

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AMONG BANGLADESHI WOMEN IN BIRMINGHAM, UK

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This paper locates literacy in the context of relations of power between majority and minority groups in society. A crucial aspect of these relations of power refers to the interface between cultural identity and literacy learning. Interviews with the mothers of eighteen six-year-old Bangladeshi children were undertaken as part of a four-year study of school-related home literacy support practices. The children's teachers were interviewed about the role of parents in their children's literacy learning.

1. The Social Process of Literacy

Literacy does not necessarily have the same meaning or function in all societies, or in all communities within a society. Literacy is not only being able to read and write but being able to utilize these skills in a socially appropriate context (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). The development of an individual's literacy is shaped by the structure and organisation of the social situations in which literacy is practised. Literacy development, according to this theoretical position, is driven by qualities of individuals' engagement in particular literacy practices (Reder, 1994). By emphasising the patterns of individuals' access to and participation in various roles within specific literacy practices, engagement theory seeks to account for the rich variety and patterning of literacy within and across cultural groups. Literacy is a socioculturally constructed activity which varies because of different configurations that families take in different social and cultural settings (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

Literacy activities come into being through larger political, economic and cultural forces in a given society; neither their structures nor their function can be understood outside of their societal context (Scribner, 1987). In multilingual settings roles and social meanings should be understood with respect to language and literacy choices. De Castell et al (1986) argue that in order to understand literacy, the substantive context of personal, social and political values in which literacy occurs must be explicitly addressed. Since cultures differ in what they consider to be their "texts" and in the values they attach to these, they will also

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differ in what they regard as literate behaviour. The same person may be regarded as “illiterate” in one culture, while appearing to be quite literate in another culture. When a number of cultures co-exist within the same society it is more likely that a range of versions of what constitutes being literate will be encountered (Ferdman, 1990).

2. The Social Construction of Illiteracy

Only those who have power can decide what constitutes “intellectualism” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Once the intellectual parameters are set, those who want to be considered intellectuals must meet the requirements dictated by the dominant class. The intellectual activity of those without power is always defined as non-intellectual, yet it may be that some of those defined as “illiterate” are refusing to be literate as an act of resistance. Members of oppressed groups may consciously or unconsciously refuse to learn the specific cultural codes and competencies authorized by the dominant culture’s view of literacy (Giroux, 1987). “Illiteracy” is therefore as much a social construction as “literacy”. The notion of “illiteracy” has to be seen not as an objective description of social fact, but as an ideological, historically located interpretation which is a product of specific interests and which constructs a group of people (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996). Street and Street (1991) argue that “school literacy” tends to define what counts as literacy, and that this constructs the lack of school literacy in deficit terms: that is, those who are not literate in the terms determined by the school are seen as illiterate, and therefore lacking essential skills. Adults who lack reading and writing skills are often judged to be intellectually, culturally, and even morally inferior to others. Illiterate adults should be seen as members of oral sub-cultures with their own set of values and beliefs, rather than as failing members of the dominant society. Illiterate adults see themselves, often, as interdependent, rather than dependent, sharing their skills and knowledge with members of their social networks (Lytle & Landau, 1987).

3. Literacy, illiteracy and relations of power

Macrointeractions between dominant and minority groups appear to result in the internalization by minority groups of a sense of ambivalence with regard to their cultural identity and a sense of powerlessness in relation to the dominant group. Wagner and Grenier (1991) posit a specific phenomenon of *minority group illiteracy*, which represents the effect of generations of economic, educational and psychological subjugation such that members of the minority group internalize the inferior status attributed to them by the dominant group. The person who *refuses* to become literate (as determined by the dominant group) as an act of

resistance may be able to read the world (politically and culturally) very clearly, despite refusing to read the word (acquire technical skills) (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The illiteracy of certain minority groups can perhaps be best understood not as skills deficiencies but as refusal to internalize the values and attitudes of the literacy practices favoured by the dominant cultural group within society (Devine, 1994). For example, those who have been migrants in a new country for ten years, and have not become literate in the majority language of the host country, may realise only too clearly that literacy will not guarantee them economic gains. Greater literacy does not correlate with increased equality and democracy, nor with better conditions for the working class (Street, 1984). Yet for migrants an attempt to acquire literacy in the majority language may require them to put at risk their cultural identity. It is this question of the relationship between literacy and cultural identity that informs the next section of this chapter.

