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## **Becoming Literate in Taiwan: kindergarten experiences as the first part of a long literacy journey**

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**ABSTRACT** The lifeworlds of children incorporate home, school and community locations. They are different environments and each has different contexts and goals. In Taiwan, while school is more focused on an overt exchange of teaching and learning, home is more informal and generally characterized by unstructured contexts and parents' attention that encourages and enhances their children's learning with practical knowledge. Consequently, while literacy is taught in school via a well-planned curriculum, at home it is expected to happen via everyday communications and family activities that promote a close parent-child relationship. This ethnographic study was designed to consider emerging literacy practices in two main venues of kindergarten children's life (school and home) to get a greater understanding of how early literacy is evident in Taiwan. In addition, patterns and practices of children's literacy learning in both urban and suburban areas of Taiwan are scrutinized and analyzed to provide a rationale for early literacy learning and teaching in a time of governmental mandates and global literacy efforts.

### **Introduction**

Engaging with young children as they work with their literacy artifacts (such as children's storybooks, drawings, advertisements, paper, pencils, and the like) is a process of discovery. As children's responses to literacy learning differ, we become aware of the complexity of discursively constructed patterns of early literacy learning in the world that we inhabit. Only by illuminating the children's literacy learning experiences in their micro- and macro-environment can we reveal the unique patterns and practices in specific contexts so that we are able to reconsider our understandings about the discursive dimensions of early literacy learning and teaching. This article attempts to provide descriptive data for two purposes. First, the social contexts of language learning systems and early childhood education in Taiwan are briefly discussed to provide a better understanding of the early literacy teaching and learning over the past decades. Second, an ethnographic research study about the early literacy experiences in two different education settings in Taiwan is presented and closely scrutinized.

### *Social Contexts of Language Systems in Taiwan*

Since 1945, Mandarin Chinese (Kuo-Yu) has been used in Taiwan as the national language or official code to symbolize the history of the Republic of China originally established by the Chinese Nationalist party (KMT) in mainland China in 1912. However, people in Taiwan presently use the original traditional and complicated character system, whereas people in mainland China use the

simplified system that was modified by the Chinese Communists. In addition, the educational system has further played a decisive role in the process that leads to the imposition of Mandarin as the official language. Prior to the lifting of martial law in 1987, the practice of language unification in Taiwan was implemented through suppression of linguistic differences (Cheng, 1994; Wang, 2004). Not only was the use of non-Mandarin vernaculars totally prohibited in school, but students were punished and humiliated in the classroom if they spoke their native tongue, such as Taiwanese (i.e. Taiwanese Hokkien), Hakka, and multiple indigenous languages. Over the past two decades, Taiwan's political and economic systems have undergone drastic transformations, including democratization, the lift of martial law in 1987, regime shifts back and forth between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, during the period 2000 to 2008) and the Chinese National Party (2008 until now). Along with the rise of a Taiwanese identity that is inseparable from the national political struggles and conflicts, some new language policies have been implemented or proposed since the DPP assumed power in 2000. The Language Equality Law, for example, intends to promote the non-Mandarin vernaculars (i.e. Hakka, Taiwanese and indigenous languages) to a status more equal with Mandarin Chinese so that its long-term hegemony could be countered to some extent. Moreover, considering that globalization and internalization were essential for Taiwan's survival under the constant threat from China, policy has been approved that, instead of learning English from the age of 13 in junior high school level (which has been compulsory education since 1968), all students must take English courses starting from the third grade in elementary school. In fact, many schools have already started to offer English courses as early as kindergarten. Furthermore, many universities demand that students take and pass examinations to prove certain levels of English proficiency as a requirement for graduation.

#### *Early Childhood and Early Literacy Education in Taiwan*

Preschool education in Taiwan is not compulsory, but the Taiwanese government provides assistance to toddlers from lower income families to enter the school system early, leading to an increase in the number of students in preschool. The statistics released by the Ministry of Education (MOE) (2006, 2010b, 2012a) show that in early 1970, there were 91,984 students enrolled in preschool. The number has been climbing: by 2005 there were 224,219 kindergarteners; in the 2009-2010 academic year 182,049 children were enrolled in kindergarten or nursery school; and most recently in 2011 there were 189,792 preschoolers. The high number of preschool enrollments in recent years ostensibly reveals not only the value of education to the government but also parents' commitment and expectations regarding early childhood education in Taiwan. However, there was a lack of specific guidelines offered for language learning and development in early childhood until 2012. Enacted on 1 Jan 2012, the bill of Early Childhood Education and Care Act is a revolutionary move in the Taiwanese preschool system to consolidate the education and care of young children (in both kindergarten and nursery school) under a single administrative system and to put into practice a child-centered pedagogy that focuses on the child's best interests. Regarding literacy learning, it is indicated specifically in the Early Childhood Education and Care Act that kindergartens should provide learning activities to enhance language ability for young learners. Moreover, reading has been vigorously promoted in Taiwan in recent years. The MOE (Ministry of Education, 2008) published a parent handbook to encourage and guide parents to foster children's reading habits from birth, in an attempt to ensure that young children would not only develop an appreciation for books prior to preschool but might also be able to read and acquire basic Chinese characters.

In 2012, the MOE (Ministry of Education, 2012b) published *Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care*. The curriculum puts stress on the 'whole person development' in the early childhood stage. Not only does a child receive input from the surroundings, she or he also provides output to create or enrich the surroundings. In other words, the Early Childhood Education Curriculum Guidelines in Taiwan emphasize the individual development of the child as all well as the contextual constructions in his or her lifeworlds. Moreover, language learning and instruction is one of the six major domains in the *Curriculum Guidelines*. The publication states that comprehension of graphic symbols, written words and expression of graphic symbols should be involved in school activities. Further, one of the goals of the domain is that children should enjoy

reading and can articulate their personal viewpoints (Ministry of Education, 2012b). The newly released guidelines provide kindergarten teachers additional specific and constructive instructions to plan the language and literacy curriculum.

### **Method**

The design of this study is qualitative and uses an ethnographic method to investigate the early literacy experiences of young children in Taiwan. The research settings were in two kindergarten classrooms in two cities of southern Taiwan (Kaohsiung and Tainan). The ABC Kindergarten is located in the urban area of Kaohsiung, while the 123 Kindergarten is located in the suburban area of Tainan. Our primary goal was to gain information about how literacy is enacted in the two schools. We sought to ascertain and interrogate how children and teachers are engaged in literacy activities, how literacy is understood by children, teachers, administrators and parents, and how notions regarding the acquisition of early literacy have been re-examined and reconfigured in response to the phenomenon of globalization in Taiwan.

Four kindergarten children (two from each school) were invited to participate in this pilot study. Those relevantly embedded contexts (school and home), discourses (e.g. teachers' beliefs, parental expectations, governmental policy), and people (parents, teachers, school administrators, the child and siblings), which connect to the children's early literacy experiences were also closely scrutinized. The research procedure can be divided into two main phases: observations and interviews. Field notes were created during the observations while all the interviews were digitally recorded. Research findings were derived from a careful analysis of the parallels and divergences among the data abstracted from the observations recorded by the two researchers.

