as well she gathered attendance sheets from the home rooms and took them to the school office. The school's diagnosis had hardly ensured her a program that would gain economic entry in the mainstream society or even yet, the "teen culture." While other teenage girls were aligning themselves in friendships as social networks that centre around chatting on the telephone, hanging out at lockers in the hallways, passing notes in class, and meeting at the mall sharing their school and social lives, Janine left school early each day at 1:45 P.M. and went directly to the restaurant. Like a slave to fate, it was there she worked alongside her parents vacuuming the crumbs and chopping vegetables in solitude, day after day with little praise in a monotonous domestic routine. She was against the wind. Janine's teenage years were rapidly evaporating. Although seductive televisions images provided models of possible lifestyles and influences language, kid's fashions, and music globally, Janine and her sisters or cousins did not wear "cool" clothes, groove over pop idols, or stay tuned to the music in rock videos. School for them was not about wearing the team colors at the basketball game, hanging out with friends, or sharing the latest teen fashions for these second

generation immigrants did not fit in the school culture. The Spice Girls, Mary Kay and Ashley, and Britney Spears were in vogue during their teen years, but the Chan sisters or their cousins seldom noticed.

The Winds of Hope: Books

At one time, Kay's aspirations for her children were more lofty. Often when I went to the restaurant during the less busy hours, I found Kay sitting at the back table absorbed in a romance novel (from Hong Kong), or perhaps reading a "pop-culture" Chinese magazine that she often shared with me. Together we would flip through the pages as she pointed out fashion, make-up, furniture, new clothing styles, and movie recommendations. Pointing to a movie review, Kay urged me to see Gwyneth Paltrow in Shakespeare in Love. "*Very good, you go,*" she says. I went but not she. On occasion I noticed Kay's Bible, a Chinese New Testament on the back table. Once, I met Mrs. Wong, a Jehovah Witness, who came regularly to the restaurant "*to bring the word about Jesus.*" Although Mrs. Wong learned English during her first years in Canada living in a "small town," her Bible lessons were conducted in Chinese. This Bible practice was contrary to participants in Jiao's study of Chinese graduate student wives (1994) who welcomed visitations from Jehovah Witnesses or attended Bible study groups at Canadian churches so that they could practice English with native speakers. Kay, a Buddhist, used religion "*so I can keep on learning.*" From visits to the home it was evident that Peter regularly read, too, as there was always a recent edition of Sing Tao, a Canadian Chinese newspaper, folded untidily on his night table.

Lingering always in Kay's heart was the hope that the winds would blow gently and bring **fu** (fortune) to her family. For a long time she clung to the idea that her children would be traditional scholars bringing honour and status to the family. By chance one day, Kay showed me two sets of Encyclopaedia Britannicas - one set in English and the other set written in Chinese-bound in green leather with blue trim and hand-tooled lettering in gold leaf. Included with the purchase were a matched set of dictionaries in both English and Chinese, a medical-health guide, and the 100 Great Books which included scholarly titles such as Tolstoy, Newton, Aristotle, Freud, Rabelais, Swift Pascal, Adam Smith, Virgil, Shakespeare, Augustine, Marx, Homer, Descartes, St. Thomas Aquinas, Machivelli, Milton, Melville, and Einstein. Profound reading of classic literature was a formidable aspiration but an impractical goal for a family who seem entangled in a language web. Taking on extra jobs as a dishwasher and sewer, Kay struggled for several years to make the \$400 monthly payments so her children could have quality books. Most of the books remain unopened still in their shrink wrapped protectors—except for eight of the ten Chinese encyclopaedias which Kay has read. "*Hope like a taper's light flickers*," for Kay, who with tears rolling down her cheeks came to realize that her children may never read these extensive tomes, the symbols of knowledge. Holding back tears, silently I helped her pack the books away out of her sight. There was no need to dialogue for the echoes of other words came tumbling back. Chinese "don't talk about their problems, they just keep it inside " (Lee, 1996, p.61).

Perhaps with disappointment, it appeared that Kay has put all her *jing li* (attention and effort) into building a business for her family. Nonexistent were

informal auxiliary learning activities which according to Trueba, Cheng, and Ima, (1993) enhance school success such as access to the zoo, the children's festival, museums, movies or amusement parks, partaking of sports activities at the YWCA or swimming pool, and exercise in the fresh air with bicycles, walks along the river, visiting a bird sanctuary, or playing at the gym equipment in city playgrounds which the school assumes is part of children's home life. Whether in China or in Canada, working-class immigrants may not value learning through social play. When the children had days off from school, they went to the "small town" outside of the city, where their Aunt and her entrepreneur husband juggled the managing of several commercial enterprises-convenience store, video store, and a sewing and tailoring shop. Life in the small town was similar to life in the city. The children remained in the household to watch videos, helped their relatives in the store, or the older girls worked in the uncle's café waiting on tables. Unlike the Chan's inner-city neighborhood, Erin, the older daughter talked about the small town: *"we can spend more time outside because the small town is not as dangerous as the city. No one locks their door."* Safety is a problematic in inner-city neighbourhoods, especially the Chans. Scott-Jones (1995) believes that "demands placed on families by the need to monitor their children's activities in the interest of safety may take time away from other family activities that might contribute directly to the acquisition of academic skills (p. 93)." This applies to the Chans for when the children were at home watching Chinese videos, Kay knew that they were out of harm's way while she and Peter worked late at the restaurant.

An assumption that Kay was resistant to change was quickly dispelled. I noted her enterprising endeavours when she tried to create niche markets for her restaurant. She expanded her patrons beyond those who dropped into her Chinatown establishment by catering food to her brother's computer café in the downtown centre. She also advertised 10 per cent discounts to Chinese university students as well as she placed a full page take-out menu in the Yellow Pages of the telephone book at a considerable expense. I admired her resourcefulness and resiliency. As a business woman, Kay was ambitious and visionary, standing four square to all the winds that blew.

Dreams Wither at the North-wind's Breath

In Canadian schools, the barometer of success is literacy—those who can read and those who cannot are labels that are hard to erase. IQ and Achievement tests become the arbiters of literacy for tests are a sorting activity and ESL (English as a Second Language) or LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students often are quickly delegated to the low achiever label (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Corson, 1998; Sleeter, 1994; Cummins & Cameron, 1994; Cummins, 1984) rather than the social or educational context. Stuckey (1991) sees literacy as a weapon, the knife that severs the society and slices the opportunities and rights of its poorest people (p.118). In Chinese culture, education is valued and academic achievement was a sign of good parenting (Chao,1996). If a child fails, the family is embarrassed and loses face in the community. Kay was suffering silently for Janine and her younger brother, Kent, have not done well in school which

brought humiliation to the family.

When interviewing her grade three teacher, tears rolled down Monica's cheeks when I described Janine's present school life. (During a previous study, I had been a researcher in her classroom and spent four years in the school). Monica, an exemplary primary teacher, had worked with Janine in an inner-city community school that was designated as having special needs because of the majority of students were of Aboriginal ancestry. She remembered her with fondness. "Janine is not an academically challenged student," she declared." She was the middle girl sandwiched between the two sisters. She could read but she is ESL and remains sheltered in a home that speaks Chinese only. Janine lacks interactions with others in after-school activities and the varied experiences that would help her connect to what she reads. She concluded that "unfortunately, her parents work long hours so that most of her experiences were limited to a small triangle—the home-school-restaurant worlds."

According to another teacher who knew Janine in the same elementary school:

"Unlike her younger sister Dawn, the wind of hope, who has been successful in school, Janine never connected to other children in her class." She continued, "She was a loner and throughout school she had no one to talk to. When you don't fit in, it is hard to make friends. Most of the girls in her class were Aboriginal and bonded together leaving Janine on the margins. The girls wore make-up and hung out at the stores, sometimes getting into trouble. Janine was shy and sweet. She was lonely in the crowd."

