

The Space and Practice of Reading

A Case Study of Reading and
Social Class in Singapore

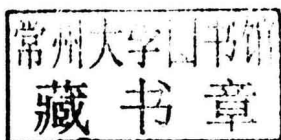
Shin Ee Loh



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Social Class in Singapore

Chin Ee Loh



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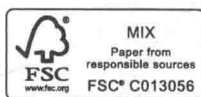
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The Space and Practice of Reading

Mirroring worldwide debates on social class, literacy rates, and social change, this study explores the intersection between reading and social class in Singapore, one of the top scorers on the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) tests, and questions the rhetoric of social change that does not take into account local spaces and practices. This comparative study of reading practices in an elite school and a government school in Singapore draws on practice and spatial perspectives to provide critical insight into how taken-for-granted practices and spaces of reading can be in fact unacknowledged spaces of inequity. Acknowledging the role of social class in shaping reading education is a start to reconfiguring current practices and spaces for more effective and equitable reading practices. This book shows how using localised, contextualised approaches sensitive to the home, school, national and global contexts can lead to more targeted policy and practice transformation in the area of reading instruction and intervention.

Chapters in the book include:

- Becoming a Reader: Home-School Connections
- Singaporean Boys Constructing Global Literate Selves: School-Nation Connections
- Levelling the Reading Gap: Socio-Spatial Perspectives

The book will be relevant to literacy scholars and educators, library science researchers and sociologists interested in the intersection of class and literacy practices in the 21st century.

Chin Ee Loh is Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

**This book is dedicated to my family – my husband,
Mark Tay, and children, Tze Ern and Min Ern.**

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- 1 Loh, C. E. (2012). Global and national imaginings: Deparochialising the IBDP English A1 curriculum. *Changing English*, 19(2), 221–235.
- 2 Loh, C. E. (2013). Singaporean boys constructing global literate selves through their reading practices in and out of school. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 44(1), 38–57.
- 3 Loh, C. E. (2015) Building a reading culture in a Singapore school: Identifying spaces for change through a socio-spatial approach. *Changing English* 22(2), 209–221.
- 4 Loh, C. E. (2016). Levelling the reading gap: A socio-spatial study of school libraries and reading in Singapore. *Literacy*, 50(1), 3–13. doi: 10.1111/lit.12067

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Preface

Personal Reflections

The research drawn on in this book is driven by my own personal interest as a reader and as an educator who has worked in different schooling contexts in Singapore. As a teacher, I taught across the educational strata, from high-achieving students in the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) to students in the Normal Technical (NT) stream, typically slated for vocation institutions, before my current post at the NIE in Singapore as a teacher-educator. As a GEP teacher in the early 2000s, I was provided with much opportunity for training and curriculum development that I felt would have been useful to teachers of other streams but which was then not always available. I enjoyed being a GEP teaching and working with my students but felt that it seemed unfair that such benefits should be limited to one group of students.

My concern with social class also emerged from my own family history. My paternal grandmother was the principal of a Chinese medium school, and my relatives on my father's side of the family generally did well academically and financially. On the other hand, on my maternal side, I observed how poverty led some of my cousins to academic under-achievement and lack of opportunities later in life. I also saw how parental or adult involvement contributed to success even when resources were less than optimal. The all-girls' school I attended had a fair mix of students from different walks of life. However, in church, I mainly interacted with students from middle-class and wealthier homes. Exposure to people from both extremes of the wealth and poverty spectrum opened my eyes to the different opportunities available to individuals within Singapore.

The interest in reading is, as such, professional, personal and political. In my professional capacity as a teacher and teacher-educator, I am interested in finding ways to help students learn to read, to want to read, and to read better. Personally, I have always been a voracious reader, and while my reading interests varied with age and season, I am convinced of the value and power of reading for enjoyment and for developing the individual as a lifelong learner. As a parent, I want to cultivate a more equitable Singapore for my children to grow up in. Even though I belong to the category of a middle-class parent, with insider knowledge of the educational system (Draelants, 2016) that could contribute to my children

getting ahead of the educational and credential game, it is personally unconscionable for me as an educator not to attend to “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1988) who may not have the same advantages as my own. The aim is not to accuse middle-class parents of securing undue advantages for children. Like many middle-class parents, I too struggle with what it means to provide the best for my child in a highly competitive, uncertain world (Reay, 2013). Rather, I seek to question how schooling can address the inherent inequality of meritocracy, which presupposes neutrality to race, religion or gender for the selection of the best but seldom acknowledges the different starting points of individuals. Ever the realistic optimist, I believe that the educational system can be changed for the better.

