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## *Becoming school literate parents: An ESL perspective*



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*Framed by literacy as social practice and social theory of learning, this paper provides a preliminary exploration of how an ESL parent developed a sense of school literate identity<sup>1</sup> as her three children successively entered formal schooling. This case study is the beginning of a larger investigation in which we shall more fully explore the dynamic of literacy relationships between parents of ESL children and the schools their children attend. We take the opportunity in this paper to explore some emerging issues that, while preliminary, are worthy of teachers' and schools' consideration and point to the need for further research into the question of ESL parents' literate identities at their children's schools.*

### ***Introduction***

As more children enter schools from families in which English is not the language spoken at home, literacy teachers face the challenge of building effective home and school partnerships that foster ESL (English as a Second Language) children's literacy development. In Australia, many urban schools have a high population of non-English speaking background students. For example in New South Wales, enrolments of primary students of language background other than English (LBOTE) in 2007 represent 27.9 percent of total enrolments (see [https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/reports\\_stats/stats/schools.htm](https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/reports_stats/stats/schools.htm)). This reality presents significant challenges for the learning of English and particularly for literacy learning in the early years.

Literature documenting parental involvement in children's literacy learning suggests that children with highly involved parents demonstrate higher literacy attainment (e.g. Bailie, Sylva, & Evans, 2000; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Jeynes, 2005). Discourses of expectations of a home literacy environment often portray school literate parents who understand the literacy demands placed on their children at school; and who provide meaningful learning experiences that are congruent with school literacy practices and expectations. Such discourses about parental involvement are ideologically charged in that they imply knowledge of what should be

1 A school literate parent in this paper is defined as a parent who understand and have access to English literacy practices and expectations valued at school.

read/written, what literacy events are supposed to provide a meaning rich environment for literacy development. Yet, many parents of ESL children have been engaged in and are still engaging in discourses that have different print conventions and representations. Thus it is reasonable to expect that these parents bring a different set of cultural resources for making sense of the language demands of school literacies and appropriate ways of supporting their children's literacy learning, which may not coincide with what school expects of a parent literate in English. It becomes imperative then that we understand how parents of ESL children negotiate their understandings about school literacy so that they might support and engage with their children's learning at school.

While some studies to date have focused on intervention programs as a way to increase parents' participation in their children's literacy learning (e.g. Axford, 2007; Bailie, Sylva, & Evans, 2000; Woolley & Hay, 2007), there are few studies that inform schools of how ESL parents learn how to engage with and support their children's school literacy and ultimately, how this process becomes one of reciprocity between parents and school. Thus this paper explores one ESL parent's negotiation of understandings about English school literacy, with implications identified for a more comprehensive study that takes stock of the relationships between ESL parents and school.

### *Becoming literate – a sociocultural perspective*

This paper views literacy as social practice that is shaped by sociocultural settings in which literacy is used (Freebody, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990). Sociocultural studies of literacy have revealed the various forms and functions of literacy across diverse social, cultural and linguistic settings (e.g. Cassity & Harris, 2000; Heath, 1983; Kennedy-Williams, 2004; Minns, 1990). This body of research has important implications for how educators view relationships between home and school literacy experiences and call upon educators to think broadly about literacy in ways that 'recognise the multiple language and knowledge systems of multilingual and multicultural communities' (Jones Diaz & Harvey, 2007, p. 212).

A literacy as social practice perspective challenges literacy stereotypes that sometimes have been inferred from home literacy studies conducted in white Anglo-Saxon middle class homes (e.g. Clark, 1976; Holdaway, 1979; Taylor, 1983), such as the notion that all children are read to, that literacy only involves print-based written language, or that story reading is the only means by which children learn to be literate before schooling. Despite the well-documented diversity of languages and practices that characterise literacy in Australia, concern has been expressed that Australia has continued down the path of an emphasis of English-only literacy at school (Jones Diaz & Harvey, 2007). While this path is understandable – children need to learn to be literate in the language of the dominant culture in order to function effectively in it – to do

so at the exclusion of children's other languages and literacy practices runs the risk of disempowering children in terms of what they know and can do in terms of literacy in their first languages; and fails to acknowledge, validate and build upon the complex sociocultural contexts in which children's literacy understandings are emerging (Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004).

