Literacy and Home Culture

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'Five on the First of December!': What Can We Learn from Case Studies of Early Childhood Literacy?

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Introduction

One of the great strengths of work in the field of early childhood literacy, over almost two decades, has been its pioneering use of ethnographic case studies. Theories of cognition, and fashions in literacy teaching, may come and go, but the evidence from such studies persists powerfully in the imagination. The reader of Heath (1983), Purcell-Gates (1995), Campbell (1999), or Gregory and Williams (2000) will not easily forget the children and families they present, in the way that experimental studies of the acquisition of onset and rime, or grapheme–phoneme learning, all too readily fade or merge in the memory.

In-depth case studies, particularly those showing the relevance of the *whole* home-and-community environment to the literacy learning of the child (or adult, in Purcell-Gates' study), necessarily describe a very small number of cases, and make no claims that these cases 'represent', or can generalize to, an imagined total population ('all Appalachian families', or all Urdu speaking families in Bradford, or all socially disadvantaged families everywhere). Their effectiveness, like that of most qualitative research, lies in what Lincoln and Guba (1984) would call their 'trustworthiness', rather than on the claims to reliability and validity associated with larger samples. Such trustworthiness derives, however, not from convincing, life-like detail, but from the careful

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presentation of a logical, well-evidenced argument: an argument supported at each step by documentation from field recordings or observation notes, and strengthened by the researcher's own systematic scrutiny of her or his own theorizing as it develops. In Geertz's (1973) term, this really is 'thick description': not highly-coloured prose, but descriptive writing which makes intelligible the reasons for the beliefs and attitudes, actions and outcomes, recorded by the researcher. Numerous accounts of young children's language and literacy learning meet this very exacting standard (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Gregory and Biarnes, 1994; Heath, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1990; Volk, 1998; Weinberger, 1996). The important question, perhaps, is how we are to put such trustworthy information to good use.

In posing this question I propose, through using case study evidence of my own, to discuss the purposes of case study research in general. For while no large claims or generalizations are made by authors such as those I have named, those of us who use their findings to further our own understanding, or to support our own theorizing, may well make such claims on their behalf: 'As Heath shows, children whose early routines do not include hearing bedtime stories . . .' we say, and build her findings into our own arguments. So in asking how we should use such small-scale studies, I am also asking how the findings from my own work can be put to use. And while I have elsewhere attempted some broad generalizations to theory (Brooker, 2002), I have chosen here to describe two individual case studies of early literacy learning which, though highly contrasting, and offering plenty of familiar 'indicators', allow of no straightforward interpretations. They do, however, suggest implications for practice, and this is the 'usefulness' I wish to advocate.

Background: Family Influences on Children's Early Literacy

From the 1970s, the social class dimension of family literacy practices has been recognized as a major influence on young children's literacy learning in school: 'attitudes to literacy vary so much from one social group to another that a child's progress through school is significantly predetermined before he ever sets foot in the place' (Newson and Newson, 1976: 445). This effect was attributed both to the overall 'expectancy' of middle-class children, their 'air of entitlement' (Heath, 1983: 242), and to specific 'middle-class' practices associated with school success in reading and writing: 'books in the home', bedtime stories, parents who model literacy habits by their own frequent reading and writing. Efforts to improve the literacy prospects of educationally disadvantaged children, from the EPA projects of the 1960s to Bookstart in the 1990s (Wade and Moore, 1993), and the home–school reading initiative (Hannon, 1987; Hewison, 1988; Topping, 1992), have focused on instructing parents to share books with their children, an emphasis supported

by findings from the Bristol Reading Project (Wells, 1986). Conscientious parents, including those from minority ethnic and working-class homes, have meanwhile tended to focus on teaching and testing 'the ABC' to promote their children's learning (Harste et al., 1984; Stuart et al., 1998; Tizard et al., 1988), although the intervention of school-age siblings may mediate these practices (Gregory, 1998, 2001; Volk, 1998).

The dichotomy between literacy practices derived from middle-class cultural assumptions (that the child 'naturally' acquires membership of a literate culture) and those derived from working-class or minority beliefs (that the child needs to be taught the 'basics' by rote in order to crack the literate codes of the school and society) has been mirrored by a divide in research on literacy, which has tended to focus *either* on literacy as a sociocultural practice, *or* on the technology of learning to read and write. Though the former perspective may appear to offer the fullest explanation of children's learning processes and outcomes, the latter focus, in the form of the National Literacy Strategy, presently dominates UK policy. It remains to be seen whether this 'technological' approach enables children from homes *without* the cultural capital of a literate background to acquire 'cultural literacy' as well as to decode print.