### **Results and Discussion**

The data from class observations and interviews with the parents and associated school teachers and administrators revealed different patterns of early literacy learning and teaching among the selected urban and suburban children in this research study. Specifically, eight thematic characteristics of literacy learning experiences were agreed upon between the two researchers. Based upon the rich data collected from the interviews and observations, the participants' literacy experiences were noted, analyzed and are discussed here. These eight selected characteristics were:

1. School profiles: literacy environment & culture;
2. Literacy curriculum;
3. Literacy assessment & evaluation;
4. Teacher's beliefs & expectations;
5. Teacher professional development;
6. Family-involved literacy activities;
7. Parents' beliefs & expectations; and
8. The children's literacy journey.

These eight specific characteristics regarding early literacy learning experiences in the two schools in southern Taiwan will be clearly depicted and discussed in the following sections.

#### *ABC Kindergarten*

*School profile: early literacy environment and culture.* ABC Kindergarten is a private preschool that uses an American-style curriculum. It is located in downtown Kaohsiung, the second most populous city of Taiwan. This medium-sized school has a Montessori-integrated curriculum program for kindergarten and preschool children aged two-and-a-half to five years old. It runs from 7:30am to 6:30pm from Monday to Friday. The regular class is held from 9:30am to 4:30pm, while the remaining time prior to and following the regular class is allocated as free time and open for children who need to stay in the school because of their parents' work schedule. In addition, based on the American curriculum for educating young children, this school provides two different English immersion programs: an all-English curriculum (a whole day of English) and a bilingual curriculum (a half day of English and a half day of Chinese). There are eight classes, with a total of

183 students (2-23 teacher-student ratio), 21 teachers (including 18 preschool or kindergarten certified teachers and three foreign teachers) in this school.

In this school there is a large library immediately to the right of the entrance gate. This children's library has an accumulation of hundreds of children books available for the entire student body to read. For those children who come to school early or leave late, it presents an open opportunity to be actively engaged in early reading activities while they wait for their parents. Another unique characteristic of this American preschool is the high levels of parental education and their professional backgrounds which then translate into high family socio-economic status and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

ABC Kindergarten classroom is organized around Montessori principles with modifications based upon parental expectations and school's curriculum design. The main emphasis of its classrooms is placed on children's active exploration, experimentation, and decision-making. The walls of the classroom are brightly decorated with children's artwork and educational posters. There are child-sized tables and chairs set up around throughout the room. Shelving on the side of the room holds a multitude of games, puzzles, and interactive manipulative educational materials, including blocks, LEGO bricks, marbles, and tangram puzzles. An easel with paints is off to one side of the room and newspapers are spread out underneath it to catch the paint drippings. There are two radios on the teacher's work station, and piles of student textbooks and workbooks. The room appears to be chaotic at first sight, but our research team would like to modify our first impression to be 'orderly chaos' as we settled into observing the class afterwards. Before the class started in the morning, children were actively engaged in activities of their own choice throughout the whole room while the main homeroom teacher, who was in charge of the whole class daily routines, management, attendance, and administrative matters, was checking and reading parent communication books. We observed that several children were working with puzzles at the desks, some were playing with blocks on the small rugs on the floor, a small group of children were pretending to sell food in the 'store,' some children were reading books in the corner, and still others were drawing and coloring. The children were serenaded with English songs played softly through the school's central broadcasting system throughout the classrooms and hallways before the first class began.

*Literacy curriculum.* Based upon the ABC Kindergarten's modified Montessori curriculum design, the two young participants' literacy learning experiences are manifested as below, including (1) English literacy, (2) Chinese literacy, (3) numerical literacy, and (4) local dialect (Taiwanese) literacy.

*English literacy.* Over a period of years, the school team (with the collaboration of foreign teachers and local Chinese teachers) designed and published its own English teaching and learning textbooks. This series of textbooks is sequentially organized and developed for kindergarten children in the context of both bilingual and all-English programs. Based upon Montessori philosophy, the English textbooks emphasize not only the desired meaningful and authentic language contexts but also the individual progressive learning experiences. There are four modules under this set of English literacy textbooks: Target Topics, Phonics, Science, and Math. The children have the individual module for two hours every day (one hour in the morning and another hour in the afternoon) once a week (i.e. Monday for Target Topic, Tuesday for Phonics, Wednesday for Science, Thursday for Math, and Friday for monthly topic). In other words, the two young participants in this research study have a total of ten hours of English literacy learning in a week at ABC Kindergarten.

*Chinese literacy.* ABC Kindergarten has incorporated a set of early Chinese literacy textbooks into the bilingual programs from a well-known and widely accepted Taiwanese publisher (ACME Publishing). Based on the new nine-year compulsory education integrated curriculum standards defined by the MOE, the design of the Chinese literacy curriculum at ABC Kindergarten is interdisciplinary and integrated to focus on physical and mental development, independent learning and social communication, cultural diversity and creativity, as well as to incorporate concepts of globalization and localization. In addition to the adoption of the key early Chinese literacy textbooks, the Chinese teachers also create their own supplementary handouts or worksheets, as they want to be able to connect everyday happenings, both locally and globally, into the children's literacy learning. The development of four language skills (listening, speaking,

reading and writing) is integrated and facilitated simultaneously throughout the course of Chinese teaching and learning. Specific examples and characteristics of each language skill are manifested during the classroom observation as below.

*Listening.* The teacher always starts the lesson with a warm-up listening activity. It is usually a creative story or a children's song pertaining to the target unit lesson. All of the children are quite enthusiastic while the story is being read or the song is being sung. Some of them are very inquisitive about the plot or ending of the story, while the others eagerly raise hands to share personal stories that relate to the story being told afterwards.

In addition, during 'circle time' on every Friday morning, which lasts for about thirty minutes, all the children are grouped into three classes according to their ages for 'Chinese poem read out loud'. During this 30-minute class, they are to build up a repertoire of Chinese poems learned by heart and recite them with appropriate intonation to make the meaning clear.

*Reading and speaking.* With a careful seating arrangement (the youngest in the front row, the older children in the back row, with the others in between), the teacher led the whole class in reading the text line by line. Throughout the guided reading, all the children were required not only to read out loud but also to track the words on the textbooks with their fingers. In the meantime the teacher would provide correction and feedback on the children's Chinese pronunciation and phonological awareness. Developing and expanding the children's vocabulary knowledge was also evident in the class when the teacher stopped the children at new words and explained the meaning in multiple ways (such as a detailed oral explanation, descriptive examples, pictures or other teaching aids). Sometimes the teacher would play the word sequence game to encourage the children to expand their Chinese vocabulary. After the guided reading the teacher would work on developing children's comprehension skills, which involved questioning and discussing the materials as they read along. The initial step of comprehension was to ensure the children's attention and understanding of what they were reading. Higher levels of comprehension skills were also expected to guide the older children to think, reflect and connect what they read into their daily life and express themselves well to others.

