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Unpacking mundane practices

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Unpacking mundane practices: Children's experiences of learning literacy at a Chinese Complementary School in Scotland.

Abstract

This article builds on the growing research interest in complementary schooling in England and internationally but a field of study less well trodden in Scotland. It takes a socio-cultural view of literacy learning and demonstrates how in a Chinese complementary school in central Scotland spaces are created for children of primary school age to participate in multifarious literacy practices. Drawing on observations of three classrooms supported by interviews with teachers and conversations with children it is argued that there is need to re-examine the assumption of mundane pedagogical practices frequently associated with learning Chinese literacy. It illustrates how activities around reading and writing are often as not a product of the teachers' own experiences of education but are also influenced by the children who draw on a range of bilingual and biliterate resources at their disposal. Furthermore the study highlights the need for further research in the Scottish context to investigate how children's engagement with diverse literacies help shape their emerging and dynamic learner identities.

Keywords complementary schools, community languages, Chinese literacy, culture of learning, pedagogy

Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been an increasing understanding that literacy is not simply a narrow cognitive skills-based process but literacy is determined by the homes, communities and institutions in which individuals are socialised (Heath, 1983). The interwoven nature of literacy and cultural practices, Gee (1990: 43) believes, is 'part of the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs'. Street (1994) also looked beyond the traditional boundaries of reading and writing and considered literacy as an ideological phenomenon. That is, he considered

a multiplicity of literacies, embedded in specific cultural contexts and social practices in the home and the community and claimed that these practices are always associated with relations of power and politics.

This study also takes a socio-cultural orientation on literacy and explores the nature of pedagogic practices in a Chinese complementary school in the central belt of Scotland and the subsequent impact on primary school aged children's experiences with biliteracy learning. The article concurs with Li Wei and Wu's (2010: 34) assertion that there is a need to unravel the view of teaching of literacy 'through what seem to be mundane pedagogical activities in the Chinese complementary context'. A series of teaching episodes are drawn on to illustrate the interplay that exists between on the one hand Scottish-Chinese children's transformative learning identities and on the other hand the teachers' diverse conceptions of learning and teaching shaped by their own experiences of education coupled with their desire to stimulate an interest in learning Chinese literacy. It is argued that these multiple position takings creates flexible spaces for not only traditional and routine cultural literacy practices frequently associated with learning the Chinese script but also a less rigid pedagogy where teachers' and children's perceptions of teaching and learning come into contact.

Related Research

Recent years have seen a spate of scholarly activity acknowledging the important educational and social role of complementary schools in both England (Lytra and Martin, 2010) and internationally (Brinton *et al*., 2008). These studies cover a broad range of linguistic minority communities and provide windows on issues such as language choice, the fusion of cultures of learning, dynamic literacy practices and children's changing identities. However, studies of the complementary school phenomena in Scotland remain thin on the ground.

The establishment and continued expansion of the complementary school sector in the United Kingdom (UK) is viewed as a direct result of a system of linguistic apartheid in tandem with prevailing monolingual state language policies (Li Wei,

2006) and represents attempts of concerned parents to organize classes themselves in order to develop their children's heritage languages and literacy.

McPake (2006), who has conducted the only mapping exercise of complementary schools in Scotland, has shown that the extent and nature of such provision are very variable. While there are some excellent initiatives, and the level of commitment among providers is high, much of the provision is poorly resourced as community members pursue limited grants subjected to the vagaries of local council budgets. Meanwhile, analysts such as Cummins (2000) caution against 'romanticising' the learning of community languages when heritage languages are marginalized from mainstream education and issues of academic underachievement and structural inequalities are glossed over.

That said, these weekend and evening schools serve a vital role in developing children's social capital through participation in shared cultural activities. This peer networking is especially important in the areas of Scotland where minority families are geographically isolated. Notably, these complementary schools have created safe spaces where teachers and children draw on a range of resources at their disposal to engage in fluid language and literacy practices (Creese *et al.* 2006). Consequently literacies are not static but syncretic where cross-cultural encounters and negotiations characterized by power differentials co-exist to create children's new and creative biliterate identities (Gregory *et al*. 2004; Kenner, 2004).