Research has called for teachers to acknowledge and build upon children's literacy experiences in order to maximise literacy success at school (Kennedy & Surman, 2007; McNaughton, 2002; Thomson, 2000). The importance of doing so is underscored by the idea that contexts in which we use literacy shape our literacy predispositions, or what Bourdieu (1992) would refer to as *habitus*. With respect to literacy, these predispositions include literacy practices to which we become accustomed and texts we come to value, purposes for which we use literacy and ways in which we engage. Bourdieu (1992) argues that the contexts in which we significantly engage – such as home and community settings in which children are reared – shape these predispositions and develop our cultural resources or what we come to know about and understand our world. Children bring these resources to school where they may serve as cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) insofar as children have opportunity to draw on their resources and have these acknowledged, validated and built upon to assist their learning and effective participation at school (Thomson, 2000).

While the research discussed here has focused on what children bring to school from diverse settings, a question remains – what are the literacy resources that ESL parents bring to their children's school literacy situation? Research has shown that parents play a key role in framing home-school relationships (Cassity & Harris, 2000). Their unique understanding of their children and beliefs about literacy practices have a significant influence on children's literacy learning (Kim & Kwon, 2002). Further, parents' past literacy experiences shape their views of what it means to be literate and how they might view their children's literacy learning needs, with diverse sociocultural settings spawning diverse views (Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001). For example, parents who were brought up in literacy practices that focus on mechanics and rote learning may interpret English literacy as isolated skills that are reinforced by drill and practice (Carson, 1992). The ideas and practices these parents bring with them therefore tend to affect their interpretations of school literacy practices and their provision of the sort of literacy environment children are exposed to in the home. A study of new immigrant parent involvement in schools in Canada (Peterson & Ladky, 2007) has identified practices that foster parents' support of their children's literacy. These practices include teachers learning about the language and culture of their students, encouraging parents to read to their children in their mother tongue, and teachers increasing their awareness of the role of their first language for success in their children's English literacy. Yet little is known about how ESL parents negotiate what

is required and expected in the context of their children's school literacy education, so they might engage with and support their children's learning at school.

The kind of negotiation that these practices entail acknowledges that, when children and by association their parents enter school, they move into a new community of practices. For ESL children and parents, this community may be unfamiliar territory. Entry requires negotiation of relationships as well as literacy practices and dispositions. As such, this negotiation entails identity work. Ideally, this work is reciprocal, invoking principles of 'empowerment and validation of children's languages, cultures and literacies central to children's formation of identities as members simultaneously of several communities' (Jones Diaz & Harvey, 2007, p. 212).

However, there is little information on how parents may be supported and how the school literate identities of parents and children are negotiated in this complex process. It is in light of the gap in the research – and in the broad context of concern over the stark contrast between linguistically and culturally diverse literacy practices that characterises many of Australia's homes and communities and the uniformity that prevails in literacy at school – that we conducted this preliminary case study, in which we begin to explore issues related to ESL parents negotiating literate identities in terms of their children's school literacy as a community of practices through the lens of social theory of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

### **Learning, identity and becoming**

The paper draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) seminal work on situated learning and identity. More than mastering new information, learning is seen to be situated in a community of practice and occurs through certain forms of participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). To become a member of a community, one needs to have access to community practices and be actively engaged in community activities. As such, communities of practice become both the resources with which members organise their activities and relate to each other as well as 'the prime context' (Wenger, 1998, p. 47) in which novices make sense of the community of practice through their engagement with expertise members. From this perspective, the decisions ESL parents make about what types of activities to provide at home to promote literacy development are, to a large extent, mediated by their understanding of literacy practices.

Lave and Wenger (1991) enrich this social theory of learning with the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, which is characterised as a change of learners' participatory roles entailed in a learning activity, moving from peripheral to full participation. Learning is regarded as 'an evolving form of membership' (p. 53), and is itself a process of identity formation. Identity is a concept that draws on cross-disciplinary scholarship and has

become an emerging area of interest in studies of language (Joseph, 2004), language learning (Norton, 1997; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), academic literacies (e.g. Chen, 2001; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001) and recently teacher professional development (e.g. Tsui, 2007; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). The central premise underlying these studies is that our understanding of language, learning and teaching cannot be derived without a consideration of how identity is constructed.

