A comparative study of family social capital and literacy practices in Singapore

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Abstract
Social capital – the social relations between people – is an important component of the family environment and is crucial for the creation of human capital for the next generation. Drawing on James S. Coleman's theory of family capital, this study focuses on parents' utilization of social capital to support children's literacy acquisition in four Singaporean and immigrant middle-class Chinese families in Singapore. Comparative analyses of observation and interview data reveal that these families differed not only in the volume of social capital they possessed but also in the activation of this capital for their children's biliteracy and educational development. They also reveal that the parents' application of social capital is motivated by such factors as the status of the family (immigrant or native), parental occupation, parents' educational views and the family's acculturation to the host society (in the case of immigrant families). Furthermore, a family's skilful use of its social capital could compensate for a relative shortage of human capital. These findings, taken as a whole, contribute to Coleman's theory by disentangling potential from actualized social capital.

Keywords
home literacy practices, human capital, between-/within-family social capital, immigrant families, intergenerational closure, literacy acquisition

Introduction
The home and classroom are vital to children's literacy acquisition and make independent and important contributions to children's long-term literacy.
development (Dickinson and McCabe, 2001). Although effective school instruction can enhance literacy development, language and literacy are typically first encountered at home (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Weigel et al., 2005). A literacy-rich home environment can facilitate the development of emergent literacy in preschoolers and increase their subsequent chances of success at school (Bus et al., 1995; Jordan et al., 2000; Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994; Share et al., 1984). The complexity and dynamics of family literacy environments have received a great deal of research attention since Heath's (1982, 1983) groundbreaking work that recognized the diversity of ways in which different communities socialize their children into language use. Building on her pioneering work, many subsequent studies (e.g. Gillanders and Jimenez, 2004; Gregory and Williams, 2000; Lynch, 2008; Morgan, 2005; Peterson and Heywood, 2007) have found that home literacy environments can vary greatly, even among families that are from the same social class or share other major demographic features.

Building on previous theoretical and empirical research, this study adopts a comparative perspective and investigates how parents of two immigrant and two Singaporean families utilized family social capital to support their children’s literacy acquisition in Singapore. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. In what ways are native and immigrant families in Singapore similar and different in their possession and utilization of family capital, especially social capital, for their children’s English and Chinese language development and literacy learning?
2. What factors may contribute to the similarities and/or differences identified?

**Theoretical framework and previous research**

To answer the research questions, we draw on Coleman’s (1988, 1990) theory of family capital to interpret the relationship between family resources and children’s literacy development. While both Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman have theorized social capital, they took different perspectives. Whereas Bourdieu adopted a critical approach to social capital by examining how mechanisms of mainstream institutions (e.g. schools) partake in the reproduction of power and privilege, Coleman focused on the role of family/parental involvement in developing social capital for their children’s educational advancement (for discussions of the differences between the two approaches, see Dika and Singh, 2002; Ream and Palardy, 2008). Although we
are well aware that social capital has a role to play in respects other than children’s academic development, for the purpose of this study only the potential effects of family social capital on children’s biliteracy learning are considered. To this end, we frame our inquiry in terms of Coleman’s theory because it provides the theoretical perspective that has been most widely and productively used to interpret the beneficial impact of family social resources on children’s academic outcomes (see Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Croninger and Lee, 2001; Putnam, 2000). As will become clear, the four participating families came from the same social stratum, and the most consequential difference between them had to do with efforts to activate available family social resources rather than unequal access to these resources. Thus, Bourdieu’s critical perspective does not mesh well because of its focus on the class-based reproduction of social inequality.

According to Coleman (1988), family capital is not a single entity but has multiple dimensions. It is ‘analytically separable’ (p. S109) into three distinct forms: financial capital, human capital and social capital. Financial capital refers to a family’s physical resources, such as family income and material wealth (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Human capital is the level of educational attainment of the parents and other key family members, and is embodied in individuals’ knowledge, skills and capabilities to act with in certain social structures. Social capital is the network of social relationships that exist in the family as well as between the family and other families/institutions in the community. These three forms of family capital together reflect the quality of children’s home environment and can be transformed into their literacy development and school success (Li, 2002, 2007).

Among the three forms of capital, social capital is central because it brings parents’ human capital to bear on the accumulation of human capital in the next generation (Coleman, 1988). As Coleman (1988, p. S110) has pointed out, ‘... if the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child’s educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or a small amount, of human capital’. One type of social capital is the parent–child relationship that exists in such joint family literacy activities as shared book reading and parental help with children’s homework. It is known as within-family social capital (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Taylor, 1995). For children who have siblings or live with an extended family, this type of capital also includes their relationships with members other than their parents (Coleman, 1988).
As a form of within-family social capital, parents’ involvement in their children’s learning is related to cultural disposition. There is a common perception that Asian and Asian immigrant parents have high expectations of their children and tend to supervise them more than other cultural groups do (Coleman, 1987; Ho, 2000). However, some studies have come up with findings contrary to this perception. Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998), for example, surveyed 17,912 eighth graders from four immigrant groups (Chinese, Korean, Filipino and Mexican) and three native groups (white, black and Mexican) in the USA, and found a low frequency of parent–child interactions – especially parental involvement in children’s school learning – among Chinese immigrant families. In another study involving 4,405 secondary school students and their parents in Hong Kong, Ho (2006) found a similarly low involvement of Hong Kong parents in supervising homework and communicating with their children about schooling. The age of the students participating in these two studies might explain, in part, their parents’ low involvement in their schooling: the parents might have expected increasing autonomy from their teenage children and thus intentionally relaxed their supervision. Given this possible age effect, there is a need for more research on Asian children in younger age groups to clarify the contradiction between common perceptions and empirical findings.

Social capital is not restricted to the family; it also resides in the community, in the social relationships between a particular family and other people, for example other parents, other children, teachers and schools (Coleman, 1988). This form of social capital is referred to by Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) as between-family social capital. For instance, a close relationship between parents of different families or the existence of intergenerational closure (i.e. parents socializing and keeping in touch with the parents of their children’s friends) constitutes between-family social capital (Coleman, 1988). This form of social capital enables parents to know more about their children, the teachers and the school system (Coleman, 1988; Ream and Palardy, 2008). It has been found to be related to higher levels of educational achievement by children (Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Ream and Palardy, 2008). In addition to intergenerational closure, between-family social capital may also take other forms, such as heritage language schools (Li, 2006; Parke et al., 2002) and religious activities (Heath, 1982; Volk and de Acosta, 2001; Zinsser, 1986). For many immigrant families, the social networks they
establish outside the family can be important resources for facilitating their children’s school learning (Li, 2002, 2007).

