

# FAMILY LITERACY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A FILIPINO FAMILY IN CANADA

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**ABSTRACT.** This inquiry uses ethnographic methods to examine the relationship between literacy practices and the construction of cultural identity in a Filipino immigrant family in Canada. The study was conducted by a researcher who is herself an immigrant to Canada from Asia. The literate lives of the six people of the Holman family indicate that literacy is not just an individual construct, but a more complex concept that involves family relationships that are embedded in cultural identity. Individual identity is expressed in the intersecting ways the six family members (a grandmother, two parents, and three children) relate to each other and is manifested through their individual literacy behaviors. The individuals do not share the same perspectives on their cultural identity. Instead, significant diversity exists among the family members across the generations. By presenting a close-up picture of the intersecting relationships between the literacy practices and cultural identity in a typical immigrant family, this study opens gateways for educators to understand immigrant children and their families' literacy and way of life in Canada, and informs classroom practices that affirm learners' diverse backgrounds.

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cette recherche réalisée à l'aide de méthodes ethnographiques porte sur le lien qui existe entre les pratiques d'alphabétisation et l'acquisition d'une identité culturelle dans une famille d'immigrants philippins établis au Canada. L'auteur de l'étude, d'origine asiatique, a elle-même émigré au Canada. Le mode de vie alphabétisée des six membres de la famille Holman n'est pas une construction individuelle, mais un concept plus complexe qui fait intervenir les relations familiales inhérentes à l'identité culturelle. L'identité individuelle s'exprime dans le mode d'interaction des six membres de la famille, qui comprend la grand-mère, les deux parents et les trois enfants. Cette identité se manifeste dans les comportements individuels de littératie. Les membres de la famille ne partagent pas tous le même point de vue sur leur identité culturelle et d'importantes divergences existent entre les opinions des membres de différentes générations. En présentant une analyse détaillée de l'interaction des pratiques d'alphabétisation et de l'identité culturelle dans une famille d'immigrants type, cette étude permettra aux éducateurs de mieux comprendre les questions liées à l'alphabétisation et au mode de vie des enfants d'immigrants et des membres de leur famille et inspirera des pratiques pédagogiques fondées sur la diversité des horizons culturels des élèves

There is a consensus in literacy research that a person's identity as a member of a society is intertwined with the meaning and consequences of becoming and being literate (Bell, 1997; Norton, 1997; Ferdman, 1991; Godley, 1998). As literacy is defined in part by group boundaries and status, the process of becoming literate, as well as the types of literacy activities engaged in, embodies a person's cultural identity (Ferdman, 1991). Literacy is thus viewed as an essential part of a person's conception of his/her culture and personhood – appropriate to the members of the ethnic group to which he or she belongs (Ferdman, 1991; Street, 1995). Researchers in language and identity further suggest that although an individual's identity is derived from in-group memberships, individuals may choose to change their group membership if the present one is not considered positive (Hansen & Liu, 1997; McNamara, 1997; Pierce, 1995). Norton (1997) argues that identity is associated with desire, “the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety” (p. 410), and is inseparable from the influence of power and privilege of the larger societal context. Therefore, an individual whose desire is not satisfied will choose to negotiate or shift his or her identity in accordance with the relationship between the individual and the social context. Because language and literacy are the salient markers of in-group identity, an individual's language choices and actual language use in specific contexts become important indicators of social relationship with others (Hansen & Liu, 1997, p. 569).

The connections between literacy and cultural identity have been addressed frequently at the individual level. Godley (1998), for example, describes how individual identity is connected with how society views and gives meaning to writing. Noll (1998) analyzes how two American Indian youths constructed meaning through reading and writing and other literacy practices. Neilsen (1989), who has documented the literate lives of three adults, views literacy as an individual way of knowing and behaving. These studies, which have successfully presented the individuality of literacy and its social meaning for the self in the fabric of society, are carefully shaped segments of literate lives. The researchers, however, did not address the relationship among an individual and the significant others in his/her family. Such a study is important because an individual's identity normally exists in association with his or her family members, and then the larger society. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to engage in a detailed examination of the interrelationships between family context and individual literacy.

The cultural background of researchers is also important as it affects how they view the relationship between literacy and identity. Most researchers (such as those mentioned above) are from the dominant culture, and view literacy and identity from the perspective of Western society. Very few studies on immigrant literacy come from an insider's perspectives. My own perspective on literacy and identity originates from my cultural background

as an Asian immigrant to Canada. My understanding of self and society is mediated through my relationship with my family members. As Chang (1982) summarizes, the concept of selfhood in Asian culture is that “a human being has meaning and the right to existence only in relation to other family members on the one hand; and in relation to the universe and the laws of Nature on the other” (as cited in Liebkind, 1992, p. 149). This conception, which is dominant in Asian culture, is in contrast to the concept of selfhood in the West (Liebkind, 1992).

My position is that the meaning of self to a large extent arises in the life of an individual through ongoing exchange with other family members, who share similar knowledge, beliefs, morals, and customs. Family milieu is a most significant social/cultural context in which literacy is socialized, represented, and transmitted. The family members’ beliefs and values shape their literacy lives; and dialectically, their literate lives are an inseparable part of who they are as a whole, as a basic social institution, a living system (Montgomery & Fever, 1988; Leslie & Korman, 1989).