Within the growing corpus of qualitative research conducted in complementary schools a number of authors have concentrated on the Chinese community. Gregory (1993) was the first to highlight the potential mismatch that existed between approaches to teaching and learning literacy at a weekend Chinese School. This was characterized by an emphasis on attention to detail when writing Chinese characters, reading recitation and limited peer interaction in the Chinese school classrooms. Whereas An Ran (1999) found children were more participative in complementary language classes compared to mainland China and also indicated points of similarity between the complementary and mainstream sectors such as reading aloud in groups, opportunities for children to ask questions when talking around texts and grammar

exercises related to texts. Meanwhile Li Wei (1994) concentrated on language shift in the Cantonese-speaking community in Newcastle upon Tyne and later examined the influence of social network patterns and the changing proficiency of children's spoken Cantonese and written Chinese (Li Wei, 2000).

Francis *et al.* (2009) looked at the interwoven relationship between language and identity and explored the role of Chinese schools in supporting British-Chinese children's socially and culturally constructed diasporic learner identities. An interesting finding within this study was the young people identified a range of practices within Chinese schools that supported their learning such as the competition and reward culture and greater teacher involvement due to smaller classes. Wu (2006) discovered a diverse group of teachers across a range of Chinese schools who relied on their own school experiences when teaching - but these approaches differed from what the students experience in British mainstream schools. This synergy created contested spaces where both teachers and students negotiated a new 'culture of learning' in their classrooms. Similarily, Wei and Wu (2010) described the 'socialisation teaching of literacy' and demonstrated how a focus on literacy activities which emphasises cultural traditions and values can act as a catalyst for the generation of competing notions of language and cultural heritage between teachers and the younger generation.

The prestigious nature of Chinese literacy is frequently stressed in Chinese children's lives and knowledge of the script is viewed as an integral part of their cultural identity (Author, 2006). Chinese people take pride in being able to master the script and for a person 'to be Chinese in a proper sense, he or she must also be a fully literate person' (Verma and Mallik, 1999: 32). As such it is not surprising that in a survey of school students in the east of Scotland the students of Chinese heritage (compared to other minority groups) were the most likely to attend complementary schools (McPake, 2004). Moreover, Li Wei (2000) believes that the distinctiveness of Chinese writing system (more so than spoken language) plays a symbolic role for unifying the Chinese diaspora settled in Britain.

Learning the Chinese script is to participate in deeply rooted historical and cultural practices including the rote learning and appreciation of classical texts (Lau, 2007); learning brush calligraphy and stroke order rules (Law *et al*., 1998); learning the pictographic origins of characters (Lee, 2008) and memorizing a vast number of complex character configurations (Shu and Anderson, 1999; McBride-Chang and Chen, 2003). Furthermore, this literary tradition still resonates with teachers and the acquisition of Chinese literacy is inextricably bound to philosophical and pedagogic approaches to teaching and learning in Confucius-heritage societies (Watkins and Biggs, 2001; Hu, 2002; Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). These inherited methodologies are frequently conceptualized as 'rigid and non-motivating' (Curdt-Christianson, 2006: 204) and generally involve teacher-dominated classroom discorse, memorizing and reciting texts from core textbooks, disciplined self-study, frequent practice and adherence to regular tests.

However, Ma Qing (2011:167) cautions against interpreting these culturally rooted teaching methodologies simplistically and draws on the example of Confucius who had a critical and questioning mind in respect to learning. The purpose of the research, therefore, is to interrogate the notion of mundane practices (Li Wei and Wu, 2010) by viewing the complementary school as an ecology of practice where both teachers and children navigate prevailing pedagogical ideologies. A series of teaching episodes are drawn on to shed light on both the centrality of traditional Chinese literacy practices but also instances where children play out their fluid learner identities by drawing on the range of flexible bilingual and biliteracy skills and knowledge.

The Research

The Chinese School at the centre of this research was founded in 1985 and is a registered charity. The School provides classes for two hours on a Sunday morning for over seventy children and young people of school age from a wide geographical area. Cantonese or Hakka is usually the spoken variety of Chinese used in the home but for most of them English has become their primary language of literacy after starting formal education in Scotland. Despite the increasing number of parents

opting for their children to attend Putonghua classes as a consequence of changing language policies in Hong Kong[1] (Bray and Koo, 2004) and China's increasingly important economic position in the commercial world, Cantonese still remains more popular among the parents at this Chinese school because most parents, now settled in central Scotland, originate from Hong Kong or the Cantonese speaking southern provinces of mainland China (such as Guangdong). For this reason the lesson observations detailed in this section focus only on the Cantonese classes.