What went wrong? One of the underlying difficulties was the ineligibility of the Chan children for local ESL services since they were Canadian born, children of immigrants. Despite the reported success of some Chinese business-class immigrants in Canada there seems to be a prevailing misconception that essentializes that all Chinese immigrants are doing well (Li, 1998), especially in school. When seeking to understand learners, it is imperative to understand the

cultural contexts within which they have developed, their community of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1999) to interpret whom the learners are in relation to others, and learn how to process, interpret, or decode their world. For Janine, school was simply a place where, more concertedly, than anywhere else in her world, she learned how little valued she was. For her, tests were similar to a sorting machine, separating the chaff from the wheat. Students who can not speak English well were often shut out of opportunities to learn and make contact with their schoolmates and often were sorted by skin color and class into programs that prepared them for very different futures (Olsen, 1997).

Failure to learn did not develop out of thin air; it was scrupulously created through hegemonic policies, practices, attitudes, and beliefs. In a very concrete sense, the result of educational inequality explain by example what a society believed its people are capable of achieving and what they deserve (Nieto, 1999, p 23). According to Corson (1998), schools assess their students' academic success on the ability to display the words and meanings that are given high status as cultural capital (p.124), i.e. proficiency in the English codes. Somehow, Janine had not missed the real purpose of reading which was constructing meaning, but her meanings or cultural capital did not match the school's expected responses.

Another reason was the limited opportunities at the conflict ridden urban school for learning. Erin, Janine's oldest sister was living with her Aunt in a small rural town while she completed high school. Erin stated that she was anxious to leave their transient neighborhood inner-city elementary school:

The kids were disruptive in class. They brought knives to school and the teacher was always yelling at them and sending them to a time-out room. Sometimes, the police came to the school because the kids stole or set fires. The teacher didn't have any time to give the good kids any attention. We just did math on worksheets, wrote book reports, and handed them in. I guess we had to learn on our own. Did you know that the principal cancelled recess because there was too much violence on the playground? It is different going to school in the small town because there is more teaching.

Children from visible minorities, those who live in poverty, or speak a native language other than English are often tracked into low-ability groups in what Haberman (1991) calls “a pedagogy of poverty,” a basic urban style education based on memorization and tracking. Too often, many students of immigrant families like Janine and Erin who grew up outside of the dominant culture were at a disadvantage when certain vocabularies, knowledge, strategies, and skills expected by teachers are not made explicit in their classrooms (Wason-Ellam: 2001;1999; 1992; 1993). Nothing could be closer to the truth in Janine’s school. When she experienced difficulty in comprehending what she had read in grade four, in the transition from moving from picture storybooks to junior novels, she was placed in a special needs program which spent less time on meaning-related activities about literature, a critical agent of socialization, and more time on decoding words or as Janine describes, *“I did lots of worksheets instead of reading.”* Although Janine was well on her way to reading independently, it was assumed that reading or linguistic troubles (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) meant that she simply needed to develop the ability to deal with the sound/symbol relationships and to identify words (Allington, 1980)

rather than read more broadly to gain experience. In her case, the teachers seemed to be locked into “the phonics” instructional practice, the method dictated by administrators and policy makers who were not interacting with students on a moment-to-moment basis to glean a window on the problem. The barrier for her was her ethnicity; she lacked and still lacks the language (a broad vocabulary) and the “cultural scripts” that represent knowledge of objects, situations, events and actions that are necessary to make the text meaningful.

As time passed, there were many critical moments when Janine as a reader was revealed. Over and over, whether she read novels aloud or shared her personal literary responses I realized she was a reader. The barrier’s to Janine’s academic achievements seemed to be more social and cultural than linguistic or cognitive. Throughout conversations with the school, the prevailing stereotype existed that because Kay and Peter did not learn English, they were ignorant, did not know or care about education, and were dysfunctional parents. Even the translator degraded Kay’s efforts to meet the school’s demands who stated, *“Kay was told to get some books and read to her children but she never did.”* Unbeknown to the school, Kay bought books but she was not competent in picture book reading activities as a social practice and did not know where to go for assistance. *“I don’t know how to teach reading”* said Kay. The school “informed the mother” but made no provision for demonstrating book reading strategies for her children. In time, the picture books gravitated to a seldom used shelf in the children’s bedroom to gather dust. Eventually, the books were replaced by a library of video stories. A content analysis of Janine’s report card revealed that from the time she began school, teachers wrote comments such as *“I would like to see you get your parents speaking more English that they have learned from you,”* or *“English needs to be spoken in the home all*

the time for you to be successful in a school setting.“ Comments such as these which advocated *monolingualism*, a subtractive acculturation, put great pressure on Janine about her own identity and culture. It also showed how the school failed to acknowledge the important role that culture may have in students’ values and behaviour, and consequently in their learning. Pressures to conform to be English-speaking brought great distress to Kay and Peter who said, *“We cannot close the restaurant to go to school. We have to be there in case somebody comes. We must earn money to take care of the family, not learn English.”* Purcell-Gates (1995) warns that the kinds of stereotypes held of minority, low-status groups by the mainstream and educators are most often indictments of deficiency and attributions of fault. “This “blame the victim” syndrome may lead inevitably to a shrugging off of responsibility by the mainstream and its educational establishment (p.188).” So why did Janine not attend ESL classes?

Excluded From ESL

At Janine’s high school, there was an extensive ESL program, a program that excluded her in the same way she was excluded from ESL in elementary school for she had Limited English Proficiency (LEP). In this school district, English as a Second Language (ESL) students were identified as those from homes, communities, or countries where language other than English was the first language. For whatever reason, Canadian-born Janine nor her siblings or cousins were not given ESL or LEP training which may be contrary to the prevailing policy. In her case, the policy was not enacted although she and her siblings had been diagnosed as ESL learners when they entered school. She not only struggled with school literacy demands but also academic content. Her present teacher

claimed that Janine was a poor comprehender as evidenced in her intelligence tests. I queried Janine' assessment as intelligence tests assess verbal abilities and were not always culturally relevant.

Traditionally, standardized tests or tests with a similar paper and pencil format have relied on short reading passages followed by a combination of literal and inferential comprehension questions usually employing a multiple-choice cloze format. Using this format, the reader is required to choose the best word for completing sentences. However, marking those answers has nothing to do with the way reading is actually used, except in taking tests. In recent years, this approach to reading comprehension as a *product* has been challenged for several reasons. First, the reader is required to apply skills in an artificial, contrived setting rather than situated contexts. The focus is on getting the answers "correct" rather than looking at the qualities of the answers to determine how the reader is making meaning. Second, the tests fail to account for the reader's prior knowledge. Third, the tests fail to assess a reader's ability to integrate information across large samples of text. Critics of such measures argue that it is more valid to observe how readers perform "authentic" tasks; that is to say, the assessment should be situated within the learning *process* to see the reading act in progress (Farr & Greene, 1993) to have a window on what is happening and how the reader is making meaning while reading.

As time passed, there were several critical moments when Janine as a reader was revealed. One moment was while conducting a miscue analysis, a process assessment that looks at the reader during the process of reading, she read a passage to me on Terry Fox, the Canadian hero, who ran the Marathon of Hope to raise money and awareness of cancer research, Janine sailed over the words. When I questioned her about what was cancer research. She responded

that it “is like when the teacher gives you a question about cancer and you go to the library to do research and then write a report about it.” Her limited experiences had not afforded her the opportunity to conceptually understand medical or scientific research. Not having access to Canadian television programming or to be in the regular classroom, her past years in special classes were laced with fill-in worksheets, which required little lively discussions, extensions of ideas, tapping experiential knowledge, or critical and thoughtful thinking. Over and over, whether she read novels aloud or shared her personal responses to novels she was reading independently, I concluded that Janine’s problem is not comprehension but a lack of a broad range of experiential knowledge. In April Upstairs, one of the novels she chose from the public library, Janine came across the word “carry-on luggage”. When I queried her about the meaning of the word, the response was “probably when you go on the plane, the pilot carries on your luggage for you”. A reasonable response for someone who has not had any experience with air travel. The barrier’s to Janine’s academic achievements seem to be more social and cultural than linguistic or cognitive.