My goal was to uncover the relationship between literacy practices and the construction of cultural identity in a South Asian immigrant family, the Holmans. They live in a prairie city, which I will call Salington, in Western Canada. Salington is a typical prairie city with a South Asian population of 1,335, comprising only a small segment of the total population (216,445), with European Canadians being the majority (Statistics Canada, 1996). The Holmans immigrated to the city from the Philippines in 1983. At the time of this study, they had lived in Canada for fifteen years. They, along with one black and one East Indian family, live in a predominantly Caucasian, middle-class neighborhood. The family has three generations living in the same house – the grandmother (Anna), the parents (Roberta and Edward), and three daughters (Salsha, Jasmine, and Jessie) aged 6, 13 and 15. (Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to ensure the anonymity of the participants.)

My research questions were:

- a) how does an immigrant family use literacies in the home milieu and what is the significance of them?
- b) how do the family members relate to each other and construct their ethnic/cultural identity through their literacy practices?

By focusing on the home milieu of this family and considering it as a socio-cultural context for the literacy practices of both adults and children, I sought to understand their conception of self in relation to their significant others in the family.

My understanding of the Holmans’ literacy practices and their meaning-making was influenced by Bell’s (1997) theory in which she used

commonplaces to comprehend the interrelationship between literacy, culture, and identity. Bell (1997) defines her theory of commonplaces, rooted in Aristotle's *Topica*, as "the set of fundamental elements that are essential to any complete discussion or discussion of a topic" (p. 42). Bell's commonplaces for literacy include User (individual or a group of people), Text (print and oral language), Context (community and society), and Process (interaction). These four elements provide a framework for my meaning-making of the data collected. In this study, User consists of the six family members; Text consists of the print and writing materials, and the oracies in both English and Tagalog; Context comprises the family milieu where the family literacy events occur, and the larger society environment in which they reside. Process resides in the range of literacy activities which the family members interact with Text and develop patterns of interaction with each other.

## METHOD

Ethnography has been defined as a process to study human interactions in social settings through the process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behavior (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Charles, 1998; Schwandt, 1997). Ethnography has allowed me to gain an understanding of the meaning of the family literacy practices of the Holman family. During a three-month period in the winter of 1998, I visited the Holman's home twice weekly, with each visit lasting two to three hours, for a total of twenty four visits.

I used ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviewing, field notes, journals, and artifact analysis to gather data. Letters of consent were signed by each members of the family before the beginning of the study. Participant observation took place in different settings such as in the house, in the park, and shopping centre, and on a variety of occasions such as casual visits, family dinners, a reunion, and family outings. I also kept descriptive fieldnotes and reflective journals to record the literacy activities of the family and the nuances of interactions among the family members.

I used both informal and formal interviewing methods. Informal conversational interviewing was used throughout the study (Wolcott, 1994). Semi-structured interviewing took place in the final stage of the study after I established rapport with my participants. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed so that the transcripts could be used for analysis. All the transcripts were reviewed, and letters of consent for using information from the transcripts were signed by the participants. The interviews provided the participants' own perspective on their literacies and living, and afforded an in-depth understanding of their own perceptions about their cultural identity.

Data analysis in this ethnographic study was a continuous and developmental process that occurred concurrently with data collection. To organize my interview and observation data, I used the conceptual techniques of theorizing, sequential selection, and thematic analysis suggested by Goetz and LeCompte (1984). This process provided me with the major themes to describe and understand the Holman family literacy practices. Once these themes were arranged, I used Bell's (1997) theory of commonplaces, described above, to interpret the data.

I begin by presenting a "snapshot" of the family, then focus in turn on the literacy of each generation – parents, daughters, and grandmother – and move to discussion implications. The paper concludes with a second snapshot of the family in interaction.

#### THE FAMILY: A SNAPSHOT

Around five o'clock in the afternoon on an ordinary day, everybody in the Holman family is home. Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha are back from school; Roberta and Edward are back from work. Roberta, who is medium-built, with dark hair to her shoulder, and wearing a T-shirt and a long skirt, is busy preparing for supper in the kitchen. She likes to cook different kinds of fish and rice dishes, that are their fixed tradition, for supper. She also does some Western cooking she learned from work, a nursing home where she is a kitchen helper. She values their mealtime highly: "Eating a meal together once a day will help the family stay together."

Edward is about the same height but smaller built than Roberta, with a short mustache, and small witty eyes. He reads a community newspaper or materials he brings from work at the dining table, chatting with Roberta and Grandma at the same time in Tagalog. They usually exchange information about work and their children.

Grandma Anna is in her seventies. She stays home all day. The afternoon moment when everybody is home is her favorite time. Her long grayish hair is done in a bun. She speaks only Tagalog, the Philippine national language. She talks with her son and daughter-in-law, listening to the news they bring home. Once in a while, she gets up and helps Roberta with warming up food. Sometimes, when she is feeling well, she gets everything ready for Roberta before she comes back from work.