Research which treats literacy as a sociocultural practice, learned during family socialization and shaped by ideological and political forces, has confirmed the class and cultural, base of such practices. Heath's (1983) account of the literacy practices of families from culturally distinct groups living in close geographical proximity emphasized the social class dimension of these practices: 'As the children of the [middle class] townspeople learn the distinction between contextualized first hand experiences and decontextualized representations of experience, they come to act like literates before they can read' (p. 256). This redefinition of literacy as cultural discourse, which has largely displaced studies of literacy as a 'neutral technology', owes much to Street's (1984) account of the two versions of literacy – the autonomous (neutral and conservative) and the ideological (cultural and politicized). Literacy, Street (1984) insists 'is always embedded in some social form . . . and it is always learnt in relation to these uses in specific social conditions' (p. 43). His own study of the maktab, or Koran school, in an Iranian village, emphasizes the importance for children of being apprenticed in their own culture's 'ways of taking meaning' from texts (Street, 1984: 156; see also Rogoff, 1990), so that their literacy learning is integrated with their overall social and cultural learning.

Some consensus has emerged from ethnographic studies on the family practices that promote school success for children to whom literacy has not come 'naturally'. Typically, high-quality 'literacy events' (Heath, 1982), 'literacy encounters' (Harste et al., 1984) or 'activity settings' (Volk, 1997) are recorded in households where children share in spontaneous everyday literacy practices (paying bills, writing rosters of household duties, making shopping lists

or reading magazines), where appropriate forms of literacy are an integral part of family life, where children are included in family plans and projects, and where social meaning and value are given to children's early mark-making activities. Parents' efforts to teach children to read and write according to their expectations of 'school learning', rather than in accordance with their naturally occurring family and cultural practices, seem less likely to benefit the children; while the 'quantity of books' as opposed to the ways they are used, is no guide to children's future success (Harste et al., 1984).

In the light of these findings, there seems to be no necessary reason why children from poor and minority backgrounds should start school with fewer favourable indicators for literacy learning than those from more privileged homes: there is nothing essentially middle-class about writing notes and cards, or making lists of jobs to be done. The two case studies presented here suggest some of the infinite variability of families in these categories, and the variability of their children's early literacy experiences.

The Context for the Case Studies

The larger ethnographic case study from which these two individual cases are selected had as its focus, not only literacy learning, but pedagogy: specifically, it explored the pedagogies generated by the home and school cultures of a group of children entering a single reception class. These 'home' pedagogic practices, and those of the school, are arguably demonstrated most clearly in the teaching of reading and writing, which serves as a proxy for school success in general for most parents, and probably for many teachers too. While the larger study theorizes the links between the family and community cultures of *groups* – all from a poor working class neighbourhood, and half from the Bangladeshi community within that neighbourhood – and their preferred home pedagogies, the case of each *individual* (child, parent, family) is less readily theorized. Above all, the qualitative researcher wishes to avoid oversimplifying the complexities of the contexts s/he has uncovered, and violating the individuality and agency of each family.

Some general 'group' variables are undeniably present (Brooker, 2002). Within the working-class identity of the All Saints' neighbourhood,[1] culturally different beliefs and expectations about children's development and learning shape the preferred parenting and pedagogic practices of the English-speaking ('Anglo') and Bangladeshi families. These include beliefs about the value of play as a way of acquiring knowledge and skills in early childhood; beliefs about the nature of childhood, and of adult–child relationships within the family; and beliefs about the purposes of literacy, as well as about the best ways for children to become literate. Though a researcher, intent on avoiding cultural deficit theories, may claim that these beliefs, and the practices they produce, are equally valid, they are plainly not equally *valuable* when the

children start school, in a classroom that has a culture of its own. It was not surprising, given our existing knowledge of the school attainments of young children (see for example Sammons and Smees, 1996; Strand, 1999a, 1999b) that the Bangladeshi children as a *group* had poorer Baseline Assessment scores, and made poorer academic progress in their early months at school, than their Anglo classmates. When the individual cases are considered however, the conventional explanations for poor achievement – such as parental employment or maternal education, family poverty or large family size – do not seem to explain very much, making it difficult to provide satisfactory answers to questions, either about 'what was going on?' or about 'what should educators do?'

'Five on the First of December!' – Two Case Studies

The two boys presented here offer themselves up as ready-made comparative cases. Not only did they start school on the same day in September, in the same classroom, they were also born on the same day (nearly five years earlier) and in the same hospital, in the provincial town where both families lived. Troy, the 'Anglo' boy, was the oldest of three children when he started school at All Saints' Primary, and Abdul Rahman was the youngest of three. Both their mothers had a fourth child in the course of their reception year. Troy was overwhelmed with excitement to learn, in the course of the reception class rituals, that he and Abdul Rahman shared a birthday – 'We're *both* gonna be five! Five on the first of December!' – but Abdul Rahman seemed less impressed, perhaps because birthdays were low-key events in his family's reckoning. Both boys were among the oldest children in their respective groups (the sample of individual cases was composed of four boys and four girls from the Anglo and Bangladeshi intake to the class); and both achieved the highest score in their group in the statutory school entry assessment, discussed below (Troy's total was 26, Abdul Rahman's was 13). Early home visits and parent interviews showed that both were from well-ordered, respectable and aspiring families, with high expectations for their children. Their experiences of home however – and in consequence, their experience of the classroom – were very different. But since neither child's experience, as we will see, was in any way 'typical', the lessons to be learned from them may seem to be elusive.