Since Coleman’s (1988) exposition of social capital, there has been a growing body of research on social capital and its relationship to children’s educational development. However, there are several gaps in the existing research. One gap lies in the blurring of the distinction between the possession of social capital and the benefits that could be derived from it in many previous studies and the consequent ignoring of the actual utilization of the resource (e.g. Dyk and Wilson, 1999; Muller and Ellison, 2001; Sun, 1999; White and Glick, 2000). The availability of parental social capital is conceptually distinct from its activation to impact on child development (Ream and Palardy, 2008), and to keep the two distinct facilitates a nuanced perspective on the role of social capital in children’s literacy learning. Another gap is the lack of detailed information on how social capital can be transformed into children’s learning and development. To be sure, there have been many quantitative studies of the relationship between social capital and educational achievement in children (e.g. Dyk and Wilson, 1999; Hofferth et al., 1998; Israel et al., 2001; McNeal, 1999; Yan, 1999). These studies have generally relied on survey designs, cross-sectional data and regression-based analyses. Although they have pointed to associations between social capital and learning outcomes, they have not been able to flesh out such associations or yield insights into the various ways in which social capital is capitalized on. To obtain such insights, qualitative research that draws on rich, in-depth data is needed. A third gap concerns the samples involved in existing research. Many previous studies (e.g. Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Sun, 1998; Valenzuela and Dornbusch, 1994) have investigated the role of parents’ social capital in the educational achievement of adolescents. Few have considered younger children, especially preschoolers, and examined the impact of family social capital on their acquisition of emergent literacy. The preschool-years period, when formal school instruction has not yet started, may be an especially critical time for family social capital to play a role in a child’s development. To fill these gaps, this comparative study employed a qualitative research design to examine how four families from two Chinese communities (i.e. native vs. immigrant) in Singapore resembled or differed from each other in their access to, and activation of, social capital for their preschool-aged children’s emergent biliteracy development.
Method

Participating families

The study reported here is part of an ethnographic study that compares the family literacy practices of two communities in Singapore – native Chinese families and immigrant families from China. It involved six middle-class families selected via purposive sampling (see Patton, 2002), with three families from each community. These families were sampled on the basis of the following considerations. First, middle-class Singaporean families were selected because Singapore has ‘a large majority with life-chances and lifestyles normally associated with the middle class, and only a small proportion of low income people’ (Tan, 2004, p. 3). Second, given that the Singaporean government has adopted a policy of attracting talented foreigners, immigrant families from China, the largest source of immigrants to Singapore, were included in the ethnographic study. To ensure comparability with the sampled Singaporean families, only middle-class families with well-educated parents were selected. A close examination of children’s biliteracy lives in these two groups of families could help us gain some insights into the home biliteracy practices of typical Chinese Singaporean families and middle-class immigrant families from China. To develop an understanding of the effects of family demographic factors on parental biliteracy practices, the sampled families differed in terms of parents’ education, profession and family structure. To address the research questions presented earlier, only four of the six families were included in this study. These families were selected because there was substantial evidence demonstrating that although the parents were largely comparable in both their financial capital and human capital, they differed in their efforts to activate family social capital for their children’s biliteracy acquisition.

Educational context in Singapore

Before presenting demographic information about the focal families, it is useful to give a brief description of the educational system in Singapore and its uniquely bilingual educational policy so as to contextualize the present study. Shaped by its socio-historical roots, the population of Singapore shows rich diversity (Pakir, 2008; Statistics Singapore, 2001): about 76.8% of the total population is ethnic Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian and 1.4% other ethnic groups. Faced with the multicultural and multilingual reality of an island state with few natural resources, the Singaporean government has
adopted bilingual education as a nation-building policy. Students in the school system are required to be literate in both English and their ethnic mother tongue (Chinese, Malay or Tamil). Students from the Chinese ethnic community are expected to be bilingual and biliterate in English and Chinese (Mandarin). Because it is the medium of instruction for an overwhelming majority of school subjects from preschool to university, English has, however, premier status, and there is a universal English-knowing bilingualism in the country today (Pakir, 2008).

Preschools in Singapore are not part of the formal compulsory education that starts when children turn seven. They are usually privately run by non-profit community foundations, religious organizations, race-society affiliated organizations and commercial enterprises (Lim and Torr, 2007). Different preschools have their own curricula, offer different types of programme and have staff of varying qualification levels (Abu Bakar, 2007; Lim and Torr, 2007).

As Singapore is a meritocratic society, its educational system is highly competitive. Literacy acquisition is at the heart of the curriculum in the early school years. The overarching goal is that all students should be able to read and write in English and their mother tongue at the end of their six-year primary schooling (Silver, 2002). From Primary 5, students are streamed according to their academic results in English, their mother tongue and maths obtained at the end of Primary 4. Students placed in different streams follow different curricula with different academic requirements. At the end of their primary education, students take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and are sent to different secondary schools based on their PSLE scores.

Because of the high stakes implied by academic achievement in a society that practises meritocracy and elitism, a social attitude known as kiasu is common among Singaporeans and immigrants. Kiasu is a Hokkien (Chinese dialect) word that literally means ‘fear of losing’. Not to lose out in a highly competitive society, many Singaporean parents impose extra schoolwork on their children in the hope of making them become top students in their classes. In fact, the competition begins in the preschool years, not only for young children but also for their parents. It intensifies at school entry. To send their children to a prestigious primary school involves a critical race for many parents. Generally, children whose parents or older siblings are alumni of the primary school of choice enjoy priority admission. However, since 2000, those parents who have no alumni membership can increase their children’s chance of admission by providing voluntary service to the primary schools they wish to send their children to (Ministry of Education, 1998). This policy
was designed to encourage parental involvement in schooling and has become a source of pressure and an arena of competition for many parents.

In addition to working as volunteers for top primary schools before Primary 1 entry, many parents send their children to various enrichment and tuition classes for preschoolers so that they can outperform others when primary schooling starts. The three main subjects – English, Chinese (for Chinese children) and maths – are given primary emphasis, whereas non-academic skills, like piano, ballet and sports, also receive considerable attention because most elite schools also consider these skills when they admit students. As a matter of fact, Singaporean parents in general spend so much on private tuition that it has been tagged a ‘shadow education system’ (Khong, 2004, p. 8). Knowledge of Singapore’s educational context, as described here, is crucial to understanding the home literacy practices the four participating families engaged their young children in.