Fifteen-year-old Jessie likes baggy pants and black T-shirts with dragons. She looks "sporty" and energetic, has short shining black hair and a round face. She is reading a horror book she borrowed from the school library, in her room in the basement. She comes out to set the table shortly before dinner is ready. Her job also includes cleaning the table after supper.

Thirteen-year old Jasmine's job is to wash dishes after dinner, so she is watching TV in the living room. She is more gentle and "bookish" looking: long black hair, glasses, and a small long face. Like her sister, she wears long baggy jeans and a tight gray T-shirt.

Round-faced, six years old Salsha is the baby of the family. She does not have the same sense of fashion as her sisters, and does not know the popular brand or style. Her only criterion is that there should be cute animals, especially dogs, on her shirt. She runs around the house telling everybody about what happened in school, such as the fact that she fell down when she was skating, or repeating the French words she learned. Sometimes she goes to play with her stuffed Dalmatians, draws pictures at the dining table, or plays new music she learned on her electric keyboard.

#### LITERACY, LIVING, AND IDENTITY

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) suggest that literacy used by ordinary people in ordinary and critical situations makes it possible to gain an understanding of "the workings of a social system and the ways in which it can impede, constrain, or enhance our everyday lives" (p. 199). The personal accounts in this section are literacy experiences of the six members of the Holman family. Unfolding through an ethnographic lens, the family members' stories illuminate the family members' literacy practices, their backgrounds and cultural beliefs, their perception of their positions in society, and their intersecting relationships with each other in the home milieu.

#### *Learning to be Canadian: Roberta and Edward*

Edward did not finish his last year of engineering degree in the Philippines, going instead to Saudi Arabia to work as an electrician. He then went back to the Philippines to do some contract work. For Edwards and Roberta, the first year in Canada was hard. As a newcomer with little English, he could not find a job right away. He hated English when he was in college. Only when he arrived in Canada and had a family to support did he realize the importance of English. His first job was as a dishwasher in a restaurant. When he was working in the restaurant, he used a government grant to take some short technical engineering courses at a technical school. When he finished those courses, an owner of a company offered him a job in engineering and he has been working in the company ever since. When he reflects on those years, he still remembers the difficulty of job-hunting.

Edward does not seem to have confidence in his English. He commented, "Even now, I still have problem with English." Since it is easier to express himself in Tagalog than in English, he speaks Tagalog at home. He values reading. In his opinion, no matter how old people are, if they are working,

they should always read to update their knowledge. Edward considers himself a non-fiction reader, because he enjoys reading “real” stuff such as newspapers. The family does not subscribe to the daily local newspaper because Edward is the only one who reads the newspaper at home and he can read it at work. But he reads at home the *Free Press* and the *Sun*, the free weekly community newspapers, and some books related to his work. He likes watching television news in the morning when he is having breakfast. Edward does not write very much. The only writing he does is to write letters to his family in the Philippines if he has many stories to tell them. Most of the time, he prefers to talk to his family back home on the phone.

Some Saturdays, Edward takes the children to read in a nearby community library, a branch of the city public library located not far from their neighborhood. He himself checks the newspapers and books related to his work. If he finds some books that are interesting, he takes them home. Occasionally Edward reads to Salsha in English since she is still learning to read. The older girls are old enough to read by themselves. But most of the time it is Roberta who reads to Salsha before bedtime just as she did to Jessie and Jasmine when they were little.

Roberta finished her university education and became a medical lab technician in Bacoor, a city in the Philippines. When she first came to Canada, she wanted to go to school here to continue her training as a medical lab technician. But she was seven months pregnant with Jessie and, because they lived on Edward’s limited income, she stayed home raising their child. She did not go to the ESL class offered for immigrant women. Instead, she learned English through watching soap operas such as *General Hospital* or *The Bold and the Beautiful* and magazines such as *Chatelaine*, and “talking to Canadians in the stores,” she told me, referring to the shop assistants who speak good Canadian English.

Roberta started her job as a kitchen assistant in a nursing home on a casual basis. Three years later, she became a full-time employee. Her work starts at 9:30 a.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m. Every morning she gets up at about six to get the children, especially Salsha, ready for school. The time in the morning allows her to do the washing and other chores of the day. She barely has time to read for herself. Once in a while, she reads a newspaper or magazine, but very seldom does she have enough time to do more than flip through the pages. Like Edward, she does not write a lot. Most of the writing is letters to friends and relatives. She pays the bills and jots down some shopping lists. Sometimes she leaves notes or instructions for the girls. These notes are all in English. She never writes to them in Tagalog, but speaks with them only in Tagalog. She explained to me, “Because they use English all the time, and they don’t know how to read in Tagalog. What can I do?”

Roberta and Edward are still learning to adapt to Canadian society. Edward views newspaper reading as a way to get to know Canadian culture and to learn to fit in. Roberta believes in learning through communicating with Canadians. Both of them view themselves as foreign sojourners and think they need to adopt Canadian culture to survive here, "We are foreigners. We came to their country and they let us stay here." In Roberta's opinion, Canadian culture is "White" culture,

In Salington, the percentage of people from other countries that are not White, probably low. So I would say "yes," all over the country, mostly are White people, so White culture will dominate.