Home Effects

For the purposes of comparison, some straightforward indicators of first home, and then school variables will be discussed. First, for the home: maternal educational experience; family literacy practices; child's early occupations and experiences; child's pre-school educational experience; the curriculum and

	Troy (1st of 3 children)	*Abdul Rahman (3rd of 3 children)*
Maternal education	Mother had 11 unhappy years of schooling (in care, with frequent changes of home and school); considers herself a successful learner and able to help her own children to learn	Mother had 9 happy years of schooling in Sylhet, including Bengali language and literature, and home support for literacy; considers herself a successful pupil and learner but unable to help her children
Family literacy	They have bought 'hundreds of books' for their children but no-one reads except with Troy (parental duty). Parents 'hate reading', and instead write, constantly (letters, lists, stories)	Family reads mostly for religious purposes but mum enjoys romances and reads news on Teletext; children have no children's books of their own but read their school books in the evenings
Early learning (play activities)	Home had 'every toy from the Early Learning Centre possible', and Troy's favourite toy was Duplo; his mother played and talked with him 'constantly'	Rahman had a small car in his pocket all the time; accompanied his mother all day while she cooked and kept house; went wild with his brothers on their return from school
Pre-school experience	Attended social services creche from 18 months; then local under-5s centre from age 3	Attended playgroup very sporadically (he was the only Asian child there and found it hard to settle)
Home curriculum	Mother taught him letters, colours, counting, writing name, nursery rhymes, stories, shapes, general knowledge, drawing (paints taken away because they made a mess!)	Mother taught him Bengali and English alphabets and counting; Bengali rhymes, some Arabic/Quranic teaching.
Home pedagogy	Play (learning from educational toys), audio and videotapes; 'working constantly with him' on letters, etc; family days out to farms and places of interest	Rote learning and memorization (family round the dining table sharing school books, copying writing)
Preparation for school	Instructed to talk to teachers, join in, try everything and bring work home to show parents, report on what he's done	Instructed to sit still, say nothing, listen and study hard

Figure 1: Extracts from a data display from interviews with mothers of 16 children during their first month at school

pedagogy of the home; and the child's explicit preparation for school (Figure 1). Most of this information derives from lengthy interviews with Troy's mother Charlotte, and Rahman's mother Sabina. Given the diverse range of indicators present in both boys' early experience, it is at once clear that it would be foolhardy to attempt to predict their success in acquiring literacy at school.

Troy's set of home variables, as Figure 1 indicates, presses almost all the right buttons (children's books in the home, ABC learning, nursery rhymes, story-tapes, the constant modelling of writing for a range of purposes). At least superficially, his parents' preferred pedagogy resembles that of his first classroom. The missing buttons however are crucial: Charlotte and Bob 'hate books' and 'never read' except in the call of duty, reading the books their children bring home from school. The 'hundreds of books' – Bible stories, *Peter Rabbit* stories, *The Wind in the Willows* – which have been ordered from book clubs for Troy and his brother are kept in a glass-fronted cupboard, for when he is old enough to look at them properly rather than tear or spoil them.

In general terms, too, the parental commitment to a school-like pedagogy of 'learning through play' is tempered by Charlotte's preference for direct

teaching with a visible outcome (at his first nursery, she claims, 'they learned one thing every week, one shape, one letter, one colour – he learned much more there'). In this household, play is valued in theory but viewed with some scepticism in practice. However, Troy has also experienced a range of pre-school settings, where he has become familiar with all the approved early learning apparatus (educational toys and games, audio and video tapes) that his home also offers. He has been encouraged to converse confidently with adults, and to show off his accomplishments – both letter and number knowledge, and general knowledge.

Abdul Rahman's different set of 'home' indicators are equally ambivalent as predictors for literacy learning at school. The absence of children's picture and story books in his household, and the failure to observe either a 'bedtime' or a 'bedtime story' routine, do not appear to bode well. His rote learning of alphabets may also be unhelpful in the acquisition of school literacy (Harste et al., 1984, Stuart et al., 1998). He has not experienced the 'play' pedagogy that will characterize his reception classroom, and has encountered few of the educational toys and games through which he is expected to learn in his first year of school. But like Troy he is highly motivated, and aware of his parents' aspirations for him: he knows that he is going to school to *learn*, and that his hard work and progress matters a lot to his parents. In the early weeks in the classroom, the ways each of the families has prepared their child for school are measured against the school's expectations, in a range of formal and informal entry assessments.

Entry Assessments

The knowledge and skills of all the new children was formally assessed by means of the local authority's statutory Baseline Assessment procedures; the criteria for language and literacy are shown in the Appendix. The two boys' achievements are best viewed in the context of the whole case study group. Both Troy (total score 26) and Abdul Rahman (total score 13) head the list for their respective sub-groups, but the group rankings are highly influenced by ethnicity, though not by gender or by age in the year group. The scores allocated, however, record only those items that a child has 'demonstrated' during observations in the early weeks of school: they therefore roll together the child's 'actual' knowledge and skills in language, literacy and maths, and the social adaptation to the new setting which will enable them to display those skills to strange adults. Despite this, Baseline scores may exert an unintended influence on the curriculum offered to individual children, and to the class as a whole: All Saints' children, as expected, achieved Baseline scores well below the town and county average. Table 1 indicates the range of Speaking and Listening scores of the case study children.