Although second generation Scottish-Chinese make up the majority of the school population the heterogeneous nature of the learners (in terms of attitudes and motivation) means the children bring with them varied dispositions to learning literacies (Strand, 2007). Unlike some Chinese schools in Scotland which teach from the Chinese textbooks designed by Ji Nan University in China the Central Scotland Chinese school uses textbooks developed and supplied by the United Kingdom Federation of Central Scotland Chinese Schools (UKFCS) and the eight classes are structured around these core books. The UKFCS felt it was necessary to develop materials which could, culturally and linguistically, meet the needs of Chinese children living in Britain and learning Chinese part-time at complementary schools.

In common with other Chinese schools there is a strong tradition of providing extra-curricular activities after classes to support the socialising needs of Chinese children and the transmission of Chinese cultural knowledge. Some of these cultural activities have a strong association with traditional literacy skills such as calligraphy, learning and reciting Chinese poetry and preparation for choral speaking competitions.

Eight teachers and the head teacher participated in the research and their responses remain anonymous since concerns were expressed about confidentiality. Similar to Wu's study (2006:71) the identities of the teachers varied a great deal and they brought different attitudes and beliefs about learning in their classrooms. While all the teachers' commitment to the school and children's literacy development is

evident, they vary a great deal in terms of age, employment, linguistic histories, qualifications and teaching experience. Only one of the teachers is male. Two of the teachers have taught in Hong Kong but only the head teacher teaches in mainstream education. One of the teachers has experience of teaching both Putonghua and Cantonese whilst all the other teachers teach through the medium of Cantonese. None of the teachers has a community language qualification. As noted by Tsow as far back as 1984, and more recently by Wu (2006) one of the main challenges of part-time Chinese schools is finding suitably experienced and trained teachers. The Central Scotland Chinese School is no exception, and relies heavily on volunteer parents (especially mothers) and postgraduate university students to fill the posts.

Detailed observations were drawn from three classes: grade three, four, and five. Similar to other Chinese schools classes are organized according to children's language and literacy competence rather than age but for convenience the study focuses on the children who are 8-10 years of age. Each classroom visit was paired with a bilingual research facilitator. Assigning a key data collection role over to a third person raises questions of inconsistent data and the challenges of working with two layers of interpretation. However steps where taken to minimize this by ensuring debriefing conferences in which field-notes and individual accounts were cross-checked, verified and finalized after each lesson. In fact these interactions and reflections become tools in themselves for generating knowledge as observations and 'ways of knowing' in different cultural and institutional contexts were shared, explored and debated (Creese *et al*. 2008). Crane *et al*. (2009) talk of the collaborative process and the creation of 'hybrid spaces' that exist between researchers and research facilitators operating in multilingual contexts which:

> involves moments of friction and hesitation, and it is this particular moment where our thinking is challenged by new ideas and thoughts – be it while speaking with an interpreter, while reflecting on our positionality or while striving to transfer meaning from one culture into another – that moves things forward in constructive way.
>
> (Crane *et al.,* 2009: 52)

Chinese literacy lessons and pedagogical perspectives

In this section a series of teaching episodes are described and analysed to demonstrate the variety of interactions around reading and writing that takes place across three classrooms in the Chinese complementary school.

Example 1: Reading rituals and the ideology of texts

The first example deals with the grade five class reading *The story of Li Po*[2] [李白 的故事] from the text book and reflects the common routine practice of children reading aloud. The following field notes illustrate the sequence of events during the reading activity:

> T explains the new characters written on the blackboard and leads the children to read the characters in chorus. T asks children to repeat characters again making sure pronunciation and intonation are correct. Some children write English transcriptions next to these characters.

> T asks children to memorise the characters and pay close attention to their strokes and structure. She gives some oral examples of how the characters can be used in phrases and sentences

> T reads the text aloud sentence by sentence and the whole class repeats in unison after her.

> T asks questions (in Cantonese) and checks the children's comprehension of the story. Children put up their hands and respond appropriately.

> One at a time individual children are asked to read a sentence aloud. T carefully monitors the children's reading and supplies unknown characters when the children hesitate. At times T cups her hand over her ear and says [再講一次] "repeat" and walks closer to the child to check pronunciation.

> Some children read along with their peers also helping out when there is hesitation. One boy at the front plays with a toy car on the desk and recites the text from memory without looking at his book.

> T intersperses the reading with positive feedback and praise. T makes sure every child contributes a sentence.

> Reading proficiency varies a great deal from youngest children sitting at the front who read fluently from memory whilst some of the older children at the rear of class lack confidence and are hesitant in their reading.

> T has friendly rapport with children. Classroom climate is relaxed yet the reading lesson remains productive and purposeful.