In contrast, Dawn, thirteen, the second oldest Chan daughter was doing well in school as well as her cousin, Laura, also thirteen. When consenting to be participants in the study, the girls felt that their opinions on Chinese family literacy had little interest to my understanding how immigrant families learn the ways of the new culture. As Laura stated, *“We are just regular Canadian kids! We are not Chinese at school.”* Although they were friendly with classmates, their associations never developed into after-school friendships, the kind that often develop into visits, slumber parties, or birthday party invitations. Dawn and Laura had been in a constructivist classroom where I conducted a previous study

(Wason-Ellam, 1995). Unlike her sister Janine's experiences, Monica, the girls' teacher engaged a constructivist model of teaching and learning where students operated within a dialogical curriculum (Bakhtin, 1981) rather than the monologic of a "banking" conception of traditional education (Freire, 1981) where knowledge is imposed on students. Like Freire (1970) a constructivist teacher sees traditional education as a way to domesticate and thus dominate students for like empty vessels waiting to be filled, learners are generally passive in the way they receive knowledge. As an alternative pedagogy, immersed in a classroom where students use talking, reading, and writing Dawn and Laura acquired knowledge or "cultural scripts" through social interaction with peers in a collaborative learning community who shared many viewpoints, something that did not happen for, Janine.

Harshly Blows the Cruel Wind: Institutionalized Racism

Was this attitude a lack of knowledge about immigrants groups or was it systemic racism? Racism is when discrimination is used as justification for oppression (Carson, 1996, p.120) so that some members of society, children of visible minorities, are disqualified from equal participation, based on cultural characteristics or ethnicity (Ghosh, 1996). According to Cummins (1986) and Sleeter (1994), certain behaviours and modes of operation including schooling become ways of excluding those who do not belong to the dominant group. Some critics argue that schools legitimate racism and classism by privileging students from middle and upper classes by providing access to knowledge and enriching levels of instruction while offering students of the lower classes or ethnic groups highly controlled lessons (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Shannon, 1992). Rose (1989) maintains that once in a lower track such as special needs, there is little chance of mobility.

Racism creeps into schools in many ways especially for visible minority children, or those who speak a language other than English who experience ability tracking or high stakes testing that results in unjust outcomes (Nieto, 1999). The school's non-elastic ways of doing things keep certain individuals and groups in dominant and subordinate positions, producing the structural inequality I see both in the education system and the workplace (Wason-Ellam 1996; Ghosh, 1996). Wasn't this what happened to Janine and other children I have observed? Perhaps.

Winds Whistle Shri! Kent's Narrative

Kay's youngest child was a boy, a favoured status in Chinese families. Already eight years old, Kent was repeating grade one for the second time. This had been a devastating experience for the Chans. Kent arrived in school without fluency in either Chinese or English. Unlike his three sisters, he had limited proficiency in either language, did not know his alphabets, or how to read and write—except for his name. Although he did not know the words for his numbers, surprisingly he could do addition facts to fifteen, the result of his mother's teaching work-place math. Instead of "participating in school"—listening to stories, circling words on worksheets, drawing or writing words, Kent was continually disruptive in the classroom. Daily, he was embroiled in fights with other children, mainly Aboriginal, which culminated with each side hurling racial slurs directed at one another. The threats and aggression were embedded in larger issues of hostility and turf war which may be seen as overtures to belonging or general frustration. Unfortunately, Kent, the only Chinese boy in a class consisting of mainly Aboriginal boys usually lost "the daily war" and consequently banished to a time-out room to "cool off" or expelled from school. Kay was

frustrated that the school did not enforce discipline and that Kent was not learning language. She believed that *"the school needs to help Kent"* for it was up to the school to instill effort and persistence in her child. Although, Kent had a battery of IQ tests, his lack of language led to the diagnosis that he was an ESL learner. Rigidly, the school interpreted the access to ESL policy as directed to immigrant or Aboriginal students, not those who are Canadian-born. It was not until Grade three that he received ESL classes as a special needs student at the insistence of Kay. Why did the school wait until Kent slipped through the cracks before he received specialized help?

Upon Kindergarten entry, Kent had not developed print awareness which gave him a sense of what literacy was all about. Regrettably, the kindergarten classroom was not a literacy rich environment where storybook reading, play or learning through social interaction was encouraged. As a method of classroom management, young children were hurried into reading-readiness and other paper and pencil activities firmly seated at tables and chairs. Due to a lack of language or interest, Kent could not keep up with these decontextualized engagements.

Gazing in a Virtual World

At home, Kent, dressed in hip-hop clothing, was immersed in another world—the video culture. Raised by his grandmother while his mother worked long hours at the restaurant, he became absorbed in the hypnotic forces of the animated world of Disney cartoons and hero tales such as Ninja Turtles and Batman. Videos were an intoxicating "command centre" of Kent's world as he spent hours and hours in front of the screen, retreating from the social world of his siblings. Neatly stacked in the three entertainment

centres in the home were a stockpile of children's videos so much so that it became the "reliable children sitter" guaranteed to entertain when the Chan children were not in school. Liked other children left home alone while parents worked, it appeared to me that video viewing filled a both social and cultural gap within the children's lives and provided them with a companionship.

Like television, videos are not interactive. What is learned is imitative not social learning. Because images from videos are so powerful and change so quickly, children like Kent often don't understand the storyline and are left imitating the rapid movements and those elements that make the strongest impressions—chasing, crashing, shooting, fighting and so on. At times, Kent enacted various fantasy characters as stylized personas. On several occasions, Batman and Robin were depicted as he ran head down with arms outstretched behind as he made his way down the stairs. POW! Another repeated action was Kung Fu as he frequently gave karate-type kicks in the air when Kay asked to set the tables in the restaurant. Because a child such as Kent was kept passive while video watching, he seemed to have all the more need to simulate motion when he terminated viewing. While he may have imitated the actions, he didn't adopt the video language.

Postman (1982) argues that television (one can assume now videos) have become a child's companion to such an extent that it displaces other playful learning activities from the nook and crannies of childhood. He believes that one is always gazing at life in the television world rather than experiencing life itself. It may be easy for parents like the Chans to overlook this deceptively simple fact when an active child like Kent was placidly occupied. Hour after hour Kent sat there like a voyeur staring into a somewhat incomprehensible world of puzzling scenes as video characters swept from event to event

often in activities that were not age appropriate. Sadly, video viewing has pre-empted much of the traditional pattern of his childhood development---rendering passe, the normal experiences of growing up (Kline, 1993). In a previous study, I found that video viewing denies much of the normal conversational interchange between parents and children (Wason-Ellam, 1995). Interaction was a process essential to maximum language development, especially for the Chan children who were struggling with English as well as learning Chinese.

In the Chan family, video watching was unsupervised. Trend (1994) sees media viewing as a form of narcotic that dulls the senses, encourages laziness, and confuses the viewer's sense of reality (p. 229). Already it appeared that the video culture in which Kent has been seduced into was a dangerous and disjointed virtual reality. For animation (as in Disney videos) is a denaturalized fiction which does not deal authentically with real social life or interactions – usually it is dehumanized characters and a parade of flashes. Instead of developing paths to the understanding of personal experiences and modern social life, the disconnected images and messages dig deeper channels to fantasy. On the other hand, narrative in children's literature is a means of negotiating the broad patterns of thought and feeling; it is through early experience with stories that young children gain an intellectual framework within which they can integrate experience and perception. In children's animation, narrative works the other way as it is a sequence of scenes strung together like a storyboard. Various encounters might cause confusion for young viewers as the camera may cut back and forth between different aspects or perspectives of an event rather than involving an interweaving of character, plot, and theme holistically. Postman (1991) warns that media viewers may have great difficulty with objectivity, with

abstract and imaginative thinking. This may have been true for Kent. Picture storybooks, which remained on the shelf in his bedroom, required that he display agency as reading or picture reading demands that the reader continually seeks to understand and interpret the author's messages. When I first went to Kent's house, I brought storybooks to read aloud to him. Kent wouldn't listen to the words or view the brightly coloured pictures. Instead, he ran away and popped another video into the VCR and sat down in front of the screen spellbound—entrapped in a fantasy collage of blinking but fragmented impressions.