Identity, from the perspective of situated learning, is 'a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities' (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). It is construed as 'an experience and a display of competence' (p. 152). Identity in this sense 'manifest(s) as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences – all by virtue of participating in certain enterprises' (Wenger, 1998, p. 153). As such different forms of participation (e.g. peripheral or full participation) will lead to different trajectories of our identities. This situated and dynamic view of identity formation is reminiscent of Bakhtinian social historical perspective of identity (Bakhtin, 1981; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001). Similar to Wenger's conception of evolving membership, Bakhtin (1981, p. 341) sees one's 'ideological becoming' as fundamental to the formation of his or her identity, which is marked by a process of assimilating the ideological points of others through the agent's active engagement. This dialogic view of identity offers a dynamic view of parents' identities, seeing them not as fixed and stable, but changing as parents develop their sense of school literate identity and engage with and support their children's school literacy learning. Identity as a form of competence provides a useful lens for analysing and understanding ESL parents' learning to become school literate parents. What matters then in the parent's learning to become a school literate parent, is how a form of participation enables or constrains the formation of an identity. This issue is explored in this case study.

Two important dimensions of Wenger's theory of identity are active participation and negotiation of meaning. For ESL parents, active engagement with community members and negotiation of meaning are particularly important as they bring with them different perspectives on what constitutes school literacy practices. When ESL parents come in contact with new school literacy practices, they may lack access to the repertoire of school practices. Consequently, these parents may experience and manifest an identity of being incompetent of supporting their children's school literacy learning as will be revealed in the case study. What it means to be school literate is something that must be worked out as an experience of participation and negotiation of meaning. This may involve understanding and tuning into their children's school literacy practices, reconciling interpretations of what it means to be school literate, and developing their repertoire of resources they have at

their disposal to engage the children in the home context in ways school expects while not supplanting their existing practices and having opportunity to engage with their children's school in ways that provide parents with opportunities to share their repertoires of literacy practices so schools and parents can find some middle ground and engage in genuine give-and-take of perspectives and experiences that characterise effective home/school literacy partnerships (Kennedy & Surman, 2007; Louden et al., 2005; McNaughton, 2002).

Together, access, negotiation and participation are considered three powerful sources underlying the change and growth of a learner (Wenger, 1998). This conception of identity formation provides a useful framework for capturing issues and processes that learners may face when they come to learn new practices. This paper argues that these issues and processes have equally critical importance for parents of ESL children, who may face the same transition process with their children and need to be engaged in a process of discovering appropriate ways to participate competently in supporting children's literacy learning.

### *Becoming a school literate parent*

This case study focuses on Mary, a parent of an ESL child, Cathy, in a Kindergarten class in a southern Sydney primary school. At the time of data collection, 98% of enrolled students came from 45 different language backgrounds at the time when the data were collected. Fifty five per cent of this group was Chinese speaking and most of these children entered Kindergarten with little or no English, Chinese being their home language and the language used in their community. By way of comparison, the ABS 2006 census indicates that Cantonese and Mandarin languages figure are the six most common languages (including English) spoken at home in Australian, in NSW and in Sydney, with these figures rising from 2001 census data.

Data collected in this study include observations of parents working with children in class, interviews with the parents about their beliefs about school literacy practices as well as with the class teacher about her view on building home and school partnership. In this paper we draw on a case study of a parent, Mary, and explore factors that have contributed to her negotiation of understandings of school literacy practices. This case study was chosen because of Mary's unique experience in learning about what constitutes school literacy as she engaged in her three children's literacy learning. The case study highlights significant events which have helped Mary negotiate a school literate identity as her children successively entered school. The analysis shows that this negotiation gave Mary access to school literacy practices and thereby her participation in her children's school literacy learning. This case study points out some key emerging issues that teachers and schools need to take stock of when developing home/school literacy relationships, which



warrant further research.