4. Literacy and cultural identity

Cultural identity may be understood at group and individual levels (Ferdman, 1990). A group's cultural identity involves a shared sense of the cultural features that help to define and to characterize the group. For example, for Bangladeshi families in Britain the spoken Sylheti language may be more than a means of communication; it may also represent the group's identification as Bengalis, and their difference from the majority culture, and from other minority cultures. Even if literacy in the community language is absent, the desire to conserve spoken Sylheti may reflect a desire to maintain distinctiveness from the surrounding society. For some groups aspects of religious life may be central to their cultural identity. If features central to the group's cultural identity are viewed negatively in the larger society, the group may incorporate a negative component into its self-evaluation. Individual members of groups will vary both in the extent of their identification with the group and in the degree to which their behaviour is based on the group's cultural norms. Some individuals within a minority group may be willing to adopt some of the cultural practices of the majority, while others refuse to do so.

As literacy is a culturally defined construct, it follows that it should have close links to cultural identity (Ferdman, 1990). When literacy is transferred from a dominant culture to a minority culture which has not historically been literate, majority culture values will be transmitted as part of the "package" of literacy (Street, 1987). In order to acquire literacy in the majority language it will be necessary for the learner to adopt some of the cultural behaviours and values of the majority, and risk sacrificing cultural group identity.

5. Literacy and power among Bangladeshi women in Birmingham

As part of a broader study of school-related home literacy interactions in a minority language community in an urban setting, 18 Bangladeshi mothers were interviewed in their own homes about their children's reading. The interviews were conducted in the mothers' home language, Sylheti, with the assistance of a bilingual/bicultural interpreter who lived in the local community. All of the respondents were born in Bangladesh. They had emigrated to Britain between seven and seventeen years previously. Most of the mothers had attended school for five or six years in Bangladesh, although three had received no schooling. The children's teachers were also interviewed about their perception of the role of parents in their children's literacy learning.

All of the parents reported that Sylheti was the only language used by them in the home. They reported that their children spoke English to each other, and Sylheti when speaking to parents and other adults at home. The language of literacy for these families was Bengali.

5.1. Relations of power in literacy learning

Relations of power in interactions between dominant group institutions and minority group families are visible in families' attempts to support children's reading in school-related home literacy tasks. Literacy interactions can be analysed in terms of their specific detail (at the *micro* level), and in terms of their relation to power structures in society (at the *macro* level) (Cummins, 1996). It is by an integration of micro and macro analysis of literacy interactions that literacy learning in minority communities can be fully understood. In addition to questions about their children's home reading practices, parents were asked about their interactions with the school. These interactions were evident in attendance at parents' evenings, parents' workshops and Bangladeshi women's groups in the school.

5.1.1. Parents' evenings

Of the 18 mothers, seven attended parents' evenings, although another seven said that their husbands attended. Of the seven who attended parents' evenings, three said that they could not understand the teacher, so their child had to interpret. A typical response from one of the mothers was as follows:

When we go to parents' evening the children interpret for us, so we can understand what the teacher is saying.

The relations of power in this context are clear. Information is given in the language of the dominant culture, and interpreted in a correct or incorrect form by the child. In this situation it is very difficult for parents to ask searching questions of the teacher about the child's attainment. At the same time, it is problematic for the teacher to give a full account of the child's progress and/or academic difficulties. One of the teachers commented as follows:

At parents' evening it's not always easy to talk to the parents because you really need an interpreter for each parent

Another parent responded as follows:

If I go to parents' evening I won't really understand what's going on, and I'm embarrassed to ask anyone, so I don't go.