As immigrants who chose to live in Canada, they think they need to "do the Canadian ways". As Edward says,

Because we are in Canada, I think if you want to stay here in Canada, you must accept Canadian culture. If you don't go by Canadian culture, you must go back to your hometown or to some other place, because the Canadians need to preserve Canadian culture, because we are in Canada.

Edward and Roberta refer to "the Canadian ways" as the differences in many aspects of Canadian society that they have observed over the years, including family values, parenting styles, and parent-child relationships. Roberta gave one example about her perception of "the Canadian ways":

In Canada, children do not support their parents when their parents are old. Many of the seniors live in a nursing home away from their families. In my workplace, I see so many of the old folks with their families just a few minutes away from there. Most of their children just come to see them once a while. Very sad. And the children here too, when they grow up to about eighteen, they do not want to live with their family and want to be on their own. Some of them do drugs, and crime. In the Philippines, we live with our parents until we get married and we support our parents when they get old. Edward and I never imagine sending his mother to a nursing home.

"To go the Canadian ways" can sometimes be very difficult. They realize that they cannot go all the way to being "Canadian", as they were brought up and educated in the Philippines. They are Canadian citizens, but that does not change who they are. Roberta notes, "Whatever we do, we are still Filipino in a way, because by blood we are Filipino. It's by naturalization, we are just Canadian citizens. We [were] not born here." They are very proud of their origin, and disagree with some of the Canadian values. Roberta comments:

There are some ways I don't like for Canadians. They are so liberated and Philippines are not like that. I was raised to be a modest girl, and we have to listen to the parents all the time. We can't break the rules or they will "kill" you. Even at the age of twenty or even if you are working, you live with them and you can't answer them back.



They themselves are learning not only to achieve a balance in the two cultures, but also to achieve a balance in parenting, that is, how to raise their children in Canadian society. Roberta said, "How I raise them depends on how I was raised." Both of them felt that it was not easy to raise a big family like this in a culture different from their own, especially when they wanted to raise their children in their own way. Edward confides their difficulty in raising their children in Canadian culture:

If you live in Canada, raising your family, it is hard to pursue your culture with your kids. Especially when they go to school, when they are growing with their friends and classmates. It's hard to teach them. The Canadian culture will influence them, no matter what. They [Canadian culture] will influence more than their own. But we are trying to preserve the culture and teach them everyday, but I have no guarantee.

Edward and Roberta think it is important to preserve their language, and for their children to understand what Tagalog language is, referring to the written language, and to be able to speak it, even a little bit. But the influence from school and society is so strong that they feel it is very hard to preserve their language and culture on their own. In the Catholic school, their children are counted as a minority. Sometimes they bring home different ideas about how they should behave when they compare themselves with other children (e.g. how late they can stay out and at what age they can date). Even within the home milieu, it is hard to resist Canadian cultural influences. Media, especially TV and videos, are a big influence against their preservation of culture. The children watch TV extensively and they acquire Canadian values from the media. Edward is against media influence, but he does not seem to have much control over it. Edward commented,

On TV there are a lot of violence, and a lot of propaganda about individualism and independence from the family. They have drugs and inappropriate scenes for kids. Young children would rather believe what's on TV than what their parents say. And it is easy for them to learn and imitate what is shown because they are young. They learn something and they do it actually in life. I don't like it, but they watch it all the time. It is not very good for them.

Actually, Roberta and Edward do not want to raise their children as strictly as their parents raised them. Roberta thinks being too strict is not good for her children, so she gives her children a lot of freedom and tries to incorporate the Canadian way. They want their children to be successful and to be like anyone else in Canadian society. That's one of the reasons that they do not put strict requirements on the children's language choice at home. Also, Edward and Roberta realize that their culture, like their Tagalog language, is not an asset to success in the society either. It may be a hindrance because of their differences and the tacit racism in the society. In Edward's opinion, people do not claim that they are racist; however, they

practise it. To illustrate his point, he gave me an example, “If two candidates, a Chinese and a White Canadian, compete for a promotion in my company, I am 100% sure that the White Canadian will get it”. They recognize that for immigrants to be successful, they not only have to sacrifice some of their own values, but also have to work twice as hard as Canadians do. They view higher education as a way to combat racism and encourage their children to focus on education. Edward’s own experience proved it. He updated his university education and got a job afterwards. They tell their children: “You are good at academic courses, you should continue that. Practically, education is the first priority, especially for immigrants.” Edward reasons:

So education is important. If you have higher education, you can tell them [the employer] and you can complain [that you are not fairly treated in the competition for the promotion]. If you don’t have the thing [higher education], you cannot complain. If you are the same, you cannot complain. They [the employers] will just say, this [the fact that we hired the White Canadian] is because I feel he is better than you, even if you are upset and know that you are better.

### *Growing up Canadian: Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha*

In contrast to their parents’ Philippine accent, Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha speak good non-accented Canadian English. Both Jessie and Jasmine “hang out” with their friends a lot, in the mall, window-shopping, chatting, or watching a movie. Sometimes they will visit their friends’ homes. Much of the time they spend hours talking to their friends on the phone. Jessie’s favorite time is to sit in her room and read, while Jasmine likes to watch TV.