At the time of this study, Mary had three daughters, all of whom attended the same primary school. While Mary stayed at home as primary carer of her children, her husband ran a Chinese restaurant and worked long hours. Cathy was the youngest of the three children. She was five years old and in the last term of her kindergarten at the time of data collection. Cathy was identified by her classroom teacher as a fluent reader who demonstrated sound emergent literacy knowledge, verified by classroom observations and interviews with the child. The family spoke Cantonese at home and all three children attended a community language school to learn Mandarin on Saturdays.

### **Cathy's classroom literacy context**

In Cathy's classroom, the majority of children came from Chinese speaking backgrounds – their native language was either Cantonese or Mandarin. Other language backgrounds represented were Japanese, Arabic, Greek, Hindi and Macedonian. One child spoke English at home as their first language. Modelled reading and writing and guided reading with leveled readers in reading groups with the whole class were undertaken on a daily basis. These experiences had high priority in terms of teaching time and resources and were the focus of formalised assessment of children's literacy. During these experiences, the teacher, who we call Sandra for the purposes of this paper, provided explicit instruction, worked to develop mutually understood language of the topic with the children and develop their background knowledge relevant to the text and task at hand. She believed it important to 'get the reading behaviour happening', as she put it, in terms of book-handling turning pages, following the print with fingers, holding the book the right way up, looking at the pictures and gaining some sense of meaning and enjoyment. Sandra also read to the class at least two or three times daily for enjoyment, and included experiences such as drama, cooking and free play to engage children's participation in literacy and support their learning.

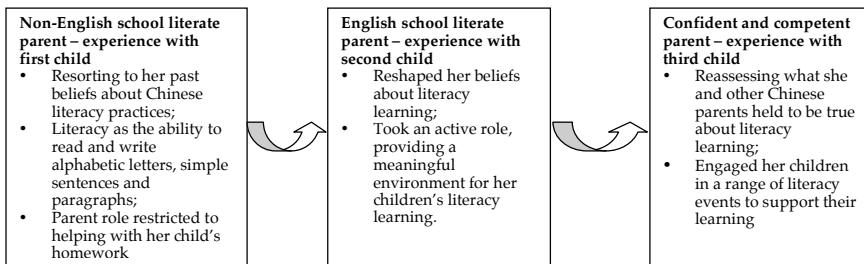
Sandra valued children's parents as 'significant educators in children's lives' and valued working with them to give children the best start possible. However, it was her perception that the literacy in children's homes was more formal and structured than she provided in the classroom. Sandra took stock of parents' expectations but also wanted 'parents to understand the learning process' as implemented at her school and in her classroom. She ran a volunteer reading program, in which parents helped with reading groups in the classroom, including Mary.

### **Formation of Mary's school literate identity**

Figure 1 provides an overview of the processes underlying Mary's coming to learn to support and engage in her children's literacy learning. Consistent with Wenger's (1998) conception of identity as experience and competence,



Mary's learning process may be characterised as one of gaining competence, which is represented by a shift from feeling incompetent to being confident and competent in supporting and engaging in her children's literacy learning. The figure shows a trajectory of Mary's identities, which was evolving and formed through different forms of participation. In the section that follows, we explore emerging issues that contributed to Mary's becoming a school literate parent.



**Figure 1: Trajectory of Mary's identity formation**

As we discussed earlier, one's engagement in making sense of community practices is fundamental to identity formation. Reconstructing understanding of what it means to be literate was central to Mary's formation of a school literate parent identity. When talking about her involvement in her first child's literacy learning, Mary identified herself as a parent struggling with her child's school literacy practices and expectations. Mary's sense of struggle was disempowering as she felt incapable of providing support for her eldest daughter, highlighting the need for Mary's access to what was expected and how literacy was done in her daughter's school, so that her effective participation might be enabled:

It was hard to provide any parental input to your first child's literacy learning as an immigrant. It is extremely difficult. You don't know where to start and how you can help' (Interview 1 with Mary).