In this case the parent is powerless to support her child's education, because she has no access to information about the child's progress. The parent is rendered voiceless by the school's failure to provide either bilingual teachers or trained interpreters who can provide access to information (Harman, 1994). This micro-interaction in the school setting mirrors the experience of many minority groups in their macro-interactions with dominant-culture institutions in society.

5.1.2. Parents' workshops

Parents were also asked about their attendance at parents' workshops. These were morning sessions which had been running in the school to inform parents about the curriculum. Half of the Bangladeshi women interviewed had never attended, while four said that they used to go, but no longer attended. Five parents said that they attended regularly. One of the parents who did not attend gave the following response:

I don't go to the parents' workshop at the school because I can't read and write or understand English, and it's a bit embarrassing. I know there's a girl there who will translate, but I feel a bit embarrassed to go. It doesn't look right, the girl is young. I couldn't even say a word, I feel so embarrassed about it.

In this response this parent articulates her lack of empowerment in her relations with the dominant-culture school.

5.1.3. School support for home literacy learning

Relations of power in interactions between the school and the parents were also visible in the parents' attempts to support their children's school-related literacy. Parents were asked whether they had ever received explicit advice from the school about how to support their

child's reading at home. Seven of the parents replied that they had received such advice, while eleven replied that they had not. Parents described the advice they had been given as follows:

The teacher has told me that if I can't understand a book, I can talk about the pictures. But if the book was in Bengali and English I could read the story myself.

The teacher said make up a story from the pictures. I can't read English, only Bengali.

The teacher had given advice to these parents which assumed that they were illiterate. The parents' responses clearly demonstrated that although they could not read English, they were literate in Bengali, and they could have used this literacy to support their children's reading. However, this resource was ignored by the school. A teacher summarised the advice given to parents:

We have stressed that most of the help they can give their children is talking about books, you don't have to be able to read the book yourself, you can ask questions, or just say "What is your book about?."

The parents were also asked whether they would like more advice about how to support their child's reading. Four of the parents responded that they had been given sufficient advice, and two said they didn't mind. Twelve of the parents said that they would like further support. Two of the parents responded as follows:

I can't ask the teachers for help with teaching Rehman to read at home, because I can't understand their language.

I did ask the teacher for advice about how to help Shanaz to read, but because I don't know the language, or read and write, I felt embarrassed and couldn't understand. I don't really say anything to the teachers now. I'm a bit frightened because I won't be able to do it.

The teachers were aware of this need, but it remained unfulfilled:

I think the parents would welcome help to teach their children. I think they would be very interested.

Another teacher described a strategy for educating the parents in home reading strategies:

There are a lot of parents, particularly younger parents who have been educated in this country, they have some understanding of the system, and they do ask a lot of questions...we think they might be quite a captive audience

In targeting only those parents who already had some understanding of the education system in Britain, the school potentially increased inequality, as those parents in most need of support were excluded.

The relations of power in these interactions between school and parents are clear. Parents are excluded from their children's schooling by an educational structure which fails to value their existing cultural and linguistic resources, and which only involves those parents who are prepared to learn the language and cultural rules of the dominant majority group. These micro-interactions in the educational setting vividly reflect the macro-interactions of power in minority groups' attempts to participate in majority-culture institutions in society.

5.1.4. Parents' support for English literacy learning

Parents were asked whether they actively supported their children's English literacy learning at home. Of the eighteen parents, one said that she did help her child to read English, while one said that she did not. Of the remainder, two said that their husbands helped, while fourteen said that siblings were the main providers of English reading support. There was no evidence that the parents' lack of reading support was due to apathy. Rather, it was due to a feeling of powerlessness:

It's very hard to teach the children at home because I don't speak English. I am trying my very best.

The link between English language proficiency and empowerment is clear in these data. The parents' commitment to their children's education is visible in their responses. As in an earlier example, a parent indicated that the reason she was unable to support her child's reading was not a deficiency in her, but the unsuitability of the reading resources sent from school:

I would like the story books to be in English and Bengali, because I could explain the stories to the children. I can't read the English books.