According to Li (2009) this traditional reading ritual, illustrated above, is generally embedded in the belief that children will improve their reading ability indirectly through intensive recitation of the texts. Although some mainstream educators may frown upon the practice of reading aloud in chorus, Perera (1987) believes this literacy-enhancing activity helps children develop an ear for the language. Furthermore trying out different registers (for example, formal recitation) and exposure to different literacy structures increases the power and flexibility of the child's oral repertoire (Alexander, 2003).

The lesson above also illustrates how the habit of reading aloud (evident at all stages in the Chinese school) allows the teacher to check pronunciation. Of the nine basic tones of Cantonese, six are commonly used and changing the pitch level can alter the meaning of the character. Thus one of the challenges for the children (and the teacher) is tone differentiation when reading (alongside the a preponderance of homophones). The interwoven nature of oral proficiency, knowledge of Cantonese tones and how these language elements are encoded in the writing system is important here. When asked if tonal errors were common when the children read the class teacher replied:

> It depends on how much they speak Cantonese to their parents. It is difficult for them when they don't practice it regularly.

Ingulsrud and Allen (1999) explain that reading aloud in Chinese classrooms is a practice that emanates from the nature of the writing system as it trains children to pay attention to pronunciation, tones and rhythm. Moreover, the meaning of a Chinese character is not always transparent by itself and can be highly context-dependent. Examples of multiple character lexical units words include [詩人] (si1 jan4) "poet" (poem + person = poet) and [貓頭鷹] (maau1 tau4 jing1) "owl" (cat+headed+eagle=owl). Packard (2000: 17) believes 'words' are a western-

construct and Chinese readers simply 'gets the meaning' of an utterance as it unfolds, without it necessarily being parsed into word-sized units. Therefore reading aloud helps children gain a more holistic understanding of the material, because the readers have to judge where the sense group stops in order to pause appropriately. This practice of recitation as a means of literacy growth still resonates among the teachers. As a result, this facet of literacy enshrined in cultural traditions, manifests itself in children's participation in speaking competitions organised not only within the school but also nationally[3].

Observations at the school show that at times teachers divert attention away from the study of characters to guide children to an appreciation and comprehension of the text. A common view held among teachers at the Chinese school was that literature, especially traditional tales, offered opportunities to 'read beyond the lines' and this acts as a stimulus to cultivate moral qualities and social norms. The class teacher encapsulates this outlook:

> Establishing moral values is part of the Chinese children's character development. It is part of our culture. Some of the stories are written with this in mind. It is up to the teacher how to explore this and some say it is very important.

The traditional Han Chinese tale, studied by the children (in the above lesson), *'Reducing an iron rod to a sewing needle'* is a fitting example. It tells the story of Li Po, who disliked the books of classics and history that his teacher made him read. He thought they were difficult and boring. He slipped out of class one day and encountered an elderly woman who was honing a rod of iron into a needle. Li Po learnt from her that if you persist and are determined to work hard you will always get the required result.

As the class teacher explains:

> I use the story of Li Po to encourage the children to persevere at their studies. Children can learn from this. The story tells them that so long as

you do not give up, you can complete what seems to be an impossible task.
But it needs hard work. Philosophy comes from language.

In sum, teacher talk mediates not just instructions and explanations but also a wider culture of learning is embedded in the lesson as the teacher communicates high expectations.

Using Louie and Louie's (2002) criteria, the content of the textbook studied and memorized by this grade five class covers many examples of culturally inscribed texts including: transmitting and renewing aspects of cultural heritage (stories about cultural celebrations such as the mid-autumn or moon cake festival); establishing appropriate Chinese moral values and socially accepted norms (the traditional folktale of 'reducing an iron rod to a sewing needle'); expanding knowledge of environmental studies   (sight-seeing in Hong Kong); sharpening thinking skills (guessing cultural artefacts from clues in the text), and enhancing language development (how to write a Chinese letter and poetry[4]). As such the children are exposed to a wide range of genre and gain an appreciation of different literary conventions but the cultural knowledge imprinted in texts remains transparent.

A number of scholars have shown how it is common practice in Chinese complementary schools to place value on textbooks and folk stories to socialize children into particular ways of seeing the world (Curdt-Christiansen, 2008) and how the learners position themselves in terms of embracing, rejecting or contesting these cultural messages (Cresse *et al*, 2009; Li Wei and Wu, 2010). Space prevents an in-depth discussion of how the learners in this study negotiate these essentialised views of their heritage culture but it does indicate the need for further research to explore children's complex and dynamic Scottish-Chinese identity constructs (He, 2002; Maguire and Curdt-Christiansen, 2007).