Jessie and Jasmine like reading. Jessie reads horror novels (such as Lois Duncan’s *The Daughters of Eve*, Arthur Slade’s *Draugr*, and Robert Blouch’s *Psycho House*), short stories, and poems. Jasmine reads whenever she has to for school assignments. They both keep diaries, but do not write every day. Instead, they write whenever they feel something is important or they feel emotional. They are good writers. Jessie put together an anthology of poems for a school assignment, a collection of her favorite poems about nature, humor, animals, and emotions, with illustrations. She also wrote an expository piece about sleeping outside school. Jasmine composed a very creative piece called “The Curse” using suspense and mystery. Their teachers commented that their writings showed not only their initiative and creativity, but also their clarity and mastery of the English language.

Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha all prefer to use English rather than their heritage language Tagalog at home. They seldom speak Tagalog with friends, even with a Filipino friend at home or at Filipino community events. They read, study, and play in English, watch English TV and movies. Their only exposure to Tagalog is the conversations among their parents and grandma.

They do not have many books in Tagalog as there are not many Tagalog books or magazines available. None of the girls can read much Tagalog. They acquired the Tagalog language merely because their parents and grandma speak it. They understand it orally but cannot read and write it. Among the three of them, Jasmine speaks Tagalog best as Grandma Anna came to Canada when she was three and babysat her. Jasmine spoke it better when she was younger than she does now. Jessie has problems with Tagalog most of the time, and Salsha can use only a few words. Now when their parents talk to them in Tagalog, they normally reply in English and are not willing to speak Tagalog. Sometimes they try to talk to Grandma in Tagalog "to impress her," but only in fragments like a few words or phrases. Jessie, who cannot speak Tagalog, but considers herself "not completely hopeless," said, "I am an English speaker."

The children differentiate their home life from school life. At home, they follow their parents' rules about how to behave and what they can do. But they acknowledge that their own cultural values are different from their parents' (and grandparent's). Jessie confides:

They [the parents] want to keep the Filipino culture in us, because it is part of them and of us, but they know and understand that we've grown up with Canadian values. They try to mix the two together.

To Jessie and Jasmine, speaking English is a way of acting and living as a Canadian. Gudykunst (1994) suggests that the language we speak or choose to speak is the major way we mark boundaries of our cultural or ethnic identity from others. When I asked Jessie and Jasmine whether they think they are Canadians or Filipinos, their first response was that they are Canadians because they were born in Canada. Their concept of being Canadian seems to be associated with freedom. Jessie illustrates "what it is to be a Canadian":

Most of it is about freedom. You don't have to fear of being killed for anything, there's tons more equality and equity here. Like that commercial: "I am Canadian." Just being Canadian is Canadian. There really is no definition for the values of being Canadian, just the way you act and live as a Canadian is Canadian.

Having a strong sense of being Canadian, Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha rarely speak Tagalog at school even to some Philippine friends who can speak Tagalog or at home to their parents or Grandma. "People will think you are different." To them, the ability to speak Tagalog is not an asset to their ability to speak English. Their mother explains why they choose not to use Tagalog at school (or at home):

Because nobody else understands the language except themselves or whenever they talk to a Tagalog person. But at school, they don't apply

Tagalog. Probably they are embarrassed to use that because surroundings are all English speaking. They are different.

Roberta and Edward think that because English and French are the official languages of Canada, to be able to speak French and English will be an advantage, a source of prestige for their children in the future. Jessie missed her chance to study French when she was in elementary school, which she regrets. Jasmine and Salsha are enrolled in a French Immersion Program in a Catholic school. Jasmine seldom studies or speaks French at home, but Salsha has greater interest in French. Every time I visited them, Salsha would take out some French books or her drawings with French illustrations to read to us. Nobody else except Jasmine knows French in the house, so sometimes Jasmine helps Salsha with her French. Salsha likes to teach her mother Roberta, who does not know French but has spent a lot of time listening to her reading, using the French storybooks from school.

Six-year-old Salsha likes to go to school. Her mom wakes her up every morning at 7:40 and dresses her for school. Salsha is learning how to read and write in both English and French. She has a knowledge of sentences including the left to right writing order, grammar and even punctuation. She likes to draw and she knows that pictures have meaning. Her drawings reflect a variety of aspects of her life experiences and have thematic similarities. First, they are based on her real life experiences, such as a picture of herself in a beautiful gown as a flower girl at a wedding (later she showed me her album, and I learnt that she was once a flower girl for a family friend's wedding,) and pictures of her best friends in the class and her favorite singer Celine Dion. Secondly, some of the pictures are based on stories she read. One of her pictures is of an Arabian woman riding on a horse led by a maid. Apparently, the idea of the story is from some sort of story-telling, either from books or TV or her parents. Thirdly, many of her pictures are about the surrounding environment of the area the family live in – trees, birds, seasons.