The parents did their best to resource their children's English literacy learning. Although none of the families owned more than eight English reading books, fourteen owned two or more. Parents also commonly provided resources for their children to write in English:

The children are always drawing and writing at home, with felt tips and crayons. I have to buy paper and pens all the time, because they use them so much.

The parents in the study attempted to support their children's English literacy learning by providing reading and writing resources, and by organising their homes so that siblings were able to offer help to younger children. These activities were largely developed without explicit support from the school. In fact the parents' attempts to communicate with the school were often frustrated by their lack of English proficiency. These micro-interactions between school and parents reflected the structures of power in society. Despite the school's attempts to reach the community through school-based involvement programmes, coercive relations of power were reinforced (Cummins, 1994), leaving Bangladeshi parents largely voiceless in the schooling of their children.

5.2. Literacy and cultural identity

5.2.1. Attitudes to children's English learning

Parents were asked about their attitudes to their children's language learning. In each of the households the children spoke to each other in English, and spoke to their parents in Sylheti. Most of the families were happy with this situation, although one parent was concerned that she could not understand her children's conversation:

When the children speak English at home I tell them off. I want them to speak Sylheti at home, because I can't understand English.

All of the parents were positive about their children learning English at school. A common response was the following:

It is very important that the children learn English, because this is where they live. They need to learn English to do well at school.

Once again the parents' commitment to their children's education is visible in this typical response.

5.2.2. Attitudes to children's use of Sylheti

Concomitant with their commitment to their children's learning of English was the parents' attitude to the home language, Sylheti, and the community language, Bengali. All of the parents believed that retention of Sylheti was important for their children. Their main reason for this was that they wanted to be able to communicate with the children. As Sylheti was the home language, the parents did not indicate a need to *teach* this language at home. The children acquired it naturally from their parents. The parents were asked whether they told stories to their children in the home language. Fifteen of the parents said that they did,

while three said that they did not. These stories were told regularly, and were in a variety of traditions:

I tell the children stories in Sylheti, traditional stories, Islamic stories, and stories I make up myself. I do this two or three times a week.

I make up stories for my three boys, like 'there were once three princes who became kings', and so on.

These responses make it clear that home-language storytelling was thriving in the homes of these families. This oral literacy activity was used to reinforce religious and cultural traditions. A corollary of this interaction was bound to be development of narrative and comprehension skills, and a love of story. These skills would contribute to the children's literacy learning. There was no evidence in the parents' responses that this oral literacy activity was recognized or valued by the school. Teachers were aware of home-language storytelling as a valuable learning opportunity, but its potential remained unfulfilled in the classroom:

I know there's a strong oral tradition of storytelling; perhaps we don't appreciate that enough, because that's an incredible skill, to be able to tell a traditional story like that.

5.2.3. Attitudes to children's Bengali literacy learning

The parents were also asked about their attitude to their children's Bengali literacy learning. All eighteen parents responded positively to the question of their children learning to read and write in Bengali, a higher status language than Sylheti, but not the language of the home for these families. Typical responses were as follows:

Because we are Bengali, to us it is very important that Kabir learns to read and write Bengali.

It is very important that my daughter knows how to read and write Bengali because otherwise if she goes back home she won't know the language or culture.

It is very important to me that he learns the language because we are Bengali. It is good that he has English as a second language.

These responses make explicit the links between the community language and cultural identity. Although parents spoke of the importance of Bengali for reading letters from the homeland, the language had a significance beyond its function as a means of communication. It represented the group's identification as Bengalis, and their difference from the majority culture, and from other minority cultures. To this end, twelve of the eighteen parents took steps to directly support their children's Bengali literacy learning. Common responses from the parents were as follows:

I read Bengali stories to the children on Saturday and Sunday. They are too tired after school. I sit with the children for two hours on Saturdays and Sundays, and I teach them Bengali and Arabic.

