

# A Look at Chinese Parents' Literacy Practices and Their Preschool Children's Literacy Experiences

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## Abstract

Home environments have been found to have a critical impact on young children's early literacy development. To date, few studies have examined the home environments of families from Asian backgrounds and their relationship to literacy practices. The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between the literacy practices of Chinese parents living in the United States and their young children's literacy experiences. The results revealed a positive relationship between Chinese children's home environment and their literacy experiences. The implications for working with Chinese children and their parents to enhance early childhood literacy skills are discussed. In short, home environments rich in literature and language may help to prepare Chinese-speaking preschool Dual Language Learners to succeed in school.

## Keywords

Chinese Families, Home Literacy Beliefs, Preschool Children, Literacy Behavior

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## 1. Introduction

As the fabric of the United States continues to change, more and more children will begin school having been raised in a bilingual environment. How this environment will affect language and literacy development in English, as well as the child's native language is an issue that is of much interest to parents, educators and researchers alike. Previous research has suggested that children acquire language and literacy practices through their interaction with the adults in their everyday environments (Brice Heath, 1982; Snow, 1991). Thus, because it is

believed that literacy practices are transmitted to the child within their immediate environment, i.e. the home, it would seem plausible to predict that what a child is exposed to and learns about literacy during the early years will be a reflection of the practices within the home environment (Brice Heath, 1982).

Recent changes in the fields of child development, psychology, and early childhood education have led to modifications in early childhood education practices (Saracho, 2018). The shift in thinking within the field has occurred due to advances made within developmental theory, understanding the role that high-quality classroom environments can have on children's learning and development, and finally understanding the importance of ensuring children receive developmentally appropriate instruction that takes into account differences in social and cultural contexts (Saracho, 2018). According to recent advances in developmental theory language and literacy develop early in lifespan and are fostered through play, story-book reading, music, and other forms of literacy practices (Saracho, 2018). Moreover, using language and literacy instruction that is culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate can help to ensure that children become literate and for those children acquiring a second language becoming biliterate. Thus, understanding these changes in the field is critical in order to assist and support teachers and parents as they engage with young children to promote and strengthen their early literacy skills.

## 2. Early Literacy Skills

According to a report released by the National Institute for Literacy in 2009 entitled "Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel" a number of early literacy skills have been found to be strong predictors of later literacy development. Strong predictors include knowing the names of printed letters, knowing the associations between printed letters and sounds, manipulating sounds and understanding how to break words into smaller units, rapidly naming letters, numbers and colors, writing letters and one's own name, and finally remembering the content of spoken language such as instructions (Eunice Kennedy Shriver NICHD, 2010). Moderate predictors include knowing how to use a book, for example knowing that print in English is read left to right, recognizing environmental print, having a vocabulary to engage in conversation, and finally understanding categories, for example being able to distinguish between visual symbols like a stop sign and a yield sign. According to this report understanding what early precursors support later literacy development can help teachers prepare children for later classroom learning and school success. That said, because parents are thought to be their child's first teacher and many young children's early literacy experiences begin in the home it is also important for parents to understand what early literacy skills can support school readiness and later learning.

### 2.1. Home Literacy Environment

One area that has been extensively examined for monolingual children living in

the United States is the relationship between emergent literacy skills acquired in the home environment and their relationship to school success (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) described emergent literacy in three ways: 1) as “emergent literacy characteristics”, that is, the skills which function as precursors to reading and writing; 2) “emergent literacy environments”, that is, the physical and social environments that may have an effect on literacy; and 3) the “emergent literacy movement” which involve the practices that lead to an increase in the social interaction patterns engaged in by preschool children. Current theories addressing the acquisition of language and literacy have begun to focus on the concept of reading readiness (Saracho, 2017). The reading readiness model asserts that developmentally appropriate literacy practices are essential for providing children with the foundation before they can benefit from formal reading instruction. Families are critical in this process (Saracho, 2017). When families are actively involved in helping young children acquire reading skills their participation serves as a very important predictor of future success in later reading (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Haney & Hill, 2004; Landry & Smith, 2006; Yeo, Ong, & Ng, 2014; Anderson, Snderon, & Sadiq, 2017). When home environments are less than supportive of early reading they place young children at risk for reading failure upon entering school (Brice Heath, 1982; Buckingham, Beaman, & Wheldall, 2014).