In the absence of access to her daughter's community of school literacy practices, Mary responded to the challenge of supporting her first child's literacy learning in a different language by resorting to her past beliefs about literacy practices developed through her previous participation in Chinese-mediated literacy events. Our cultural identities are grounded in the specific worlds of which we are a part (Holland et al. 2001) – Mary's beliefs about literacy learning were based on her own experiences as a beginning reader in Chinese and learner of English. Mary told us in an informal conversation that she had learned English through the traditional grammar translation method in her secondary and university studies in China. Her interpretation of what

it means to be literate was reminiscent of this experience that had shaped her literacy habitus or predispositions. In light of her own experiences, then, Mary described her interpretations of literacy as the ability to read and write alphabetic letters, simple sentences and paragraphs. This belief diverged from the goal of reading for meaning, a literacy practice espoused by her children's school. Not having access to school literacy demands and expectations, Mary felt excluded from participating in her eldest daughter's literacy learning:

I have three children. When my eldest daughter went to kindergarten, I did not know how I could support her school work ... I taught my eldest daughter the basic numerical numbers such as one, two, three, ... I thought children at kindergarten were expected to learn how to read and write the simple alphabetic letters such as a, b, c. Once she (the eldest daughter) could read some sentences and worked out simple multiplication, and that's it. ... I didn't know what was expected at Kinder and ignored a lot of things. It was not till the third term that we realised my daughter was not coping with school very well. I began to help her with her schoolwork. I was not brought up here. I didn't know what was expected (of literacy learning). They adopt different teaching methods and I wanted to help (her), but didn't know how (Interview 1 with Mary).

Difficulties with Mary's access to literacy practices appeared to be exacerbated by the amount of time she spent alone at home, and her initial lack of perceived need to learn English as the community in which she lived was densely populated with Cantonese and Mandarin speaking Chinese – thus she did not attend school to further improve her English in Australia.

However, when her second child began school, Mary began to have access to English literacy practices. Bringing schoolwork home provided Mary with some understanding of what was expected at school and afforded some opportunity for Mary to develop the competence required for participating in her children's school literacy learning. Building on this experience, Mary positioned herself as a school literate parent with more knowledge about what was expected in a school literacy community of practice. When talking about her experience with her second child, Mary explained: 'It was when my second child entered Kindergarten that I realised there were a lot of things that parents could do to support a child' (Interview 1 with Mary).

Mary's participation in her first two children's school literacy practices helped reshape her beliefs about school literacy learning in an English-speaking Australian context. For Mary, literacy now meant more than completing homework assignments and other teacher requirements that were seen as the main literacy activities practised in home and school in China (Carson, 1992). In accordance with this shift, Mary's role in her children's literacy expanded from helping with her children's homework to include sharing stories and reading aloud in English at home. This shift not only reflected story sharing and reading aloud as important literacy activities at school, but a broader school emphasis on English-only literacy practices that

privilege these activities, as we have previously discussed. As Mary reflected on this shift, she explained:

When we were in China or Hong Kong, our parents would follow us around and help with our homework. I wanted to develop my children's independence ... Here in Australia, they expect their children to be independent and to be creative. ... I am much more experienced but I felt I owed much to my eldest daughter because I failed to give her what a parent could do at the early stage of her schooling... When my second daughter went to school, we realised the importance of reading stories to children. That is, I should read one bedtime story to her every day. I found that children's imaginative ability could be developed through listening to stories. Gradually she can do 'talking news' or write journals on weekends. In addition, I found bedtime is a prime time for memorising things. Children remember things better at bedtime. While I was reading the story, she (her second daughter) kept asking me how such and such things happened... ...I feel I am much more experienced now in supporting Cathy's literacy development (Interview 1 with Mary).

Mary's appropriation of story sharing and reading aloud was encouraged and quite specifically shaped by her involvement in the school's home reading program. Our observational and interview data collected in the school in Cathy's first year, to support our interviews with Mary, revealed that the Principal was a strong advocate for parental involvement. At the beginning of each year, the school sent a newsletter about the home reading program to children's families. This newsletter described reading routines and how to tackle words children did not know. Parents were advised on how to talk about texts with their children, direct attention to illustrations, encourage children to predict, and hand over control to the child to read aloud. Parents were encouraged to praise their children for their efforts and to avoid reading a text more than three times. These guidelines gave Mary access to and a means for directly participating in her children's school literacy, although one could question the extent to which this might be problematic for supplanting other literacy practices or discouraging meaningful literacy experiences in the children's first language, the importance of which was discussed previously in this paper (Peterson & Ladky, 2007).