Another significant characteristic of the Chinese literacy curriculum at ABC Kindergarten related to the children's emerging reading ability was the provision of regular self-reading sessions and occasional shared reading or story time. In addition to the large library there is a reading center located on the corner of each classroom. Here children can be found with books, magazines and newspapers that are displayed on three-tiered shelving. These reading materials are chosen based upon the monthly learning topic and replaced weekly by the homeroom teacher. There are many opportunities for the children to explore books independently or peer-share-read with a classmate at break time, recess time or private study time every day; therefore, children can always be found sitting reading quietly by themselves or with friends in the classroom's reading corner. Some of them even engaged in role play with one another, pretending to be the teacher while the others pretended to be students. Moreover, it is quite common for the occasional group to share reading in which the homeroom teacher or teaching assistant reads to children in small groups at various times of the day. Children are always excited about this shared reading or story time, sitting attentively around the storyteller on the floor with highly responsive attitudes and behaviors. This joyful atmosphere is richly enhanced by the storybooks' rich print in written language and illustrations, the narrator's dramatic tones and speech, the children's curiosity and laughter, and the enduring power of reading enjoyment.

*Writing.* Different types of writing exercises were commonly seen in the classroom at ABC Kindergarten during the research observation. After the guided reading session, the Chinese teacher usually provided a short mini-lesson on word recognition or phonic recognition. She wrote the target vocabulary or phonetic symbols on the board, and then verbally reinforced the children's understanding with the contextual usages as everyday phrases or sentences in a way that was relevant to their lives. Different examples and exercises ensured that all the children could understand the concept. The children were encouraged to draw and write their own stories using the words or phonetic symbols from the board. Afterwards the teacher monitored the children, moving between them, and when a child had difficulties putting words together or was making grammatical errors, she was always attentive to the child's individual needs, patiently guiding and assisting him or her in finishing the writing task. If time permitted, she would have the children share their own pictures and writing with the rest of the group as the final activity for the class.

*Numerical literacy.* Children's numerical literacy and basic mathematical concepts are also important educational focus on ABC Kindergarten's curriculum, designed to prepare the children for primary schooling in elementary schools. Basically, following Montessori principles (Montessori, 1986), the school asserts the fact that there are sensitive periods in a child's development, whereby the acquisition of mathematics is eagerly and joyfully explored through indirect preparation and repetition of activities with concrete, scientifically developed didactic materials. Therefore, number recognition, counting and some basic mathematical equations are not the entirety of the numerical curriculum for the children at ABC Kindergarten. They consistently and effectively provide practical activities and sensory teaching aids to allow children to experience the concepts of order, sequence, measurement, shape, classification, time and date, and so on. Moreover, another characteristic of ABC Kindergarten's numerical literacy curriculum is that its systematically inter-disciplinary integrated curriculum coincided with the school's overall monthly curriculum module and thematic topics, such as 'About the Ocean', 'Space Travel', 'Go Shopping', 'Earthquakes', and so on. The children's numerical literacy learning experiences have been facilitated in a practical and meaningful way, rather than being limited to memorization of isolated mathematical formulas and calculation drills; in other words, the children actively participate in their integrated and meaningful learning, inventing their own procedures for solving computational and story problems in authentic everyday life contexts. Ultimately, the children will be capable of doing 2nd grade mathematical exercises after they graduate from ABC Kindergarten, as the school's teaching goal states.

*Local dialect (Taiwanese) literacy.* ABC Kindergarten follows the MOE's policy of 'promotion of teaching local dialects' and adds the local dialect literacy content in their overall school language curriculum. Since this school is English immersion based, the local dialect curriculum is taught for only one hour (circle time) a week in the school. During the circle time, all teachers are required to create an authentic but playful Taiwanese-speaking environment, which is relevant to the children's daily lives, in order to develop their listening and speaking ability and further cultivate their sensitivity and appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity. Typical local dialect lessons and activities such as Taiwanese children's songs and chants, stories and plays, riddles and jokes are frequently seen during the one-hour session. Sometimes the teachers would also display associated visual posters, which are provided by the MOE to facilitate the Taiwanese language teaching. Other typical Taiwanese customs and rituals are also introduced to the children, such as old-fashioned toys, Taiwanese puppet shows, coming-of-age and ancestor-worshipping festivals, farming and Taiwanese agricultural society, and so on. Just as during other lessons that day, the children looked interested and motivated during the one-hour Taiwanese 'circle time', although only a few students were willing to speak Taiwanese. Most of them were obviously delighted in listening to the teachers' Taiwanese and kept laughing about the 'strange and silly sound', as the children readily remarked during the class observation.

*Literacy assessment and evaluation.* All the students at ABC Kindergarten have their own learning portfolio folders, labeled 'My School Journal by [student's Chinese and English names]'. This child-centered folder is reviewed on a monthly basis and includes the child's personal journal writing, individual thematic unit worksheets, scribble pages, child-parent collaboration project pages, photos and pictures, parent reflections, and feedback pages from the homeroom teacher. It provides both teachers and parents with a comprehensive understanding of the child's learning strengths and progression in the class. Many parents keep their children's learning portfolio indefinitely as they regard it as a precious record of the children's learning growth journey.

*Teacher's beliefs and expectations.* Classroom teachers make instructional decisions on a daily basis and often from moment to moment. In other words, whatever they do in the classroom is not only abiding by the established policies and practices in the early childhood education system in Taiwan, but also based upon a set of beliefs about how children generally learn, and each teacher's preferences for given ways to teach. The teachers at ABC Kindergarten shared with us that they believed that there were various instructional literacy practices that could be used to help children become effective early readers and writers in contemporary society. The teachers advised that they did not think that one single method could achieve their goal, but rather they used a variety of techniques. They think every child can read. Believing in every child's literacy learning development, the teachers need to be resilient and sensitive enough to the individual learner's

development, parents' attitudes and expectations, and the discursively constructed society which regards reading as an essential skill for future academic success.