## 2.2. Dual Language Learners and Literacy

In addition to growing up in a low literacy environment, having a home language other than English can also put preschool children at risk for learning to read in English (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 2002). Moreover, children learning two languages may vary in their exposure to information in both languages, which in turn may affect their school readiness skills (Hammer et al., 2014). Knowing the effect of dual language learning on literacy and language development is critical to ensure school success. That being said, to date much of the research addressing dual language learning and school readiness has focused on Hispanic children and their families with few studies addressing other languages and cultures (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 2002; CECER-DLL, 2011; Sawyer, Manz, & Martin, 2017). The question that arises then is whether the difficulties encountered by Hispanic children are also experienced by other English second language learners, and if so are they related to literacy development.

## 2.3. Chinese Children, Early Learning, and Literacy

In general, it has been shown that Asian children tend to perform well in school. For example, Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Balsink, & Shligram (2000) found, when examining the differences between middle-income Chinese-American and European-American children on standardized tests measuring receptive vocabulary and mathematics, Chinese children initially performed less well than their European American peers on the vocabulary tests, but better on the mathematics

test. However, by the third year, Chinese children either caught up to, or passed their European-American peers on the vocabulary test and remained consistently ahead of them on the mathematics test. In order to gain insight into the differences between these groups, parents were interviewed as to their beliefs about education. Chinese parents reported that they believed academic achievement and formal instruction were very important to their children's success, whereas European-American parents placed less emphasis on formal instruction and more on their children's self-esteem and socialization. Given the results of this study the question remains as to whether it is the learning of a second language that puts children at risk for reading difficulties, or a combination of parental beliefs concerning the role of literacy practices and education in theirs and their children's lives.

To date with the exception of a few studies (Hurst, 1998; Xu, 1999; Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003, McBride-Chang, Lin, Fong, & Shu, 2010; CECER-DLL, 2011; Farver, Xu, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2013; Li & Tan, 2016; Buvaneswari & Pada-kannaya, 2017) little is known about how the literacy environments of families from multicultural backgrounds relate to their preschool children's early literacy experiences and the promotion of literacy skills. Thus, in order to extend this area of research, the present study examined the relationship between the literacy practices of Chinese parents living in the United States and their young children's literacy experiences. The following research questions were addressed in this study: 1) to what extent do Chinese parents promote and engage in literacy practices at home?; 2) what is the relationship between Chinese parents' understanding of English and their engagement in literacy practices?; 3) what is the relationship between Chinese parents' literacy practices and their children's literacy behavior?; and 4) what is the relationship between parental education and young children's literacy behaviors?

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

A sample consisting of 28 Chinese parents born in Asia, 22 mothers and 6 fathers of preschool children (mean age 3.9 months) born in the United States were recruited for participation in a literacy study from a childcare center serving only Chinese families in New York City. Only eight (28.6%) of the parents had less than a high school education with 14 (50.0%) reporting post high school education. See **Table 1** for demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristic		Number	Percent
Gender of child	Males	12	42.9
	Females	16	57.1

**Continued**

Relationship of person completing the survey	Mother	21	78.6
	Father	7	21.4
Level of education of person completing survey	Less than 9th grade	4	14.3
	Some high school not completed	4	14.3
	High school degree	5	17.9
	High school degree plus some college or trade school	7	25.0
	4-year college degree	6	21.4
Level of education of spouse	College +	2	7.1
	Less than 9th grade	4	14.3
	Some high school not completed	4	14.3
	High school degree	6	21.4
	High school degree plus some college or trade school	8	28.6
	4-year college degree	3	10.7
Race and ethnicity of parent (guardian) completing survey	College +	3	10.7
	Pacific Islander/Asian	28	100
Country of birth of person completing survey	Hong Kong	4	14.3
	China	20	71.4
	Malaysia	1	3.6
	No response	3	10.7
Country of birth of respondent's spouse	Hong Kong	8	28.6
	China	16	57.1
	Malaysia	1	3.6
	Taiwan	1	3.6
	No response	2	7.1

**3.2. Procedure**

The data reported in this study were collected as part of a larger research project that examined the relationship between teachers' reading practices, and children's use of temporal language. Letters were sent home to parents in English and Chinese asking for their child's participation in the larger research project. All parents who agreed to allow their children to participate in the study were asked to complete a modified version of the *Stony Brook Family Reading Survey* (Whitehurst, 1993). The survey was originally designed to gather information about a family's demographics, reading practices and attitudes toward reading (Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994). All surveys were translated into Chinese. Parents were given the option of completing the survey in either English or Chinese. All surveys were returned to the center in a sealed envelope. Survey responses were translated into English by a research assistant fluent in both English and Chinese. All survey data were analyzed in the laboratory.