When talking about helping her third child Cathy, Mary positioned herself as more confident and competent in terms of how she perceived her role and contribution in supporting Cathy's school literacy. It became apparent that access, participation and negotiation were three powerful sources of this change in Mary's identities as a school literate parent. By participating in her children's literacy activities, she discovered school-appropriate ways of supporting them. Mary's engagement in negotiation of meanings was evident in her willingness to redefine her previous beliefs about literacy practices and form new understandings such as functions and social uses of literacy and text genres. Observing literacy events in her children's classrooms also

gave Mary access to how texts were used for various purposes in socially important literacy events such as writing a note and a request letter – as did her participation in the volunteer reading program as will be discussed in more detail in the next section:

We have been lucky to have Mrs Price as the class teacher (for Cathy). She tries her best to teach children; this is very important. There are a few classes (6) in kindergarten. Most of them haven't been taught letter writing yet. She (Mrs Price) has already taught the class three types of letters. My child (Cathy) would copy the format of the letter on a piece of paper for fear that she might forget it. So I knew she had been taught how to write a letter. For example, once a mother in the volunteer program, her husband was seriously ill, Mrs Price told the kids 'XX can't be here to help us today. We miss her very much.' She showed the class the letter format and my daughter wrote something like this 'Dear Mrs XX, I miss you very much. How is your husband? Is he getting better?' and 'Thank you for helping us with', ah 'home reading, and painting, and cooking', something like this. She also wrote 'I hope you can come to help us soon'... (Interview 2 with Mary)

Learning to be a school literate parent saw Mary confront her recent and past experiences and her previous and emerging beliefs via her access to and participation in literacy activities. In Wenger's (1998) theory, engagement in negotiation of meaning is manifested in one's effort to produce and appropriate new meanings and practices. With this new identity, Mary now used her understandings and beliefs to reassess what she and other Chinese parents held to be important about English literacy learning in their children's Australian school contexts. Where previously she had resorted to her daughter's homework for clarifying expectations of school literacy and considered helping with homework assignments as the only way to support children's learning, Mary now engaged her children in a range of literacy events to support their learning. Through this engagement, she came to understand that children can learn literacy through everyday events:

Some Chinese parents thought children have not got much homework to do at home. There was only one book (home reading) to read each day. In fact they (teachers) don't want to give them (children) much homework. They want them to internalise knowledge in class and be able to use them. Homework puts pressure on kids. It is important that children can learn and internalise things in class. Children can also learn from daily experiences. ... For example, we go to the beach; we tell children about fish in the sea; we go to the zoo: we tell them about the 'mammal' family; tell them about the bill of the 'platypus'; tell them about 'dinosaurs'. We go to the library and find books and show children the pictures (of those animals). They (children) don't have to remember everything. Later on when a similar topic was touched on in class, she (Cathy) would say, 'I know this, I know this'. So home literacy experience helped her to form the concepts (Interview 2 with Mary).

Mary's shift of identity was also evident in her re-evaluation of her relationship with her children. Mary was educated in classrooms where

teachers were seen as authority figures that should be respected and not challenged. Based on her observations in her children's classrooms, Mary was able to form a new learning partnership with her children that saw re-articulation of social relations:

In this way she (Mrs Price) motivated the children to write. Sometimes a child may not know how to spell a word. She would say to them 'It is OK. Come and write the word first and I will help you if you get it wrong. If the child ever made a mistake, the teacher never said 'you are wrong', instead she said to the kids 'Good try, good girl'. She always encourages the students to do things, motivates them to do things. The whole class are not afraid of making mistakes. They always put their hands up and wanted to come to the front and have a go (Interview 2 with Mary).

