Attitudes and Approaches to Literacy in Scottish Chinese Families

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This study investigates the attitudes and approaches to literacy in the homes of eight Chinese families settled in a region of Central Scotland. The Chinese parents in the study were interviewed at home, using the assistance of a bilingual teacher. The findings indicate that the Chinese parents have varied educational backgrounds and linguistic profiles. Almost all the families do, however, have a commitment to maintaining Chinese literacy skills and are supporting their children at home in developing these skills. What also emerged from the investigation was that acquiring Chinese literacy was perceived by the parents to be linked with the transmission of traditional Chinese cultural values. The study revealed that some parents searched for innovative approaches in their teaching of Chinese characters to their children, whilst approaches adopted by other parents were more influenced by the process of reading and writing Chinese they had experienced within their own formal education. The findings indicate that strategies need to be developed and implemented in order to enhance the dialogue between Chinese parents and schools. Finally, further implications of the findings for educational policy and practice in Scotland are discussed.

doi: 10.2167/le641.0

Keywords: Chinese parents, Chinese language, character learning, multilingual literacies, multilingual Scotland, home-school policy

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in the nature of family contexts and their role in influencing the development of children’s literacy skills. Teale and Sulzby (1986) have shown that children gain both knowledge, and awareness, of literacy through a number of experiences in the home. These include interacting socially with adults and siblings in reading and writing situations, observing adults modelling literate behaviours, and exploring print independently. Purcell-Gates (1996) believes that the quality of these experiences varies considerably from one family to another. This, she claims, is due to different levels of functional literacy in the home and, by association, to the educational attainment of significant adults in the child’s life.

The effects of the home-literacy learning environment in English-speaking homes is well documented in the USA (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) and in Britain (Hannon, 1995; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2000; Weinberger, 1996) but less is known about the extent and nature of literacy practices in linguistic minority homes. Schools continue to ignore rather than build on the rich and dynamic multi-literate lives of children from minority ethnic communities, and

0950-0782/06/05 0355-19 $20.00/0
LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION © 2006 A. Hancock
Vol. 20, No. 5, 2006

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thus fail to make use of a resource provided by increasing numbers of children and young people who speak a language other than English (Landon, 2001a; Lo Bianco, 2001). Smyth (2003), who conducted research in low diversity schools in Scotland, has shown that teachers frequently interpret first language literacy in terms of their own cultural expectations. Minority ethnic parents’ contribution to literacy development was perceived exclusively in terms of English and parents’ apparent lack of knowledge of school practices was viewed as problematic to their children’s English literacy development. Yet, this is in direct contrast to empirical research (Thomas & Collier, 1997), which shows that those who are more literate in the first language acquire literacy in the second language more quickly.

Literacy has its roots in historical practices, and is inextricably bound together with an individual’s or group’s cultural identity (Ferdman, 1990). Li Wei (2000) believes that the distinctiveness of Chinese orthography becomes a symbol of community identity and cohesion for the Chinese diaspora settled in Britain. Hence, a reduction in, or loss of, the ability to read and write may take on particular social significance for members of the Chinese community. This view is reflected in research which has acknowledged Chinese parents as anxious to send their children to weekend complementary schools to retain the literacy of the home and keep traditional Chinese cultural beliefs and values alive (Linguistic Minorities Project, 1985; Pal, 1994; Wong, 1991).

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to survey parents and use them as informants as to their attitudes and approaches to literacy learning. Research of this type would give educators a deeper understanding of linguistic minority parents’ relationship with their own children’s literacy development.

Related Research

This present study draws heavily on the growing body of ethnographic research published during the last 10 years into the social construction of reading and writing in multilingual communities in Britain. Saxena (1994) was the first to highlight the diversity within the Punjabi community in Southall, and described the complex literacy awareness and different script choices associated with an individual’s religious affinity and educational background. Similarly, Martin-Jones and Bhatt (1998) documented the fluid nature of the literacy repertoires and identities of young Gujarati speakers in Leicester. This research recognised the number of interactional factors which influence the shaping of the individuals’ linguistic proficiency, affiliation and inheritance (Leung et al., 1997). These include the opportunities (time and location) available for learning literacy, the degree of allegiance owed to their cultural inheritance and to personal and recreational interests. Other studies which have paid attention to a broader view of literacy include Hirst (1998) and Kenner (2000) who focused on pre-school children observing or participating in a range of literacy activities, in different languages, as part of their daily lives, whilst Gregory (1994), Blackledge (2000), Sneddon (2000) and Helavaara Robertson (2004) provided insights into the nature of literacy experiences of multilingual primary aged children.