All survey responses were analyzed using PASW Statistics Version 18 (PASW 18.0). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the characteristics of the sample and the survey data. Spearman correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship parents' literacy practices and children's literacy behaviors. Ordinal logistic regression analyses were used to examine the relations between parental education and children's literacy behaviors.

## 4. Results

The findings related to each research question are reported in this section.

### 4.1. Chinese Parents' Promotion and Engagement in Literacy Practices with Children

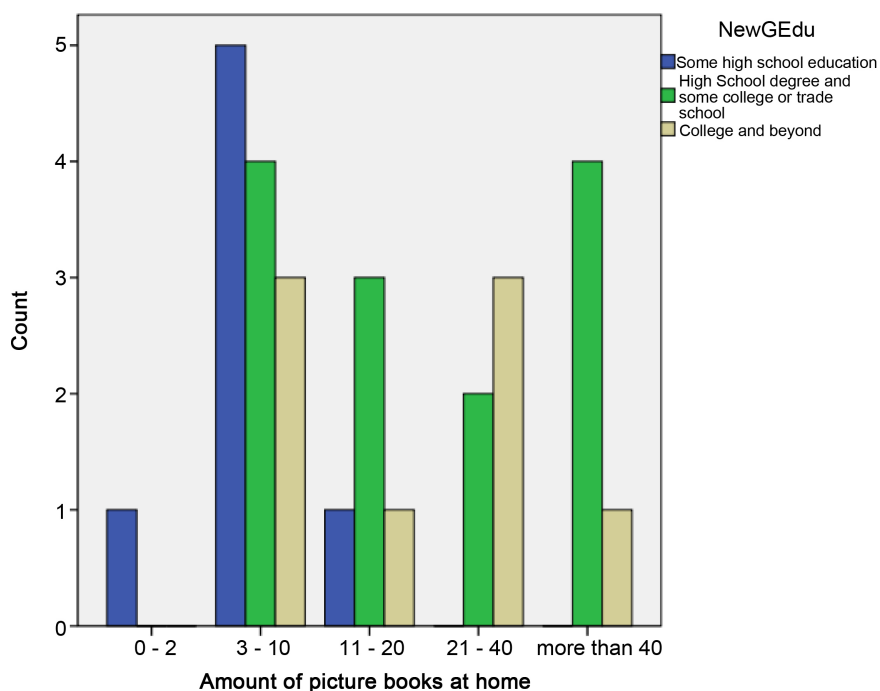
In order to address this question frequencies and percentages were computed for all of the survey items related to the parents' literacy practices. In general, the majority of parents reported engaging in literacy practices that would promote their children's literacy development. For example, parents reported that they and their spouse enjoyed reading. Most reported spending at least 15 minutes to over an hour reading daily. In addition to their own literacy practices, parents reported that they began to read to their children when they were between 6 and 24 months old with only eight parents reporting beginning to read to their child after the age of 2. The majority of parents reported that they spent time watching traditional television programs, as well as educational programs, had over twenty books in their homes, and had children who requested to be read to at least once or twice a week. Furthermore, these parents reported that their children enjoyed reading and frequently spent time looking at books. Surprisingly, the majority of parents reported their children rarely went to the library. **Table 2** provides a summary of questions and responses of the parents. **Figure 1** is a bar graph representing the relationship between the number of books in the home and parental education.

**Table 2.** Frequencies and percentages of parent's responses to survey questions.

Questions		Number	Percent
How often does your child watch educational TV?	Hardly ever	1	3.6
	Occasionally, but not more than once per week	8	28.6
	Once or two time s a week	14	50.0
	Nearly every day	5	17.9
How much time per day does your child spend watching TV?	Less than one hour	13	46.4
	From 1 up to 3 hours	12	42.4
	From 3 to 5 hours	2	7.1
	From 5 up to 7 hours	1	3.6