Qualitative research, for me, is what Eisner (1998) describes as a way of “seeing”, of finding new ways to understand education for transformation. This book is an attempt to understand how students learn to read and about how their life circumstances and schooling may encourage the development of particular perspectives and competencies towards reading. It is not a book about what kinds of reading strategies work best (for good overviews, refer to Pressley & Allington, 2015; Samuels & Farstrup, 2011). Rather, educational policy and practice must be localised, contextualised and enacted in actual school contexts, and my aim is to provide insights for educators to rethink educational policies and practices, taking into account the kinds of students being taught and the contexts in which they are being taught. By examining everyday practices of reading through practice and spatial lenses, this book aims to identify and locate systemic structural inequities embedded in reading policies and the day-to-day operations of schools to provide genuine opportunities for all.

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1 Introduction

Social class, cultural capital and reading

This book is about how understanding reading as a social practice, particularly a social practice that is infused with the micropolitics of power tied to issues of social class, provides a powerful lens through which to rethink the way educators formulate reading instruction and intervention. Through two ethnographically-inspired nested case studies of students reading, one in an elite all-boys' school and another in a co-educational government school, I examine how practice and spatial perspectives of reading can complicate our understanding of what it means to read and to be a reader. Essentially, the argument in this book is that macro-discourses of what it means to read are embedded in the policies and day-to-day practices of reading and that practice and spatial perspectives can reveal how they operate on a daily basis. Making visible the typically unnoticed structures that shape home, school and societal perspectives and practices of reading allows policy-makers and educators clearer vision with which to shape localised reading instruction and strategy for more effective and equitable learning.

Reading includes meaningful decoding and comprehension of print and online texts, fiction and non-fiction. The concept of reading has expanded in this multimodal age to include a wide variety of texts and media across various platforms, media and cultures (Jenkins et al., 2013; New London Group, 1996). Whereas the concept of reading in this study embraces the multiliteracies approach, the focus in the research discussed in this book is on traditional school literacies. Certainly, whereas digital technologies and worldwide communication have a wide impact on learning and literacies, Warshauer's (2007) reminder that "competence in traditional literacies is often a gateway to successful entry into the world of new literacies" (p. 43) is relevant in today's world.

My focus in this book is on reading and learning to read as a class practice, where individuals learn particular ways of reading and being a reader from their class positions and inclinations (Solsken, 1993). Firstly, economic resources ensure access to reading in terms of material resources such as books (Chiu & Chow, 2010; Smith, Constantino, & Krashen, 1997). Secondly, understanding reading as a class practice acknowledges that learning to read and identifying as a reader are about values, beliefs and attitudes that contribute to particular ways of thinking about self as a reader and in valuing and using reading in one's daily life (Moss, 2007; Solsken, 1993). What kinds of capital do students mobilise to

2 Introduction

convert their reading as cultural capital into school advantage? How are reading identities constructed? What kinds of reading identities are privileged in school? How do students from different classes access these kinds of reading identities? How do home practices influence students' learning to read at school?

To examine the issue of reading and social class, I draw on sociocultural, practice and spatial perspectives on reading. Rather than viewing reading or learning to be a reader as "natural" or "innate" to an individual, this book takes the perspective that reading is a socially situated activity that can only be understood in its contexts of use (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Luke & Freebody, 1997b). Practice perspectives focus on the everyday practices of reading, attending to how individual beliefs, values, speech and action inscribed on the identity of individuals are the result of structural constraints and individual agency (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; de Certeau, 1984). Finally, spatial perspectives focus on the relation between space and social relations and can reveal how spatial organisation in classrooms and schools can provide or prevent access to reading (Harvey, 2009; Loh, 2016; Massey, 2005).