The above range of research has predominantly taken place in urban locations in England, with significant minority ethnic communities. In addition, these studies have focused on minority languages other than Chinese, no doubt partly
because previous research conducted into Chinese communities in Britain encountered barriers to gaining access to Chinese parents. The reasons often cited for failure to include Chinese communities in research studies of this sort include the reserved nature of the participants, parents working unsocial hours in the catering business and difficulties in locating qualified and experienced bilingual and bicultural investigators (Li Wei, 1994; Taylor, 1987).

Little is known, beyond anecdotal evidence, of the availability of literacy materials in Chinese homes. As part of a wider study of family life, Sham and Woodrow (1998) looked at reading and writing in the homes of five Hong Kong Chinese families in Manchester. All the parents sent the children to Chinese Sunday school and wished their children to become biliterate. Notes for food orders were written in Chinese characters and in one case study the mother encouraged her daughter to help write letters to relatives in Hong Kong to practise her Chinese writing. The only evidence in the home of writing in English was the children’s homework, but there was an abundance of reading materials, such as school textbooks in Chinese, as well as Chinese newspapers and magazines.

The parents’ contribution to their children’s literacy acquisition is considered central and some interest has been shown in school age children learning a logographic script. Gregory (1993) described one child’s very different experiences of learning two writing systems in a mainstream school and in a Saturday Chinese school. The preferred learning style of the five-year-old was based on perfection through practise and attention to detail emphasised by his family. Gregory felt the parents and grandparents influenced this style as a result of their own experience of acquiring literacy, in the more formal education systems of China and Hong Kong. Similarly, An Ran (2000a) discovered that mothers drew on what they remembered of their own schooling in China when teaching their children to read and write Chinese at home. That is, the parents took a highly structured instructional approach working from standard textbooks rather than interacting with texts associated with reading for enjoyment advocated by mainstream schools. In another study, Kenner et al. (2004) found that during peer teaching sessions at school six-year-old Chinese children produced their own interpretations of the explanations provided by their parents whilst teaching Chinese characters at home.

According to Sham (1997), copying down notes and memorising facts were the preferred learning style of the Chinese pupils in a secondary school she studied. She believes these learning styles were affected by socialisation and behavioural rules learned at home. These include Confucian values of ‘respect for superiors and elders’, ‘loyalty and filial piety’ and ‘learning by memorising and practice’. The latter is seen by Sham as deriving from how the Chinese written language is traditionally learnt.

Children educated in Hong Kong and China will be expected to have learnt almost three thousand characters during the six years of their primary schooling. Taylor and Taylor (1995) describe how children learn to read by being taught as many characters as possible in a short time using methods called ‘systematic learning’ and ‘concentrated character recognition’. These echo similar descriptions by some observers of the pedagogies in primary schools in Hong Kong and China (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Ebbeck, 1995; Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999). Li and Rao (2000) noted that three-year-old Cantonese-speaking children attending
kindergarten in Hong Kong begin to learn Chinese characters as well as the English alphabet. They also reported the importance of parental involvement in Chinese literacy development because of the need to get children to pronounce characters correctly and gain meaning from a logographic script. The researchers claim that ‘when a new Chinese character is encountered, parents usually teach the child this new character, by naming, explaining and defining it’ (Li & Rao, 2000: 88).

The research, albeit sparse, into the Chinese community in Britain gives us an important insight into reading and writing embedded in cultural and social practices. It frequently makes the assumption that the approaches to literacy learning at home and school will not be the same, whereas Cummins (1984) warns against generalisations of this kind, pointing out that this factor is likely to vary not only across but also within cultural sub-groups. Additional variables such as the home print environment, parent–child engagement in literacy-related activities, quality of educational instruction and broader societal factors also need to be considered.

The emphasis of the present study, therefore, is aimed towards investigating the heterogeneity of Chinese families within an isolated context taking into account the parents’ educational background and expertise in specific literacies whilst shedding light on their attitudes towards literacy learning in the home.

**Methodology**

The setting for this qualitative study is the central belt of Scotland where there is a small and often scattered minority ethnic population. The focus is on eight nuclear Chinese households. The following key research questions guided the survey throughout:

1. What are the parents’ attitudes towards their children learning Chinese?
2. How do the parents think learning to read and write in Chinese should be taught?

The data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with the parents in the home. The use of open-ended questions is especially suitable for gleaning rich information for it provides the participants space and freedom to answer the questions in their own terms and offers the interviewer a chance to elaborate on the attitudes and opinions obtained. In most cases one parent, usually the mother, was present. Three fathers took part, two with their partners. An aide-mémoire of questions and topics to be covered was prepared beforehand (see Appendix).