From our years of experience, all of our kids can read at the level of Grade 1 or even Grade 2 after they graduate from our school. Actually, we're pretty proud of their 'preliminary academic success' as they would have an easier and smooth transition to elementary school education afterward. Moreover, since we are facing a lot of pressure from the parents to have a 'jump start' literacy programs for our kids, we do put emphasis on our literacy curriculum design and instructional practices. However, we all know that every child is so different, so we always remind our teachers to be sensitive and flexible in their teaching. (Interview with teacher Vicky at ABC Kindergarten)

Chinese teachers at ABC Kindergarten believe that the overall literacy instruction, i.e. the process of teaching and learning to read and write either in English or Chinese, needs to be considered in a holistic and integrated way so that children are able to link activities to their lifeworlds and use language appropriately in a variety of contexts. They do not rely on didactic instruction as their only form of teaching. Within this whole-language framework, four modes of language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are equally emphasized and integrated, and they believe that each mode serves as a medium for the development of the others: For example a teacher stated:

We try to begin reading instruction in as natural a manner as possible, focusing not only on the forms of language but also the functions of oral/written words as tools for communication. Connecting the concept of language with the children's lives is also critical in our Chinese literacy curriculum, since we believe all the kids should be learning language as a whole unit, to produce the 'whole' parts of language – listening, speaking, reading and writing in a natural and meaningful way. (Interview with teacher Vicky at ABC Kindergarten)

Furthermore, by virtue of the high quality of their training [1] as well as experiences in professional development (see below, 'Teacher professional development'), the teachers at ABC Kindergarten believe that their pedagogy has been successful in helping children to become literate in the early years so that the children are able to move on to more complex tasks with confidence. For instance, throughout the Chinese literacy learning and teaching process, the teachers structure the preschoolers' learning programs specifically on the phonetic sounds of printed Chinese words while the young learners are assisted in the decoding process to recognize the most common and frequently used Chinese characters in their daily environments. The teachers also include experiences and activities that enable the children to build the semantic and pragmatic skills that will ultimately help the young children to make sense of what they read and to further produce meaningful communication to others. As the interviewed teacher advised:

Just as other parents' expectations, we don't want our children being left behind in the beginning. In order to let the children have an easier transition to elementary school, what we can do is prepare our children well for reading readiness and school readiness ... Even though the government policy has restricted the early Chinese literacy instruction in preschools for years, we are still very confident and assured about our literacy curriculum design and practices, with years of children's outstanding academic performance and positive parents' feedback and support. (Interview with teacher Lisa at ABC Kindergarten)

*Teacher professional development.* Recognizing the close relationship between teaching quality and children's school readiness skills, ABC Kindergarten puts great emphasis on teachers' professional training and development, including a focus on teachers' instructional practices and a consideration of the quality of support for the teacher in the learning environment. All the teachers at ABC Kindergarten are required to take regular in-service training workshops to enhance their professional knowledge about literacy so that they are able to be able to use effective practices in their classrooms. At the same time, the school itself also builds ongoing professional development support by having on-site mentors and weekly teaching reflection-and-sharing meetings. They do this to incorporate more reflective professional development opportunities with the overriding goal of improving instruction for young children for academic success:

Teaching in kindergarten is both mentally and physically exhausting though you have hours of joy spending time with kids every day. Your energy, as well as your brain just feel like withering

and dropping off day after day when you need to be fully in charge of twenty young kids' doings and sayings. I personally appreciate our regular teacher-to-teacher meetings which serve as a recharging station for new teaching ideas and practices as well as an emotional vent to let out working pressure from parents and children. (Interview with teacher Lisa at ABC Kindergarten)

*Family-involved literacy activities.* Early literacy acquisition does not happen in a vacuum. Undoubtedly, the home is the child's initial and critical contextual environment for learning. The importance of the home environment is grounded in the fact that the home serves as a setting in which language and literacy learning are typically first encountered. Recognizing the strong relationship of early literacy ability towards successful readers afterwards, the parents of the participants at ABC Kindergarten have expressed their concerns and perspectives during the interviews about their children's early literacy learning activities and environments in two ways: the literacy-enriched environment and the functional literacy activities.

*Literacy-enriched environment.* Through authentic communication and reciprocal interactions in their everyday family life, the parents have played a supportive role to ignite their children's active learning motivation and behavior. Both parents of the participants at ABC Kindergarten emphasize the importance of a literacy-enriched environment where the children should not merely be passive recipients bombarded with literacy stimuli. The parents in our study shared with us that they would encourage their children to explore and discover the physical literacy-enriched environment.

We have walls of books in our home just because both my husband and I are bookworms. So you can always see different kinds of books, magazines, or newspapers everywhere in our house. I used to buy sets and sets of children books for my boys to create a book-reachable-anytime-anywhere environment. They are expensive, you know ... But after years of observation, I see my boys only read those specific books which attract them most, such as themes about mechanic robots, Chinese history and insects. Therefore, I don't buy any new set of books for them now, but will still take them to the libraries sometimes to check out their favorite books. (Interview with Alex's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

I would say there are not many books in our home, compared to other families. So when she visits her playgroup friend's home which has a huge accumulation of children books, she always gets stuck in the study room and spends lots of time reading alone by herself, instead of playing with others ... But there are always books available for her at home when she wants to read, since we go to the library or bookstore quite often ... And we also offer a lot of writing materials for her, such as crayons, color pens, paints, scribble papers, white board and even an iPad. She is so much into drawing and writing whenever she has the tools in hand ... believe it or not, she makes cards to different people everyday, with her drawing and warm greeting words on it. (Interview with Betty's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

Other than children books, we also subscribed to monthly children magazines, which come with CDs, DVDs, and educational toys. Of course, the toys attracted him the most. And he used to like to watch the DVDs more than the magazines when he was young. But after he went to kindergarten, he read and played with the magazines more often. (Interview with Alex's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

A bedtime story is a must in our everyday routine. For me as a working mom, snuggling up with my girl for a bedtime story is an eagerly awaited and enjoyable event. And I believe, she has the same feeling about this precious parent-child moment too as she would be very grumpy and disappointed if we were away from home for work that night. (Interview with Betty's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

*Functional literacy activities.* Since it is usually the case that both parents of the participants at ABC Kindergarten are working parents, weekends are usually the family day. These days are generally recognized as family time and enable the building of close parent-child relationships. From the interview data, the parents have indicated that they use interactive strategies to encourage literacy in their child's daily life. They use everyday activities as literacy moments. For example, if they are ordering a kid's meal from a fast food restaurant, obtaining information about a toy from its label,



purchasing a birthday card for a friend, or chatting with an uncle or aunt via Facebook, they make sure they talk to their child and encourage them to speak and use new forms of language. As one parent explained:

We like to take kids to McDonald's for brunch on the weekend. And Alex is always excited about ordering his own meal by himself. Even though he always orders the same combo meal every time, he would like to go over and read aloud all the food items from the kid menu. And of course in the early instances, he made mistakes and had problem recognizing the words sometimes, so either his Dad or I would assist him right away if we happened to notice it. But to my surprise, he could read all the words from the menu at the next weekend visits. (Interview with Alex's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

Alex is addicted to playing video games. When he was playing new online games, he would always ask his elder brother or Dad to read those unfamiliar words on the screen for him. Or when he was playing new board games, he was eager to know the rules from the instruction sheet. Daddy would usually read the rules to him and his brother. And interestingly enough, when the two boys have an argument during the game, Alex would approach the instruction sheet to accuse his brother of violating such-and-such a rule. (Interview with Alex's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