**Family profiles**

Key demographic information about the four participating families is summarized in Table 1, below. To protect the privacy of participants, all names are pseudonyms. A profile of each family follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal child</th>
<th>Fiona</th>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Steve</th>
<th>Helen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at start of study (years, months)</td>
<td>4, 7</td>
<td>5, 7</td>
<td>4, 5</td>
<td>4, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth order</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Immigrant</td>
<td>Immigrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ occupation</td>
<td>Primary school English teacher</td>
<td>Research associate</td>
<td>Primary school Chinese teacher</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Secondary school English teacher</td>
<td>Bank clerk</td>
<td>Pre-university English teacher</td>
<td>Research associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ education</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>PhD student</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant home language</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of grandparents</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fiona, from one of the two native families, was born in 2003. She has a brother three years younger than her. She is a pleasant girl who was active, outgoing and mingled well with her peers in the kindergarten and in the community. Born to an English-speaking family, she had little difficulty in conversing in English with adults and peers in daily activities. Since her family believe in Christianity, Fiona attended a half-day Christian kindergarten. Taking only the afternoon session in the kindergarten, Fiona usually spent her morning practising the piano under her mother’s supervision or attending a swimming class downstairs. After she came back from the kindergarten, in the evening, her mother would occupy her with exercise books on English, Chinese and maths if she had no homework from her kindergarten teachers. Generally, two or three times a week, Fiona went for tuition classes after dinner. Every evening, before she went to bed, her parents would read to her in both English and Chinese.

Fiona’s parents both obtained their bachelor’s degree in Singapore, her father majoring in chemistry and teaching English and PE at a secondary school, and her mother majoring in English and teaching English and maths at a primary school. Her mother worked on a half-time basis so that she was able to take care of the children. English was the dominant home language. Only when the grandparents came to visit would the family switch to Mandarin. Both parents were active members in the neighbourhood community and at church. Through joint family outings with their neighbours and regular subgroup meetings with fellow church members, they came to know many of Fiona’s classmates in her kindergarten and tuition classes and other parents with children of a similar age.

Wendy, from the other native family, was born in 2002. Like Fiona, she was also the elder daughter of the family. Her younger sister was born in 2004. Her family lived with her maternal grandparents under the same roof. Most weekday mornings, after she got up, Wendy would watch children’s TV programmes with her sister until it was time for her to take the school bus. After kindergarten, she had no tuition classes to attend and would continue to watch TV as long as there was no homework to be done. Her maternal grandmother would ‘allure’ her granddaughters away from the TV by reading Chinese storybooks to them, teaching them Chinese poems, or taking them for a walk in a nearby garden. She would also read to them before they went to bed. At home and in the kindergarten, Wendy was quiet and timid. She needed a lot of encouragement to speak in class.

Wendy’s father has a master’s degree in finance and was a manager at a local bank. Her mother had a master’s degree in psychology and was a research
associate in a research institution. At the time of data collection for this study, she was a part-time PhD candidate studying at a local university. Before her current employment, she had five years of teaching experience at a local primary school. Since Wendy’s parents came home quite late in the evening, they spent more time with their children at the weekend, playing computer games with them or taking them to shopping malls. Both parents spoke English to Wendy and her sister most of the time. The maternal grandmother hailed from Taiwan and spoke mainly Mandarin when interacting with both children. The grandfather switched between English and Mandarin.

Steve, from one of the two immigrant families, was born in Singapore in 2003. His elder sister is 14 years older and was an undergraduate student at a prestigious university in the USA when the study started. Since both his parents worked full time, Steve went to a full-day community-run childcare centre downstairs. His parents sent him there at 8.00 am before they went to work and picked him up after work at around 5.00 pm. Steve’s mother spent most of her time after dinner with her son, coaching him on schoolwork and assignments from tuition classes. She gave more such supervision on weekends. Bedtime storytelling with the parents was done on a daily basis. From his first year in kindergarten, Steve attended, on average, two to three tuition classes run by his preschool and the community centre each semester.

Both Steve’s parents used to be college English teachers in a northern province of China. The father came to Singapore in 1998 for his postgraduate studies. After obtaining his master’s degree in applied linguistics, he worked as a pre-university English language teacher. He was also a part-time tutor of Chinese at a language centre. The mother came to Singapore with the daughter in 2001. At the time of the study she was a Chinese language teacher at an international primary school. Although Steve’s parents made deliberate efforts to speak English at home with him during his first year in kindergarten, Mandarin was the dominant home language. Proud of her daughter’s academic achievements, Steve’s mother was determined to replicate her parenting success for her younger son.

Helen was born into the other immigrant family in Singapore in 2003. She was the only child in the family until July 2009 when her mother gave birth to another daughter. Since both of her parents had full-time jobs, Helen attended a full-day childcare centre near the institution where her father worked. Like Wendy, Helen’s day started with cartoon TV programmes, but it was only for half an hour before her father sent her to kindergarten. When she returned, Helen would talk about her day at kindergarten with her mother, who was usually busy preparing dinner for the family, or would
watch TV alone while her father was working in the study. Sometimes, after dinner, her mother would play with her outside for about half an hour if she was not occupied with her work. Helen attended no tuition classes except for a piano class that she went to on Sundays. She used to attend a painting class but withdrew because it did not allow parents to sit in to accompany their children.

Helen’s father had been in Singapore since 1997. After obtaining his master’s degree in applied linguistics from a local university, he worked as a research associate at a research centre. Like Wendy’s mother, he was also studying part time for his PhD degree at the time of data collection. Helen’s mother obtained her bachelor’s degree in accounting in China and came to Singapore in 2001 to work as an accountant for a company. The parents were so occupied by their work that they missed one of the two parent–teacher meeting sessions in Helen’s preschool years. Despite using English as the working language at work, neither parent used it at home. Instead, they spoke Mandarin to Helen and a Chinese dialect to each other. Helen’s family made friends with many immigrant families from China and often went for family outings with these families.