The interviews were conducted by the researcher and a peripatetic Chinese Bilingual Teacher. As well as acting as interpreter and cultural broker for the parents, the Bilingual Teacher’s role also involved the drawing up of a list of parents whom she felt would cooperate in the research. Initial contact had already been made with all of the households by the Bilingual Teacher before the research commenced. This was facilitated by the fact that her present job consisted of supporting the Chinese children at school and acting as an interpreter at parent consultation meetings. In addition, home visits constituted an important element of her professional duty to establish communication with
parents and prepare profiles of the pupils she supported in schools. Hence some of the challenges associated with undertaking home-based research were absent in that a rapport and trust had already been established over a period of time with the participants.

The original intention was for all the interviews to be tape-recorded, transcribed and translated into English. However, during pilot interviews permission to use a tape recorder was refused by the parents. To avoid future embarrassment it was decided to adopt a less intrusive approach. Consecutive interpretation allowed time for information to be jotted down by the researcher while the verbal interaction took place in Cantonese. After the interview the researcher’s notes were read by the Bilingual Teacher to assess for accuracy of interpretation.

There are a number of dilemmas surrounding the role and identity of the researcher whilst conducting studies in multilingual settings. Connolly and Troya (1998) believe that white researchers cannot elicit meaningful data from minority ethnic respondents because of the inherent differences in experiences and power relationships between them. A further criticism is the danger of perpetuating stereotypes and endorsing racist assumptions held by the dominant population when a researcher is unfamiliar with the participants’ belief systems and lifestyles. Thus it may be argued that such studies ought to be conducted only by presumed members of these ethnic groups. Practical advantages associated with this shared cultural inheritance include knowledge of the language and awareness of rituals and rules of behaviour whilst conducting access arrangements and interviews.

On the other hand Francis and Archer (2005) have recognised the less than ideal nature of ‘insider’ research. They claim that this ‘matching’ exercise between interviewer and interviewee may disguise the researcher’s own bias during fieldwork and data interpretation. There is a concern that responses gleaned from interviews might be misconstrued in order to fit the researcher’s own perceptions, experiences or background. Furthermore, it should also not be assumed that ethnicity is a fixed category and consequently the basis of cultural solidarity. Fortier (1998) believes that identities are dynamic, socially constructed and take on multiple forms within ethnic groups. Bhatti (1999) reflected on these issues during her ethnographic enquiry into an Asian community. Despite being linguistically acceptable to the participants she believed the relationships with those she came into contact with were subject to hierarchical differences as a result of her age, gender and status as an academic and researcher. Throughout the present study the researcher aimed to remain aware of and sensitive to potential asymmetries of power and to the role played by the Bilingual Teacher.

**Educational Background of Parents**

The migration history and educational background of minority ethnic parents is considered a significant influence on their ability to support their children’s literacy development (Cummins, 1980). This information is summarised in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used for family names in order to retain their confidentiality. The majority of the parents in the sample originate from the New
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Age</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Age arrived in Scotland</th>
<th>Stay in Scotland</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>Language spoken at home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Cheung (43)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6 yrs Hong Kong</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td>7, 11, 13</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Cheung (38)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10 yrs China</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Yang (48)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10 yrs Hong Kong University: Scotland</td>
<td>factory owner</td>
<td>12, 14</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Yang (41)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10 yrs Hong Kong</td>
<td>factory worker (p/t)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Chung (43)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7 yrs Hong Kong</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td>11, 13</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Chung (40)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9 yrs Hong Kong and Scotland</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Tse (39)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9 yrs Hong Kong and Scotland</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td>8, 10</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Tse (38)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10 yrs Hong Kong College Scotland</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Leung (40)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10 yrs Hong Kong and Scotland</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td>4, 6, 8</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Leung (36)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 yrs Hong Kong</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr So (38)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8 yrs Hong Kong</td>
<td>chef (hotel)</td>
<td>1, 5, 11, 12</td>
<td>Hakka/English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs So (33)</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11 yrs Scotland</td>
<td>housewife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Lai (33)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 yrs China</td>
<td>chef (restaurant)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Lai (33)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 yrs China</td>
<td>housewife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Tsang (43)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8 yrs Hong Kong</td>
<td>chef (take-away)</td>
<td>6, 7</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Tsang (31)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 yrs China</td>
<td>take-away (p/t)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Territories of Hong Kong, where Hakka is commonly spoken. This was the predominant language used in the homes. The migration picture is complex, with many partners arriving independently of each other, although it closely reflects the larger migration trend of Chinese communities in Britain as the economic recession and political instability in the 1960s in Hong Kong caused people from rural areas to look for opportunities abroad.

