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## **HOME LITERACY PRACTICES: DO FATHERS PLAY THEIR PARTS?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Much has been written about the significance of parents' involvement in the growth of children's literacy at home and the correlation between their literacy practices and academic achievement at school. While most literature has focused on mothers' contribution alone in their children's literacy development, the involvement of fathers as the most important figures in the domestic site has been given less attention. Informed by theories of literacy as a social practice, this paper reports the findings of a close examination on the literacy practices of Malay fathers and their roles and contributions to their children's literacy development. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this paper draws on data gathered from in-depth interviews with the participants and supplemented by observations at the participants' residences. Key findings centre on the fathers' distinctive values and ways of sustaining literacy for their children. The findings also call attention to the predominant influence of membership of diverse social communities on the fathers' literacy practices.

**Keywords:** History; Climate; Environment; Data Recovery.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

For many children, literacy awareness begins before they go to school. It does not just happen; neither it is taught. It is indeed a natural activity for those who are brought up in the environments that are rich in literacy-related experiences. It is transmitted from one generation to another through the place and value given to literacy events surrounding the family daily activities (Pitt, 1999). Research in early literacy has shown that while children construct their own knowledge of literacy, parents and other important adults and family members play an important role in supporting children's literacy growth (Anderson & Gundersen, 2001). In this context, the adults serve as *literacy brokers* (Padmore, 1994) who are responsible in the upbringing of the children as well as in encouraging and shaping their views on education.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Central to children's literacy development is the significant involvement of their parents as the first and most prominent figures or *socializing agents* (Heath, 1983) for the children. However, it is argued that most studies concerning parenting in Malaysia have extensively appraised mothers' exclusive involvement to represent *parents' participation* (Rozumah; Ziarat et al., 2002). Little research has been conducted so far to include fathers' exclusive involvement in childcare and household labor within Asian families in general and Malaysian families in particular (Rozumah, *ibid*). According to Datin Paduka Zaleha (2002), this occurs because of the customary belief that presumes mothers' absolute roles in children-rearing process. Fathers, in contrast, are naturally privileged because of their vital role as the breadwinner of the family. Therefore, they should not be burdened with the responsibilities of educating children.

Mat Saat (2002) highlights that that it is crucial to examine how Malaysian fathers are re-defining their involvement in contemporary Malaysian society given their position as family leader, role model and dependable figure in the children's growth. The authors are of the opinion that fathers' contribution should also be considered when dealing with parents' overall involvement in home literacy practices. This brings to the fore the justification for the conduct of the study reported in this paper. The study was intended to explore fathers' roles as literacy brokers, looking explicitly at their individual literacy practices as well as their involvement in enhancing the literacy practices of their children within the domestic sphere. This paper specifically reports the findings of a close examination on the literacy practices of two Malay fathers and their contributions to their children's literacy development.

## METHODS

In order to investigate the literacy practices of the fathers and their involvement in their children's literacy practices, qualitative case studies were made of two Malay fathers (Mr. Ahmad and Mr. Badrul) and their respective family members. The main data gathering methods were semi-structured in-depth interviews with the fathers as key participants and non-participant observation. Interviews were also conducted with the participants' family members to obtain supplementary data and validate the data gathered from both fathers. The non-participant observation was intended to note the fathers' discernible literacy practices as they occurred in their natural setting, namely, their residences. In the tradition of qualitative research, the data were read reiteratively and analysed rigorously through an inductive process of identifying the recurring and salient themes.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***1. Mr. Ahmad***

Mr. Ahmad is a thirty-eight-year-old father of three children, aged twelve, ten and six. He has been working in various non-governmental firms prior to his current position as a manager in one of the most established telecommunication corporations in Malaysia. His current work entails considerable amount of interactions with the company's staff and clients. Owing to his prominent position in the firm, he is required to work for approximately thirteen hours daily; he normally leaves for work at 7.30 a.m. and reaches home around 8.30 p.m. On weekends, he enjoys watching television together with his children, and sometimes he brings them to shopping complexes for window-shopping and sightseeing. Born as the youngest child of ten siblings, he obtained his primary and secondary education in Malacca. He then pursued his studies in the US where he graduated with a degree in Metallurgical Engineering.