Data collection and analysis

From August 2008 to August 2009, the first author visited the four families regularly. Given that the children joined the study at different ages, and to ensure inter-family comparability, only data collected before the four children started Primary 1 were included in this study. There was a minimum of 12 visits to each family, spread out through the data collection period (at least once a month), with each visit lasting two to four hours. The two main data collection methods employed were semi-structured/informal interviews and participant observation. The parents were initially interviewed to obtain a general picture of each focal child’s biliteracy life at home. Interview questions included the family background and history, social networks, family biliteracy practices, parents’ educational views and their children’s biliteracy proficiency and kindergarten performance. Subsequent interviews were more informal or conversational in order to address salient topics that had not been touched on in the initial interviews, or any point of interest that had come up during participant observation. Such conversational interviews occurred regularly at the parents’ convenience, for instance over dinner or when parents were doing housework. Based on ‘a typical day’ of the child gained from the initial interviews, participant observation was arranged around high-frequency
literacy-related events in naturalistic contexts at home. Those events included reading storybooks, doing homework, playing the piano, playing with toys and having casual conversations. Consistent with the ‘funnel structure’ of ethnographic research, the process of observation was ‘progressively focused’ (Silverman, 2006, p. 93). Findings from previous observations helped to refine the focus of subsequent observations so that there was a progression from descriptive observation to focused observation and then to selected observation (Spradley, 1980). Although the primary site of data collection was the home, family activities in places like parks, churches, public libraries, shopping malls and playgrounds were also observed. Most observations were audio-recorded and extensive field notes were also taken. It is important to point out that virtually all the observations and interviews were conducted in the home or in environments where both parents and children felt comfortable and relaxed. The families were asked not to change their routine activities due to the presence of the first author, and the overwhelming majority of interactions observed were initiated by the family members. To reduce intrusiveness, data were only collected after the family members had become used to the researcher’s presence.

As a valuable tool in explicating the social connections and relationships between individuals, network analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts and observational field notes to draw network maps and identify important ‘others’ in the focal children’s biliteracy lives (Lin, 2001; Marsden and Lin, 1982). Not only family members but also other people in the community were located within the focal families’ network maps. For instance, the grandparents of some children in this study figured prominently in the families’ network maps because they were main sources of exposure to the Chinese language for their grandchildren. To help identify various forms of social capital embedded in various literacy-related activities inside and outside each family, an inventory of indicators of social capital was developed from Coleman’s (1988, 1990) work on social capital and previous studies (e.g. Israel et al., 2001; Muller and Ellison, 2001). These indicators included family structure, family size, frequency of parent–child interaction, parents’ aspirations and expectations for the child, parental monitoring and intergenerational closure. This set of indicators was applied to the network maps and literacy-related activities in the children’s lives. This led to the identification of two forms of social capital: within-family social capital embedded in literacy-related interactions between parents (or other family members) and children, and between-family social capital embedded in social relationships outside the family that parents could utilize for their children’s educational development.
For instance, the frequent interaction of some children with their grandparents in Chinese literacy-related activities was identified as within-family social capital, whereas their interaction with other children in the neighbourhood, as a result of their parents’ connection with other parents in the community, was characterized as between-family social capital. The four families’ profiles of social capital were then interpreted in light of the parents’ educational views, as expressed in the interviews.

An ethnographic design relying on in-depth interviews and participant observations for data collection is especially suitable for investigating such culture-related research topics as literacy beliefs and practices (Mackey and Gass, 2005; Wiersma and Jurs, 2004). Compared with previous studies relying on cross-sectional data, one strength of our study lay in its capacity to provide a textured picture of preschoolers’ biliteracy lives in the specific sociocultural context of Singapore from the emic perspectives of their family members (Burgess et al., 2002; Gregory et al., 2004).

Researchers’ positioning

The ethnographic researchers’ cultural and professional backgrounds should be explicated because they constitute ‘the initial framework against which similarities and differences in the studied group are assessed’ (Agar, 1980, p. 43). As the one collecting data in the field, the first author is a female Chinese in her late 20s pursuing a doctoral degree in education at an educational institution in Singapore. She received much of her education in China and obtained her master’s degree in language education from a renowned normal university before coming to Singapore in 2007. She is literate in both Chinese and English and can speak both languages fluently. Her bilingual proficiency facilitated her communication with both the Singaporean and immigrant participants. As a female research student, her family visits were non-threatening and earned her privileged access in certain situations, especially to the mothers who were the main caregivers and chief informants. Moreover, her bilingual and cross-cultural background was a common bond between the participating families and herself. Her former educational experience in China made it easy for her to understand certain cultural beliefs and practices shared by both the immigrant and Singaporean Chinese families, such as the importance attached to education and the strong emphasis on personal efforts to learn. The professional training that she received and the extensive reading that she did, especially during her PhD candidature, led her to adopt a sociocultural view of literacy. She believes that the biliteracy
development of a child depends crucially on both the family environment and the socio-economic milieu of the larger society.

In the field, the first author’s positionality with the families evolved over time and varied with contexts. At the beginning of the study she was, most of the time, a detached observer of the families, which allowed her to achieve a degree of ‘participant objectivation’ (Wacquant, 1989, p. 33) and encouraged the participating families to make their mundane practices explicit to her. Meanwhile, the second author drew on his intimate knowledge of family educational practices in Singapore, resulting from his 15 years’ experience of teaching and researching language education in the country, and acted as a sympathetic informant for the first author. His insider perspective allowed the first author to situate seemingly exotic home biliteracy practices in the socio-cultural context and prevailing belief systems of Singapore. As the study progressed and mutual trust became established, the first author participated increasingly in the lives of the focal families and was able to gain access to information that had previously been unavailable. Her natural relation to the object of her study, however, posed the potential threat of important home biliteracy practices becoming mundane and invisible. The second author’s positionality, however, enabled the first author ‘to overturn the natural relation of the observer to [her] universe of study, to make the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane’ (Wacquant, 1989, p. 33). In other words, the second author, as an outsider to the focal families, constantly prompted her to take a fresh look at those significant biliteracy practices and beliefs that had become increasingly mundane and invisible as a result of her being too close to them. Thus, we were not only aware of the potential effect of our positionality but also tried to exploit our positionality throughout the research process.

**Member checking**

To ensure credibility, two types of member checking were employed in this study (Bygstad and Munkvold, 2007; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morse et al., 2002). First, during the interview sessions, crucial information provided by the participants and our interpretations were restated or summarized for them in order to clarify and determine their accuracy. Second, at the end of the study, a summary of our research findings was sent to each participating family so that they could check their authenticity and accuracy. The participants did not propose any substantive changes to the summary, thus affirming the credibility and confirmability of our interpretation and representation of their experiences and views. Together with our prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation via
different sources of data, the member-checking procedures helped to establish the trustworthiness of the study (Barbour, 2001; Walters, 2006).

Findings

Our analyses of the observation and interview data reveal that the two native Chinese families differed from the two immigrant families from China in terms of the social capital available to the parents as well as in the ways they mobilized these social resources for their children’s bilingual development and educational achievement. There were also notable differences in these respects, both between the native families and between the immigrant families.