Most of the parents had their entire education outside Scotland where the language of instruction was either Cantonese in Hong Kong or Putonghua in Mainland China. There is a commonly held assumption that many Chinese in Britain, especially women, have a limited schooling as they come from agricultural and fishing backgrounds in the New Territories where education provision was inadequate prior to the implementation of a system of nine-year universal education from 1978. However, this does not equate with the present sample as only four of the parents had an education restricted to primary school. These parents stated that they could not proceed to secondary school because transport to schools from rural areas and the school fees were beyond the means of their families. Two parents progressed to further or higher education whilst three parents had a split education between Hong Kong and Scotland. Only one parent received the whole of her education in Scotland.

Although the individual parents’ responses varied in their self-reported expertise in the reading and writing of Chinese and English there appears to be a strong correlation between literacy levels and opportunities to learn literacy through formal education (Table 2). There was a natural shift in expertise towards English literacy for those parents who received all or some of their education in Scotland. Those who had completed secondary schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Read Chinese</th>
<th>Write Chinese</th>
<th>Read English</th>
<th>Write English</th>
<th>Speak English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Cheung</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Cheung</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>not very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Yang</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Yang</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Chung</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Chung</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Tse</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Tse</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Leung</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Leung</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr So</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs So</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Lai</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Lai</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Tsang</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Tsang</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
<td>not very good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in Hong Kong or China were more likely to be literate in Chinese and to some extent had gained literacy in English when English was taught as a subject at school.

It is acknowledged that this type of sociolinguistic survey should be interpreted with caution. Asking the parents for their own views on their communicative competence can result in researchers being given unreliable or idealised information (Kalantzis et al., 1989). However, the Bilingual Teacher who frequently communicated with the parents both orally and in writing during the course of her work was able to substantiate the parents’ subjective views about language use and proficiency.

Formal education was not the sole influence on literacy proficiency. There were also opportunities for parents to develop literacy skills through their own personal and recreational interests. Unlike other parents, who claimed to have forgotten some Chinese characters since finishing formal schooling, Mr Cheung, who was educated only to primary level more than 30 years ago, stated his Chinese literacy skills were ‘good’ because he regularly reads a Chinese newspaper. Similarly, Mrs Tsang reported that her English literacy skills were ‘not very good’ but were developing because she was learning to use a computer at a community education-run ICT course for Chinese women.

All but three of the parents with knowledge of Chinese literacy had learnt traditional Chinese characters at school in Hong Kong and continue to use this preferred style. The parents who were educated in Mainland China used simplified characters, introduced in 1949, in an effort to increase literacy levels. These parents were also taught pinyin, (a phonetic romanised system based on the sounds of Putonghua), as a means of early reading instruction.

To obtain additional information on the issues of language inheritance and affiliation the parents were asked what language they spoke, and to whom, and in what contexts. All the parents professed knowledge of several spoken Chinese varieties (Cantonese, Hakka and Putonghua), which are mutually unintelligible, as well as English. This language profile is influenced by a number of factors such as their place of birth, language of schooling, partner’s preferred spoken variety, extended travel opportunities and friendships. (For a discussion of Chinese spoken varieties as languages or dialects refer to Yang, 1996.) For some parents their spoken language defined their sense of ethnic identity within a diverse sociolinguistic landscape. As Mrs Tse stated: ‘I am a Hakka person’.

The multilingual world that the parents lived in was described in the following way by Mrs Tsang:

Hakka is our first language, English because of the children, Cantonese is used at the Chinese school and we speak Putonghua to the kitchen staff. My daughter is going to dance classes and the teacher only speaks Putonghua so I have to teach her that language.

Parental Attitudes

The majority of the parents had a strong orientation towards maintaining Chinese literacy skills with their children. The most common reasons given for
this were future employment prospects and enhanced life-chances available to them through developing literacy in both Chinese and English. The following quotes from two parents is typical of their responses:

The growing trade with China means one day Stephen might get a job in China. It is better for his career. He has an advantage because he is Chinese. You need to learn to read and write both languages. (Mrs Yang)

They can go to Hong Kong, America or stay here. It is important to balance both languages. (Mrs So)

In China, literacy practices were historically restricted to a small scholarly elite of males who studied and memorised the Confucian classics in preparation for civil service examinations. As a consequence the spread of functional literacy amongst the majority of the population was prevented. Lee (1996) believes this literacy knowledge as an access to employment opportunities still resonates with parents regardless of social class and gender.