Since we are oftentimes busy with our dissertation writing at night, Betty has gotten used to spending time reading or scribbling by herself in our common study room. But sometimes she would like to ask us to accompany her to read or write ... And of course, she is very curious about whatever we are doing, especially when she watches us typing on the computers. She would even ask to pretend to be us sitting at the computer typing ... Just a few months ago, she was so inquisitive about my typing on Facebook. To satisfy her curiosity, I taught her some basic functions of Facebook and let her type to talk to her auntie in Hong Kong. I still remember her eyes full of wonder and joy when their first conversation began. Even though that was a very slow conversation because she was not familiar with the Chinese typing system and spent quite some time looking for the phonetic symbols to put into words, she had so much fun then. (Interview with Betty's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

*Parents' beliefs and expectations.* Parents' beliefs and expectations are the starting point for the experiences they have with the child, providing guides to action and in turn being reciprocally shaped by that action. As such, parental expectation is regarded as a critical factor in influencing the parent-child interaction patterns, socialization behaviors and the value placed on children's performance and achievement. However, parental beliefs vary from person to person since they are constructed from each parent's individual histories, cultural backgrounds, socialization norms and unique parent-child interaction patterns. The interview data from the two participants' parents' beliefs about children's literacy learning revealed that both of them asserted that positive early language and literacy acquisition could serve as stepping stones to the children's future academic learning in elementary schools in the short run, and even as a rudder steering a ship in the vast ocean of literature the individual will encounter in the long run. However, their attitude towards and expectation of their children's early literacy learning are quite resilient and sustainable.

I think preschool period is a very crucial life stage for a child to develop his or her own being. A good literacy learning experience definitely lays the foundation for future academic success. And I just know he can read as early as a preschooler. So why not lead him to the vast ocean of reading as soon as he acquires the basic literacy skills once he holds the power rudder? (Interview with Alex's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

Ever since Betty was a baby, we felt that she would be a strong and avid reader. She has been sensitive and responsive to different sounds and everyday conversations around herself. She has also paid great attention to pictures and prints in her daily life surroundings. Being inquisitive about the symbols, the meaning and pronunciation of words is usually people's first impression on her – a non-stop question popper ... Her passion to read is so intense that it sparks us parents to stick to our responsibility and promise to assist her in the early literacy learning stage. (Interview with Betty's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

We don't really put pressure on her and expect her to be a straight A reader or something like that. Since we are quite happy about the school's well-organized curriculum for children's early literacy development, what we do now is to be fully assisting her with school assignments and supporting her literacy learning experiences in everyday life. (Interview with Betty's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

School-readiness is the only concern we have about him and also the reason why we send him to a private kindergarten. There is no such formal Chinese literacy instruction or curriculum in public kindergartens as far as I know about the current government policy. Anyhow, we just want him to gain the basic communication skills to use language flexibly and appropriately in differing social contexts, the phonological awareness of phonetic symbols and sound correlations, and finally as well as the 'novice reader' ability to understand the characteristics of prints and books and even recognize some high frequency daily vocabulary ... but we just know he can learn, and he will be a very good learner as long as he takes it seriously ... anyway, we hope he would have an easier transition period between kindergarten and elementary school. (Interview with Alex's mom at ABC Kindergarten)

*The children's literacy journey.* 'I want to give this heart-shaped box to my mom as her birthday present. This is a surprise I made for her.' Betty read to me during the free-play and self-exploration time from a piece of paper on which she had written 'Happy Birthday, Mommy. Wish you happy and beautiful everyday!' in Chinese phonetics with her name in whole Chinese characters to one side and a little girl holding a heart-shaped box out to a tall smiling woman standing by a man holding a birthday cake drawn on the other. Soon after, Betty was sitting with the other two girls reading the children storybook entitled 'Magician's Box'. Sometimes they read aloud together, sometimes they played the teacher-student reading activity 'Read after me'. They even grabbed a plastic box, putting a hat made of newspaper on their heads and a paper poncho on their shoulders, to act out the story. All the girls were having fun around the reading corner. (The Chinese literacy topic from the textbook for that month was 'Mommy's surprise box'.)

After the 30-minute group instruction, the teacher instructed the children, according to their age group, to do their work at three different work stations. Alex was among those in the older group at the writing station for the individual writing exercise. 'In the morning, my brother and I are in our room, playing LEGO.' Following the teacher's target sentence structure practice for today (time-subject-place-action), Alex's writing worksheet showed a four-panel color drawing (bright orange sun, two little boys, a room with two beds and desks, and LEGO blocks on the area rug) with corresponding Chinese phonetics in each section of the drawing. While he was coloring his drawing, he was talking enthusiastically and energetically to the boy sitting next to him about his huge collection of LEGO blocks at home.

Through the observations in this research study, the participants at ABC Kindergarten not only showed great interest in reading books and proper usage of Chinese and English phonetics and graphic symbols in their writing, but also demonstrated good narrative and communication skills to express their ideas and thoughts. In other words, Betty and Alex are both exhibiting great promise in early literacy acquisition in a flexible, supportive whole-language kindergarten environment, and are progressing well on their way to becoming good readers and writers when they are about to enter elementary school. To put it more specifically, as a multifaceted learning phenomenon, at home and school, which consists of a set of attitudes, behaviors and skills relevant to whole-language development, the early literacy journey of the participants at ABC Kindergarten can be categorized thematically as (1) environmental print awareness, (2) phonetic and morphological awareness, (3) reading and writing autonomy, (4) social and functional communication skills, and (5) acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity.

First, the participants at ABC Kindergarten are highly sensitive to the environmental print in their everyday life, both in English and Chinese, whether it be inside or outside the classroom. Everyday written material such as calendars, convenience store coupons, computer game instructions, snack bags, birthday cards, restaurant menus, road signs and comics are included in this. Being immersed in an enriched print environment, they 'read' everywhere without any formal reading instruction within the context of their everyday experiences and form some idea about the way in which printed material conveys meaning and function. Second, reinforced with formal instruction every day at school, the children at ABC Kindergarten are aware of the characteristic of

Chinese language in that the Chinese characters are morpho-syllabic, each corresponding to a spoken syllable with a distinct meaning. In addition, through the complete systematic Chinese phonological curriculum at ABC Kindergarten, the children are equipped with the decoding capacity of phonological representation of Chinese words to extend and facilitate their reading competence in their reading practices. Third, being provided with meaningful and legitimate literacy learning options and opportunities in modified Montessori-based classroom, the children are empowered to develop their autonomy as novice readers and writers in a cooperative learning community. The children are intrinsically motivated to pick up their reading materials, read by themselves, share and discuss with others or even reflect what they read in their writing during the free play and self-exploration time. Fourth, the children have demonstrated the basic narrative ability and social communication skills since they have been encouraged to participate in extended discourse conversations in the class. Interactive activities such as in-depth discussions about the books, pictures, tables or figures that they are reading are valuable to lead the children into analytical conversations that inspire their thinking abilities, scaffold their narrative capacity and further develop their communicative competence. Finally, as the children are immersed in the American curriculum-based schooling, English and Chinese are equally emphasized and English is implicitly learned in a natural communicative progress. Consequently, the children have gradually increased their awareness and acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversities at the beginning of their long literacy journey.