What makes viewing compelling for Kent was that video technology can defy the physical laws of the universe with repeating actions and dazzling objects that can jump, fly, spin, accelerate, whirl, disappear, reappear, transform shape size and color (Wason-Ellam, 1996). This of course makes the visual dynamism a detailed and often a bizarre spectacle of color and action. Postman (1991) contends that the overwhelming volume of fragmented information that is stripped of any contextual basis is presented within a "pseudo-context"—designed to give irrelevant information a seeming use (p.76)

In direct contrast to the Chan children who socialized only within the family network, I found (Wason-Ellam, 1999) that most of the immigrant and refugee children in a study of a working class suburban neighbourhood learned English quite rapidly. In an effort to gain social acceptance, their ethnicity seemed to blend into the "kid culture" which supplied a "term of reference" such as ideals, images, and visions against which they and their peers were expected to script their lives. Within the neighbourhood playground was an assortment of slides, swings, climbing apparatus, basketball hoop as well as an outside hockey rink that was used by children as they gathered to play in winter. According to a Cambodian father participating in that study: *"My children learn English from school and from*

friends. They play outside when they go home. Everybody talk to them. Some of my kids play hockey. The kids speak English at hockey." But Kent's world was different as he had no friends or out of school activities.

One of the basic reasons, there was intensive observation in this study derives from the premise that patterns through which literacy encounters are understood are culturally variable (Leichter, 1984) across society and among families of different class and ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes, patterns were difficult to uncover because there is a distance between the world of the researcher and that of the participants. In both the observational and the ethnographic stance, I focussed both on the *physical environment*, how the child's physical space set the stage for literacy activity and the *interpersonal environment*, the child's social interactions with others. In surveying the artifacts in Kent's world it might be tempting to have assumed that video print might be a potential form for literacy learning. There is considerable agreement that today's children are deluged with print but it is important to consider how the print in the child's world may have differed from the print we might imagine. In Kent's video world, print was variable. It came in multifarious sizes and fonts, moved around, became larger, shrank, changed colours and disappeared. I grappled to represent this print experience for it hardly led to genuine understanding. Instead, print in Kent's universe seemed to be overwhelming and confusing.

Experiential Learning

I continually wondered if Kent had an untapped potential? I took him one afternoon to the Dinosaur and Biology exhibits at the University to interrupt the tedious repetitions of video watching. Perhaps, I was pondering how he would react to a novel experience. At

the same time, I was struggling to define how I should participate for I realized that my role was not to change what Kent was doing but rather to try and make sense of what was happening within his child-orchestrated observable moments. Curiosity, maybe or thinking that something could be going on and maybe there could be other possibilities were questions continually lurking in my thoughts. Holding tightly to my hand, Kent was at first overwhelmed by the physical space of the museum exhibit. He kept pointing to the skeletal dinosaur replica —“*What’s this? What’s this?*” all the while looking around at this new locale. Kent was enthralled with the dinosaurs and kept pointing and inquiring, “ *What does it do?* “ He pensively looked at Pterosaur overhead in winged flight, the serrated teeth of Allosaurus, or Stegosaurus with its spined tails and clawed feet. Words began to tumble out as he tried to say the names of the dinosaurs. “*That’s Allosaurus!*” At the same time, I snapped photos to put into a small book in which I wrote a story--Kent went to see the dinosaurs. It was something he could finally read as the book was about his own lived life. Over and over he read his book until the pages became tattered. It was then that Kent became interested in reading other books about the dinosaur world.

On another occasion, I took him to the swimming pool to enrich his repertoire of experiences. While stopped at a traffic light, he blurted out, “*What happened to that house? It looks like it got burned in a fire or something.*” Kent was pointing to a home renovation where the exterior of the home was wrapped in a black insulation paper. What overwhelmed me was how articulate he could be talking in full sentences, something he never did in school.

After much negotiating, Kay and Peter have hired a private tutor for Kent who has switched from the conflict ridden inner-city school to a school in a middle class

neighbourhood. Although there are lots of gaps in his learning, he has been building language. For the first time, he has classmates as friends. With that comes invitations to birthday parties of children who are outside of his family network. He attended three parties with all the cake and ice cream treats during his first year in the new school—two boy parties and a girl's. At last, he has a chance to practice English like other kids. At nine years old, he is no longer alone.

THE YEUNG FAMILY

Turning onto Avenue X, I swerved to avoid the shards of glass from the shattered beer bottles in the street. Three-thirty in the afternoon and its going to be boisterous evening—Check Day. Residents are in the street. I check The car doors are locked and I have plenty of gas in case I need a quick getaway. I pulled up to the small Chinese-Canadian Café, a tired building which seemed hinged to the neighbouring ones on the side—a laundromat, a clothing depot for the needy, and a confectionary store on the right and a second hand store on the left. Weary reminders of times that were better—as each building lent a shoulder to the other to keep up the facade. When I entered, a hush fell over the café as the regular diners all knew that I was from away. Angela, a child informant was playing with customers when I entered as the café was busy. The café appeared smoke-filled and acrid as this is one of city's smoking restaurants per modification of the city's bylaw. Most of the customers were smoking. I gravitated to the back of the café sitting on a fountain stool near the kitchen. Sam, the owner said "hello" as well as Jenna, his wife. Angela came bouncing across the café eating a sweet, shaped like a pink ice-cream cone which had been given to her by one of the neighbour-customers.

The second family of five individuals, the Yeung family, were café owners who had three participating informants, two adult members and one child, Angela, the eldest child, was just two and half and would soon be entering preschool. Angela became the focal

child as she was just beginning to communicate within her world as she interacted with customers in their small establishment. It was a simple café adorned with sheet tongue and grove paneling with a light chestnut wood veneer. Hanging over the enterprise was an air of a bygone time. The café had very tired paint with furniture reminiscent of a truck stop in a small prairie town complete with a soda fountain faced with low round chrome fountain stools, a relic of the 1950s. In conversational exchanges with customers, Angela used English much like other two and half year old toddlers. But when her father or mother spoke, they exchanged words in Chinese. Unlike the Chan family, the Yeungs served a Canadian menu—hamburgers, hot dogs, fries, apple pie, coffee, pop, and ice cream—to local residents in a seedy neighborhood with lots of rentals of older homes; many of the renters are in transition. *“A restaurant is easy way to make money,” says Jenna. “But it is hard work.”* Essentially, the café functioned liked a “living room” for the family as the children played underfoot with toys or with customers who stopped daily. There was little demarcation between home and work spaces as the daily routines of family life such as eating, socializing with the Chinese community, peddling a tricycle or caring for small children took place in the restaurant. The younger daughter, Erin was placed with a toy in a cardboard packing box in lieu of a commercial playpen and the infant, Danny, lay in a baby carrier on the floor. Moments counted as Sam and Jenna handled food preparation served piping hot and collected bills all the while juggling the bottle feeding of a hungry baby, depositing a plate of French fries to a famished child, or checking on another toddler napping in the back. Life was a frenetic pace for these entrepreneurs 16 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Like the Chans, the Yeungs had to keep their restaurant doors open, *“just in case customers wants to come.”* Inasmuch as this café

had become “a drop-in centred” peopled with “a clientele with time on their hands” who spent their lonely hours sipping coffee, chatting, and smoking as days slipped into other days.

Leaving Guang Zhou, (Canton Province) four and half years ago and a salesman’s job, Sam Yeung came to Canada as a family class immigrant. Already living here was his Aunt and Uncle who owned a Chinese restaurant, with two locations and assisted his immigration. Initially, Sam worked for them and did not take LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) classes. Together he worked three jobs almost round the clock including shifts as a hotel porter, cook, and dishwasher in order to save as much as he could to send for his wife and start his own business. After a year, Jenna, formerly a member of a Cantonese soccer team joined him. Ultimately, they purchased their own café a block away from the Chan’s home. At the beginning of the study, they had three children born in Canada all under age two and one half. Jenna, a self-employed worker, had just returned to work two days after the birth of her youngest child taking her place beside her husband cooking and serving. Above the restaurant, the family lived in a small apartment next to two other apartments that were leased to tenants. The neighbouring houses, rented by working class and welfare families appeared unattended. Along the walkway there were broken beer bottles, cigarette butts, and garbage strewn on the pavement. Daytime maybe relatively quiet but on weekends and warm summer nights the community echoed with the sounds of noisy revellers returning from the bars, bingo halls, and rowdy parties.