All the parents in the sample saw advantages in the ability to read and write in more than one language and felt it was their responsibility to give their children these opportunities. As Mr Leung said: ‘It will take a long time to do that but it will be more beneficial when they are adults. They can look back and appreciate both sides of the coin.’

For the Chinese parents, learning Chinese literacy was also closely bound to the maintenance and transmission of their culture. This view was expressed by Mr Chang: ‘It is important to learn Chinese. When they have their own family, they need to teach their children the language, they need to pass it on to the next generation. It is important for our heritage.’

Literacy and cultural identity were profoundly interwoven for many of the parents and there was a perceptible resistance to what was regarded as cultural impoverishment. When asked what her attitude was towards her children learning Chinese literacy, Mrs Leung replied: ‘Poor Chinese, poor Chinese person.’

In addition, several families mentioned the functional benefits of having bilingual skills whilst on heritage visits. As Mr Cheung explained: ‘When we go to Hong Kong for a visit the children will be able to read all the instructions in Chinese and English.’

A further indication of the positive attitude towards learning Chinese was their children’s attendance at a community Chinese school. Out of the sample, the majority of the parents sent their children to one of the three weekend schools available to them in their geographical vicinity. The three families who did not send their children to a Chinese school spoke of a variety of reasons such as transport difficulties, conflicts with work schedules, the inadequate amount of time available for learning Chinese and the language of instruction in the school being Cantonese when the home language is Hakka. The latter appears to reflect the parents’ own educational experiences of learning Chinese literacy through a variety of spoken Chinese other than their own.

The value some parents placed on learning Chinese was illustrated by the suggestion that Chinese should be taught at the mainstream school. Mrs Cheung explained this position:
I was watching the Chinese Channel news and it said that the Shanghai Bank had sponsored a Chinese teacher in a secondary school in London to encourage the children to learn Chinese. If there is a possibility to have a Chinese teacher it will also be good for everybody not just the Chinese children.

Although many of the parents sent their children to the weekend Chinese complementary school they also expressed their dilemma of wanting their children to gain Chinese literacy skills whilst recognising the importance of acquiring the literacy of the dominant society as a route to qualifications and higher education opportunities. These views are consistent with previous studies conducted amongst Chinese parents in both Britain (Tsow, 1984; Wong, 1992) and internationally (Siu, 1996).

Of particular interest is the case of Mrs So, who initially rejected her linguistic inheritance and culture because of her own experience of racism when starting school. She recalls:

We only spoke Chinese in the home but I was born here. When I went to school the only English I knew was ‘yes’ ‘no’ and ‘Hong Kong’. The whole class ganged up on me and banged my head against the railings, it is so vivid, I can see the girl’s face now grabbing my hair. I’m now thirty-three and it happened when I was five. There was racism constantly at school. I was paranoid because of my own experience so I said learn English to [my son]. I’m very concerned that my children don’t suffer like me.

This parent’s initial insistence that her children should not learn Chinese, because it represents an obstacle to assimilation, is at variance to her husband’s wishes. On later reflection, the mother felt it was important for her children to reclaim their cultural and linguistic heritage and agreed that the children would attend the Chinese school and she now supports her children in developing their Chinese literacy skills at home. These stages of ‘ethnic evasion’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘emergence’ are reported in more depth by Tse (1998).

**Approaches to Literacy Learning**

All the families in the sample, except one, had a strong desire to maintain their Chinese literacy skills, and they supported their children in developing these skills at home. In these families the mother appeared to be the primary ‘teacher’ even in the families where the father was more accomplished in Chinese literacy. However the strategies employed by the parents and the time and energy involved in these learning activities varied from family to family. Possible influences include the parents’ talents in Chinese and their recollections of learning Chinese literacy in school.

The nature of Chinese writing is frequently oversimplified in the literature in the Western world. Notable exceptions are Li et al. (2002) and McBride-Chang and Chen (2003). Chinese characters represent morphemes rather than ‘words’ and are monosyllabic. In modern Chinese the majority of characters are not ideographs or pictographs but are compound characters consisting of two elements. This includes a component called a semantic radical which give information about the meaning. For example, the radical ‘women’ 女 appears in
words assuming female roles ‘she’ 她 ‘sister’ 姐妹 and ‘aunt’ 阿姨. The other
component of a standard character is a phonetic radical which gives a clue to
the pronunciation. However, due to the passage of time and dialect variations
these phonetics are not always reliable or consistent.