Table 1: Baseline Speaking and Listening scores, from a possible 11 items

Child	*Sex*	*Ethnicity*	*Score*
Amadur	M	Bangladeshi	1
Abu Bokkar	M	Bangladeshi	2
Abdul Rahman	**M**	**Bangladeshi**	**3**
Cameron	M	Anglo	3
Jason	M	Anglo	5
Jelika	F	Bangladeshi	3
Jemma	F	Anglo	4
Joshua	M	Anglo	5
Katy	F	Anglo	4
Kelly	F	Anglo	8
Khiernssa	F	Bangladeshi	3
Mohammed	M	Bangladeshi	1
Rufia	F	Bangladeshi	3
Sonia	F	Anglo	2
Tuhura	F	Bangladeshi	2
Troy	**M**	**Anglo**	**10**

Since 'Speaking and Listening' is an assessment of English, and none of the Bangladeshi children has English as a first language, the differential between the two groups is predictable, and the within-group differences may reveal more about the individual child. 'Reading', by contrast, assesses the kinds of book-handling and conceptual skills associated with sociocultural rather than linguistic factors. As Table 2 shows, Troy (despite his parents' distaste for books) has demonstrated rather more of these skills than Abdul Rahman, though Rahman does well in comparison with many of his English classmates.

'Writing' (shown in Table 3) differentiates far less between the 16 children, since none has acquired conventional writing skills, but all are able to make marks of the kind regarded as a step towards early writing. Where Troy however, achieves the descriptors 'distinguishes between marks and letters' and

Table 2: Baseline Reading scores, from a possible 11 items

Child	*Sex*	*Ethnicity*	*Score*
Amadur	M	Bangladeshi	0
Abu Bokkar	M	Bangladeshi	2
Abdul Rahman	**M**	**Bangladeshi**	**3**
Cameron	M	Anglo	2
Jason	M	Anglo	1
Jelika	F	Bangladeshi	3
Jemma	F	Anglo	2
Joshua	M	Anglo	5
Katy	F	Anglo	2
Kelly	F	Anglo	3
Khiernssa	F	Bangladeshi	2
Mohammed	M	Bangladeshi	0
Rufia	F	Bangladeshi	0
Sonia	F	Anglo	3
Tuhura	F	Bangladeshi	3
Troy	**M**	**Anglo**	**5**

Table 3: Baseline Writing scores, from a possible 9 items

Child	*Sex*	*Ethnicity*	*Score*
Amadur	M	Bangladeshi	1
Abu Bokkar	M	Bangladeshi	2
Abdul Rahman	**M**	**Bangladeshi**	**2**
Cameron	M	Anglo	1
Jason	M	Anglo	3
Jelika	F	Bangladeshi	2
Jemma	F	Anglo	3
Joshua	M	Anglo	3
Katy	F	Anglo	2
Kelly	F	Anglo	2
Khiernssa	F	Bangladeshi	3
Mohammed	M	Bangladeshi	2
Rufia	F	Bangladeshi	3
Sonia	F	Anglo	4
Tuhura	F	Bangladeshi	2
Troy	**M**	**Anglo**	**4**

'writes letter shapes', Abdul Rahman achieves only 'uses marks to communicate meaning'.

It was difficult to judge whether the 'snapshot' Baseline scores, rather than their own ongoing observations, influenced the staff's expectations for the children, and their subsequent provision for each child's literacy learning.

School Effects

The indicators of 'school effects' on the children were drawn from direct participant observation (including systematic observations) in the classroom, throughout their first year at school. Observations and field notes recorded each child's experience of transition and adaptation to the classroom; the child's interactions with peers and adults; their curriculum choices, and level of involvement in activities; and the level of home–school communications. This information, summarized in Figure 2, suggests that factors apparently unrelated to 'home learning' and prior accomplishments were having an impact on each of the boys' school progress. Many of these factors derive from the relationship between the family and the school.

Troy, despite his home advantages, experienced some difficulty in adapting to his new setting. He was initially wary of other children, perhaps sensing some differences between their own background and expectations, and his own. Though always outwardly busy, he was often only superficially occupied – colouring casually at a drawing table, or moving a mouse about a mouse mat, while observing other children's less self-conscious behaviour. He liked to draw, but would hastily respond to any show of adult interest in his drawing with the announcement that 'I can't write! I'm not going to do any writing, I don't know how to'. He knew too that he 'couldn't read', and was not sure that