Salsha is too young to reflect on her identity. However, she is growing up as an English-French bilingual. I have watched and heard her study French and English enthusiastically, but never heard her speak Tagalog voluntarily. One day, I visited the family when she was home alone with her grandma Anna. Anna and I were trying to communicate with my limited Tagalog and her limited English. Grandma asked her to translate for us, but Salsha refused after she tried a few words. Later, Salsha told me, "Grandma doesn't know much English, but I do."

### *I don't blame them: Grandma Anna*

Grandma Anna came to Canada ten years ago when Jessie was five and Jasmine was three. She likes her life in Canada as it is a clean country and she thinks that the people are nice. Even though she cannot speak English and talk to other people, she is happy in Canada because she is with her son

and his family. She stays home, helping with some cooking. She enjoys reading the Bible in Tagalog. The old yellowish Bible on her dresser tells that Grandma Anna is a devoted Christian. She can speak a few English words such as “hello”, “thank you”, and “excuse me”.

Anna always sits in the corner listening and quietly leaves without anybody noticing. The family room has two big white couches at each side of one corner. Opposite to the couches across the room stands a cupboard with a 17-inch TV in one side and toys and dolls on the other side. Various green plants stand on a rack in the corner between the two couches. The children usually sit on one couch where there are toys and stuffed animals on the back, and Grandma sits on the other couch watching them play or watch TV. The children seldom go to her and talk with her. She is used to this and understands that it is not easy for them to speak Tagalog. During the ten years in Canada, she has watched the children grow and gradually drift apart from her although they live day-to-day together. Edward values her position and her wisdom about the past as a grandparent. Roberta sees Grandma Anna as a Tagalog language promoter and preserver. The children seem to be better in Tagalog since Grandma came to live with them. But the children do not necessarily recognize the value of the presence of Grandma as their parents do. Edward explains that the children have different values from them:

They value the parents as the most important. To grandma, sometimes, they don't [pay attention]. They just don't. They just ignore her. They are valuing, but not in the way I do. Sometimes they just ignore her, because she is not our parents, something like that. She is not my dad, she is not my mom.

Grandma Anna thinks that the children are very Canadian. Compared to her other grandchildren in the Philippines, they have less respect for elders and seem more distant from them. Grandma feels that if the children could speak Tagalog all the time at home, they would understand each other fully. They would be closer to each other than they are right now. However, she said she did not blame them because they are growing up in Canada, and English is one of their official languages, especially outside home:

I understand that the kids do not know much in Tagalog. When they speak English to me, I don't blame them. I am trying to answer them in Tagalog. I will tell them to speak Tagalog if they know. But if they don't know, we cannot communicate. I will just stop talking and just listen to them. So communication just stopped. I don't blame them when they speak English because what they learn in school is English.

## DISCUSSION

Street (1993) states that the study of literacy as social practice opens up inquiries into “the nature of culture and power, and the relationship of

institutions and ideologies of communication in the contemporary world” (p. 12). The Holman family’s daily living, their cultural values and beliefs, their cross-cultural experiences in an English-speaking society are of paramount importance in their adaptation to a society that is culturally and linguistically different from their own. In the Holman family, literacy becomes a socio-cultural activity constructed and negotiated by the individuals of the family in their own relations to their culture of origin and Canadian culture. The literate lives of the six people of the family, their beliefs and uses of literacy, provide us with a deeper understanding of the family’s conflicts and conformity on their pathway to adapt to Canadian culture. The individuals’ choices of languages and consciousness of the social significance that is associated with their choices have served to indicate “social relationships based on shared or unshared group memberships” between the Filipino and mainstream Canadian cultures (Heller, 1982, as cited in Hansen & Liu, 1997, p. 569). Their experiences indicate that “literacy is the means by which these people learn to be at home in the worlds they choose” and their literate behaviors are an inseparable part of who they are (Neilsen, 1989, p. 123). For the Holman family, literacy is ultimately about the ways the family members situate themselves in the world (Gee, 1991)

More significantly, the Holman family literacy practices add an important layer of meaning to the relationship between literacy and identity: Literacy is not just an individual construct, but a more complex concept that involves family relationships that are embedded in cultural identities. In the research literature, it is assumed that individual identity is in conformity with the identity of the ethnic group. In-group diversity is seldom addressed or recognized. In the studies of Heath (1983), Noll (1998), or Taylor (1983), for example, the individuals are viewed as separate identities who perform as a group and are in common with other members of their family and communities. Bell (1997) notes, they are “interested in what they have in common rather than the ways in which they differ” (p. 66). However, as Ferdman (1991) points out, “in spite of commonalities within ethnic groups, a good deal of within-group variance will also be present, especially in a heterogeneous society” (p. 350).