Example 2: The role of memorization and testing
The following fieldnotes, again from the grade five class, demonstrate the traditional practice and central role of memorization in the Chinese school.

> Class is noisy with children running around. A short period of time is given for revision of the passage given for homework the previous week and practiced at home. T said 'close books' [合埋書]. Children silently write out passage from memory. At the end of the task time is allowed for children to read over their work and correct any errors. Much sharing of rubbers and corrections made to character stroke configurations. T collects books in. She later makes corrections in red pen and records marks.

The above extract shows that this memorization activity not only develops the children's handwriting skills but also acts as an assessment tool. In this context, Watkins and Biggs (2001: 6) argue that a distinction needs to be made between rote learning and repetitive learning. That is, children who are making good use of memorization are not necessarily rote learning (as many western educators assume) where the passage is memorized without any understanding. In fact, their view is that many Chinese children develop an understanding of the text through the process of drill and memorization and this teaches them to produce such texts themselves.

When the children are writing Chinese characters they must pay attention to detail especially stroke type and order. The teacher reiterates the importance of repetitive intensive handwriting practice when writing characters and recalls her own schooling:

> If you got a stroke wrong you had to write the character ten or twenty times. It was the same for English. If you spelt a word wrong you had to write it out ten times. It is our way of learning.

Western mainstream primary school teachers may condemn these mundane teaching methods, such as dictation and the memorization of whole passages as it does not appear to engage the children in learning but the Chinese teacher expressed a different view when questioned about this strategy:

> This is a very common practice in Hong Kong schools. It is very useful. It helps the children remember the characters and the story or a poem. I still remember the poems I learnt at school. Students in Hong Kong use the same approach when they learn English. They use textbooks and memorise new vocabulary and whole passages.

Many lessons at the Chinese school consisted of revision and the teacher explaining and exemplifying a series of exercises in preparation for a test. The teacher goes through each exercise asking for suitable answers and providing support. At this stage exercises usually require children to explain word meanings; to provide synonyms (same meaning baby [嬰兒]/ infant [嬰兒, 幼兒]; and /or antonyms (opposites hot [熱]/cold [冷]) for given words; to distinguish characters that are similar in writing (visual discrimination); to recognize different pronunciations of a character, or to make up sentences from a given character or phrase. Although lessons of this type may be criticized as 'teaching to the test', the teacher felt the consolidation and preparation of exam techniques was beneficial:

> When I learnt English in Hong Kong we did similar exercises. We learnt through a lot of exercises and I knew if it was correct.

In addition, parallels can be drawn with similar exercises found in mainstream schools such as cloze procedure and matching sentence halves.

Lesson observations at the school reveal that a significant proportion of the teaching is orientated around the core textbook and preparation for tests. Furthermore, the lessons are dominated by teacher-talk in an expository and explanatory format employing traditional question and answer formats. This echoes Curdt-Christiansen's (2006) analysis of classroom discourses in a Chinese heritage language school in Canada. When interviewed many of the teachers report that they rely solely on the textbook and appreciate the prescriptive nature of the curriculum. The following response sums up the attitude of the majority of the teachers:

> Most of us are not professional teachers so the textbooks give us the structure and guidelines.

Example 3: The dictionary game

The following fieldnotes, from the grade four class, show there are instances when the teachers deviate from the textbook and incorporate literacy-related group activities into lessons to stimulate the children's interest and promote learning.

Can we do the dictionary game Ma Lo Sze (Teacher Ma)?[5] Y calls out. T replies 'yes' and divides the class into three groups. Children congregate around three desks. T writes the character 好 (*'good'*) on chalkboard. Teacher asks the children to pronounce the character. The children with heads down excitedly trace their fingers down pages of the Chinese dictionary rapidly turning pages. One child calls out 'yur wrang'[6] another jumps up and down 'hurry hurry'. 'page twothreefive' The T observes the class smiling and goes to support one group who are experiencing difficulty locating the character in the dictionary. The children's involvement and enjoyment is evident.

As a result of a child's request the teaching methodology in the class shifts and the extract above shows how the teacher and the children create an environment which values talking and listening as the children borrow discourses from mainstream classrooms. The subsequent peer group interaction provides opportunities for scaffolding learning by encouraging collaboration between more and less expert partners in dialogue. The character search procedure in a Chinese dictionary involves a number of steps: identifying the character's radical and counting the number of strokes; finding the radical in the index of characters (consisting of a table of 214 radicals from 1 to 17 strokes at the front of the dictionary); count the strokes remaining in the character after the radical has been subtracted to yield the desired character in another section. In the episode described above some of the characteristics of dialogic teaching as set out by Alexander (2005) are present. That is the centripetal, highly controlled routine is punctuated by centrifugal interludes where children give varied responses and enjoy more ownership over their learning (Bakhtin, 1981; Hunt, 2010).