	Troy	*Abdul Rahman*
Experience on transition	Parents insist on informing school about child; Troy recognises school toys, equipment and methods; utilizes all classroom areas and curriculum activities; knows culturally appropriate strategies for making friends with children, and conversing with adults	Parents not seen to speak to staff; Rahman takes time to settle; forms Bangladeshi boy friendship group but makes few English-speaking friends; becomes curriculum-avoidant (wandering, cruising, off to toilets), has limited range of curriculum activities
Involvement in learning	Mixed: either 'watchful', 'uninvolved' or 'animated, committed, planning'; most frequently involved in construction and maths activities, or in drawing	Often described as 'absorbed, concentrating, thoughtful'; most frequently observed in role-play and mark-making areas, but also 'in transit'
Adult support for learning	Demands and receives high levels of interaction with school adults (mature language skills and confidence, has always enjoyed adult conversation): 22 adult interactions in 90 observation intervals, spread over 4 weeks	Demands and receives very little adult interaction (waits to be spoken to): 4 adult interactions in 90 observation intervals, spread over 4 weeks
Parental input into schooling	Parents make constant requests of school about his teaching and learning; high level of information exchange; home-school reading exchange: mother is tutored/inducted into school approach to literacy learning	Parents make no requests; no exchange of information and specifically no bookbag dialogue: mother is ignorant of school approach to literacy learning and unable to give appropriate help
Knowledge of home in school	School and class kept fully informed of home and family life (mother's pregnancy, family trips, home practices and pedagogy, child's achievements)	School fully ignorant of home and family life (mother's pregnancy, illness and bereavement, home practices and pedagogy, child's achievements)

Figure 2: Extracts from the children's observed school experiences

he wanted to try: sometimes he browsed in the book corner, but abandoned the activity if an adult approached. But outside of literacy matters he was confident and keen to display his knowledge and skills; and his ability to engage adults in conversation made up for his rather self-conscious early efforts at peer friendships. The high level of adult interaction he enjoyed (demonstrated in his systematic observation records) was due as much to his own chatty overtures to the busy classroom adults as to their own conscious or unconscious patterns of behaviour.

Abdul Rahman experienced difficulty separating from his mother at first, but soon hooked up with the other Bangladeshi boys, and sometimes the girls, in his class, and tentatively learned to occupy himself. He had few contacts with classroom adults, but appeared reasonably confident as he experimented with new activities, such as sand and water, often in silence. He was not observed in the book corner in his early weeks at school, but when invited to share a book (for Baseline assessment purposes) he responded appropriately. By half-term however he had become one of a tight-knit group of Bangladeshi boys, designated 'The Four Musketeers' by staff, whose rationale seemed to be to pass the day with only minimal encounters with the official curriculum. Rahman only slowly, over many months, extended his range of friendships and learning activities.

Learning to Read: Acquiring School Literacy

The reception classroom was a literacy-rich environment, and the planned curriculum offered numerous opportunities for learning about print – with and without adult support – every day. On days when I conducted systematic audits of the language and literacy provision available, the full spectrum of activities, from individual reading sessions with a teacher, to group work (stories, writing or phonics), to child-directed activities like computer programs and alphabet dominoes, was always on offer. On days when I audited the children's activities, every one of the case study children was observed to participate in literacy-related activities of some kind. Not all of them, however, had the same degree of access to the highest level of input – the experience of reading with the class teacher. This was due to the fact that 'book-sharing' turns in school were linked with the home–school reading scheme, an arrangement whereby the book shared by the child and teacher in class was sent home to be shared with the family.

Although the school's 'Reading Curriculum Policy' does not mention the role of parents and other family members in children's literacy learning, the 'bookbag' in which books are taken home does contain an advice sheet entitled 'Helping Your Child to Read'. The advice, however, deals exclusively with the domestic and social *context* for reading ('Find a quiet part of your home', 'Give regular praise and encouragement', 'Don't be anxious or worried or angry') and offers no suggestions as to the *content* of the session – how to do it. Parents who are unsure how children acquire this important skill are not told how they can support the process.

A rationale for the absence of instructional advice can be implied from the school's policy statement that, 'The approach used to teach reading at All Saints' is very much an individual, child-centred one. . . . Therefore no one approach will suit all children'. Ideally, then, the class teacher would speak to families individually about their child's individual needs and learning style. Since this is impractical, she writes to them in a friendly and individualized way via the home–school reading record, a photocopied sheet which travels to and from school in the bookbag. Her messages, as these examples show, skilfully combine encouragement and advice:

> 3 December *Time for Dinner*
>
> Rufia is making good progress with her book skills. Please help Rufia to point to all 'the' words in the book, so she begins to focus on words.
>
> 15 December *Huggles Breakfast*
>
> I am trying to encourage Kelly to slow down and begin to follow individual words with her finger.

The subtle differentiation of this child-centred approach, however, has an additional dimension. It is individualized, not just to specific children,

but also to specific parents. Thus Troy's mother receives particularly detailed information and guidance:

> *The Storm*
>
> Troy quickly recognised the pattern of text, and after we had shared the story together he was able to follow each word as we read. This book introduces new vocabulary: 'look', 'at'. Troy is also becoming confident at using pictures to help him with unfamiliar words – this is important and should be encouraged.