Initially, Sam spoke limited English. In the lull of the afternoon between lunch and dinner, I often saw him sitting at a window table in conversational dialogue with the regular

customers. Social conversations were on topics such as the weather, local news, shopping bargains, cars, or sometimes comparing the prices of groceries. Over time, his ability to communicate in English matured. Sam seemed to be appointed the social radar of the entire neighbourhood as customers were continually popping their head through the door to seek information or to ask the whereabouts of regular patrons—*“have you seen . . . ?”* For him, reading was usually the daily English newspaper (in contrast to the Chans) where he read the headlines or scanned the want ads looking for good shopping deals. Additionally, a monthly restaurant magazine, Chinese Restaurant News, provided help with commercial purchases. When he decided to purchase a utility meat slicer, it became a neighborhood event. Neighbour-customers helped him access the yellow pages, the Bargain Finder, the want ads, and maps to find destinations. One of them, who had lots of time to spare, drove around with him to compare prices. Occasionally, he would allude to part of the local news read in the newspaper such as an increase in taxes or a sports team victory. *“Taxes going too high,”* was a frequent social comment to customers. Writing was utilized to list “specials” on the menu board, customer orders, bills, forms, but a daily grocery shopping list was usually written in Chinese (Figure 3). The customers assisted him with the English spellings of signs-i.e. *ham and cheese sandwich \$3.99*. Banking and purchases were by cash as Sam did not write checks, use credit or ATM Bank cards. Like Sam, Jenna could speak some English when entering Canada from China, but could only read or write Chinese. Upon her arrival, she attended an English class (LINC) through the immigrant settlement agency. After completing a level one class she discontinued as it was essential that she work at their restaurant *“to make money”*. *“We learned the English in class. I had no one to talk to at home,”* said Jenna. *“I didn’t learn. In restaurant, it is too busy. No time to talk English to customers.”* In an attempt to remove barriers for new immigrants the local

LINC classes were offered several nights a week. *“No choice. I cannot go. I could not leave the restaurant,”* sighed Jenna *“when restaurant closed, I take care of my family.”*

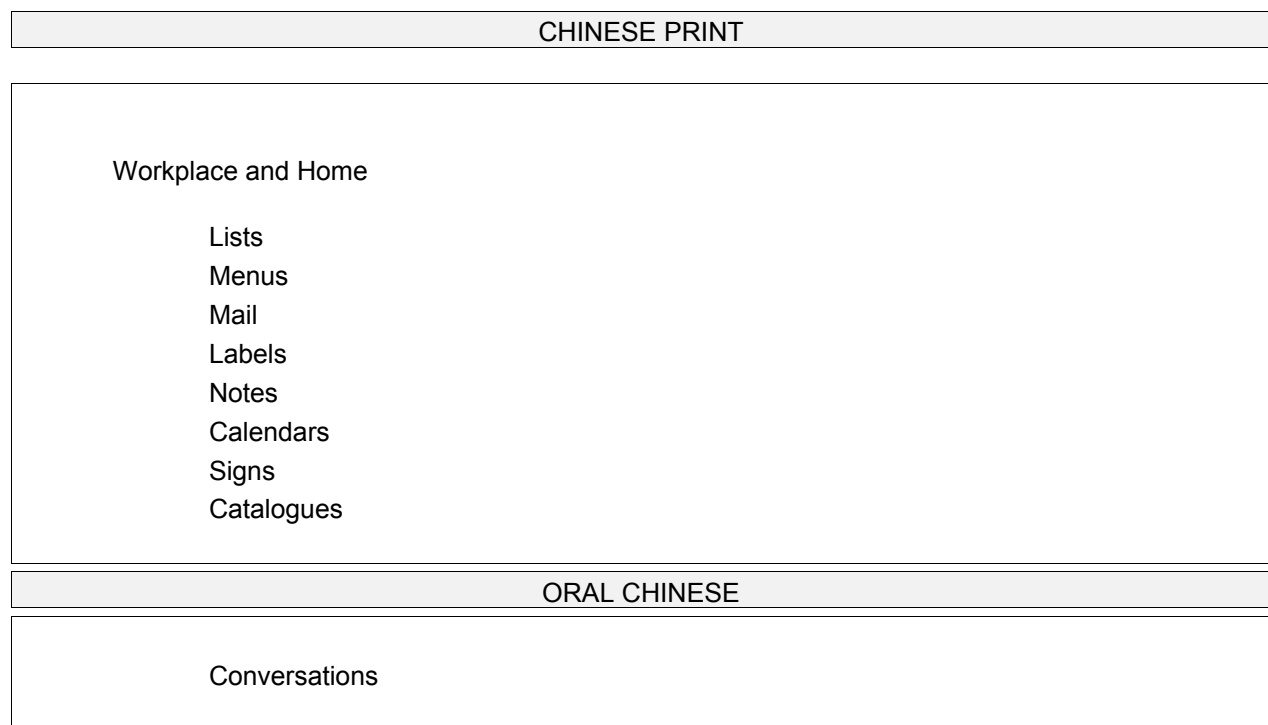


FIGURE 3. Chinese Literacy in the Workplace and Home of the Yeungs

Neighbours as Dialogical Partners

Participant observation within this family provided a “window” on the process of how

young children can become bi-literate when parents are not fluent in English. Like the Chan family, the Yeungs had limited occasions to use English but were not as isolated as they exchanged dialogical interactions with their neighbour-customers who were members of the Aboriginal and mainstream cultures. In sifting through the data, I tried to make a meta-analysis of what was happening in both languages, Chinese and English (Figure 4). In so doing, I did not stand before their social world, for I was standing in the midst of it (McLaren, 1989) trying to make sense of frequent visits. In the Yeung home, literacy served a significant role in accomplishing numerous everyday activities. Rather than purchasing from suppliers, shopping was simplified as they went to the big box stores such as Walmart, Costco Discount, or Superstore where a self-service system made access to goods easier. Since major purchases were under one roof, the Yeungs became astute about comparison pricing and labels. *"I buy children's coats made in Korea in Walmart. Sewing much better. It is colder there than China,"* says Jenna.

ENGLISH PRINT	
Workplace And Home	
	Numeracy
	Bills
	Labels
	Business
	Citizenship Papers
	Pre-school Forms
	Maps
	Receipts
	Magazines
	Telephone Book
	Flyers
	Medicine
	Some Children's Books
	Catalogues
	Restaurant Signs
	Directions
	Accident Reports
	Shopping
	Numeracy
ORAL ENGLISH	
	Greetings
	Teaching Daughter
	Alphabet, Counting, Colors, Labels, Animals
	Radio
	Shopping

FIGURE 4. English Literacy in the Workplace and Home of the Yeungs

Gently Blows the Soft Wind: Angela's Narrative

So how are the Yeung children learning? It was in the restaurant's social space that Angela was growing up as a bilingual and bicultural learner. She was learning to speak English from her daily conversational interactions with the customers and Cantonese from oral exchanges with her parents. Every time I visited the Yeung family restaurant, I would watch Angela crawl up on a chair positioning herself beside a customer to initiate a conversation. Knowing that adults can contribute to children's learning by providing supporting mechanism to help them accomplish tasks within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), I observed attentively. During my early observations of adult assistance in the development of Angela's language competence I noted that she was learning from direct experiences with objects and from discussion and labelling of this encounters. Usually the café was filled with an assortment of time-worn and weathered men who wore sadness across their lined-faces as they sat sipping cups of coffee, refill after refill. As I continued to observe, I noticed that when Angela passed by them, her smile lit up their spirits. It was in watching the interactions between this bubbly little child and the regular neighbour-customers that I renewed my faith in community as a sanctuary. It became clearer that the café was the social world of the community—for both the family and the customers. In between rushed moments Amy's parents talked to the customers, lent snow shovels, helped each other, offered words or empathy, and shared local news reminiscent of the "Cheers Bar" where everyone knew your name.