Alice (aged 9) is keen to share her knowledge of the organisation of a Chinese dictionary and its radical index after the lesson and explains how the character 好 [good] is located:

you have to find that bit (*covers the left part of the character with her finger leaving the radical exposed*) now count how many strokes… one two three

so you then look in the three stroke section (*turns pages*) see (*indicates* 女) then how many strokes that half (*points to the remaining strokes in* 子) …three…now find the three stroke section…look down *(scans the list and locates the character* 好*)* and …VOILA!

Not only are the children in the class capable of articulating the process involved in locating and identifying characters in a Chinese dictionary, they also show knowledge of learning strategies such as skimming and scanning an index. Other strategies deployed by the children include the ability to analyse the component parts within Chinese characters and their relationship with radical clusters as well as distinguishing between character visual configurations and the number of strokes. In brief, the children's proficiency in manipulating a Chinese dictionary, not only supports the pronunciation and the meaning of the new characters they come across whilst reading but it also points to important literacy-related strategies and skills, which have the potential to be transferred to other learning contexts.

Example 4 Flexible bilingualism and biliteracy

The next teaching episode, from the grade four class, not only points to another example of collaborative group work (albeit within a culture of group competition) but also shows how the teacher supports the construction of written sentences whilst allowing opportunities for children to draw on their flexible bilingualism (Creese *et al*, 2006). From the fieldnotes the following entry is recorded.

T divides class into groups. T writes character on the board 'sun'[太陽] and 'women' [女人]. Children work together to make a sentence giving instructions to each other. One child in the group acts as a scribe writing the sentence. Children call out 'copy it quickly' 'rub it oot' 'no it's this' 'put it there'. When ready the team shouts out 'finished' and teacher checks the sentence [那女人在晒太陽], meaning 'the woman is sunbathing'. T often replies corrects children's syntax using the correct model and asks the children to repeat the sentence using the appropriate structure. When each team wins T adds a character stroke on the board until it eventually forms the character [正] 'correct'[7].

From the extract it is clear that that code-switching is part of the children's naturally occurring discourse and is an integral part of their identity formation. It is also evident that their flexible bilingualism performs an important function as a tool for thinking and literacy learning. That is the teacher taps into the children's prior knowledge and bilingual skills to support the learning of new characters. For example, in the lesson above the teacher writes the Chinese character [海] on the board she asks 'what is this in English?' By using equivalence, the teacher reinforces the meaning of new characters and vocabulary is extended in both languages. As the teacher explains:

> If I can teach them how to say it both ways it leads to a better understanding. They can translate from Chinese to English and English to Chinese. I may say 'What does that mean in English?' For some children it may be more practical to remember in English.

The teacher's explanation here suggests that for many of the children English has become the dominant language of education and literacy learning. As such, this merging and synthesizing of children's bilingual resources is used as a device to build a bridge between the two writing systems and promotes both the teaching and learning of literacy. For a more in-depth analysis of classroom discourses and interesting insights into the creative uses of code-switching in Chinese complementary classrooms refer to Li Wei and Wu (2009).

Many children in this grade four class annotate the new characters introduced in the lesson using English transliterations to support the pronunciation and memorisation of Chinese characters. This echoes Wong's (1992) study, which discovered that this literacy-learning technique was employed by the vast majority of students in the Chinese schools in England. Similarly, Kenner *et al.* (2007) observed young children using this strategy as a bridge to the Bengali script.

It is clear from this lesson that the children drew on their knowledge of English phonic skills learnt in the mainstream primary school to map onto the sound of

Chinese characters. Goh (2007: 128) argues that this bilingual approach enhances the children's language awareness skills as they gain an appreciation of the relationship between the two distinct writing systems. An example of Ca Mei's transcriptions can be found in figure 1. Here the annotation "sick" and "wa" have been written next to the characters [蛙] (waa1) "frog", [式] (sik1) "style". When asked about using this transliteration device, Ca Mei (aged 9) stressed the importance of listening skills and phonological knowledge as her explanation suggests:

> I just listen to the teacher and write it as it sounds in English. It helps me remember how to say it.