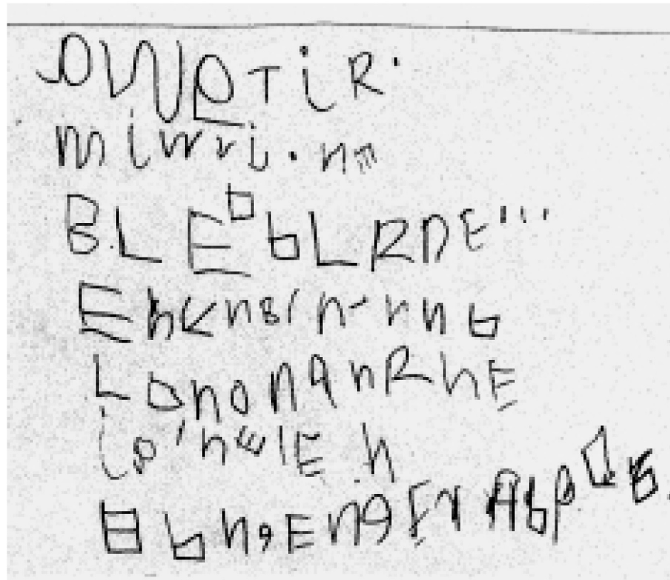
This helpful feedback comes largely in response to the demands made by Charlotte, whose own written comments are so long that she soon supplies an exercise book in the bookbag to accommodate the dialogue. Few other parents gave any indication that they were reading or responding to the teacher's careful comments, though most assured me they 'did try to find the time' to read their children's books at home. Abdul Rahman's family, not knowing what was expected of them, wrote nothing on the reading record all year, although they returned his book punctually each week.

This parental 'demand', moreover, tends to regulate each child's access to book-sharing in the classroom, which is organized in part by working through the pile of returned bookbags and inviting children in turn to come and 'change their book'. A child whose bookbag is not returned rarely receives this invitation, since there is never enough time to 'hear' them all. Class reading records for the year show that the mean number of individual sessions for the sample children was 16. Troy's total was 25, and observation notes indicate that these sessions were particularly lengthy and lively: Troy enjoyed the social and conversational aspects of the book-sharing routine, and those reading with him could enjoy the successful practice of a pedagogy they wholeheartedly believed in. Abdul Rahman's 22 sessions, many of which were very brief, included some with the bilingual assistant. (One of the Bangladeshi children had only six sessions: in addition to having very poor attendance, Mohammed lost his bookbag early on, and so dropped to the bottom of the reading queue.)

A similar form of differentiation began to evolve with regard to writing, one of the few classroom activities for which children were grouped by ability. From January, the 'top group', as the nursery nurse explained to me, were put together 'to stretch them', while a 'middle group' and a 'bottom group' were offered different writing experiences. Troy was in the top group, which benefited from some sustained and skilled adult input. One observation reads:

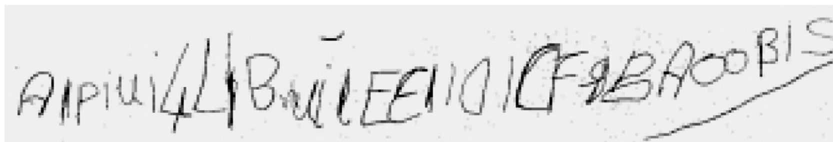
> Groups discussing town carnival with Cathy (p/t assistant), ready to write about it: Troy writes letter string, says he wants to put 'the sun came out for the carnival'; talks about the /s/ and the /f/, knows how to write /the/, writes /k/ for carnival. Writes 3 sentences altogether, thinks about words and sounds separately.

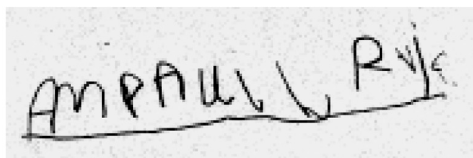
The 'middle group', unfortunately (to which Rahman was allocated), was simply asked to 'write' (any letter string was acceptable) and then invited to dictate their 'story'. No discussion took place, and no links were made between the children's written and oral accounts. Yet samples of the two boys' writing and dictated stories from the previous week (Figures 3 and 4) show no evident grounds for offering one of them so much more scaffolding and instruction than the other.



'A square balloon disappeared and it took the man up in the sky and it took him up and up and then down and down.' [dictated]

Figure 3: Writing sample from Troy (unaided) following input on *The Blue Balloon*





'Mum got birthday presents for me. She got balloon for my house. She got balloons and a birthday cake for me, in town. Abdul Rahman.' [dictated]

Figure 4: Writing sample from Abdul Rahman, the same occasion

Learning from the Outcomes: Unpicking the Deficit Model

Towards the end of the school year, I was asked to read regularly with a little group of children whom the class teacher considered 'ought to be reading by now, but they get no support from home'. Abdul Rahman, who to my certain knowledge *was* being supported by his family, was one of these children. But by this stage it was already clear that some differentiation had occurred for which no rational basis existed – either in the apparent knowledge, skills and aptitudes of the two boys, or in the support they were receiving at home. These two well-motivated children, with their idiosyncratic but highly 'educative' family backgrounds, seemed to have been assessed as having unequal potential, and set on different educational trajectories.

By the end of Reception, Abdul Rahman together with all the Bengali boys in his class, and all but one of the girls, had been assigned to a lowly position in the classroom hierarchy – a position 'justified' perhaps by the linguistic and cultural deficits he was assumed to start school with, but unjustified by closer examination of his background. His early experiences, though lacking in colourful picture books, plastic fridge magnets and Teletubbies comics, contained all of the ingredients for making a reader. His mother and father had taught him, not only rhymes and letters and numbers, but appropriate dispositions towards learning. Their daily routines, though different from those of English families, demonstrated the uses of literacy and the value they attached to it. Their sons read together in the evenings (Rahman's father and brothers switched to English with ease), and the family subscribed to an ethos of hard work and study.