Common across these three perspectives are the following:

- Reading as identity construction
- Interconnection between home and school practices
- Relation between macro- and micro-practices of reading
- Power as-a controlling element, whether explicitly or implicitly addressed
- The importance of contextualising our understandings of reading in the local context and its relation to the global
- Understanding the day-to-day lived experiences of reading
- The dialectic between space and social relations
- The view of the student as an active agent
- Equitable education and social justice

This chapter is arranged as follows. In the first part, I explain why attending to social class and reading is important. Next, I provide an overview of the theoretical perspectives underpinning the book and explain how sociocultural, practice and spatial perspectives contribute to our understanding of reading, social class and learning. In contrast to cognitive perspectives on reading, attending to the ecology of reading through attention to the sociocultural, practice and spatial perspectives of reading highlight that the value accorded to different reading practices valued at home, at school or within a particular society only makes sense when understood as situated practices located in particular times, places and spaces (Collins & Blot, 2003). This is followed by an overview of Singapore and the education system to contextualise the discussion, followed by descriptions of the two case study schools. Finally, I end the chapter with an outline of the rest of the book.

Why social class?

Social class matters for thinking about educational policy and practice. Although individuals may have greater access to flows of media and migration in an

interconnected, global world (Appadurai, 1996), there is also increasing income stratification between the very rich and the very poor across and within nations (Bauman, 1998; Lois, 2014; Piketty, 2014) in these changing contexts of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 2001) and “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000). In this “new work order” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), the highly educated and skilled, what Reich (1991) terms the “symbolic-analysts” tend to be disproportionately rewarded, even as low-wage earners find their relative income reduced. Analysing U.S. data, Reardon (2013) notes that the academic achievement gap between students from high-income and low-income families has consistently increased since the mid-1970s, in part because of the growing importance of education success to economic success and the ability of high-income parents to invest more heavily in all aspects in their children’s education. Poverty, leading to reduced resources and early learning opportunity, contributes significantly to academic achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Within Singapore, income inequality has also risen significantly in the last decade (Bhaskaran et al., 2012; Lien Centre for Social Innovation, 2015). Ng (2013), pointing to Singapore’s relatively large inequality gap reflected on Programme for International Assessment (PISA) scores, suggested that “while on average Singapore students outperform many students around the world, there appears to be less equity in learning opportunities and outcomes in Singapore than the international average” (p. 371).

Traditional markers of class include income, educational credentials, occupation, housing, and self-identification (E. S. Tan, 2004, 2015). Also, while class has been traditionally divided into upper, middle and lower classes, class boundaries and features shift with time. For example, in their analysis of the BBC’s 2011 Great British Class Survey, Savage et al. (2013) identifies new categories, including an “elite” class, whose wealth separates them from the established middle class, and a “precariat” class, characterised by very low levels of economic, social and cultural capital – categories reflective of widening income inequalities worldwide (Piketty, 2014) and global societal changes (Apple, 2010; Weis & Dolby, 2012). Ball (2003) notes three kinds of operations on class: class theory, which attempts to define classes theoretically; class analysis, also known as social stratification, which is the attempt to establish and operationalise class categories for purposes of comparison; and class practices, which “incorporates a variety of work ranging from consumption research, work on identity, workplace studies and experiences of oppression, inequality and social reproduction” (p. 6). My focus in this book is on class practices in the area of reading as an identity, “a lifestyle and a set of perspectives on the social world and relationships in it” (Ball, 2003, p. 6), embodied in a person’s values, beliefs and actions, including ways of reading and identifying as readers. Fundamentally, in this book, I am interested in understanding how class allows or restricts access to reading identities and resources and, in that way, possibly contributes to students’ academic and economic mobility.

School as an institution is a key mediator of class and can reinforce individuals’ class positions or transform individuals and societies by preventing or ensuring access to various capitals required for social mobility. Students from upper- and middle-class homes often have greater access to economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that allow them to achieve or maintain their class

positions by contributing to the child's ability and inclination towards academic studies and achievement. Participation in high culture events such as attending concerts and visiting museums (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Useem, 1978, 1980; Jaeger, 2009) and cultivating reading habits (Chiu & Chow, 2010; De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000) are commonly cited examples of cultural capital available to students from upper- and middle-class homes. Other forms of cultural capital may include the level of parents' education and their ability to provide transportation, childcare arrangements and extracurricular activities (Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). More recently, investment in international education through enrolling children in international schools (Doherty, 2009; Lee, Wright, & Walker, 2016) or sending them to overseas universities (Nogueira, 2010; Waters, 2006; Windle & Nogueira, 2015) are ways to accumulate educational advantage in a global market. This new "parentocracy" where "a child's education is increasingly dependent upon the *wealth* and *wishes* of parents, rather than the *ability* and *efforts* of pupils" (Brown, 1990, p. 66, italics in original) contributes to increasing inequality with middle-class parents using all means possible to ensure their children get ahead in the economics and social class game.