The literacy patterns of the Holman family make evident that even within a family milieu, the individuals do not necessarily share the same perspectives on their identity. Identity, an individual’s self-concept that derives from his/her knowledge of having membership of a social group together with the emotional significance attached to that membership, proves to be non-unitary and non-static (Allen, Wilder, & Atkinson, 1983; Hansen & Liu, 1997). Rather, considerable diversity exists among the family members. In the Holman family, Grandmother Anna holds the traditional Filipino cultural values that appear to be in great conflict with the Canadian values

that her grandchildren believe in. Grandmother Anna has a direct influence on Edward and Roberta, while she plays an indirect role in the lives of her three grandchildren. Among the three grandchildren, it would seem that the younger they are, the more they are detached from the traditional values of the family, and the more they are drawn to the mainstream values of the society. Six-year-old Salsha, for example, seems to demonstrate her Filipino identity least, but has the strongest Canadian identity in her choice of language, and the themes in her drawings. The parents, Edward and Roberta, identify with their Filipino identity, reinforced by the physical and cultural presence of Grandmother Anna. Although Edward and Roberta would like to maintain their Filipino culture in their children, they try to be open-minded about their children's preference for Canadian values, because they understand that a Canadian identity is important for their children's success in the future in Canadian society.

It is apparent that the identity of the individual members of the Holman family is expressed in the intersecting ways they relate to each other and is manifested through their individual literacy behaviors. Norton (1997), following Weedon (1987), maintains that how people understand their social relationship to each other and to the world is embedded in individual experiences, constructed through language, and situated in a variety of social sites. Therefore, literacy and identity are "mutually constitutive" (Norton, 1997, p. 411). The Holman family members actively construct their own identities as they take up different social positions through their individual uses of language and literacy. In the following, I refer to Bell's (1997) commonplaces for literacy, the four elements, User (individual or group of people), Text (written or oral language), Context (community or society), and Process (interaction) to better illustrate the ways literacy and identity in the Holman family dialectically intertwine with each other.

**THE USER-TEXT RELATIONSHIP:** The Users of the Holman family, Anna, Edward, Roberta, Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha, interact with each other through Text, the written and/or oral forms of three main languages: Tagalog and English, and French. However, the choice of Text is mediated by the values of the individual Text that the individuals perceived. Edward and Roberta, for example, view Tagalog as the indicator of their cultural identity and English as a means of survival in Canadian society. The three girls, on the other hand, view English as the indicator of their Canadian identity; Tagalog, on the other hand, represents their difference from the mainstream. Therefore, they consciously or unconsciously resist the use of Tagalog and the traditional Filipino values of Anna and their parents. Hence, their association with Grandmother Anna becomes less significant as Anna's culture differs in what "they consider to be their 'texts' and in the values they attach to these," so that "they will also differ in what they view as literate behavior" (Ferdman, 1991, p. 352). The existence of the third Text,

French, further reinforces their Canadian identity and the mainstream values that they express through their choice of language and culture and their literate behaviors.

**THE USER-TEXT-CONTEXT RELATIONSHIP:** In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Freire (1987) postulates that reading the Text (word) must be situated in the reading of Context (the world). His concept of context comprises the immediate community and the dominant society. Bell (1997) suggests that the Process by which a User interacts with Text is the same as the process through which a User interacts with Context. In the Holman family, grandma Anna's context is enclosed in the family milieu. Being able to speak only Tagalog, her Context is limited in her immediate family. Her Filipino identity is, therefore, not affected by the larger Canadian society.

To Roberta and Edward, their social contexts involve the home and workplace. Their cultural identity is determined by the Filipino culture in which they grew up, and their three-generation home environment that is part of that culture, and influenced by the social reality outside home. Through their contact with the larger society, they see tacit racism. What is valued in society contradicts what they value at home. For example, being able to speak a heritage language is not seen as an asset at all in the Canadian education system. Therefore, they endorse in a sense their children's Canadian identity and do not put strict requirements on the children's choice of language or the way they relate to Grandma Anna.

To Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha, their social contexts involve home and school. Living in a predominantly mainstream neighborhood and being visible minorities in school, it is apparently difficult for them to maintain their ethnic identity as their parents and grandparent do. The dichotomy of school-home literacy practices for students of diverse backgrounds has been documented by many researchers, such as Au (1998), Delpit (1995), Purcell-Gates (1995), and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988). In school and the larger society, literacy practices represent the values of the dominant in the society, which is, in the Holmans' opinion, the "White" people's society. Their "funds of knowledge" of the home language and culture are not recognized outside home (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), and their ethnic identities are not being affirmed. The Holman family, especially the three children, have internalized the social relations established through school and have learned to abandon their ethnic identity that is considered negative in the school and the society (Nieto, 1999). The three children's experiences in the school confirm the findings of Deyhle (1992), Heath (1983), and Valdés (1996) that there exist "cultural, linguistic, and communication discontinuities between home and school" (Nieto, 1999, p. 65). Because validation of students' cultural background has positive influence on students' learning, the consequences of this school-home dichotomy are detrimental to learners' academic and psychological well being. It is very



likely that learners of diverse backgrounds such as the three children Jessie, Jasmine, and Salsha of the Holman family become detached from their cultural practices, which is embodied in their Tagalog language and the values of their parents and grandparent. As Jennings and Purves (1991) point out, they are being “[led] away from their past and their family; it is the main cause of alienation as well as the main cause of acculturation” (p. 8).