It was not as if Troy's 'advantages' were uncomplicated: unlike Abdul Rahman's, his parents thought reading was basically boring, a necessary chore rather than a pleasure (Charlotte claimed that she provided tape-stories, rather than books, for her children, because 'books make them fidget, they can't ever sit still, listening to stories'). At home, Troy was never encouraged to co-construct stories from picture books because Charlotte believed the words were there to be learned, not guessed at. Yet by the end of the year Troy had begun to make sense of print in a way that would motivate him to press ahead with his reading, while Rahman still lacked all confidence in himself as a reader.

With benefit of hindsight, the reasons for these outcomes – and for the questionable judgements made, in the course of the year, by a skilled and experienced staff – are not difficult to enumerate. One child's pre-school and home experience provided continuity with his school experience, the other's did not. Troy, we might say, had language, culture, books, toys and nursery experience on his side as he began to acquire school literacy; Abdul Rahman did not. Troy possessed the linguistic and social skills to establish

friendly relationships with school adults; Rahman did not. Charlotte possessed the requisite skills to instigate close dialogue with her child's teachers; Sabina did not. Charlotte understood the strategies needed to exploit the home–school reading scheme for her child's maximum benefit; while Sabina, who was unaware that she was allowed to write on the record in Bengali, most certainly did not.

Troy's home 'deficits', for these reasons, had been successfully overturned, while Rahman's had been institutionalized. *Individual* idiosyncrasies and variations in the two boys' experiences seemed to have metamorphosed into *structural* variations. The explanation for this *overall* outcome of their year in school prompts a shift to more general theories.

Building Theories from Explanations

Debating the rights and wrongs, ins and outs, of individual cases, has limited use for our understanding of how 'children in general' become literate, or how 'schools in general' should provide for each individual. To make our in-depth stories, and thick descriptions, meaningful, we have to move first to theory, and then to recommendations for practice. While many theoretical accounts could be offered of the structural factors shaping Troy's and Abdul Rahman's experiences, what matters in the end is the strategies such theories suggest for working with children from diverse home backgrounds.

One way of accounting for the two boys' varying success in importing their home literacy into the classroom is through the nature of their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986/1997). The 'home' assets, or capital, of the two children and their families, were considerable – both families were articulate and knowledgeable, and had established social connections within their own communities. In general, Bourdieu has argued, symbolic capital of this kind can be transposed across boundaries from the 'field' of the home, family and neighbourhood into the 'field of education'. But only one set of assets was in the appropriate 'currency' to be invested in the official education system (Gewirtz et al., 1994). Troy's early acquisitions of knowledge and skills in literacy were recognized and validated in his first weeks in the classroom, and in his Baseline assessments. Abdul Rahman, whose father was a pillar of the local Bengali community, and whose family were highly regarded in that community, had acquired skills which did not transpose into the school setting: the currency of his 'home' capital (including his knowledge and skills in literacy) was not valid in the classroom, and as a result the support his parents gave him was somehow invisible to staff. Practitioners' assumptions about families have their own, self-fulfilling, consequences in the assessment and subsequent allocation of children in the classroom. Because his teachers, despite their strong commitment to equality of opportunity, saw him as disadvantaged, Abdul Rahman in effect *became* disadvantaged, in the classroom.

This failure to transpose symbolic capital from home to school points to the powerful effects of the barriers between homes and schools, families and teachers, in reinforcing the exclusion of some children from the opportunities offered to others. Cultural capital is one factor in such exclusion (Lareau, 1987, 1989; Reay, 1998) and is also one aspect of a less readily identifiable phenomenon, the exclusion that results from the school's choice of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein 1990, 1996). Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse helps to explain how the boundaries between different groups arise, and how they are maintained. No one at All Saints' Primary *intended* to exclude Rahman or his family from the culture of the school, but the school's pedagogic discourse, with its emphasis on liberal-progressive and child-centred methods, and on the ideological inheritance of 'learning through play', effectively excluded any family whose own cultural beliefs conflicted with this discourse. (In some instances, this included the poorer white families too.)

The exclusion effected by the pedagogic discourse of the school applies to both pupils and parents. In the classroom, Bernstein suggests, it is composed of two intertwined aspects: a regulative discourse, which governs the rules of social behaviour (how to act like a proper pupil), and an instructional discourse, which governs the rules of teaching and learning (how to act like a learner in this setting). The ideal-type pupil/learner, within this discourse, is an outgoing, active and communicative child, who learns by inquiring and constructing her/his own knowledge; in literacy matters, a child who acquires literacy through the active exploration and creation of texts. Such a child, though enshrined in certain western, 'universalist' child development theories, is far from universal, as we now know (James et al., 1997).