In five of the families, literacy tasks are conducted in conjunction with
homework assignments from the Chinese schools. Textbooks and accompanying
workbooks were used as a stimulus. These resources have been produced
since 1993 by the United Kingdom Federation of Chinese Schools (UKFCS)
in response to the demand for appropriate materials for British-born Chinese
pupils learning Chinese part time. Level One introduces eight to ten basic char-
acters per lesson (e.g. numbers, animals, clothes), whilst Book Two comprises
short sentences. The level of literacy progresses to the more advanced books
and their contents cover themes of everyday life as well as Chinese history,
culture and literature.

There were instances when home and school literacy practices blended. A
number of children annotated the characters in their workbooks with their own
phonetic English transliteration based on the pronunciation of the characters
proved by their parents. This was evident in the workbook of a seven-year-old
boy shown to the researcher by one parent. On the other hand, one mother
disapproved of this approach claiming that it undermined the importance of hard
work associated with learning through memorisation.

Mrs Tse used oral mediation and explanation when teaching her ten-year-
old daughter at home. First, the mother broke down the Chinese characters
into their component parts ‘like a jigsaw’. She went on to name and explain
the character. Here ‘snow’ 雪 is described as ‘rain 雨 picked up by the hand’. The
mother then went on to define the semantic relationship to other charac-
ters asking the child to recognise the learnt radical (component part offering a
cue to meaning or pronunciation). The child was then taught the compound
characters 雨衣 (raincoat) and 雨傘 (umbrella) which all share the character雨
(rain).

Similar approaches to learning are also adopted by two other mothers as the
following suggest:

You have to explain the character first. I was given no explanation. I was
not taught the meaning or how to remember. That is why I lost the skills.
Teaching is much better today. It was boring when I went to school. (Mrs
Chung)

It is important to learn the radicals, left hand side or top, you have to
remember the radicals. (Mrs Lay)

The concept that children do not acquire Chinese characters wholly by
memorisation, learning each one as an unanalysed whole, but rather that they
develop morphological awareness strategies (i.e. can detect meaning from unfa-
familiar characters) is supported by Shu and Anderson (1997). They state that the
child who has knowledge of the function of radicals develops metalinguistic
awareness which in turn accelerates their literacy development.

There was a consensus of opinion amongst the parents regarding how large
numbers of Chinese characters are learnt. They emphasised frequent practice,
drills, dictation and tests. A number of parents spoke of the cultural significance of the aesthetics of ‘beautiful writing’ and stressed the importance of teaching the proper sequence and directionality of strokes (refer to Wong, 1991) when writing Chinese. Mrs Tse uses ‘pictorial instructions’ with her children:

You have to make them use their imagination. I take the textbooks away from the children and say ‘follow me, draw a square and don’t close the mouth. Add a moustache’. They can’t just copy from a book, they get it wrong and you need to teach them the correct sequence and talk it through with them in an interesting way like ‘draw a smile’ or ‘draw two eyes’. For more complicated characters you get them to draw a square and divide it into three parts.

This method differs a great deal from the approach adopted by Mrs So who was educated only in Scotland and claims to have limited Chinese literacy skills. Out of all the parents in the sample, she spent the most time monitoring her children’s Chinese homework, making them memorise the Chinese characters through daily repeated mechanical copying. Occasionally her husband corrects the stroke configurations.

It would have been outside the scope of the present investigation to make detailed observations of parent–child interactions around literacy in the home as this was not the aim of the research. For an insight into this approach to data collection see An Ran (2000b), who discusses the way Chinese parents approach the teaching of characters and the question of memorisation.

Many of the parents described a number of additional learning activities in around reading and writing. For example the use of the convenient hand-held electronic bilingual dictionary had a different purpose in two of the families. Mrs Lai and her ten-year-old daughter used the electronic dictionary together to translate English homework into Chinese for better understanding, whilst in the Tsang household, the dictionary was used for family literacy development. The mother and two children ‘listened to the machine’ to support their pronunciation in English whilst reading storybooks brought home from school.