Those parents who did not offer support at home for the children to read Bengali said that they would send their children to a tutor for this purpose when they were eight years old. In the homes where children were learning to read and write Bengali, there were Bengali literacy instruction books. In most of the households children owned Bengali reading books. This support for the children's Bengali literacy learning makes visible the links between language and cultural identity. The parents were able to offer Bengali literacy support to their children without having to acquire a new language, and without having to take on aspects of the majority culture. For these parents Bengali literacy had a significance quite different from English literacy. There was no evidence, however, that the parents' Bengali literacy support was recognized or valued by the school. The teachers' attitude to the children's Bengali literacy learning was characterized in terms of the potentially harmful effect of a pedagogical style which was different from that of the school:

At the mosque the emphasis is without doubt on reading without understanding, getting the words right or you'll be smacked. That has a very powerful influence on them.

5.2.4. Parental literacy

The parents were asked about their ability to read and write Bengali. Of the eighteen parents, twelve reported that they were *very good* readers, while thirteen said that they were *very good* writers. One said that she was a *good* reader, while two said that they were *not very good* readers or writers. The three parents who had received no schooling reported that they could not read or write Bengali. Most of the parents therefore considered themselves to be fully literate in Bengali. However, there was no evidence that their literacy was valued by the school. Instead, the school mirrored the broader society in devaluing the competence of this minority group, and only attending to those aspects of literacy which were determined by the dominant culture.

This pattern of literacy in the community language contrasted sharply with the parents' reported literacy in English. Of the eighteen parents, none said that they were *very good* or *good* readers. Thirteen said that they could not read English at all, while fourteen said they could not write English. While this pattern of illiteracy in English in part explains the parents' powerlessness to support their children's English literacy, it also raises questions about the

implications of becoming literate in the language of the dominant culture. The school was aware of the parents' inability to read the English school books sent home with their children:

I expect parents to sit next to their child and comment on the pictures, even if they can't read the script; that's more than enough.

The picture is yet more striking if we extend the notion of literacy to proficiency in spoken English. Of the eighteen parents, sixteen reported that they could speak no English, while the remaining two said their spoken English was *not very good*. Five of the parents said that they could understand no spoken English, while thirteen said their comprehension of spoken English was *not very good*. These responses should be seen in the context of the parents' residence in England. The most recent immigrant arrived seven years earlier; the longest resident had been in Britain for seventeen years. The average length of time since immigration was 9.6 years.

For these parents Bengali and Sylheti languages were cultural features which helped to define their group. The desire for their children to acquire literacy in Bengali, and to conserve their spoken Sylheti, were strongly stated. These parents were largely regarded by the school as illiterate, as the advice they received about how to support their children's English literacy was to "talk about the pictures".

6. Conclusions

Those who want to be considered literate must meet the requirements dictated by the dominant class. "Illiteracy" is therefore as much a social construction as "literacy". These Bangladeshi parents did not have the power to decide what constitutes "literacy" in English society. In their relations with the school, as much as their relations with society, they were rendered voiceless by a definition of literacy which was located solely in the language and culture of the dominant group.

In failing to recognize or build on the existing literacy of these parents, this school dictated the same coercive relations of power as exist in broader society, denying a voice to those who are either unable or unwilling to become literate in the language of the dominant group. This was in spite of the school's efforts to involve minority families in their children's education by providing parent workshops, women's groups, and offering advice on how to read with their children to at least some of the parents.

These parents of Bangladeshi children were regarded by the school as illiterate because their particular literacies did not fit with the literacy of the school. They had a clear

sense of the value of their languages and literacies. Both the spoken Sylheti language and the community language of Bengali were viewed as important features of cultural identity. However, the school was not able to incorporate these values in the education of the children. The parents were ascribed an identity which located them as an illiterate, subordinated group in British society. This left the parents powerless in their concern to support their children's learning, and left the school powerless to build on the families' cultural and linguistic capital in the education of their children. Despite the efforts of teachers to involve the parents in their children's reading, the majority-culture school was unable to make use of the considerable resources of the Bangladeshi community. This breakdown at the local level of school and community was likely to be mirrored in the macro-structures of power between minority group family and dominant group institutions in society.

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