Interpreting and acting, and understanding and responding are important part of the ongoing process of negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). Mary's engagement in school literacy events developed her ability to interpret and make use of the school's repertoire of literacy practices. Mary took advantage of reading events that focused on meaning making and that went beyond those she was trained in when learning Chinese such as correct word identification and isolated word sound correspondence found in more traditional Chinese classroom (Carson, 1992). She replicated literacy events that she observed in class and engaged her children in a range of activities that were integrated into the fabric of their daily lives. Her home literacy activities included weekend trips, story reading and reading labels in the grocery store. These activities provided opportunities for her children to explore literacy concepts through their construction of meaning:

We get the girls engaged in all sorts of activities on weekends: we take them to shopping; we take them to see new things. Hopefully what they have learned will be imprinted in their memory ...

In shopping, I'd ask the children to look at prices, price tags. They then understand why there is a dot after 'one dollar'. ... I also get the girls to look at the names of vegetables and fruits. We don't know much about the names of the vegetables here. I will ask them to teach me. For example, here in Australia they call 'coriander' differently. What do they call it? 'Parsley'? We've got a different variety of vegetables, Chinese lettuce, for example is different from Aussie one. I ask them to identify differences and tell me what they have observed.

... We can't help them (the girls) much with science concepts because we don't have space for them to grow flowers or plants. But they can read about them from books. On weekends, you can also take them to 'farms' and to the nature. They can't really experience all the things personally, like the process of how worms turn into butterflies. But you should buy books and they could read to discover the process themselves (Interview 2 with Mary).

Becoming a school literate parent is complex for parents of ESL children as it requires them to question and redefine their previous beliefs about literacy practices and reformulate new understanding of English literacy practices

through their participation in literacy activities their children encounter at school. The following section discusses issues that contributed to Mary's reformulation of a strong school literate parent identity.

### *Discussion*

As previously explained, the primary focus of the social theory of learning is on learning as social participation. This case study has found that access, participation, and negotiation are three important resources that contributed to Mary's becoming a school English literate parent. Initially Mary's access to her children's school literacy practices was mediated through the schoolwork brought home by her older children. This access was later expanded through her own engagement in school literacy activities such as monthly meetings for ESL parents. Mary affirmed that the monthly meetings held by the school for ESL parents allowed her to understand school literacy practices. The information she gained about these practices enhanced her involvement in her children's school literacy learning. Participation in these school activities afforded her the opportunity to understand the demands and expectations of literacy learning at school, and enabled her to find appropriate ways of supporting her children. It seemed that each form of participation created an opportunity for Mary to learn, leading to a trajectory of her school literate identity.

While previous studies (e.g. Axford, 2007) suggest that intervention programs may increase parents' participation in children's literacy learning, this study offers further insights into what other opportunities for participation may be provided for ESL parents. Mary attributed her growing confidence to her involvement in a school volunteer reading program designed for parents to help the class teacher with in-class reading groups. Observing literacy lessons and activities in the classroom allowed her to gain insights into school beliefs and how they are translated into classroom practices. The insights and strategies she gained and developed provided her with tools/resources for supporting her children.

It can be argued that Mary's learning occurred through her engagement in a community of practice vis-à-vis classroom actions and interaction. This situated learning experience affords her the opportunity to learn 'in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). The volunteer reading program offered her the opportunity to 'negotiate an experience of meaning' (Wenger, p. 13), which is a critical dimension of Wenger's social theory of identity formation. An important implication arising from this finding is that schools may provide ESL parents with opportunities for 'experience of meaningfulness' (Wenger, p. 51) as a way to facilitate their formation of their school literate identities. Furthermore, Wenger's community of practice is characterised as learners' 'mutual engagement' with other members of the community, participation

in the 'joint enterprise', use of 'a shared repertoire' (Wenger, p. 73). Through participating in a community of practice, Mary learned certain ways of engaging in literacy events in action with the class teacher. She developed ways of how to interact with children and relate to children as is previously discussed. Most importantly, her participation was a unique opportunity to work with an expert member and to be recognised as a co-participant in her child's literacy learning.