**Continued**

How often do you or another family member read a picture book with your child?	Once or twice a month	7	25.0
	Once or twice a week	14	50.0
	Almost daily	7	25.0
At what age did you or another family member begin to read to your child?	0 - 6 months	2	7.1
	7 - 12 months	1	3.6
	13 months to 1.5 years	5	17.9
	1.5 to 2 years	12	42.9
Approximately how many picture books do you have in your home for your child's use?	later than second birthday	8	28.6
	0 - 2	1	3.6
	3 - 10	12	42.9
	11 - 20	5	17.9
	21 - 40	5	17.9
How often does your child ask to be read to?	more than 40	5	17.9
	Hardly ever	1	3.6
	Once or twice a month	7	25.0
	Once or twice a week	11	39.3
If your child is read to, how much does your child enjoy it?	Almost daily	9	32.1
	A little	1	3.6
	Pretty much	10	35.7
	Very much	10	35.7
How often does your child look at books by himself or herself?	Loves it	7	25.0
	Hardly ever	3	10.0
	Once or twice a month	4	14.3
	Once or twice a week	9	32.1
How often do you go to the library with your child?	Almost daily	12	42.9
	Hardly ever	17	60.7
	Once or twice a month	5	17.9
How many minutes per day do you spend reading (not counting time spent reading with your children)?	Once or twice a week	6	21.4
	Hardly any time	3	10.7
	2 - 15 minutes	11	39.3
	16 - 30 minutes	6	21.4
	31 - 60 minutes		17.9
How much do you enjoy reading?	more than an hour	3	10.7
	Not at all	1	3.6
	Some	6	21.4
How much does your spouse enjoy reading?	Moderately	17	60.7
	Very much	4	14.3
	Not at all	3	10.7
How much time do you spend watching TV?	Some	8	28.6
	Moderately	12	42.9
	Very much	5	17.9
How much time do you spend watching TV?	Less than one hour		7.1
	From 1 up to 3 hours	10	35.7
	From 3 to 5 hours	15	53.6
	From 5 up to 7 hours	1	3.6



**Figure 1.** Number of books and paternal education (some high school, high school and some college, college and beyond).

#### 4.2. Languages Spoken at Home

Of the 28 parents who completed the survey 57.1% reported that they spoke Cantonese, 14.3% reported speaking Fukinese, 3.6% reported speaking Shanghi, 17.9% reported being bilingual speakers, and 7.1% reported speaking multiple dialects. None of the respondents reported speaking only English at home.

When asked what was the primary language spoken by their child at home 14.3% reported English, 42.9% Cantonese, 7.1% Toisanese, 14.3% Fukinese, 3.6% reported that their child spoke multiple dialects at home, and 17.9% said their children were bilingual.

#### 4.3. Chinese Parents' Understanding of English and Engagement in Literacy Practices

When asked about their understanding of written and spoken English, 62.5% of parents reported a moderate to high understanding of spoken language, with 70.8% reporting having a good understanding of written language. However, none of the parents reported English as being their primary language spoken at home.

In order to examine the relationship between Chinese parents' understanding of English and their engagement in literacy activities a series of Spearman *rho* correlations were computed. A moderate positive correlation was found between the respondents understanding of written language and the amount of time they spent reading ( $\rho(22) = 0.499, p < 0.01$ ). A weak correlation between parents' understanding of spoken language and time spent reading was not significant



( $\rho(22) = 0.284, p > 0.05$ ).

No relationship was found between understanding of spoken and written English and the time spent reading a picture book to their children ( $\rho(26) = -0.235, p > 0.05$ ), ( $\rho(26) = -0.085, p > 0.05$ ), the number of books in the home ( $\rho(26) = -0.365, p > 0.05$ ), ( $\rho(26) = -0.111, p > 0.05$ ), time spent in the library ( $\rho(26) = 0.263, p > 0.05$ ), ( $\rho(26) = 0.253, p > 0.05$ ), or the time spent watching educational television ( $\rho(26) = -0.261, p > 0.05$ ), ( $\rho(26) = -0.286, p > 0.05$ ).

#### 4.4. Chinese Parents' Literacy Practices and Children's Literacy Behaviors

In order to examine the relationship between parents' literacy practices and their children's literacy behaviors a series of Spearman  $\rho$  correlation coefficients were calculated (see **Table 3**).

Overall, a positive relationship was found between the amount of time parents spent reading to their children on the previous day and their child's request to be read to. Moreover, a positive relationship was found between the number of books in the home and the child's request to be read to and their enjoyment of reading. There was also a positive correlation between the time parent's spent reading picture books to their children and children's requesting to be read to, their enjoyment of reading and their time spent looking at books.