## IMPLICATIONS

This study, addressing literacy and the identity of the individuals in a cross-cultural context, has implications for educators, especially classroom teachers who are concerned about the role education and literacy play in individuals’ lives. By uncovering the literacy and living in the Holmans’ home, this study helps us gain insight into the relationship between literacy practices and the construction of cultural identity in an immigrant household. The study confirms the existing literacy theory that a person’s identity as a member of society is intertwined with the meaning and consequences of becoming and being literate. More significantly, it contributes to literacy research in two aspects. First, as the study demonstrates, an individual does not function only within a group to construct his/her identity. Individual identity is not always in conformity with the identity of the ethnic group. There exists in-group diversity, which is associated with the ideologies and power relationships in the larger society. The socialization in a primary discourse, that is, a primary socializing group such as a family, may be in conflict with their secondary discourse, such as the schools and the society based on the social values that the different discourses endorse (Gee, 1989). Second, literacy is not just an individual construct, but a more complex phenomenon that involves family relationships embedded in cultural identity. Cultural identity as a social construct, on the other hand, is determined to a large extent by how individuals or groups are accepted in the society as cultural beings.

This study, therefore, provides educators with a greater understanding of the conformity and conflicts that immigrant families experience in their process of literacy and identity formation in a multi-cultural society. The literate lives of the Holman family indicate that their Filipino culture and language are an important part of who they are as a family, and these are significant to them in building cultural continuity. Educators and teachers need to recognize that literacy and identity are “a site of struggle” for immigrant children and their families (Norton, 1997, p. 411), and the children and their families are experiencing a complex of social relations that have significant implications for their lives. There is a need for education (and society) to affirm students’ diverse backgrounds as cultural beings that exist first in association with their family members and then with the culture of the society. It is fundamental for teachers to understand the negative

consequences of rejecting students' ethnic cultural backgrounds, and recognize the positive influence that their cultural background might bring to their learning. To do so, as Neito (1999) suggests, it is crucial that the teachers take the role of cultural accommodator and mediator in promoting student learning. By doing so, educators can truly understand the literate behaviors of students of diverse backgrounds, and create an inclusive and inviting learning environment that affirms the cultural identities of all students. These educators need to reformulate the existing educational paradigms and also incorporate an explicit pedagogy for inclusion and access that empowers students of diverse backgrounds (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Educators can utilize the funds of knowledge of students of diverse backgrounds to empower them. Efforts must be made a) to affirm the values of the language and culture of students of diverse backgrounds in the school programs; b) to break the school-home dichotomy by establishing parent-teacher partnerships in school programs.

#### THE FAMILY REVISITED: A CONCLUSION

##### *At the dinner table: The researcher's tale.*

I have presented here an account of each individual within his or her relationship with others in the family, their daily literacy and living, their dilemmas and struggles. I have to confess that this discovery process makes me feel uneasy. I read Hilary Minns' (1997) book *Read it to me now! Learning at home and at school* and Lorri Neilsen's book (1989) *Literacy and living: The literate lives of three adults*. They never exposed any conflicts or tensions in their participants' lives. Am I too critical? Am I too sensitive? Neilsen (1989) tries to assure me that "literacy is the means by which these people learn to be at home in the worlds they choose," and their literate behaviors are inseparable part of who they are (p. 123). However, she argues, "Although literate behavior is unique to the individual, the process of becoming literate in context may be a process that all people share" (p. 135). In this paper, I have looked at the individuals and their intersecting relationships with each other in order to present the existing cultural and linguistic tensions among them. In the following, I am going to present a picture of harmony of the family as a whole, because harmony, just like their tensions, is also an important part of the Holman family's daily living. It is in the harmony that the individuals negotiate the borders and become one part of the sharing group of the family.

I was invited to stay for dinner on a snowy night in April 1998. When I sat down at the dinner table with the family, I suddenly understood what Neilsen (1989) means by "sharing". It was six o'clock. Dinner was ready on the table: Macaroni soup, Philippine style fried fish, pork, vegetables, and North American Kentucky Fried Chicken, Chinese style fried noodles, and

rice. It was a banquet to me. Everybody sat down at the table at their usual spots. Edward sat at the head and I was at the other end. Grandma Anna and Roberta sat on each side of Edward. Jessie was on Grandma's side and Salsha and Jasmine were on the other side with Roberta. Salsha began to talk about her school, how she fell down on the snow. Jessie and Jasmine were passing some secrets between them across the table using their own codes. Edward and Roberta exchanged some information about their work. Edward occasionally asked me some questions about Chinese food. Roberta would occasionally remind Salsha in Tagalog not to eat too fast. Grandma would stand up and ask whether the girls needed more rice or other dishes on her end of the table. The girls would reply briefly in English and thank her.

This is a harmonious picture of a family. I realize that consciously or unconsciously, they are living their own literate lives in their own way. It is through their bonds to each other that they manifest who they are as individuals and as a family. The dinner table becomes one of the social sites in which the family members' identities are constructed in a multifold web of literacies and cultures. The ordinary daily interactions in the Holman family, such as sharing a meal, reflect their positioning between their Canadian and Filipino identities. Each family member brings with him/her the complexity of social relations to the larger social worlds, and makes the relationships concrete and alive at this dinner table scene at home.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to thank the participating family, without whom this paper could not have been written, and Dr. Sam Robinson, for his ongoing support and insightful suggestions.

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