Social class thus matters when thinking about educational effectiveness and equity. Yet, globally, educational policy tends to skirt away from difficult issues of social class and stratification, focusing instead on less politically-sensitive issues of school reform and teacher quality to improve educational equity within nations (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2006b; Weis & Dolby, 2012). However, focus on school reform and teacher quality without attention to social class and stratification neglects the fact that educational policy and practice is situated in actual economic, political and social contexts (Bartolome, 1994; Mahony & Hextall, 2000) and that meaningful reform needs to ensure equitable access for all students. Discussing the shifts in the labour market and the deliberate work of middle-class parents to influence educational policy and ensure benefits for their own children in England, Ball (2003) notes that the prioritisation of institutional factors to the exclusion of poverty and social class in educational debates on educational achievement and "failing schools" in fact masks the diversion of resources from the disadvantaged to the gifted and the able students, who tend to come from more advantaged homes. Moreover, existing policy and assessment serve middle-class purposes by in part labelling working-class students and their families as failures. This deficit mentality results in teachers demeaning their students' ability and influences curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Reay, 2006b). In the U.S., intensely-segregated schools with large concentrations of children in poverty tend to be overcrowded and lack materials, trained staff, and suitable course offerings in comparison to more affluent schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes & Lipton, 2013). The language of choice, competition and performativity (Apple, 2010) thus hide the fact that the disadvantaged or marginalised may have fewer options than the rest or that schools dealing with high-poverty students require more investment to ensure educational quality and equity (Lupton, 2005).

Ultimately, social class perspectives are embedded in educational policy and in the everyday practices of policy-makers, principals, teachers, parents and

students. Reay (2006b), writing in the UK, has argued for the need to bring to the fore of educational analysis and practice the “absent presence” (p. 209) of social class. She notes that despite widening access and participation to alleviate social class injustices, increasing stratification and a lack of understanding about how injustice operates have led to most educational changes disproportionately benefitting middle-class families and points to how the prevailing fallacy that schools and good teachers can make all the difference masks systemic inequities that contribute to students’ low achievement and prevent fluid social mobility. A social justice perspective, which deliberately brings “the management of the excluded and marginalized to the core” (Thrupp & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 549) in the area of reading requires attending to those who are disadvantaged in accessing educational goods as a result of poverty.

Why reading?

Reading matters when examining educational equity because it is perceived as a basic skill that bootstraps other forms of learning (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on the PISA (2009) results state the pragmatic necessity of learning to read in the following way:

Reading proficiency is the key that allows students to build on the skill base they acquire at school and to go on to become lifelong learners. If young people leave formal education before they have learned how to learn, they will not be able to update their skills to meet the needs of a fast-changing and increasingly globalized labour market. Economic growth depends, to a large extent, on a workforce that is flexible and able to adapt to different needs. Countries that fail to ensure that disadvantaged students can escape from a cycle of low skills and low wages that are transmitted across generations not only pay a heavy human cost, but also significant costs in lost productivity and economic growth.

(OECD, 2010b, p. 94)

In a globalised market of higher literacy demands and need for constant upgrading of skills for new markets and times, the ability to read and read well ensures an individual’s ability to sustain learning and income. Beyond economic imperatives, reading can be a form of personal enjoyment (Rosenblatt, 1994; Sumara, 1998) and encourages civic participation (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Nussbaum, 1997). In *Releasing the Imagination*, Maxine Greene (1995) argues that the wide reading of literature is a way to explore other worlds and understand others who live in different worlds. This disposition of openness that can be cultivated through reading is highly desirable in a multicultural world of constant boundary and people crossing.

Reading matters because it is possible for school and societal efforts (through providing access and resources) to trump socioeconomic status when it comes