For a long while, I thought about ways to represent the neighbour-customers. Images of the painter and social historian, Toulouse-Lautrec who captured the moments of Parisian café life came to mind. With caricatures of sharp delineation and oblique

angles, Lautrec preserved for eternity his impressions of these landscapes and the customers who populated them in portraits and sketches of striking originality and power. As the Chinese philosopher Confucius says, “Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it”; I was continually reminded to look thoughtfully. Ethnography as “partial truth” does not move toward abstraction away from life, but moves to restructuring the moments of everyday life experience. The Yeung’s café has been one of the optimal illustrations of intercultural and intergenerational harmony. How, then, could I represent the visual snapshots of the intercultural neighbours who helped a young immigrant family learn language, read the telephone book, scanned maps, spelled words, examined the want ads in the local newspapers, shop effectively, carry in boxes of groceries, and in general provide a conduit of the layers of daily life. It was through these people that I see the goodness of humankind. I viewed the restaurant customers as a “social community” which anchored them and the young immigrant family by tying lives together within the transient world of the social geography. Helping others gave each dignity for it was a way of passing on local funds of knowledge to others, that is reading, shopping tips etc. In these contexts, I considered friendship between and among customers as reciprocal and I treasured watching the experience.

As time passed, the Yeungs were beginning to realize the importance of home literacy practices that prepare children in the language of the culture. Wistfully, Jenna says *“When my children grow-up, they go to university.”* Nested in the area was a neighborhood school that catered to a transient population who were subjected to an “urban pedagogy” a basic inner-city philosophy based on rote learning and little faith in the students’ abilities. This was the same school that the Chan children attended. Anxious that her oldest

daughter's life did not echo her own, "*a life of hard work*," Jenna enrolled her in a preschool several kilometres away in a better neighborhood. Her hope was that the little girl might grasp opportunities that might be otherwise missed if she attended the local community school that had been problematic for the Chans. Already, Angela had expectations about school. She expressed the language of anticipation as she talked about attending school next year. She knew toys were in the classroom and she would sing her ABCs to her teacher. A year later when Angela went to a preschool, she was successful in extending her own language and in time, teaching English to her younger sister, Ellen. Whenever the neighbour-customers asked Ellen a question, Angela would speak first, "*Say this, Ellen, a red jacket*" as she negotiated with her sister to echo in response. In time, she assumed the same teacher role with her baby brother, Danny.

The Yeung restaurant was a hub of activity as Sam and Jenna juggled multiple roles, cooking and serving customers, billing and totalling receipts while caring for their new born son. The café was open seven days a week from 8 A.M. to 10 PM and, like the Chan family, the Yeungs did all the work themselves and never employed outside help. While her parents were busy, Angela circulated through the café socializing with the customers. Her sunny smile and her lively laughter lightened up everyone's day. Customers smiled at her or engage in an interchange, "*How is Angela today?*" Angela regularly played cards with her "team-mates," two physically challenged males customers who met at the café every morning to have coffee and toast while engaging in card games. In the course of the card playing, both men held up the cards to quiz Angela's growing understanding of numbers. Usually, their game began with Angela picking some cards from the pile and her team players would then ask: "*What number do you have?*" Angela would try to guess.

She would lift her finger in the air and pointed to the objects—hearts, diamonds, spades, or clubs and counted aloud. “*One-four-seven*,” she would call in delight. If unsuccessful, they would tell her: “*It’s three! Say three.*” Drawing another card, they would continue, “*That one is four. Say four.*” Angela repeated after them: “*That’s three.*” “*That’s four.*” Then she placed the card back on the table, picked out more new cards and the game started all over again. After a few rounds, Angela would take a turn and asked one of the card players to choose some cards. Imitating the language structure, it was her chance to question them: “*What number have you got?*” With a squeal, she yelled out before they had a time to respond, “*It’s thre-e-e. Say three.*” Occasionally, the questions switched to colors. One of her intergenerational friends would hold up a card and asked: “*What color did you get?*” “*Red!*” Angela answered.

According to Cazden (1983) this adult-child language learning interchange is scaffolding where the adult supports and extends the learning. With each new utterance, Angela’s card partners provided vertical constructions by asking her for additional new information. “*What do you see?*” These examples also demonstrated modelling, another important form of adult assistance in children’s language development. The two customers not only deliberately routinized the game, but also tried to model the language pattern. Through language play, her own experimentations, conversations with the customers, and sheer trial and error, Angela was learning about the world around her and the language needed to discuss, describe, and think about each experience. At the beginning of the study she was combining two-word and three-words into telegraphic sentences in which she used as few as words as possible to express her ideas. “*Me two and half*” Gradually through scaffolding, modeling and direct instruction (Cazden, 1983) provided by the

neighbour-customers, she began to produce longer sentences such as “*I have five people in my family.*” Part of her growth was learning how to talk and think about concrete objects. Thus, the adults in the café like many parents, responded to her speech or scaffolded by adding to what she said and extending her immature sentences. In describing the emptying of her soup dish, Angela swiftly proceeded from “*no more*” to connected discourse such “*There is no more soup in my bowl. It’s all gone.*” These expansions or elaborations helped Angela develop the complexity of her language.

Once I bought her the book, Brown bear, brown bear, what did you see? (Martin, 1983) which I selected because of its repetitive phrases or questions which naturally invites young children such as her to join in the repeated chant. Initially, I read the book to her showing her the large bold collage pictures which were a visual accompaniment that functions as a graphic context. Very quickly, she caught the pattern for the question in the title was put to a large brown bear who replied that he saw a redbird looking at him. The question was then directed at the redbird, “*Redbird, redbird, what do you see?*” He sees a yellow duck, who in turns, see a blue horse etc. After reading the book to her several times, Angela could predict most of the words. Sometimes she anticipated the sequence and chimed out the words before the page was turned: “*Purple horse!*” Sam and Jenna listened to how I read pausing so Angela could guess the unfolding meaning and they quickly caught the tone. They practiced the story with her whenever they could spare a moment in the quiet spaces between refilling a coffee cup or fetching more ketchup for a customer’s plateful of fries. Once, upon my return to my university office I found a message on my voice mail from Sam. It was an inquiry inquiring about the English name of the green animal in the book (the green frog). “*Linda, what is the green animal called*

in the book?"

Angela heard language that is directed to her and surrounding her, as her family and customers went about its daily life. As she became more proficient with language, she had much she wanted to say and experimented eagerly. It is much more difficult for children to think about abstract concepts such words like *here*, *on top of*, *into* which are words that represent context-dependent, spatial and temporal concepts—distance, time, space, spatial relationships. As time went by, sentences expanded sometimes beyond those of her parents as increasingly she used more abstract words. Angela was swiftly learning the pragmatics of interpersonal communication. When customers left, she waved a good-bye and said: *"Be careful of the ice on the step! Watch out! It will make you slip!"* Angela's oral language evolved through her social interaction within the familiar surroundings of the restaurant as she experimented with the English adults around her, customers and her Chinese speaking parents, gradually approximating adult usage.

But talk alone was not enough to understand how Angela organized concepts and developed her language. Since Angela has few toys (second-hand donations from customers), I noted that there were limited opportunities for her to expand, organize, and clarify her perceptual impressions and relate language beyond social talk. So, I decided that on my visits I would bring a bag of creative and constructive toys—crayons, markers, paper, magnetic alphabets, and books to build one-to-one play encounters with her. From past experiences, I knew that it is through play that children talk about what is, what was, and what can be. Reality is suspended for a moment in time for play negotiates through concepts, thoughts and language.

Gradually, Angela gained familiarity with markers, crayons, and pens. While

drawing with me, she began to develop "motor schemes" for drawing shapes and lines. In order for Angela to make circles, dots, or lines on a page where they intend them to go, she had to learn to control her movements through experimenting starting with shaky lines. As her crayons moved over the page, she learned to make back and forth marks, round-and-round lines, and jagged shapes. Through repeated exploration, she was soon able to make circle-like shapes and single lines. During most of routines that initiated drawing as social interaction, Angela would often say, "*can you draw a house,*" or "*make my family.*" Usually, I suggested that she draw instead, but she would reply, "*No, you draw.*" Angela and I engaged in a "command-a-picture" routine where she often named a word or object as I drew willingly. Often Angela learned to label her lines and shapes in what Gardner (1980) called *romancing* in contrast to accurate or representational drawings. In this routine, Angela would draw with no seeming intention to create something specific or meaningful. When finished, she labelled her creation as a face or a person or assigned meaning to it in this way, "*See my face.*" Angela knew that she could not only name her drawings but the drawings can also be representations of things.