**Table 3.** Correlations between parent's practices and children's literacy behaviors  $n = 28$ .

Parent's Practices	Children's Literacy Behaviors		
	Child's Request for Reading	Enjoyment of Reading	Time Spent Looking at Books
Time spent reading to child on previous day	0.471*	0.191	0.034
Number of books in home	0.605**	0.408*	0.340
Exposure to educational television	0.018	-0.067	0.036
Amount of time child spends watching television	0.027	-0.038	-0.069
Time spent in the library	0.263	0.151	0.356
Time spent reading picture books	0.781**	0.565**	0.545**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Note correlations reported in the tables are for the respondents only.

#### 4.5. Parental Education and Children's Literacy Behaviors

To investigate the relationship between parental education and young children's literacy behaviors a series of ordinal logistic regression analyses were computed.

##### 4.5.1. Time Spent Reading Picture Books

An ordinal logistic regression was estimated to determine whether the time

parents spent reading picture books to their children could be predicted from their education. Regression results indicated the model was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between the amount of time spent reading picture books ( $-\text{Log Likelihood} = 15.137$ ,  $X^2(2) = 3.772$ ,  $p > 0.155$ ). Amount of education did not predict the amount of time a parent or a family member spent reading to their child, low levels of education,  $b = -1.851$ ,  $SE = 0.052$ ,  $OR = -1.69$ ,  $p > 0.08$  and moderate levels of education  $b = -1.367$ ,  $SE = 0.901$ ,  $OR = -1.11$ ,  $p > 0.129$ . Overall the model accounted for approximately 6.4% of the variance in the outcome, McFadden's pseudo  $R^2 = 0.064$ .

#### 4.5.2. Time Spent Reading to the Child

An ordinal logistic regression was estimated to determine whether the amount of time spent reading to the child the previous day could be predicted from parental education. Regression results indicated the model was statistically reliable in distinguishing between the amount of time spent reading to the child by the parent or other family members ( $-\text{Log Likelihood} = 21.351$ ,  $X^2(2) = 8.177$ ,  $p > 0.01$ ). Amount of education did not predict the amount of time a parent or family member read to the child the previous day, low levels of education,  $b = -1.599$ ,  $SE = 1.026$ ,  $OR = -1.40$ ,  $p > 0.12$  and moderate levels of education  $b = -1.04$ ,  $SE = 0.857$ ,  $OR = 2.83$ ,  $p > 0.225$ . Overall the model accounted for approximately 10.5% of the variance in the outcome, McFadden's pseudo  $R^2 = 0.105$ .

#### 4.5.3. Amount of Picture Books in the Home

An ordinal logistic regression was estimated to determine whether the number of picture books in the home could be predicted from parental education. Regression results indicated the model was statistically reliable in distinguishing between the number of books the reported being in the home ( $-\text{Log Likelihood} = 21.083$ ,  $X^2(2) = 8.67$ ,  $p > 0.013$ ). Having a lower level of education significantly predicted to the number of books in the home  $b = -2.63$ ,  $SE = 1.286$ ,  $OR = 0.072$ ,  $p < 0.04$ . The model accounted for approximately 11% of the variance in the outcome, McFadden's pseudo  $R^2 = 0.110$ .

#### 4.5.4. Children's Enjoyment of Being Read to by Parent

An ordinal logistic regression was estimated to determine whether children's enjoyment of being read to by the parent could be predicted from parental education. Regression results indicated the model was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between whether children enjoyed being read to by their parents ( $-\text{Log Likelihood} = 18.275$ ,  $X^2(2) = 0.042$ ,  $p > 0.98$ ). Amount of education did not predict to whether the child enjoyed being read to by the parent, low education level  $b = -0.052$ ,  $SE = 0.948$ ,  $OR = 0.95$ ,  $p > 0.96$  and moderate level education  $b = -0.162$ ,  $SE = 0.824$ ,  $OR = 0.688$ ,  $p > 0.845$ . The model accounted for approximately 0.1% of variance in the outcome. McFadden's pseudo  $R^2 = 0.001$ .