Figure 1 Ca Mai's transliterations

Many of the teachers tolerated this practice as a useful learning tool for remembering the correct pronunciation when first learning characters. However, a few teachers believe that the process of learning Chinese literacy goes hand in hand with cognitive effort and transliterations should therefore be discouraged:

> When I was at school we had to learn the characters the hard way. Always memorization and repeat. It is part of our language.

Example 5: Activities to gain knowledge of Chinese characters

The next lesson, from the grade three class, illustrates not only shows how some teachers engage with the children to support their knowledge of the underlying structures of characters but also demonstrates the teacher's questioning style and use of explanations anchored in literacy learning. The following fieldnotes illustrate the direction and flow of events.

> Teacher writes three characters on the chalkboard [耳] " ear" [雨] "rain" [手] "hand" Teacher chooses a child and asks them to write a compound character under a character using the same semantic radical. Child writes [捒] "push" whilst another writes [搭]"hit" . More children are picked at random to come up to the board adding further characters to each column. The child says the character and teacher repeats sometimes using the correct model if the pronunciation is not clear. She also adds explanations " Most of these characters are to do with the weather" or "All things to do with the hand". After each column has three characters the teachers opens the exercise

up the whole class. "Do you know any other characters that have the same radical?" Children put hands up and are keen to show their knowledge and add to the character columns. Teacher offers advice " You need to learn more characters so that you can write longer sentences".

The above extract shows that although the teacher remains at her desk at the front of class throughout this lesson and dominates most of the talk, she effectively orchestrates a variety of literacy exercises encouraging the children's involvement. As well as having opportunities to practice pronunciation, write characters using correct stroke configurations on the board and extend their vocabulary, the children are also encouraged to think about the writing system and the various principles underlying the construction of characters. Typical exercises at this stage include pointing out the radical of a given character, suggesting characters that are formed from a given radical, thinking of a word that includes a given character and sentence construction. Interestingly in this class, the children volunteer their own suggestions for character building without fear of embarrassment or retribution.

After the lesson the teacher clarifies her approach to learning characters:

> At the first stage you have to learn character by character but when the children have learnt a certain number of characters you can then look at how the characters are formed. It is important to study the radical and the phonetic as they are the building blocks for many characters.

On the other hand some teachers advocated a more traditional approach especially when discussing the explicit teaching of the phonetic element. As one teacher explains:

> Chinese characters do not help with pronunciation. Children need to learn characters individually by memorizing them. It is part of the language. That is why it is special. We have to learn it the hard way.

Meanwhile, another teacher advocates drawing on the varied experiences of children and aims for a synthesis of approaches when teaching Chinese characters:

> The way I teach has changed since being in Hong Kong. Because the children are educated in Scottish schools the teachers explain a lot to the children about how to read English. But I am still thinking you can't teach

all those characters you still have to memorise them also. It is sometimes difficult to explain the characters to the children because the characters have changed a lot over time. Usually the children find out in their own way and find the connections between the characters themselves. The most efficient way is to combine both methods.

The teachers' views expressed above show that the explicit instruction of morphological knowledge varies from teacher to teacher. That is where the teacher draws the children's attention to the essential principles of the script relating shape to meaning and shape to pronunciation (Nagy *et al*. 2002). As a consequence this has an impact on children's experiences of analyzing the internal structures of Chinese characters.

These different approaches to instructional practices are explicitly related to the teachers' belief systems and pedagogical knowledge (Lau, 2007). That is, teachers' knowledge, attitudes and values, gained from their own lived experiences, shape the decisions they make about their own teaching behaviour, orientations to literacy learning and perceptions of the children in the classroom. As the Headteacher sums up:

> Many of the teachers are not given professional training. They are just interested. In this school there are eight Chinese teachers using eight different ways of teaching. Some use the traditional way, others a different method.

Some of the teachers' reflect on their practices and the children's evolving learner identities. These pedagogical adjustments to teaching in the complementary school are encapsulated in the following responses:

> We don't know what happens in the children's schools. I know they have more active learning in the primary schools which means some of the children find it boring here as it is all from the textbook. I try to make the lessons more enjoyable and fun or the children will not want to come.

> Western education is for speech and expression. Ours is another angle.
> However I also taught English in Hong Kong and I have adapted some interesting activities and approaches used in the English lessons to teach Chinese. I think the children like the lessons as more and more children join in. Some of the other teachers are also interested in the way I teach.