The Yeungs learned to be more effective parent-educators. Much learning took place on a moment-to-moment basis, including those processes that are deliberate, systematic, and sustained (such as good manners "*Thank you very much*") and those fleeting actions that take place at the margins of awareness (making shopping lists). On the cusp of learning about the print world, Jenna had initiated the learning of the alphabet by teaching Angela the ABC song from rote memory. To help contextualize the letter names and their frequency in environmental print, either Jenna or Sam would capture the moment by pointing to a pop bottle, "*What letter is this?*" "C", she says for a Canada Dry

soft drink. Letter names and numbers were practiced at every opportunity from looking for “A” for Angela in some magnetic alphabets to finding it in labels on food, jars, and cans or counting fingers or buttons on her shirt. In seeing “a” in Cola, she did not see “a” as representing the sound of the letter “a” or even as a letter. Angela told her father that the letter “a” was “*one of mine*” meaning it appeared in Angela’s name. Eventually, she began to “pretend” to write the alphabets. When children intend to write letters even though those letters include mock letters, children’s talk about their writing reveals their metalinguistic awareness, that is talk about their knowledge of language. When finished writing the mock letters from left to right, she wrote her mock numbers in what I initially thought was a similar way. “1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13!” But there was a difference. As I observed her and listened to her, I found that she was writing her numbers from top to bottom which is similar to the way Chinese characters are written, something her parents always did each day as they add items to their ongoing grocery list which is tucked away under counter. By her fourth birthday, Angela was well on a pathway to understanding English literacy as she was mock reading, assembling 50 piece puzzles, and writing notes and in turn negotiating her little sister’s and baby brother’s learning which was replicated from her new preschool.

Exploring the World Through Play

Lazy summer days are for me special days in the sun and fresh air. On many of these occasions, I invited the Yeungs to come with me and my four year old granddaughter to a local park where there were swings, monkey bars, sandboxes, and slides colourfully painted in primary colors. They were reluctant at first to join me because unbeknown to me they thought that it would cost too much money to get into the park. Although they had

been in Canada a number of years they had not realized that, unlike China, playgrounds for children and splash pools had free admission for everybody. They had not valued the type of play that mainstream Canadians did. *“Toys are a waste of money,”* said Jenna, *“they do not last very long.”*

Unlike Kent, Angela seldom watched TV because the only black and white TV they had in the café was never turned on. Thus, she was not growing up with TV playmates such as Barney, Sesame Street characters or the Teletubbies while here parents worked long hours. Angela spent most of her day with customers, playing games or chatting. It was through the continual interaction and negotiation with the customers that she has learned the semantic and syntactical structures of the English language. As she now is age four, she was already able to differentiate the two language systems for she knows where and with whom to use them. When speaking to parents and her extended family members, she used Chinese; she used English to interact with the customers and others who are not her family members. Her contact with print such as letters on a bottle, in a flyer, or in books, cards, and papers has assisted her development of metalinguistic awareness about written language. She knew books open new worlds. When Jenna preregistered Angela for a preschool that was out of their inner-city district, she made a critical educational decision. Angela was going to be attending a middle-class school and taking a new identity lived in and through social activity. According to Holland et al. (1998), identity is conceptualized through social practice. As they participated in a bi-cultural world, the Yeungs emphasized an “additive identity” that is different from the Chans, that is, they are Chinese Canadians rather than Chinese living in Canada. There seemed to be a balance for the Yeungs but what will the future hold? They have now sold their restaurant and purchased another in

a small prairie town several hours from the city. Once again, they will be the only Chinese family in the new community. The small town will be a safe place to raise their children but it may be the most assimilative force the Yeungs will experience as they attempt to negotiate their identity, language, and culture.

Lessons Learned

Linguistic minority families integrate at different rates into the dominant social and cultural life of modern industrial societies. The less acquainted families are with a pluralistic, complexly literate, technologically sophisticated society, the greater the time needed for integration. Thus, while the Chan and Yeung families who come from the same country may share overall characteristics of language and culture, they may differ in their understanding of how the host society and its institutions operate (Trueba, 1989, p. 12). In spite of the complexities that emerge when focussing on the contentious issues of immigration-- disruption in language, ethnicity, culture and marginalization-- I wanted to make sure I did not overlook the legitimate difficulties that so many immigrant children confront in their educational experiences. Too often, those children who experienced dissonance in school can too easily become casualties of educational systems that cannot "see" them because their problems remain invisible.

As a researcher, I moved beyond describing just the immigration statistics in the prairies (Lamba, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000) or Chinese immigrants as a group (Li, 1998). I complemented these studies by exploring a broader territory as I sought to understand the emerging literate lives of two Chinese immigrant families. Not only was I hoping to describe their new lives in a new language and culture, but I was trying to offer a

meaningful and compassionate portrait of what it means to live “in between” and to move within the liminal spaces between Canadian and Chinese cultures. I expect this study will unmask the in-depth realities of these families’ negotiations as they integrate within the community, school, and business society. As a researcher, I am drawn to critical ethnography that foregrounds the question of social inequality vis-à-vis the lives lived of families and children. I share Fine’s (1992) belief that unless researchers are willing to take an activist stance and provoke change, “we collude in producing social silences through the social sciences (p. 206).” Rather than speaking for my participants and to other researchers, I am trying to accept an added research task of raising consciousness to speak to an audience on behalf of them. Reflecting upon the literacy experiences of the Chan and Yeung families, family class immigrants, I found that several intersecting factors affect their literacy learning experiences. These factors included urban settlement patterns, mothers as teachers, business pathways, immigration status, and traditional learning environments.

First of all, the settlement pattern of the two families determined to some extent their learning environments but it was also relative to their economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). While some Chinese immigrants might join integrated “uptown” neighbourhoods, many come to experience Canadian culture from the vantage point of poor urban neighbourhoods. Lamba, Mulder and Wilkinson, (2000) state that the comparatively larger proportion of immigrants from Southeast Asia living on the Prairies who use English less suggest that settlement patterns may not be the same in smaller cities as in larger ones (p. 114). Wong & Ng (1998) indicates that the social geography of settlement can result in access to differing learning opportunities. Immigrants who settle in an ethnic enclave may

have fewer possibilities to speak and practice English and less need or motivation to learn the target language. While I cannot generalize to all immigrants, I found that the Chan family settled in the hub of old China town area making them highly dependent on their extended kinship network as a dialogical community (Bakhtin, 1981). There were fewer occasions for them to access English and use it in their day-to-day communication.

For this reason, I do not see differences and diversity within children by looking at individual skill deficits or gaps in learning, but in identifying the access and availability of cultural and linguistic resources that children bring to the classroom (Neuman & Celano 2001). Traditionally, we viewed literacy as a psychological phenomenon where we tended to define school problems in terms of what children lacks. Instead, a sociological approach focuses on the kinds of cultural capital, that is, the discourses, language, and practices that children have had access to and practice with in their communities. These resources of cultural practice are the intersections of participation and membership in particular cultural and interpretive communities, not of simple individual difference. Both the Chans and the Yeungs maintained family values, the cultural capital that Chinese immigrants bring on their backs and in their hearts from their homeland. But cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) was not sufficient for the Chan family as the school did not acknowledge the kinds of knowledge and experiences that Janine and Kent possessed. Did they fail because they didn't fit in? Or was it a lack of access to school type literacies?

Two factors significantly contributed to the Yeung's success in language learning: the negotiations and engagement between the Yeungs and the neighbour-customers who enjoyed teaching and assisting them. The dialogical network of neighbour-customers served as *institutional agents* (Nieto, 1999), that is, individuals who helped the family

negotiate resources and opportunities including information about language, managing a business, and conducting their daily living. These networks were pathways to power and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), a resource entangled with economic and political privilege which was not available in their family community. Without dismissing their Chinese ethnicity, the Yeungs began to identify with Canadian society as they learned an additive “Discourse” (Gee, 1990), the discourse of power. To be successful, Sam and Jenna needed to learn, feel comfortable in, and claim as their own, the discourse of the new home in which they lived and did business. In this way, they were able to develop the social capital needed for assimilation without acculturation which was convertible to economic capital. The Chans established a dialogical community within a social network that was exclusively Chinese. They were not able to make substantive pathways to the new culture which resulted in their social inflexibility and isolation in Canada.