As argued by Wenger (1998), negotiation of meaning requires 'sustained attention and adjustment', and involves 'an active process of producing meaning' and negotiated response to a new context (p. 53). Learning, in this sense, is a matter of 'investment of one's identity' (p. 96). It follows that parental involvement can be enacted in different ways according to parents' personal experiences and motivations. Mary's willingness to find out how she could participate in children's literacy learning constituted a strong inner resource – a strong sense of agency. Throughout the interviews, she identified herself as an active learner: willing to learn and find appropriate ways to support her children's literacy learning. Mary's observations of the class teacher demonstrated some strategies for capitalising on children's knowledge as a powerful way of connecting home and school literacy experiences and increasing children's motivation to read.

It is apparent that Mary's developing a repertoire of resources to engage her children become a source of growing competence, and hence a source of fashioning of her school literate identity. Exploring the strategies, beliefs and insights underlying school literacy practices was for Mary a collective growth process through which both her children's and her own language developed. Mary's children were a valuable resource for facilitating her own language learning:

My English improves with my daughters' 'spelling tests' and 'reading study'. My eldest daughter's got to learn twenty new words for one unit and the second daughter another twenty words. I've learned a lot of words in economics, in industry ... They taught me pronunciation as well (Interview 2 with Mary).

Mary's dual identities as a parent of ESL children and learner of the English language are important issues of becoming a school literate parent in an Australian school. Mary revealed that as her children reach higher grades, her role as facilitator was challenged because of her lack of language competence, particularly in pronunciation. It seemed then that to be proficient sufficient to be a school literate parent is critical to her involvement in her children's literacy learning. Her language competence and literate identity both enable and require each other. Mary is sure to go through a process of re-identification as she confronts new challenges posed by new demands of her children's literacy learning:



When my eldest daughter entered Year 1, she started to correct my pronunciation. When she was in Year 2, she would say to me ‘Mum, you got it wrong. It is not pronounced like that.’ I would say, ‘Oh, I see, let’s learn from each other’. I still keep our daily story reading. I don’t read them much now, only a chapter, about six pages. ... (Interview 1 with Mary)

### *Conclusion*

Identity theories offer a theoretical framework to understand what it means to become a school English literate parent and how identities can be constructed from the tensions between a parent’s prior beliefs and experiences and those in a different context such as literacy practices of English language at school. For ESL parents, becoming a school English literate parent means renegotiating a new identity in a new and different context. This case study, using a socio-cultural perspective of literacy and identity, explored how a parent of an ESL child came to develop a school literate identity and what factors played a significant role in the development.

This case study demonstrates that learning to become a school English literate parent involves more than acquisition of specific reading-to skills and habits. It involves understanding and tuning into school literacy practices, redefining what it means to be literate, and negotiating ways of being a school English literate parent. The study has found that the formation of a school literate identity – ‘an ability to shape the meanings that define our communities and our forms of belonging’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 145) – is fundamental to parental involvement in literacy learning.

The study has found that a critical component of this parent’s involvement was her access to school literacy practices. This access was made possible through the parent’s participation in school meetings, close interactions with the class teacher, and most importantly, participation in the volunteer reading program and observations of the class teacher in action. These forms of ‘peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) helped reshape Mary’s beliefs about literacy learning and offered her some strategies she could use to extend the learning of her children. Mary’s experience points out the importance of school providing ways to engage parents in meaning practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, and of involving them in actions. This study represents a preliminary inquiry. Further research of a larger scale is needed to examine what forms of participation may facilitate parents’ learning to become school literate parents.

A further implication arising from this study concerns careful examination of processes of access, participation and negotiation in terms of reciprocity. To what extent are these processes reciprocal between parents and schools? While identity theory has provided us with tools for these exploring processes, what are these processes like from a teacher’s point of view as s/he negotiates children’s and their parents’ out-of-school literacy identities? While the case study

we have presented here is preliminary and largely exploratory, it does reveal emerging issues that are worthy of teachers' and schools' consideration from the standpoint of literate identity and an understanding of school literacy as a community of practice that places particular changes of access, negotiation and participation for ESL parents' literate identities at their children's schools. Considering these issues compels us to ask questions about what kinds of learning and support are needed to facilitate parent's negotiation of identities, in particular parents of ESL children.

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