In all the families it was predominantly the mother who supervised the children’s Chinese and English homework. They monitored the work tightly, made up extension exercises and urged their children to work hard and to achieve academically. Consequently, the mother took the lead role in nurturing, discipline and in acting as a ‘cultural conduit’. Even the one parent who was born in Scotland discussed this in terms of Confucian philosophy and the importance of ‘family education’ (ka gao). The children were taught to respect one another and the importance of study, as well as accepting the guidance of their parents. There was also a strict division between work and play. The typical view expressed by the majority of parents is encapsulated in the following quote:

When my children say their friends don’t do homework I reply ‘but you are Chinese’. I was brought up to guide children from very young for their future. They have daily homework and I supervise a great deal. [My son] has to do his homework, chores and keyboard practice before he goes out to play. (Mrs So)
Conclusion

The study investigated the attitudes and approaches to literacy in Chinese families settled in a region of Scotland and revealed similarities and differences amongst the families. The similarities were:

- All the families in the sample, except one, have a strong commitment to perpetuate their literacy in Chinese, and they supported their children at home in developing these skills.
- Learning Chinese literacy in the families was inextricably linked with the transmission of traditional Chinese cultural beliefs, values and norms.
- In all the homes the parents used the heritage language with their children and this practice contributed to linguistic stability. There was not the same language shift towards English as found in other minority ethnic communities (McPake, 2004).
- The parents searched for innovative and informal approaches to teach Chinese literacy to their children.

The differences amongst the families were:

- The Chinese parents in the sample have complex and varied linguistic backgrounds and proficiencies. The parents have expertise in different literacies which they can draw upon.
- The strategies the parents use at home, and the time spent to support Chinese literacy learning, varied from family to family.
- The teaching styles used by the parents were partly influenced by their expertise in reading and writing Chinese as well as by their own experience of formal education.

The research highlights a number of issues which have implications for changes in educational policy and practice in Scotland. Although the study revealed a strong desire of Chinese parents to maintain and develop their children’s Chinese literacy skills, opportunities to develop these skills were extremely limited, amounting to about two hours teaching at weekend Chinese schools and/or parental support in the home.

This would appear to indicate a need for a National Policy on Language Education to be produced by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED); such a policy would recognise the importance of cultural and linguistic pluralism in a devolved Scotland and make a commitment towards enhancing community language teaching. In order to be effective, these classes need to have suitably qualified staff, high quality teaching and learning materials and community support. In addition, these classes should be subjected to quality assurance (CERES, 1999). There is a clear need for a Scottish qualification in Chinese. However, the variety of the Chinese language to be taught needs to be considered in the light of the complexity and diversity of the Chinese language established amongst the parents.

For Chinese students who are geographically isolated, as is the case in this present study, the Scottish Schools Digital Network (SSDN) should be utilised to develop community language skills through videoconferencing (Landon,
2001b), teaching and learning. Allowing all pupils in Scottish schools the opportunity to learn community languages will raise awareness of languages, and thus have a positive impact on intercultural sensitivity and education for citizenship initiatives.

The parents in the study had high aspirations for their children and acknowledged the benefits of developing their children’s biliteracy skills as an avenue for future career opportunities. There is a demand for skilled bilingual staff, not only within education services, but also in other service provision within Scottish society. If the present education system does not foster the potential biliteracy skills within the linguistic minority community then these bilingual professionals will continue to be in short supply, as will potential candidates with the background necessary to qualify as public service interpreters.

The research showed that Chinese parents have a deep-seated interest in their children’s education, and accordingly parental absence from parental consultation meetings should not automatically be perceived as a lack of concern. Reasons for non-attendance may be the inability to communicate in English with schools, shortage of time due to work pressures or a limited knowledge of the Scottish education system. It is important for schools to listen to parents and for teachers to appreciate the home context and daily lives of the community they serve. This includes raising awareness about literacy practices in the home and at weekend Chinese classes and the different approaches to literacy learning at school. In addition, educationalists need to be aware of the different motivations for acquiring literacy in different languages. An Ran (2001) specifically deals with the issue of negotiation between parents from Mainland China and mainstream primary school teachers.

Effective communication needs to be a two-way process and schools need to ensure that parents adequately understand the teaching and learning practices used within classrooms. The varied opinions of the parents in the survey reveal the dangers inherent in making assumptions about parents’ educational values and beliefs based on their cultural background. Teachers need to recognise that cultures are dynamic and they should strive to avoid seeing Chinese parents as a homogeneous group. As a step towards this, education authorities should revisit parental partnership policies to enhance the dialogue between home and school.

Initial home visits should be social and the majority of Chinese parents would welcome this. These visits would facilitate mutual understanding and establish a trusting and positive relationship between home and school. This preliminary link may encourage parental participation in their child’s schooling to a greater degree and would help build the foundations for future dialogue between home and school.

Flexibility is also required in arranging more formal parent consultation meetings to discuss pupil progress. This is because many parents work unsocial hours, and the timing of events sometimes prohibits parents’ attendance at school functions. This study found that Monday afternoons are the preferred time for many Chinese parents as this is the day when their businesses traditionally close.