Outside the classroom, the support offered by parents must conform to similar models. Barriers to understanding, and a lack of shared perspectives, allow initial misunderstandings about the nature of learning in the Early Years classroom to shape the longer-term patterns of home–school interactions. Over time, parents must be socialized into being 'school' parents with the right kind and degree of involvement in their children's learning and schooling. Those who are not appropriately socialized remain beyond the pale, outside the classroom in a literal as well as metaphorical sense.

Troy's and Abdul Rahman's experiences exemplify these processes. For the child from the 'included' family, regular and informative communications between home and school enable the staff to work with their knowledge of the home, and overcome Troy's early antipathies and anxieties about books and reading. For the child from the 'excluded' family, the barriers to comprehension grow steadily higher as the year goes on, until the child is allocated to a place in the school hierarchy – middling, adequate, but not what his parents have wanted for him – which is likely to continue to exclude him from high expectations and rapid progress.

Learning the Lessons of Case Studies

As these case studies indicate, both the 'problem' of differential access and achievement and its solution may lie, not in any individual family's idiosyncratic home practices, but in the differential levels of communication between home and school. Clearly the 'minimum programme' set by Plowden (Department for Education and Science [DES], 1967) for schools to inform parents about their child's progress and the school's curriculum, is nowhere near enough to ensure equality of access to educational advantages: schools need to know about the home curriculum too. Though practitioners working with under-5s have always been innovative in working with parents (Tizard et al., 1981) and continue to generate radical strategies (see for instance Whalley and the Pen Green team, 2001), primary schools are rarely able to prioritize home–school relations in their staffing, funding and development plans.

The message from most ethnographic research in this field (Heath, 1983; Weinberger, 1996) is that, if the inequalities between pupils are to be tackled, communication and understanding between homes and schools is essential; the findings from Heath's study, for instance, were converted into a range of experiments in culturally relevant curricula and pedagogies. 'Parent involvement' as traditionally conceived (helping in classrooms or with fundraising, chatting at the classroom door) can never be available to all parents, and is only rarely available to those whose backgrounds differ from those of their children's teachers. 'Partnership' between parents and professionals requires a much greater commitment of time, resources and goodwill. In early childhood settings it will require educators to be proactive in establishing dialogues with the families whose beliefs and practices are most different from those of the school – even if those families are the ones most frequently described as 'hard to reach'.

In the case of literacy learning, there can be little doubt that many children and families have benefited from one form of parental involvement – home–school reading schemes of the kind initiated by Tizard et al. (1982) and now, despite inconclusive research findings, widely practised in the UK. It is quite possible, however, that such schemes do nothing to diminish the differentials between children and may even, as at All Saints', reinforce them. If this is the case, practitioners need to re-examine their reliance on such schemes; or rather, they should investigate the ways that individual families participate in the scheme (Greenough and Hughes, 1998), and the ways their own expectations of children may be shaped by parents' modes of participation.

Differences in cultural capital, and disagreements over pedagogy, are inevitable in the diverse communities served by many settings, but they need not *inevitably* result in inequalities of experience and outcomes for children once they start school. Interventions and action research projects (Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Whalley and the Pen Green Team, 2001) indicate that, when

a wide range of possibilities for involvement is offered to parents, very few of them – and certainly not whole groups of them – remain 'hard to reach'. If reflective practitioners, like those at All Saints', can achieve a better understanding of the pedagogic practices of families like Abdul Rahman's, they will be better able to carry out their own intentions of 'working with each child as an individual', rather than regarding all children as, at some essential developmental level, the same. There would then be no reason for a child like Rahman to, in Ball's (1981) words, 'percolate downwards' (p. 108) to the lower levels of educational experience and opportunity. The most important lesson of case studies, I would argue, is to keep this fact constantly in mind as we scrutinize children's progress and outcomes, and examine our own beliefs and practices.

Note

1. Both the All Saints' neighbourhood and All Saints' Primary are pseudonyms for locations in an English provincial town.

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Appendix: The Learning Outcomes for Language and Literacy

	Language and literacy		
Stage	*Speaking and listening*	*Reading*	*Writing*
0	Insufficient or no observable evidence		
1	Interacts and communicates with a familiar person	Responds to pictures when sharing a book with an adult	Makes marks using a variety of media
	Listens and responds to a simple request or instruction	Handles books appropriately	Uses marks to communicate
	Uses language to express needs		
2	Recounts events or experiences	Knows that pictures and the written word convey meaning	Distinguishes between marks and letters
	Asks questions to find out and listens to the answer	Recognizes his or her own name	Writes letter shapes
	Initiates and takes part in role play/imaginative play with confidence	Able to predict words and phrases	Writes own name correctly and independently
	Makes up own story and tells it	Hears rhyming sounds	Uses some simple familiar letters to represent words
	Speaks clearly and can be understood	Recognizes familiar written words and knows print goes from left to right, top to bottom	
		Identifies by name, shape and sound at least half the letters of the alphabet	
3	Expresses ideas and accounts logically within conversations	Reads books with simple text	Forms letters with correct orientation and shape independently
	Makes up and tells a story with detail to a small group	Can name all letters of alphabet by name and sound	Writes simple phrases or sentences independently
	Gives simple instructions to others	Recognizes sound sequences in words	Begins to show an awareness of the use of full stops in his/her writing