Available social capital

To begin with, we found that the two Singaporean families differed from the two immigrant families in the relative amount of social capital available both inside and outside the family. With the paternal grandparents living nearby, Fiona’s parents had within-family social capital extending outside the nuclear family. The Chinese-speaking grandparents came to keep an eye on the children when both parents were away from home, and Fiona visited them frequently at the weekend. The grandparents were requested by the English-speaking parents to speak Mandarin to their grandchildren in order to facilitate Fiona’s Chinese language acquisition. Proficient in Mandarin, the grandparents’ regular interactions with Fiona provided her with ample early exposure to the Chinese language. Moreover, both parents had siblings with school-age children. Education was a common topic of conversation for them and they frequently exchanged information on their children’s education. For example, it was at the recommendation of one of her aunts that Fiona attended an enrichment class in English creative writing. In addition, Fiona’s father had a brother whose family spoke Mandarin and Hokkien. Fiona often received Chinese children’s books from him. Because English was the dominant home language in Fiona’s family, all these were valuable resources to help her develop proficiency in Chinese.

As regards between-family social capital, Fiona’s parents had established a wide social network with other parents in the community whose children were of Fiona’s age. The children went to the same tuition classes or the same kindergarten. This existence of intergenerational closure facilitated the exchange of information about schooling and effective child-rearing strategies between parents of different families. As Christians, the parents had another
group of friends at church. The English-speaking church provided further resources for Fiona’s English learning. In addition to Bible-related activities at Sunday school, such as listening to Bible stories, reading a children’s Bible and singing chants, church visits also provided Fiona and her brother with access to the church library, which their parents visited with them every Sunday morning before the service began. The parents regularly helped the children check out English reading materials, such as Christian books and DVDs. There were also occasional church-run workshops on parenting strategies, in which Fiona’s parents were active participants. There were other literacy-related activities in English for Fiona and her family in gatherings held three times a month among cell-group members, during which children prayed together with their parents and sang psalms, holding their own Bibles and copies of English lyrics.

Compared with Fiona, Wendy had more exposure to Chinese from her maternal grandparents because they lived together under the same roof. For most of the time, it was the retired grandparents, especially the grandmother, who took care of Wendy and her sister. Notably, she was the main access in the home to Chinese literacy for Wendy because all the other family members usually spoke English at home. The grandmother’s insisted that all her grandchildren must learn her Chinese and she mainly spoke Mandarin to Wendy and her sister. She helped Wendy with her Chinese homework and read Chinese storybooks to the children three to four times a week, more frequently than the parents did. Proud of her Chinese heritage and Chinese literature, she taught Wendy Chinese nursery rhymes, classic Chinese poems, Chinese antonyms and synonyms, and even the Hokkien dialect. In addition, she was Wendy’s first teacher in maths. Before she went to primary school, Wendy was already able to do simple addition, subtraction, multiplication and division as a result of her grandmother’s teaching. The grandmother was also the one the mother consulted about the children’s education, for example which primary school to choose for them.

Wendy’s family had considerable between-family social capital as well. As a former primary school teacher, Wendy’s mother had a group of ex-colleagues whom she could consult on educational matters. In fact, her ex-colleagues had already promised her that they would keep an eye on Wendy and keep her informed of Wendy’s performance at school, once she entered Primary 1. As a member of the alumni association of the school where she once studied and worked, the mother had no problem in sending her daughter to her alma mater.
In contrast, the two immigrant families were nuclear families and had no extended family members or close relatives to turn to in Singapore. Steve attended a full-day childcare centre because both his parents had full-time jobs and his grandparents were far away in China. When the family participated in the study, Steve’s elder sister was in the USA for undergraduate studies. To Steve, she was more of a model to emulate than a family member intimately involved in his biliteracy learning. Thus, the day-to-day interactions Steve had at home were with his parents. In contrast to the native families’ extensive local connections, the small social network of Steve’s parents shared their minority and immigrant status. The parents’ friends in the community were mainly Chinese immigrants from China or Malaysia. As a result, most of the playmates Steve had in the community were Chinese speakers and he did not have many opportunities to practise spoken English with them. This might have contributed to Steve’s average performance in English, especially his speaking skill, at kindergarten. Although he did well in spelling tests, as a result of his mother’s coaching at home, his spoken English was not as good. His mother admitted that he could not fully express himself in English. Since neither his parents nor his elder sister were alumni of any primary school in Singapore, his parents would have to do voluntary work for a top primary school in order for Steve to have any opportunity of admission.

Similar to Steve’s family, Helen’s parents also had neither family members nor relatives in Singapore to share the responsibility of childcare. Her grandparents were unable to come and stay with the family because they were taking care of Helen’s cousins in China. Since her father was occupied with his research work and PhD study from morning till evening, and because her mother worked six days a week, Helen was sent to a nearby full-day childcare centre. Compared with the two Singaporean children, she had fewer opportunities to engage in literacy-related activities with family members. Like Steve’s parents, Helen’s had a small social network of mainly immigrant families from China. They knew no more about the local educational system than Helen’s parents did. Like Helen, their children spoke mainly Chinese, thereby providing each other with little exposure to English when they played together. This lack of exposure to English at home might have contributed to Helen’s lagging behind in English at kindergarten. During her last year in kindergarten, her parents were asked to attend special parent–teacher meeting sessions because Helen was identified by the teacher as needing remedial teaching in English.

Thus, compared with the two immigrant families, the two native ones possessed a much larger array of social capital resources that provided their
children with ample opportunities to engage in a wide range of Chinese and English literacy-related activities. As far as within-family social capital was concerned, they had a bigger family to rely on for childcare, educational information and additional exposure to the Chinese language. Because English was the dominant home language, this exposure was crucial to the children’s bilingual and biliteracy acquisition. As regards between-family social capital, the native families had extended local connections at their disposal, such as friends in the community, at church and in alumni associations. Unlike those of the native families, the immigrant families’ social networks were restricted to those with similar immigrant and minority backgrounds. Their friends knew no more about Singaporean society and the local school system than the parents did. As non-religious families, they had no access to the social capital residing in religious activities.

**Utilization of available social capital**

Our analyses of the data also reveal differences in the interaction between the parents’ human capital and within-family social capital, and the different ways in which the parents tapped into their between-family social capital for information that could facilitate their children’s bilingual and educational development – i.e. to capitalize on social capital as an ‘information channel’ (Coleman, 1988, p. S104). These differences existed not only between the two native families but also between the two immigrant families.