With regards to his current literacy practices, Mr. Ahmad states that he spends six hours in a day to read for his work mostly performed in his own office. He starts his daily work by going through the electronic mails and reports to check on the latest updates. Sometimes he also reads newspapers to gather updated information while equipping himself with matters related to his work. Most of his reading resources are written in English. The rest of his work involves attending meetings and negotiating with the company's clients.

Mr. Ahmad explains that he hardly reads at home on weekdays due to his limited hours at home. Normally, he watches the television with his children to relax himself after his work. He often reads newspaper and magazines on weekends. Some of these materials are in English and some are in Bahasa Melayu. Given his infrequent reading habit nowadays, he generally considers himself as a moderate reader. He used to read books on parenting and family development. However, due to time constraints nowadays, he opts for materials related to his professional advancement only. Nevertheless, he feels that reading has assisted him to play his role as a father. In fact, he feels that his literacy practices have helped him in improving his career and knowledge of fatherhood.

In regards to his literacy practices with his children, Mr. Ahmad confesses that he hardly encourages his children to read due to their minimal time being together. Because of that, he trusts his wife to carry out the entire responsibilities of motivating and guiding their children to perform their reading, either school book or storybook, at home. In fact, he agrees that his wife plays a vital role in initiating their children's literacy practices as revealed in the following excerpt.

Basically, my wife encourages my children into reading. Not me. She buys books for the kids like *Kisah dan Tauladan*. I can't really recall the types of book. Once in a blue moon, I read to them, but not all the time. It's not habitual, but very seldom. I think I don't really motivate them to read but my wife does.

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When asked about his home literacy practices with his children, Mr. Ahmad claims that he rarely reads to his children, especially his youngest son who has just learned to read, but if he does so, it is done because he is forced to read by his child. This infrequent storybook reading, carried out in the living room or on the bed, is done before he sends his son to bed. Furthermore, Mr. Ahmad denotes that his children do not imitate his reading practices, generally because they barely see him reading at home. This happens because he seldom reads after coming back from work on weekdays while on weekends he normally spends an hour reading the newspapers by himself.

Although he seldom reads with his children, he always encourages them verbally to read their schoolbooks especially when he finds them spending a lot of time watching television. With regards to his children's literacy practices, Mr. Ahmad agrees that reading contributes to their success in school. He feels that they can enhance their knowledge by reading a lot of books, especially schoolbooks, and thus be able to excel in their examinations. Hence, his goal is to make his children become knowledgeable and academically successful.

It is interesting to note that the overall home practices of Mr. Ahmad are mostly dominated by the practice of reading books associated with reading academic books. Reading for school and doing homework are important activities at this home since time and space are allocated especially for these events. Furthermore, writing activities are also found to occur minimally and are mainly related to schoolwork. These findings reveal that the types of literacy events practiced at home by Mr. Ahmad and his children are mainly constructed by school literacy practices. Reading and writing events occur at home as a result of schooling needs. It is apparent in the findings that Mr. Ahmad is not an active literacy broker to his children due to his minimal participation in developing his children's literacy although he has high aspirations for his children.

## **2. Mr. Badrul**

Mr. Badrul is a thirty-nine-year-old father of four children aged eighteen, fifteen, twelve and ten. Working currently as an education officer at the Ministry of Education, his responsibilities include managing teacher placement, moderating school activities as well as supervising complaints concerning teachers, students and schools. Previously, he was involved in teaching tertiary education before he decided to shift his profession. As a government servant, his job requires him to work for eight hours in a day while the rest of the day is spent to be with his family. Every night, he sits together with his children while they are revising their schoolwork.

He usually spends one to two hours to check on their homework and read together with them. On weekends, he brings his children for shopping and outing and sometimes they watch television together. He received his primary and secondary education in his hometown the Perak. He then continued his studies in the US where he graduated with a bachelor degree in education and master degree in TESL.

In regards to his current literacy practices, Mr. Badrul usually reads the local newspapers, *Utusan Malaysia*, in his office before he starts his work, mostly concentrating on current issues and academic matters. He considers these reading practices as necessary in order to gather information and furnish himself with details regarding the educational affairs, such as problems and complaints on schools, for him to take further actions. It is essential for him to conduct immediate actions such as carrying out investigations as well as interviewing all the persons involved before he reports to the Minister. Apart from the newspapers, he also chooses the Internet as his source of information. This reading activity is carried out in his office for about an hour before he proceeds with other duties which also involve excessive reading such as letters of complaints, placement forms and many others.