### *123 Kindergarten*

*School profile: early literacy environment and culture.* 123 Kindergarten is a public school affiliated with a public elementary school in a small town in Tainan. It is a 'small but all-inclusive' school. It has only one class with 26 students. Students are aged from four to six years old. They are grouped into three levels according to their ages: Level 1 (age four), Level 2 (age five) and Level 3 (age six). There are two teachers in charge of the curriculum design and instruction of the class. Both of them are qualified kindergarten teachers who obtained a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, completed professional training, passed the Kindergarten Teacher Qualification Examination to get certified by the MOE. One has been teaching in the school for seven years and has 22 years of teaching experience in kindergartens, and the other teacher, who is younger, has taught in the school for two years. At any given time all of the students at 123 Kindergarten can be found in one of three classrooms available for their use; one main instructional room with three areas of student desks and chairs, one reading room, and one activity room. Corners, including 'puzzle corner', 'art corner', 'role-play corner', 'blocks corner' and 'reading corner', are placed in these three classrooms. Each corner accommodates six students at most.

The school has designed and implemented a theme-based curriculum. Themes are designed to relate to the students' life experiences. They include topics such as insects, or fields, and are studied in a monthly cycle. 'Symbols can talk' was the topic of the month during the observation period. On display was reading material related to the theme that was provided as supporting learning aids. Teaching content and learning content are planned based on the guidelines announced by the MOE. The regular school day starts at 7:30am and ends at 3:30pm. Please refer to the timetables of a weekly curriculum (Table I).

### *Literacy curriculum.*

*English literacy.* As a public school, 123 Kindergarten's curriculum follows the educational policies laid out by the MOE in Taiwan. The MOE (Ministry of Education, 2010a) indicates kindergartens cannot implement a 'Whole English, No Chinese' curriculum. English can be taught only when it doesn't hinder children's regular school learning. Therefore, English is not taught in this suburban public school. In addition, the teacher and parent interview data indicate that parents of the children who attend the school also agree with the policy of 'No English in early childhood'.

*Chinese literacy.* Chinese language learning is the major focus of the kindergarten curriculum. The Early Childhood Education and Care Act (Ministry of Education, 2011) states that kindergartens should provide learning activities to enhance the language ability of younger

learners. In the document 'Early Childhood English Education You Care About' (Ministry of Education, 2010a), it is even more specifically indicated that the learning order of priority should begin with the children's mother tongue, then Mandarin Chinese and English would come at last.

Week: 6/11-6/15					
Theme: Symbols can talk					
Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Content	Coming to school	No Class (due to the storm)	Coming to school	Coming to school	Coming to school
7:30-11:40	1. Teacher's meeting 2. Free Corner Time		1. Teacher's meeting 2. Free Corner Time	1. Teacher's meeting 2. Free Corner Time	1. Teacher's meeting 2. Free Corner Time
	Song Graduation song		Song Graduation song	Song Graduation song	Song Rainy day, walk carefully
	Story-telling Garden Maze		Story-telling Little Black Fish	Story-telling	Story-telling I won't let go
	Library Tour		Chinese Poems Overall review	Theme Activity Please visit my home	Graduation Ceremony Rehearsal
	Symbol game 1. Symbols with your body 2. Pictograph		Group Time Level 1/2: 1. Children song: Cheer leading 2. Phrases 3. Stroke-order game Level 3: Practice of Graduation Ceremony program	Body symbols Interesting body symbols  Body Activity 1. Hands & legs 2. Find word cards by hands & legs	
11:40-14:30	Lunch & Nap Time				
14:30-15:30	Video Time Ice Age		Video Time Ice Age	Video Time Ice Age	Video Time Ice Age
	Happy Language 1. Come, come, come 2. Brush the teeth			Happy Language 1. Little spotted cat 2. Big head	Happy Language Level 1/2: 1. Children songs: Overall review
	Happy Math 1. Deduction 2. Matching of 1-10 3. Knowing about 4			Happy Math 1. Deduction 2. Amount 3. Knowing about 4	2. Stroke-order game 1-10 Level 3: Children song: Little Monkey

Table I. 123 Kindergarten's weekly curriculum.

Each morning in this suburban 123 Kindergarten, the class starts with picture drawing in which the students draw what they want to do and which corner they would like to go during 'free corner time'. After free corner time the class starts formally. The teacher begins with a routine question,

the date and the day, by using the calendar on the wall. In the sing-along session, big-character posters of some rhymes and songs are used. Following the sing-along session is the picture storybook reading session. A teacher chooses a picture storybook in accordance with the monthly theme, and reads it to the group of children sitting in three rows. Guided questions are used to help students' story comprehension. When encountering some frequently used basic words, the teachers will give additional explanations. In the poem recitation session, a teacher leads students in reviewing the taught poems by reciting while using her finger to draw the students' attention to the characters being read. In the afternoon lesson, students learn to recognize and write Arabic numbers, mathematical operations, and Chinese phonetic symbols and syllable spelling, such as ㄨ(-ang)-ㄩ(-ang). During their in-class free time, the students cultivate the habit of reading at the reading corner. Once a week the teachers bring the students to the school library to borrow books that are to be taken home and read.

The two teachers hold the whole-language perspective, in which literacy is part of the language curriculum and cannot be separated from the other language skills. Even though some activities, such as sing-along and picture drawing, do not really involve formal reading and writing, they offer stimuli to the younger children's literacy development. In the interview, teacher Melody indicated that the lessons and activities they plan are to help build up children's literacy ability.

Reading and writing activities in the curriculum are the picture drawing session and picture storybook reading session in the morning. Phonetic symbols and word-recognition do not count as literacy activities to me; they are cognitive activities and serve as scaffolds of reading and writing. Literacy activities should be meaningful. (Interview with teacher Melody at 123 Kindergarten)

*Numerical literacy.* Numeracy, or numerical literacy, is also an important part of the curriculum at 123 Kindergarten. Early numeracy is regarded as being very important for later success in mathematical learning in the elementary school. In this kindergarten, students learn basic numeracy skills, including recognizing and understanding numbers, as well as some simple arithmetic (such as addition  $4 + 2 = 6$ ). Every day in the afternoon session a 30-minute math lesson takes place. At the time of our observations it related to the teaching of a single digit. The teacher introduced the numeral (4) and demonstrated to the students how it was written. The numeral was then used in context in an equation (e.g.  $3 + 1 = 4$ ), and the teacher explained how this worked to the students. A worksheet was distributed for the children to take home so that they were able to practice. The teacher advised us that they regarded numeracy as being a very important part of their curriculum: 'In kindergarten, cultivation of daily life order and math ability is the priority for it is easily implemented' (Interview with teacher Yetta at 123 Kindergarten).