In order to take care of her two children, Fiona’s mother had worked half time ever since the birth of her elder daughter. She managed to coordinate her work schedule with her daughter’s timetable, for example by teaching the afternoon school session to accommodate her daughter’s attendance at the afternoon kindergarten session. In this way, the mother was available most of the time when her daughter was at home. In her absence, the father would take over. He helped more during the school holidays, by taking turns with the mother to coach the children. As a form of within-family social capital that reflected the parents’ attention to their children, there were regular parent–child interactions in learning activities. As the main caregiver, the mother went through most of the literacy-related activities with Fiona at home during the day. In the mornings, she would supervise her daughter on the piano for about one hour or escort her downstairs for her swimming class. In the afternoon, after her daughter came back from kindergarten, she would help her with her homework (e.g. English spelling and Chinese dictation) or assignments from tuition classes. Then, she would give her daughter extra
assignments (e.g. questions from English, Chinese and maths exercise books) to complete while she was marking or writing lesson plans for her own schoolwork. When the daughter felt tired of doing school-like learning activities, they would do art and craft together. After supper, she would ask the father to send their daughter to nearby Chinese tuition classes and, before going to bed, she would read bedtime stories to her daughter for about 30–40 minutes, usually in English but occasionally in Chinese. These arrangements and efforts provided Fiona with ample opportunities to engage in a wide range of literacy-related activities at home, in both English and Chinese. In addition to school-like learning activities, there were also shared entertainment activities such as watching cartoons on TV and playing with toys and on computer games. During these activities, Fiona and her brother were always supervised by their parents, and the cartoons and games were carefully selected by them to ensure their educational value. At the weekend or during school holidays, there were even more parent–child interactions involving family outings to zoos, public libraries, science centres, reservoirs and parks.

In addition to investing their own human capital in their children’s educational development, Fiona’s parents tapped into their social connections at church, in the workplace and in the community. They took every opportunity to exchange information about their children’s education with those parents who had children of a similar age. They also made arrangements for Fiona to play with other children in the neighbourhood at least once a week. The effects of intergenerational closure did not end in providing playmates. According to Fiona’s mother:

- When kids play together, it’s also good for adults because we get to exchange notes, find out more about how their children are progressing . . . not because we want to compare [the children] but [for] sharing [information] . . . . At least we know how far more to stretch our own children. And we can also offer each other tips about how to deal with certain situations. So we always exchange information.

Fiona’s parents also consulted other parents on such issues as choosing primary schools and tuition classes for their children. The Chinese tuition classes that Fiona went to had all been recommended by her mother’s friends. Unlike Fiona, with both parents working full time and her mother pursuing a PhD degree as a part-time student, Wendy usually saw her parents after they came back from work, at about 7.00 pm or 8.00 pm, for one or two hours before she went to bed. As a result, there only limited opportunities for her parents to interact with her or engage in joint biliteracy-related activities.
with her. For most of the time, it was her grandmother who took care of her and her sister. Her parents only supervised Wendy when she was preparing for her weekly English spelling quiz at kindergarten. One or two days before the weekly quiz, her mother (very occasionally her father) would go through the pronunciation of the words on the list with Wendy and teach her how to spell with phonics. Joint storybook reading with her parents was not a routine activity for Wendy, either. Usually, such literacy events occurred only once or twice a month, at the weekend. Sometimes when Wendy requested story reading, her mother would ‘pick the shortest passage to read’. Wendy’s grandmother never read English stories to Wendy because she was not proficient enough in English. Thus, Wendy was not exposed to as much English literacy in the home as was Fiona. Furthermore, since her father did not like outdoor activities, Wendy and her sister did not have family outings as often as Fiona’s family.

Unlike Fiona’s parents, who took the initiative to gather educational information, Wendy’s mother had fellow PhD students, friends and former school colleagues to consult about her children’s educational issues but did not actually turn to these rich sources of information. For Wendy’s mother, kindergarten was ‘more for play, exploration, and discovery, learning for yourself’. She saw no need to send Wendy to extra classes and wanted her daughter to have a carefree childhood, as she had had. Even when her friends recommended tuition classes to her, she would decline: ‘I’ll say no. I’m this [kind of] mother . . . [that] just let her play, do what she likes.’ Thus, for two years in kindergarten, Wendy only attended the after-school painting class that she was really interested in.

In Steve’s family, although his parents were not available during the day while he was at the childcare centre, he had no less attention from them after school than Fiona had from her parents. ‘After work, my son is my first priority,’ said his mother. She coordinated her coaching of Steve with his kindergarten curriculum and tuition classes. She would help him with English spelling and Chinese dictation twice a week, usually a day before each quiz at kindergarten. At least three times a week, she would supervise his piano practice. Once a week she would coach him and help him complete assignments on his abacus and from his mental arithmetic tuition class. Every day, before he went to bed, she would read storybooks to him in both English and Chinese for half an hour. At the weekend, she would send him to tuition classes at the community centre. After he came back from those, Steve was allowed to watch cartoons on TV or play his favourite fishing game on the computer, but strictly within a time limit set by his mother. The father did not
do much coaching but he did tell stories to Steve sometimes, and Steve enjoyed this storytelling very much. The father’s stories usually came from his reading of Chinese history novels. These home activities provided Steve with ample access to English as well as to Chinese literacy. To expose Steve to more spoken English, the parents engaged in a home language use policy when he was in his first year at kindergarten: the father spoke more in English because of his greater proficiency in the language, and the mother more in Chinese. The mother would also switch to English when she gave short directions to the son (e.g. asking him to fetch something) or talked with him about his friends and teachers in school.

Steve’s parents were also keen to exploit their between-family social capital in order to facilitate Steve’s academic achievement. Playing a leading role among her friends in issues related to children’s education, Steve’s mother was viewed as a model to emulate in parenting, because of her elder daughter’s outstanding academic performance. Her friends often came to her for advice. On the other hand, she was also rewarded with valuable educational information. From her friends, she was able to find out which good tuition classes were available and enrolled Steve for them on the basis of those recommendations. For instance, Steve’s piano tutor and table tennis coach were recommended by her friends.