Generally, Mr. Badrul affirms that the knowledge he gains through his literacy practices have essentially helped him to carry out his responsibilities effectively. Given his current position, he is required to be well-versed of matters relevant to his profession in order to solve several pertaining problems. As such, he is able to meet his job requirement through reading. This is evident in his remark presented below.

Every morning I have to read newspapers; *Utusan Malaysia* is a must because I have to know if there's any complaint about schools since I'm in charge of it. I cannot miss it. My job involves mostly reading. Whatever actions I want to take, I have to read.

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Quite often, Mr. Badrul hardly reads newspapers at home after work on weekdays but he reads newspapers together with his wife and children on weekends. He usually buys English and Bahasa Melayu newspapers for his family. In addition, he usually spends his weekends reading some books and magazines on computers due to his current interest in computers. According to him, this has made him a computer literate person. Not only that, he is now able to operate and repair computers without having to go through formal tutoring. Concurrently, he also purchases magazines and books on interior designs because his favourite pastime is furnishing his house.

He admits that his reading has led him to self-improvement. He firmly agrees that learning is a life-long process, hence, a knowledgeable person denotes a successful man. The following excerpt clearly illustrates the case in point.

For us in the Ministry, a successful man is a person who is able to answer any queries or problems regarding the ministry because a lot of things are

complicated. If you are not able to explain any queries, that means you have to learn more. That means in order to work in the school department, I have to be knowledgeable since I have to know everything.

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In view of his literacy practices with his children, Mr. Badrul declares that both, his wife and him, initiate their children's interest whilst providing continuous support on reading. Every night after dinner, he usually sits together with his children while they are revising their schoolwork. Sometimes he reads storybooks and newspapers together with them in their living room. Such reading aloud activity is carried out to motivate his children to read. Furthermore, he sometimes shares the latest news that he discovers from the Internet with his children by articulating it to them verbally. When they were small, he used to tell them stories by reading and showing them the illustrations in the storybooks. Mr. Badrul and his wife purchase academic and non-academic books every month to enrich their children's reading habit. Most of the time, they buy workbooks for their children to supplement their school exercises apart from purchasing storybooks for their leisure reading. On top of that, they also subscribe educational magazines for their children.

Generally, Mr. Badrul agrees that reading helps him to play his role as a father effectively. By reading, he is able to obtain some tips to educate his children and also to be able to answer their questions. He finds that all his children share the same interest in reading. In fact, Mr. Badrul feels that his children often read more than he does as he always sees them reading newspapers on weekends or storybooks during the leisure time voluntarily. He feels that his literacy practices with his children are important to establish the love of reading and to enrich their knowledge; consequently, these will bring to higher achievement in school as well as making them educated persons. In essence, he asserts his active involvement in enhancing his children's interest in literacy.

These findings denote that Mr. Badrul is an active literacy broker to his children as manifested by the daily literacy events he creates in order to enhance his children's literacy practices and to ensure their success in school. Being an academician himself has also helped him to promote and motivate literacy for his children. This is exemplified in the events where he reads to them verbally to share the information that he gathers from his own reading. It is interesting to find that his children also share his intrinsic needs of acquiring information for knowledge purposes as well as updating themselves on current issues.

Nevertheless, the home literacy practices of Mr. Badrul are mainly bound by the school practices in which they are valued specifically for academic success. This is apparent in the way he emphasizes his children to read academic books while providing such facilities and assisting them with their homework every night in order to ensure good achievement in school. Obviously, most of their home literacy practices consist of reading and writing events as a result of schooling needs.

However, it is important to note that besides the emphasis on school literacy, the importance of literacy for other life purposes is also evident in Mr. Badrul family's home literacy practices. This can be seen from their habitual practices of reading newspapers and storybooks to fulfill their leisure time at home. As indicated in the findings, the children are very much influenced by their father's appreciation towards literacy and thus, he becomes their role model of literacy.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has drawn the attention to the diverse ways of promoting home literacy practices by two Malay fathers. It has shown that both fathers display different personal and paternal identities remarkably affected by their *membershiping* of different social roles. This paper also discloses that a considerable amount of home literacy practices exercised by both fathers and their family members primarily constitutes school or academic orientations. Therefore the findings reported in this paper authenticate that literacy is a socially constructed practice.

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