Secondly, the business pathways of the two families had considerable impact on their language learning. Assuming a capitalist pathway, self-owned restaurant work was labour intensive with an emphasis on considerable investment in human productivity. Lack of time curtailed their flexibility within the society. The Chan family chose to cater to Chinese customers. The ambiance in the Chan restaurant offered little motivation for the Chans to gain knowledge of English--they do not need to. Like the Chans, the Yeungs purchased an established restaurant, one that they could afford. In contrast, the Yeung family chose to serve simple Western foods which attracted non-Chinese customers who were English speakers. The opening of their own restaurant pressed Sam and Jenna to learn and use survival English phrases like, “*more coffee?*” Whereas the English classes that Jenna attended geared her to learn language for “school purposes,” the dialogical

community created in the restaurant helped her imbue language with social meanings. As Bakhtin, (1986) states “we know . . . language. . .not from dictionaries and grammars but from concrete utterances that we hear and that we ourselves reproduce in live speech communication with people around us” (p. 78). As luck would have it, the neighbour customers were supportive and had time to chat.

Unfolding throughout the data was the gendered perspective of what it means to be an immigrant mother whose life is isolated from English, the language of opportunity. The necessity to contribute to family support, often finds mothers like Kay and Jenna in low-paying jobs with little or no access to services provided for new immigrants with limited English proficiency. Both mothers had some experience with English in Chinese schooling, were enrolled in ESL classes in Canada but choose to terminate these classes to take jobs that would bring the family some sort of early economic independence. *“I did not know life in Canada would be so hard,”* sighed Jenna, *“I would have learned more English. If I did, I could teach my kids. I want to be a good mother.”* From the perspective of these families, the study revealed that the English classes may have little practical components for learning the language in more functional social contexts for these women were isolated from mainstream activities. For the family’s collective survival, owning one’s own business and being economically independent was more important than the individual achievement of learning a new language or doing women’s activities. Over and over, both women told me they were exhausted from this tangle of a lifestyle juggling work and child-rearing. *“I work hard so my children will have a good life,”* articulates Jenna *“I get little sleep or time alone for myself.”* Unlike Canadian women who benefit from social programs such as maternity leave, assisted child care, pay equity, and regulated work breaks, these self-

employed mothers were not eligible for any worker's benefits. Immigration did not give the women freedom. *"I had friends in China. I used to go out in China,"* says Jenna, *"but now I stay and live in the restaurant."* Both mothers were always on duty whether it is tending a sick child in the nighttime or serving a hungry customer. But among immigrant-class women, there's never a question about being strong; women work alongside their husbands doing what they can when their livelihood was at stake. Jenna and Kay did not ask questions about themselves and their well-being like mainstream women often do. *"I don't think of myself. I think of making a life for the family,"* states Jenna. They also were lamenting the fact that *"I couldn't do it all,"* that is have business success and a motherhood role that prepared their children for linguistic success and hence buffering the hegemonic practices of school.

Hope Still Flickers

Thirdly, this study is grounded in the framework of previous studies of family literacy practices which suggested that families must discover how best to create educational paths for their children. As in Gibson's study of Punjabi families (1987) who blended or "acculturate" their ways with the dominant culture the Yeung family does the same. The view that education was a means of economic and social mobility is held in common by both families. Both women were aware that Chinese children were often considered the model minority with a high achievement record in North American schools. Although both families realize the values of school achievement, they recognized that they lack the skills necessary to actualize their aspirations for their children (Borman, 1998).

Immigrant children are a growing sector of the school population; policy interventions

and funding decisions must be attuned to their special needs. Not surprisingly, I found that schools were indifferent to one of these families and their needs as there was no intervention interaction with the families, home visits, nor orientation to expected literacy practices. This family did not query or contest the culture of power that prevails in school, this is not a Chinese way. Instead, they naively believed that school was a location of equal justice and that their children would be taught fairly by the institution. This was not always so. In reality, **jihui** (life chances) are socially conditioned to a greater extent than determined by individual effort. In their case, literacy was the barrier as well as the invitation to mainstream Canadian life. Although the children in the study were Canadian born, they were not growing up in a print-rich society as defined by schools. The children's experiences showed that print was present to an individual only to the extent that it is used by members of their social-cultural network. Within the Chan and Yeung families, print did not exist independent of experience for it was embedded in their working-life literacies. The presence of print in the home of these families did not mean that it was present for them in the same way that print is present for middle-class families in the Canadian mainstream something that schools usually assume. I cannot essentialize for not all children learn concepts about written language before they come to school. But I do know from years of classroom-based research addressing children coming to school not fluent in English (Wason-Ellam: 1999, 1997, 1995, 1993, 1992) that schools use a narrow definition of literacy. Traditional education has been the means of privileging the dominant culture. Students such as Janine and Kent did not have the cultural capital schools use as currency and were at a disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1977). This means that groups outside of the mainstream may live in a different world from those on the inside thus making it more

difficult to achieve by the standards set out by the hegemonic system. As McLaren (1989) points out: “the school’s academic credentials remain indissolubly linked to an unjust system of trading in cultural capital which is eventually transformed into economic capital (p. 191).

I agree with McLaren (1989) when he argues that schools must be institutions of justice so that all children will learn rather than be the sites of oppression or sorting stations where children from minorities and low-literacy homes are denied the same access as others. I believe that expectations must be raised for immigrant, ESL, or LEP (Limited English Proficiency) children like Janine so that they have opportunities to become fully literate. I recognized that there are many cultural norms working against seeing immigrant children such as these in such a way that takes their experiences into account. Often policy-makers live in isolation from immigrant children and experienced parents who share with us what their children are like. As politicians and government agencies ask for a report card on schools— asking how well are our learners doing in standardized tests and assessments-- they have little idea of the vast literacy experiences of the ESL or LEP children we teach and the way they think and learn. I recognize that society values intellectual development or getting the correct answers to tests above all else and tends to ignore other aspects of development and learning such as the connections between students local, racial, ethnic, cultural, or global identities and how they are acculturating into society. As an educator, I am continually standing my ground. I know that when we perceive the whole child, and how he or she unfolds then our choices for teaching will have coherence and will be tailored to what an ESL child needs next.

I believe that the link between learning English and “acculturating to a society” rests

on a reductionist assumption that speaking English equals integration. Canadian society is not monoculture. Reducing culture to the acquisition of a second language overlooks the depth of what culture is in terms of values and social practices. Culture is multi-dimensional. In one realm it is the skills and competencies that are needed to make a living and be a contributing member of society. On another realm, it is the values, worldviews, shared understandings, and a sense of belonging. Over the course of the research, it was obvious that immigrant parents such as the Chans resist a whole array of cultural models and social practices in the layers of the mainstream culture such as resisting authority, teen autonomy, or rock music and sexually precocious apparel which are the socially accepted peer norms which were continually waxing and waning according to consumer and media trends.

Finally, the immigrants' stories of experience informed me that although there are many settlement services for new residents in Saskatchewan, family class immigrants were not eligible. I hope that this study will raise social awareness in an effort to negate the oppressive influences that lead to the unnecessary social domination of these newcomers to Canada. I agree with Nieto (1999) that schools need to shift their perspective to make the culturally different child the curriculum, not reading and writing. This means knowing the learner, his or her background, ways of looking at the world, and the contexts in which he or she lives. From that understanding, the school can help integrate experience with literacy, and the learner can use literacy to extend experience. When literacy is approached in this way, the learner sees texts not as fixed and separate but as a way of constructing knowledge. If a child happens to be ESL or LEP, then policy needs to be in place to assist them not matter where they were born. As an educator I have come to recognize that

each child is a literacy of one. While children may share certain abilities and knowledge, they also celebrate the different ways they know. As each child is unique, so too is their literacy. The more we affirm uniqueness of individual children, the more we recognize their ethnicity, the significance in the richness of those differences. There are many families and there are many literacies. My hope is that for the Chan and the Yeung families as well as other immigrant families “ *The wind will always be at their backs.* ”

Notes

¹ To protect anonymity and confidentiality, all names used in the study are pseudonyms.

² Mark and Laura, both first cousins, died during the course of the study in a tragic accident. I will always remember them.

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