Unlike Steve’s parents, Helen’s had much less time available for her. Her mother worked six days a week as an accountant and had to spend her time after work preparing for local accounting qualification examinations for professional advancement because her degree, obtained in China, was not well recognized in Singapore. The father’s schedule was even tighter. Almost every day, after he came home, he would continue to work in the study for hours on projects from his research centre or on his PhD project. When both of her parents were occupied, Helen was left alone to watch cartoons. Moreover, her parents did not really supervise her schoolwork, as Helen’s teachers at the childcare centre assigned little written homework. For the few non-written assignments she did have, her parents found it unnecessary to check her work. Although they had brought Helen workbooks on maths, English and Chinese from China, shortly after their purchase neither parent was guiding her to work on them any more. The parents bought a piano for Helen’s piano tuition class, but they had no time to supervise her practising. The main opportunity for the parents to interact with their child around literacy-related activity was bedtime story reading. It was also Helen’s main access to biliteracy. As a family routine, bedtime story reading usually lasted for about half an hour every day. The parents would take turns to read to Helen whichever books she chose.
(and she preferred Chinese books to English ones). At home, both parents spoke to Helen in Mandarin and made no special efforts to develop her English proficiency. Despite frequent outings with their friends, Helen’s parents did not treat them as sources of educational information or parenting strategies. In the father’s words, issues related to their daughter’s education were usually ‘discussed and solved within the family’.

As is demonstrated in the above description, in both Fiona’s and Steve’s respective families, the parents’ human capital was ‘complemented by social capital embodied in family relations’ (Coleman, 1998, p. S110) to support the children’s bilingual and biliteracy development. In other words, for these two families, the parents were more accessible to their children and drew on their literacy skills to engage their children more frequently in literacy-related activities. Conceivably, these regular and varied activities would provide opportunities for the parents’ human capital to influence the development of their children’s human capital. Unlike Fiona and Steve, Wendy and Helen did not interact with their parents in many literacy-related activities, either in English or Chinese, although their parents possessed more human capital in terms of educational attainment. Their human capital, not complemented by within-family social capital in the form of parent–child interactions, was involved to a lesser extent in their children’s educational experiences.

As regards the utilization of between-family social capital for educational information, although all four families had access to information channels, they capitalized on them to different extents. In their conscious efforts to communicate with other parents and friends for educational information about tuition classes and schooling, Fiona’s and Steve’s parents made much use of their social networks to facilitate the educational advancement of their children. However, Wendy’s and Helen’s parents utilized their social connections mainly to secure playmates for their children and rarely consulted their friends about their children’s education.

**Discussion**

In this study, we identified both differences and similarities in the possession and activation of social capital by two Chinese Singaporean and two immigrant Chinese families in Singapore. In this section, these results will be interpreted in terms of several contributing factors and discussed in relation to previous research and existing theoretical perspectives on social capital and literacy practices. It is important to emphasize at the outset that how the parents utilized their social capital was motivated in part by their different
attitudes and beliefs about the kind of early childhood they desired for their children. Consequently, it is not our intention to portray some parenting styles as exemplary and others as deficient. They were a function of differing social and cultural practices. Furthermore, although we adopted Coleman’s conceptualization of family social capital and focus on its role in literacy-related activities at home, this should not be understood as implying that parent–child interactions around literacy-related activities constitute the only form of family social capital. Nor should it be interpreted as suggesting that intense parental teaching or effort to create additional educational experiences at home is a positive activation of family social capital. We are aware that family social capital can take other forms and may be brought to bear on other aspects of children’s growth, such as attitudinal, emotional and personality development.

In terms of Coleman’s conceptualization, the social capital available to the Singaporean families far surpassed that of the immigrant families. The immigrant status of the latter limited the social resources available to them. Separation from their close relatives, especially the grandparents in China, deprived them of the opportunity to involve them as caregivers. Partly because of their shorter residence in Singapore and their expatriate backgrounds, the immigrant families were unable to establish local connections as extensive as those of the native families. Their immigrant and minority identity was usually the main connection between the immigrant parents and their friends. As Steve’s mother commented: ‘I have more friends from China ... After all, we have more in common.’ As pointed out by some researchers (Wang et al., 2005), this sort of ethnic solidarity is important for immigrants on their entry to the host society. However, it can also limit the type of social capital they can capitalize on to enhance their children’s education. In contrast, the Singaporean families, especially Fiona’s, had a multiplex social network that involved their neighbours, former classmates, fellow parents, co-workers, fellow church members and others. Thus, they were linked in ‘more than one context’ (Coleman, 1998, p. S109). According to Coleman, such a multiplex relational network facilitates the emergence of social capital. Thus, our findings are consistent with those of previous studies (e.g. Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Ho, 2006; Leseman and van Tuijl, 2006; Li, 2002; Peterson and Heywood, 2007) on the disadvantaged position of recent immigrant families with regard to social networks. Moreover, the observed role of the Singaporean grandparents in providing their grandchildren with access to the Chinese language in a predominantly English-speaking environment resonates with Gregory’s (1998, 2001) work on the role of grandparents as
mediators of literacy. In this regard, our study provides new empirical evidence in support of Coleman’s (1988) emphasis on the need to include children’s interactions with extended families or other individuals in research on early home literacy practices. This seems especially relevant to research on Chinese families because it is a time-honoured tradition in Chinese society for parents to live together with their married children. Future research should further explore the role of important ‘others’ in Chinese families in children’s (bi)literacy development.

In addition to the differences between the native and immigrant families, we also found important differences both between the two native families and between the two immigrant families. Notably, the relevance and utility of parental human capital differed as a result of meditation by the available within-family social capital. The occupational characteristics of the participating families could be one important reason for the varying involvement of the parents in literacy-related activities with their children. As schoolteachers, Fiona’s and Steve’s parents were more available at home for them, especially during school holidays, whereas Wendy’s and Helen’s parents usually had to work overtime and had much less time to spend with their children and to engage them in literacy-related activities.

Another possible factor contributing to the observed variations in parental involvement and in the types of learning activities arranged at home could be what Bourdieu (1990) referred to as habitus, i.e. the deep-seated dispositions that have been shaped by one’s environment, history, experiences and socialization, and that predispose one to respond or act in a particular way. The ‘teacher habitus’ of Fiona’s and Steve’s parents may have disposed them to interact with their children in a teacherly manner and to arrange for school-like activities for their children at home. Although parental occupation is usually included as an important indicator of family socio-economic status, which has been found to be closely related to children’s academic achievement (e.g. Ho, 2006; Sirin, 2005; Ware and Garber, 1972), clear occupational effects have not been commonly observed or reported (for exceptions see Li, 2002, 2007).