The research highlighted the varied and complex linguistic portfolios of the families. Schools should monitor the language used by parents and children in
their homes by ensuring this information is collected at the time of each pupil’s enrolment. Appropriate staff should be made aware of this information and should be encouraged to make active and constructive use of it. Education authorities and schools should reflect on how they communicate with parents both orally and in writing. Assumptions should not be made that parents have limited English or that they possess expertise in Chinese literacy; nor should we assume that they possess native speaker expertise in an undifferentiated Chinese. For instance, educationalists must take into account the distinction between Hakka, Cantonese and Putonghua and between traditional and simplified characters. Information on parents’ preferences and choices needs to be obtained by schools.

If bilingual staff are unavailable it is important for education authorities to provide a professionally trained interpreting and translation service to ensure equal access to information to parents with limited English. Leaflets using accessible language on how the education system is organised should be produced. These should be brief and carefully pre-edited to enable easy translation into appropriate community languages. For those parents with poor literacy in both languages, cassette tapes in Hakka or Cantonese should be available explaining the teaching and learning approaches of the school and inviting participation by parents.

The majority of the parents in the sample recognised the importance of developing their children’s bilingual skills. It is important and desirable that monolingual teachers appreciate the social, academic and cognitive benefits of bilingualism and that these skills should be acknowledged and encouraged (DfES, 2003). Teachers should not focus merely on the child’s difficulties with English and should refrain from encouraging parents to speak English at home. Education authorities need to provide a sustained programme of staff development and training as a means of enabling educational practitioners to value bilingualism and language diversity and develop new pedagogies to promote these within their practice.

The experience of one parent, who suffered racism at school, highlights how an individual’s language, sense of identity and self-esteem are intertwined. Schools frequently fail to recognise incidents as racially motivated because they lack experience or because of an ingrained belief that there is ‘no problem here’ (Donald et al., 1994). Policies must be in place in education authorities in order to deal with any forms of prejudice or discrimination. Schools also need to be proactive in dealing with issues of racism and language awareness within school development planning and through the curriculum. This is particularly important in areas of Scotland where the minority ethnic population is small and isolated and where there is a greater risk of harassment and abuse (De Lima, 2001).

There is a paucity of existing educational research into the minority ethnic population in Scotland (Powney et al., 1998). This present study set out to explore the attitudes and approaches to literacy in Chinese homes but inevitably it has pointed up additional areas for further research. These range from gathering observational data of literacy practices in other linguistic minority homes, as well as Chinese homes, to longitudinal studies of individuals designed to investigate the complex dynamics of linguistic expertise and changing allegiances to different literacies over time. The potential links or mismatch between the various literacy practices adopted in the domains of the home, community language
classes and mainstream schools also requires probing. Finally, evidence of the contribution of first language literacy development towards English literacy acquisition will support the research agenda for bilingual learners in Scotland suggested by Landon (1999).

Acknowledgements
I could not have conducted this study without the assistance of Yin Ying Cairney, who provided invaluable interpreting skills and introduced me to the families in the study.

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References


Appendix: Summary of Interview Schedule

Family name:
Parent(s) age:
Place of birth:
Place children born:
Age / gender of children:
Parents’ employment:
Age came to Scotland (where appropriate):
Length of residence in other countries:
Heritage visits (duration):
What language do you speak to
parents brother/sister children friends

What language do the following speak to you
parents brother/sister children friends

Place of schooling:
Age started: Age finished:
Language of instruction:
Level attained: Primary Secondary Further/Higher

If educated in Hong Kong/China did you have English language classes?
If educated in Scotland did you attend community language classes?

What is your standard of spoken English?
Very Good Good Not very good

What is your standard of spoken Cantonese/Hakka/Putonghua (or other spoken variety)?
Very Good Good Not very good

What is your standard of reading/writing in English?
Very Good Good Not very good

What is your standard of reading/writing in Chinese (traditional/simplified characters)?
Very Good Good Not very good

Any communication difficulties with heritage visits to Hong Kong/China (oracy/literacy)?

Do your children attend community language classes?
Where (if appropriate)? Reasons for (non) attendance?
Why? Why not?

What are your children’s attitudes to attending weekend classes and learning Chinese?
What is your attitude to your children being bilingual/biliterate?
How do you think learning to read and write in Chinese should be taught?
Is it different to learning to read and write in English?
What do you think of the way your children are taught in Scotland?
Do you help your children with their English homework? (reading and writing) how often?
Do you help your children with learning Chinese? (reading and writing) how often?