Discussion and Conclusion

The teaching episodes outlined in this article illustrate the multi-faceted literacy practices in a Chinese complementary school in Scotland. It does not claim that the description of the pedagogical practice drawn from this study is generalisable to all Chinese complementary schools in Scotland as each school has their own unique histories, educational aims and sometimes faith orientations (Author, 2010). However, it has been argued that there is a need to unpack the literacy practices frequently associated with learning the Chinese script and view complementary schools as an ecology of practice influenced by classroom interactions and underlying ideologies as teachers and children negotiate their identities and positionings relative to Chinese literacy learning (Hornberger, 2003).

The findings reveal that the pedagogic approaches vary across the school and often depend on individual teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning literacy. These attitudes and beliefs about learning are drawn from their own knowledge and varied experiences of education in different cultural contexts but are also influenced by a need to stimulate an interest in learning Chinese for Scottish born children of Chinese heritage. The institutionally led culture of learning is dominated by a textbook orientated curriculum and preparation for tests and the literacy practices can be summarized as passive reception, repetition, recitation and reproduction (Hu, 2002). At the same time some teachers, when faced with the challenges of engaging and motivating Scottish-Chinese children, reflected on the efficacy of some of these mundane practices and incorporated instructional methods such as group work and literacy-related games into lessons.

The article has therefore argued that there is a need to re-examine literacy practices at complementary schools as these practices are not necessarily fixed. However, this type of investigation should also be considered in tandem with literacy practices in mainstream schools as at times there is temptation to exaggerate divergent pedagogical approaches in the two different types of provision. For example, research conducted among Chinese heritage language teachers shows that an

emphasis on moral and cultural dimensions of texts does not necessarily contradict moves towards teachers as facilitators of learning (Curdt-Christiansen 2006). Conversely, it may be misleading to suggest whole class direct teaching, memorisation or commercial resources plays no part in mainstream schools when one considers prescribed synthetic phonic programmes and reading schemes currently in vogue in Scotland.

As pointed out earlier many of the teachers at the Chinese complementary school are volunteer parents without professional teaching qualifications. The Our Languages Project-Toolkit for Partnership (CILT, 2008) outlines a number of ways in which complementary school teachers practice could be enhanced by more collaboration with mainstream schooling. Suggestions include promoting joint training and opportunities for reciprocal paired observations of teaching and learning. These visits should be conducted in the spirit of respectful dialogue and learning from each other and where conflicting pedagogies exist these contentions can be used as a stimulus for professional enquiry and reflection on practice.

At the same time it is important to recognize that complementary schools are highly significant to the Chinese parents in terms of maintaining heritage language and literacy skills. They have a strong desire to maintain their independence and play a significant role in providing sheltered spaces for children to negotiate their new and evolving plural identities (Creese *et al*, 2006). However, it has been documented elsewhere that tensions can exist between teachers and children when their ideological worlds collide (Francis *et al*. 2010). The aim here is not for Chinese complementary schools to replicate mainstream practices as diverse orthographies require different learning strategies but to view complementary schools as authentic learning terrains with the potential for multiple practices, translanguaging (García, 2009) and biliteracy development. Although the benefits of this cultural and linguistic capital gained in complementary schools may be felt on an individual level it is a knowledge that frequently lacks status and power in mainstream schools (Blackledge, 2006; Author, 2009). Further research is therefore required into how children's varied understandings and lived experiences of literacies impact on their

complex learner identities in the Scottish context. Studies of this type will support the current educational discourse, integral to the new Scottish Curriculum (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2011), which values children's learning experiences outside of school.

Notes

1. The new governance of the Special Administrative Region (SAR), established in 1997, saw a language shift to Putonghua (the official spoken language of mainland China) and a policy goal for Hong Kong citizens to be trilingual (in English, Cantonese and Putonghua). Hakka is mainly spoken in the New Territories of Hong Kong. For more detail of the status of the different spoken varieties of Chinese used by the British-Chinese see Li Wei (1994).
2. Li Po lived 701- 762 and is a famous Chinese poet. His popular poem 'Quiet Night Thoughts' is frequently memorized by school children in Hong Kong.
3. These speaking competitions take the form of contestants reciting poems or prose in front of judges who award prizes for different age groups. Scores are based on several criteria such as intonation, volume of the voice, pausing positions and quality of the content as well as non-verbal criteria including manner, posture and eye expression. The performances can be delivered by an individual or in chorus.
4. Most of the textbooks end with a poem composed of lines of five-character (五言) or seven-character (七言) poems. These two forms dominate traditional Chinese poetry.
5. In keeping with the way children in the school address their teachers in Chinese.
6. The frequent incorporation of Scots in the children's speech adds a further dimension to their Chinese- Scots bicultural identities.
7. Illustration of the stroke sequence to make up a character "correct" *dui*, with a written form [正].

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