Parents’ educational views constitute yet another factor contributing to the differing involvement of their human capital. The frequent engagement of Fiona in activities that focused on what Cairney and Ruge (1998) refer to as literacy for skills development was very much due to her parents’ strong belief in parental intervention. In this regard, Fiona’s mother explained: ‘You cannot leave education to school only, you have to reinforce. So we play an important role when they come home.’ Such a belief was shaped by the social attitude of
kiasu which is prevalent in meritocratic Singapore. As the mother observed: ‘Actually, being a Singaporean, there’s this fear you may lose out . . . Besides coaching Fiona at home by myself, I also send her to tuition classes . . . I guess I’m kind of kiasu.’ Steve’s mother was also a strong believer in the importance of direct parental involvement in children’s learning: ‘If we don’t teach him what he fails to learn in the classroom, he’ll gradually fall behind others at school.’ The intensive involvement of the two mothers in their children’s learning contrasts with Hao and Bonstead-Bruns’s (1998) finding that the Chinese immigrants they studied did not frequently interact with their children about their school learning. Taken together, these results suggest that there is considerable variation within the same sociocultural group and that the influence of parents’ occupation and educational views may override that of sociocultural background.

In line with several other studies (e.g. Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995), our findings support Coleman’s (1988, 1990) emphasis on the central role of social capital in facilitating and enhancing the conversion of parental human capital into children’s educational resources. Having a parent on his/her way to obtain a PhD degree (i.e. a high level of parental human capital) in the cases of Wendy’s and Helen’s respective families may not be a sufficient condition for intergenerational conversion to occur. What seemed to matter more was the actual attention and involvement of the parents in their children’s learning, which arguably created the conditions for bringing other forms of family resources to bear on the children’s educational achievement (Sun, 1998). Furthermore, the skilful use of various forms of family social capital may compensate for relative shortages of other forms of capital (see Li, 2002; Ream and Paldy, 2008; White and Glick, 2000; Wong, 1998). For example, although Fiona’s and Steve’s parents had less human capital (i.e. in terms of their own educational attainment) than Wendy’s mother and Helen’s father, they brought their human capital into play by engaging in literacy-related interactions more frequently with their children. The observed interplay between parental human capital and social capital challenges an exclusively class-based perspective on parental involvement (e.g. Rothstein, 2004; Steinberg, 2001) and makes it necessary to add an interaction term between these two forms of capital to Coleman’s family capital theory. Coleman (1988) himself recognized the shortcomings of a simple additive model without interactive relations and proposed some combined measures of social capital and human capital (e.g. parents’ educational expectations of their children). Parent–child interaction in literacy-related activities might be another useful addition.
We also found differences between the two local families and between the two immigrant families in the ways the parents utilized their between-family social capital for their children’s educational experiences. The efforts made by the parents to capitalize on the educational information stored in their social networks varied among the participating families, and this variation reflects the ‘multidimensionality’ (Ream and Palardy, 2008, p. 256) of such capital, as discussed in the literature. Part of the explanation for this variation lies in the educational beliefs held by the parents. For Wendy’s mother, Singaporean children’s timetable at school was ‘already quite packed’. Although she was aware that other children started to attend extra tuition classes at a very young age, she remarked:

- I don’t agree with registering children in too many tuition classes. It’s not only unnecessary but also unfair to them, because they are still young and may not have found their real interest or showed their real talent yet. Registering children too early in various tuition classes in fact deprives them from developing their real potentials.

Given her view of education view, she saw no point in seeking out information from her social networks about various tuition classes or the way parents prepared their children for schooling. Like Wendy’s mother, Helen’s father did not think much of tuition classes, either. For him, kindergarten was a place for children to ‘have fun’ and ‘make friends’. Given these beliefs, it was little wonder that he did not send Helen to tuition classes or seek out information from his networks about such classes.

The observed differences between the two immigrant families, in terms of their utilization of between-family social capital, can also be attributed in part to acculturation (see Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Attitudes to and proficiency in the mainstream language of the host society are a proxy for acculturation (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995). Having confidence in the local educational system, as a result of their daughter’s academic achievement, Steve’s parents set the long-term goal to stay in Singapore, at least until their son went to university. They were well settled and had a predictable future. Therefore, they made more efforts to be accepted by the host society by encouraging Steve to learn English and by taking an active part in activities organized by the community centre serving the neighbourhood in which they lived. The mother had a group of friends who shared her positive view of the local educational system and would like to stay in Singapore permanently. Steve’s case corroborates Hao and Bonstad-Bruns’s (1998) findings about
the importance of establishing long-term residence and integrating into the host society. Conversely, instability prevents the accumulation of social capital and disrupts the establishment of relationships (Hoff, 2006). Helen’s father worked under high pressure and the instability of his employment compelled him to work hard to survive there. With a strong intention to return to China, the goals that the parents set for Helen to achieve in English learning were not as high as those set for Fiona and Steve. The father explained: ‘If we go back to China in the future, Helen’s English would surely be proficient enough, compared with her counterparts in China.’ This was one reason why Helen’s parents made no special efforts to emphasize to Helen the importance of learning English.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this ethnographic study need to be interpreted along with recognition of its methodological limitations. First, its exclusive reliance on data collected from a small sample of only four families in Singapore makes it inappropriate to generalize our findings to other families in Singapore, let alone families in other sociocultural contexts. These findings are specific to the participating families and their particular sociocultural contexts. Second, because all the parents participating in our study were well educated and of middle-class and Chinese backgrounds, our findings may not reflect the literacy practices of Chinese families from other socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, for example Chinese immigrants from lower social strata (see Li, 2002, 2003, 2004). Third, the data collection for this study ended before primary schooling began for the focal children; consequently, we do not have data on their school achievement so as to explore the relationship between home biliteracy practices and children’s literacy outcomes as measured by their school performance. Further research along this line is likely to yield important evidence of the extent to which parents’ utilization of family social capital can contribute to their children’s biliteracy acquisition and school success.

Despite these limitations, two important theoretical implications can be drawn from the findings of our study. The observed differences in the deployment of family human capital and between-family social capital lend support to the need to distinguish between the availability of social capital and its actual utilization. As pointed out by Dika and Singh (2002), the original conceptualization of social capital by Coleman had the shortcoming of failing to disentangle possession of social capital from its activation. Our study has revealed a discernable dissociation between the possession and deployment of
social capital in the focal families. Thus, it contributes to extending Coleman’s (1988, 1990) theory by providing empirical evidence for the importance of making such a distinction. Equally importantly, our study also demonstrates that the deployment of family social capital does not neatly adhere to the structure of social class and ethnicity. There are differing practices in families from similar social class and ethnic backgrounds.

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