#### 4.5.5. Children's Time Spent Looking at Books

An ordinal logistic regression was estimated to determine whether the amount of time children spent looking at books could be predicted from parental education. Regression results indicated the model was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between the amount of time children spent looking at books ( $-\text{Log Likelihood} = 19.370$ ,  $X^2(2) = 0.281$ ,  $p > 0.245$ ). Amount of education did not predict to the amount of time children spent looking at books, low education level  $b = -0.709$ ,  $SE = 1.005$ ,  $OR = 0.217$ ,  $p > 0.48$  and moderate level education  $b = -1.433$ ,  $SE = 0.893$ ,  $OR = 0.238$ ,  $p > 0.845$ . The model accounted for approximately 4% of the variance in the outcome. McFadden's pseudo  $R^2 = 0.040$ .

#### 4.5.6. Amount of Time the Child Spends at the Library

An ordinal logistic regression was estimated to determine whether the amount of time children spend at the library could be predicted from parental education. Regression results indicated the model was not statistically reliable in distinguishing between the amount of time children spent looking at books ( $-\text{Log Likelihood} = 13.186$ ,  $X^2(2) = 3.209$ ,  $p > 0.201$ ). Amount of education did not predict to the amount of time children spent at the library, low education level  $b = -1.805$ ,  $SE = 1.297$ ,  $OR = -1.641$ ,  $p > 0.16$  and moderate level education  $b = -9.01E-11$ ,  $SE = 0.852$ ,  $OR = 1.00E$ ,  $p > 1.0$ . The model accounted for approximately 6.1% of the variance in the outcome. McFadden's pseudo  $R^2 = 0.061$ .

### 5. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between Chinese parent's literacy practices and home environments and their preschool children's literacy experiences. The majority of parents in the study reported that their children spent time watching educational television, were exposed to a large number of picture books, and requested to be read to frequently. Most of the parents indicated that they enjoyed reading. The responses of these parents suggest that most of the children in this study experienced high literacy environments, that is, environments conducive to successful acquisition of literacy skills. Although the majority of parents reported that English was not their primary language or the language most frequently used at home, and therefore their children would be classified as second language learners, for the most part the home environments of these children appeared to be conducive to the children's emergent literacy development.

The fact that parents reported spending a good deal of time watching educational television, speaking only Chinese at home, and having a good understanding written and spoken English is consistent with previous research findings that suggested that Chinese parents viewed watching television as a very important literacy strategy (Xu, 1999). According to this study, parents felt that children could learn much from viewing television programs, particularly educational ones, such as how to pronounce English words properly. In light of these findings it is likely that the parents in the present study might also

have used television as a means of exposing their children and themselves, to what they too perceived to be proper English pronunciation, and therefore might have relied on television to provide their children with the skills they themselves did not possess.

Finally, the findings from this study suggest a positive relationship between the literacy environments provided by Chinese parents and their children's literacy experiences. These results are consistent with the previous findings that Chinese parents tend to maintain a very high literacy home environment in order to teach children to read and write in Chinese which is generally learned through parent-child reading (Hui & Roa, 2000; Chow, McBride-Chang, & Cheung, 2010). Thus, for many Chinese families home environments have ample literacy items which provide children with a wide range of literacy opportunities and are therefore conducive to the development of emergent literacy skills (Xu, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

In short, this study suggests that, although many Chinese children are learning English as a second language, the richness of their home literacy experiences may offset some of the risks posed by limited proficiency in the English language. Knowing this information is important because it provides educators with a window into Chinese parents' beliefs and practices concerning the importance of literacy experiences in the lives of their children. Having this knowledge can provide educators with the opportunity to build upon the skills children are learning at home while at the same time conveying to parents the importance of other literacy practices their children may not be exposed to, such as making use of the library. However, before any firm conclusions can be drawn more research is needed in order to examine the interaction between home environments, language learning, and the acquisition of literacy skills across and within a wider range of multicultural families. Moreover, due to the limited size of the present sample, future research should include a larger sample of Chinese families from a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds. For example, because the majority of parents in this study obtained at least a high school degree, it is not possible to know whether the findings reported here will be replicated with less well-educated Chinese parents. In addition, future studies should examine the reading practices of Chinese parents and their children in both English and Chinese. The results of such research would allow educators to understand whether or not Chinese children were experiencing difficulties in English, Chinese, or both languages and would provide them with the information needed to create and adjust literacy programs that would better serve Chinese-American children, building upon their strengths and ameliorating their weaknesses.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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