*Local dialect literacy.* Most students in 123 Kindergarten speak their mother tongue, Taiwanese, in the family, so it follows that there is no mother tongue or Taiwanese language curriculum. The teachers concentrate on the learning of Mandarin Chinese. However, Taiwanese is often used in the classroom as the students speak it with ease. Sometimes the teachers need to use Taiwanese to help students understand some concepts in Chinese. It became apparent that the children were using Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese interchangeably. In one of our observation field notes, we noticed that a student used a Taiwanese word in a Mandarin Chinese phrase in his writing. He didn't notice that he had done this until the teacher (Yetta) pointed it out and instructed him to make the changes so that the correct way to say the phrase in Mandarin Chinese was recorded.

*Literacy assessment and evaluation.* The teachers have adopted a performance assessment procedure for literacy development in their class in order to be able to describe and characterize the students' literacy level and progress. A major part of the evaluations is related to questions that the teachers ask during a literacy learning activity. The difficulty of the level of questions is comparable to the students' actual language level. A portfolio assessment is used to provide evidence of students' literacy performance. The pictures students draw every morning and the worksheets they do in or after school are collected as evidence of their literacy potential. The teacher also takes digital photographs of the students as they participate in literacy activities and these are added to the students' portfolios. The teachers invite the parents to prepare the portfolios together with the children. The portfolios are given to the families at the end of semesters as a documentation of children's learning journeys.

*Teacher's beliefs and expectations.* At 123 Kindergarten a whole-language perspective is the main form of teaching that supports young children's literacy acquisition. Both the teachers who were involved in the current study hold a strong belief on the whole-language perspective and regard it as the most successful strategy in the process of becoming literate. They support the view that students should learn in a whole-language environment, in which literacy skills cannot be separated from other language skills and taught alone. Language should be seen as a whole entity, and the four language skills are interrelated and complement each other (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). All the lessons and activities provide the framework to develop children's literacy.

I see literacy from the whole-language perspective. I believe children should keep accessing various phrases or complete sentences. I've been supporting such a perspective ... I believe those are the preparations and are related to reading and writing ... Oral communication is the preparation for reading and writing. When a child's preparation has been well done, and when he is reading something, he may only know one or two words in a line, for example, but since I've told them the story, they will realize that's what the teacher said. For example, this sentence is 'Not one less'. Since I've told them the story, they will recognize this word is 'one'. (Interview with teacher Melody at 123 Kindergarten)

I view literacy from the whole-language perspective. Children need to be placed in a situation, and the situation should be meaningful to them, not isolated from life, and students are also able to use it. In this way they can realize what they read for, and then they will be motivated ... Reading and writing are a series of slow motions ... They have an introduction, an elucidation, transition and sum up. All parts in the whole are coherent. To them, it's something meaningful and they will learn more happily ... From these years of teaching, I do think children learn the best in a whole-language environment. However, the school culture, the big environment and parent expectations do not allow us to create that kind of environment. (Interview with teacher Yetta at 123 Kindergarten)

Both teachers in 123 Kindergarten claimed that the students' literacy skills were behind schedule at this point in the school year; however the teachers stated that they did not worry about it. To the teachers, foundation construction is more important. They believe that once their students have built up solid foundations, they will catch up with the schedule. They understand that their students are in an environment of limited resources. Some of their students were nearly literate when they started at kindergarten. Some of them, however, could not even speak Mandarin Chinese, much less be expected to recognize any written characters. The teachers said that one of their goals was to build up the foundations of literacy ability. What they do for the kindergarten children is to build up the bridge for their future study in the elementary school. The teachers do have standards to evaluate students' literacy ability at the kindergarten stage. However, they do not demand that the children achieve the standards at any given point in time. For the teachers, rather than forcing their students to reach the standard before going to elementary school, it is more important to see them making progress in school every day. They believe that when the foundations are well constructed, the students will catch up and learn effectively in the future.

Reaching literacy is a step-by-step process. Students are from different environments and have different foundations. There are some basic tasks that should be well prepared, and they can do the reading and writing of abstract symbols. (Interview with teacher Melody at 123 Kindergarten)

*Teacher professional development.* The two teachers in 123 Kindergarten have discussions about the curriculum and student conditions on a daily basis. They share both their personal perspectives and actual experiences with each other. The MOE requires teachers to participate in workshops for a specified number of hours. Both teachers usually attend workshops or lectures that are held in the summer or winter breaks to enhance their professional knowledge and advance their teaching skills as required.

*Family-involved literacy activities.* The parents in 123 Kindergarten reported that family literacy activities for their children are limited. In this suburban community, it is usually the mothers who are responsible for supervising their children's homework. Two mothers were interviewed. One

was a working mother and the other was a housewife who stays home to take care of a young baby. Both mothers indicated that they valued and encouraged early literacy when they were able to. However, they both indicated how busy they were during the daytime, and they only had time to do activities with their children at night. Both mothers advised that they usually check the children's homework to make sure that they follow up on the teachers' instruction. Both mothers did mention that they do not have much time to read to their child as they were tired after a whole day of working, both were in paid work and looking after the baby. They did note that they encouraged their children to read by themselves.

Literacy does not exist only in school and at home. Through their contact with the social environment beyond home and school, the children expand their scope for literacy learning. On the weekends one family said that they really enjoyed outdoor activities and so did their children. Another mother noted that she brings the children to her workplace so that they have an opportunity to learn about society. The second family often went to the library or bookstores at weekends, but also said that they children really enjoyed reading by themselves.

I provide him with reading materials. Sometimes we watch TV together. Sometimes I would ask him to read something [in the environment] and ask him what it is. Maybe he doesn't have the chance to apply something he reads now, but maybe one day when he takes a walk, he will happen to see it again.

He seldom reads at home, only about 10% of the time. When he was little, I read for him. But it was too tiring. Now I just let him read by himself.

Some books were from my friends. Sometimes I will buy books online. I don't take them to the library. The kindergarten teachers have already taken him to get books from the school library. I think the school library has enough books.

Reading picture books is OK. You look at the pictures and tell me what they talk about. At this stage, you should start to train him to recognize words ... Drawing is also a kind of writing. (Interview with Boyle's mom at 123 Kindergarten)

I help them with their study at night after I'm done with the housework ... Sometimes, they read books by themselves. (Interview with Peggy's mom at 123 Kindergarten)

Parents' perspectives on and attitudes toward literacy development of young children led to their arrangements concerning literacy activities at home. The interview data fosters the realization that the parents enable literacy opportunities in various ways but were not able to participate with them on a regular basis or for extended periods of time. Both parents also indicated that their children prefer hands-on activity to reading, and said this was due to their personalities. Since the parents preferred to give their children a happy early childhood, they tried not to put too much pressure on the children. The parents seem to perceive early reading and writing as academic pressure for young children.

As to writing, I don't request much yet. But I request him to make gradual progress. It's OK that you don't write well this time, but you have to make progress next time ... Drawing is also a kind of writing. (Interview with Boyle's mom at 123 Kindergarten)

I don't request them to read every day. In my childhood, I was not given much pressure and asked to read a lot. So, I don't put much pressure on them. (Interview with Peggy's mom at 123 Kindergarten)

*Parents' beliefs and expectations.* The two participant parents in this suburban kindergarten saw reading and writing as inseparable, and indicated that they thought that the two skills are mutually dependent. They both regarded literacy as very important. The parents realized that in elementary school the children are responsible for a large amount of reading and writing, and literacy is the key to school success. To them, learning in kindergarten was a bridge to later study in the elementary school.

You can read when you can write; you can write when you can read. There is interaction between them ... Kindergarten is a stage. We just let [the children] see more and read more. I don't ask them to have to acquire this or that, but when they go to elementary school, my expectation will be different. I will request more. Because I have given you time to adjust

yourself to the learning environment at the kindergarten stage, you should do your best afterwards. If you have fallen behind in the first grade of elementary school, you will fall further behind in second grade, third grade. (Interview with Boyle's mother at 123 Kindergarten)

When you have recognized the word, you should be able to write it out ... Reading and writing are important because they are the basics. [The children] have to acquire the basic reading and writing skills. As to other kinds of learning, it's OK ... In the area of Mandarin Chinese learning, the phonetic symbols and spelling are the basics, so you have to acquire them. If you don't acquire them, when you go to first grade in elementary school, you won't be able to catch up. And you will fall behind more and more in second grade, third grade. (Interview with Peggy's mom at 123 Kindergarten)

The parents support the teachers' curriculum and believe that it can help their children to become literate. However, they have already noticed that their children's literacy is not as advanced as some others. They realize that their children cannot yet read and write well. While they accept the literacy level of their children, and they are not anxious about their progress, the parents attribute the lower literacy levels to their own children's lack of confidence regarding many things. They do not push the children to study hard. Instead, they talk about asking and expecting them to acquire the basics. One said:

[Boyle's] literacy is not OK. Not OK! Different from my expectation! At least, his word-recognition level should be OK. He can read some basic words, but there are many words he cannot read yet. The reason is quite simple – he doesn't like to read. He doesn't like to study. (Interview with Boyle's mother at 123 Kindergarten)

She has not reached the level she should have yet. She is not a very attentive person. She needs someone to push her and then she can learn well ... After school, she does homework and immediately after she is done with her homework, she rushes out to play with the friends ... When she is grounded at home, she usually gets a book and just leafs over the pages, even though she doesn't understand the words. (Interview with Peggy's mother at 123 Kindergarten)

Something interesting that both families have in common is that the parents do not force the children to read much in these years. Both mothers grew up in families where the parents didn't put a lot of pressure on them in terms of making them study hard. They held the view that contemporary kids exist in a competitive environment and are required to learn a lot. However, they also understand that 'pulling up the seedlings in order to help them grow faster' will just upset the children. They prefer to give their children a happy early childhood. The bottom line is that the children have acquired the basics and will make progress day by day.

*The children's literacy journey.* Children acquire their literacy skills in the contexts constructed through the perspective and expectations of the teachers and parents as well as the experiences shared with peers. In this suburban kindergarten, the early literacy learning experience of the participants takes place mostly in school. There they go through a literacy journey that is carefully planned and implemented by teachers who utilize a whole-language perspective. Each school day morning, they draw pictures for their free corner time plan and learn to express their ideas in writing. The teachers check their homework and pictures while having conversations with them. In the conversations, the teachers provide them with samples of how to express some ideas. These language samples may just be encountered or used in the children's later literacy activities. They also learn words, phrases and expressions in readings through the interaction with the teachers during the picture storybook reading sessions. Every school day, they learn some Chinese phonetic symbols and the spelling rules of the symbols. Such knowledge helps them when reading. And they are the 'basics' the parents expect them to have.

During break time, all children go to the 'reading corner' to get their favorite books. This is the habit the teachers have cultivated in the classroom through the years. Some students read alone and some read with classmates. Peggy likes to read to others, although her Chinese reading capability appears to be limited as she cannot recognize the majority of the characters, that does not stop her from reading. She continues as if she knows how to read, making up her own story based on the pictures. Boyle usually reads alone. Boyle stops reading when he encounters unknown



words. Sometimes he listens to Peggy's reading. These two young children show different early literacy performances.

Young children also share their literacy experience with peers in school. Peer pressure also appears to assist children's literacy development.

During the free reading time, Peggy chose a book and read to some classmates, including Boyle.

Peggy: There is no word on this book

The researcher: No words?

Peggy: No.

The researcher: Then what is it? [The researcher pointed to a sign with words]

Boyle: These are words.

Then Peggy, Boyle, and the other children started going over the pages to look [for words?]

The researcher [asked Peggy]: Do you know what story it is?

Peggy: No. For 'words'. [Field note 0618, 123 Kindergarten].

Boyle reminded a boy of his character writing 四 [four] and suggested that he rewrite it. He thought the teacher would ask the boy to rewrite the word because the boy wrote it in an ugly way. Then Boyle corrected the boy for not writing the Arabic number 9 correctly. The boy replied that Boyle had not written 6 correctly. Field note 0621, 123 Kindergarten].

### **Concluding Remarks: the kindergarten journey ends; the elementary school journey begins**

This pilot study attempts to provide descriptive data for early literacy experiences of young children in Taiwan. The data were gathered in two different contexts, in a private kindergarten located in an urban area, and in a public kindergarten in a suburban area. Our research observations indicated that the young children's early literacy experiences are influenced by their home situation as well as by the ways in which the teachers organize and plan their learning based on their beliefs, interests, and expectations. In turn, the young children were expected to enjoy their early literacy journey with the ultimate goal of paving the way for their successful school and career life in the future. However, statements made by two of the children observed and interviewed reveal their disparate perspectives on early literacy in the kindergarten context at a time when both are faced with entering elementary school.

I don't want to go to elementary school because I cannot read.  
(Interview with Peggy at 123 Kindergarten).

Am I good? I CAN READ! I know that when you read a book you can learn a lot more about the world around you. Reading books just makes me smart! (Interview with Betty at ABC Kindergarten)

Without doubt, these different responses highlight the young children's voices, attitudes and aspirations regarding their different early literacy learning experiences. These two statements, furthermore, have the potential to effect rethinking of educators' planning of children's early literacy learning experiences.

In exposing the pronounced contrast between these two children's experiences, this research definitely opens up many possibilities for future discussion. For example, it has become evident that researchers, teachers, parents, early childhood education professionals and even the government policy authorities need to engage in new, proactive and in-depth conversations about early literacy practices to ensure that all children are being provided with optimal learning experiences to become literate in their early years. In addition, all children need to be provided with contexts and opportunities to become literate as a matter of equity.

In this study we have used the metaphor of the journey. We view literacy as a journey that begins in the early years and is continuous, that is, it proceeds without interruption or conclusion. Accordingly, we hope that this pilot research study can be viewed as the beginning of a long-term

research process rather than an end point as we firmly believe that being literate is an essential skill in the twenty-first century that opens many doors.

### Notes

- [1] All the teachers at ABC Kindergarten were graduated from early childhood relevant departments. About 80% of them have at least 12 years of early childhood teaching experiences.

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