

Literacy and Identity : A view from the bridge in two multicultural London schools
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Abstract

In this paper I examine the manner in which identity impacts on literacy practices, with reference to two nine-year old girls and two fifteen year-old boys, who speak or have access to two or more languages. The younger children were part of a year-long study of the British National Literacy Strategy (cf. Wallace 2005). The older two were interviewed in the context of a study of children's responses to the cultural content of school texts. My aim is to establish how the children's talk about and around literacy reveals what are salient identities for these young people. I identify four interwoven strands which emerge from the children's talk, characterised as 'I come from here' identity, 'Back Home identity, Language Identity and Religious identity. I argue that these interwoven identities represent for the children a potentially rich resource to engage critically with school texts. This is evident in moments of discourse in which particular identities are invoked to build bridges between the children's diverse personal histories and the texts and practices validated by school. I conclude by drawing some implications for schooling and for the children's futures.

Key words: bridging discourse, identity, literacy, text, multilingualism, London,

Introduction

The title of this paper: *View from the Bridge* comes from the famous play by Arthur Miller which is one of the texts discussed in this paper. It seems an apt

choice, because I want to argue that the children I present here are in many ways able to draw on a wider span of life experiences, narratives and insights than their monolingual peers. Baumann (1996: 2), commenting on the often quoted cliché of cultural minorities being ‘divided by’ or ‘caught between’ two cultures notes: ‘I do not see why they should be seen as suspended between, rather than be seen to reach across, two cultures’. One might add too that the metaphor of ‘bridge’ offers, as well as ‘reaching across’, the idea of a vantage point, a better position from which to survey, not discrete cultures so much as a variegated multicultural landscape.

In my paper I shall take the notion of bridge further to argue that teachers can use what I call ‘bridging discourse’ to encourage connectedness, culturally and cognitively. Students too, given the opportunity, will build links between school texts and their personal histories. Yet these routes are frequently closed down rather than opened up in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, either because of the highly prescribed curriculum in schools (cf. Wallace 2005) or, in the case of adults such as asylum seekers or refugees, because of unease about ‘letting the outside in’ (cf. Cooke and Wallace 2004).

Hewitt,(1986) Rampton (1995) and Harris (1997) analyse the identity construction of young people of minority ethnic background, taking their data largely from the spaces outside formal schooling or institutionalised ‘school like’ talk. In this study I remain more centrally focused on the business of school. Although I wished to explore literacy practices and identity in as far reaching a way as possible, the interactions with the children are mediated by and take as their point of departure school events and practices, such as the National Literacy Strategy ⁱⁱ (cf. Department for Education and Employment 1998) and the English Curriculum.

The Talk around text: Literacy talk

Judith Langer offers us a view of literacy as consisting of a ‘multi-layered history of experience with language and content, cutting across many contexts’ (

Langer 2001:838) and it is this amplified view of literacy, acknowledging the interconnectedness of cultural experience, which I subscribe to here. Talk around text, which we might call 'literacy talk' is part of this wider view of literacy. In literacy talk, texts become amenable to critical scrutiny when pupils and teachers are able to speak as producers or interpreters of texts rather than 'acting out' the school curriculum. (cf. Wallace 2001). Here we can draw on Goffman's notion of footing. (Goffman 1981) which, as applied to classroom settings, allows us to see participants either as authors or mere animators of their contributions (cf. Kramsch 1993). As animators they reproduce the curriculum or conventional textual meaning; as authors the way is opened for agency in textual production and interpretation.

It would be naïve, however, to deny the impact of power differential in teacher/student interaction. There are times when I am constructing identities and points of view for the young people in this study. However there is also evidence in places that they resist this identity construction, especially on occasions where footing shifts to offer the children space for unpredicted shifts of topic, allowing them to draw on bridging discourse which spontaneously makes links with their unique life experiences.

Identity:

Postmodern accounts of identity have reacted against traditional and essentialist views by proposing an almost unlimited range of identity choices. Hall (1992) set this trend with his conceptualisation of 'new ethnicities', against the background of a globalised world which results in the simultaneous emergence of local and global identities. A key concept in this discourse is that of hybridity which argues that identities are unstable, in flux and overlapping. 'The fragmented, dispersed and decentred individual of the postmodern world is supposedly able to choose from a bewildering range of identity styles' (May 2001). In the case of language identity Rampton (1991) makes the case for the dismantling of conventional notions of language proficiency and language loyalty,

noting the interplay of heritage, affiliation and expertise in judgements about who speaks, reads or writes what language well.

Some have challenged a strong postmodern position where all notion of fixed identity is dismantled (cf. Block 2006). Sennett notes that those with less social power (as signalled by fewer and less complex social networks) need clearer social maps (Sennett 2006: 81). Recent immigrants are likely to fall into this category. May (ibid) notes too that postmodernism may have understated the resilience of national cultures. This is even more the case with the recent resurgence of religious identity. Religious allegiance has frequently underpinned demands by minority ethnic communities in the United Kingdom for either separate schools or heritage language lessons on the curriculum. Hall (2002) documents the demands by the Sikh community in Leeds for Punjabi lessons within the school curriculum, demands motivated largely by the fact that the Sikh religion uses the Punjabi Gurmukhi script for its holy texts.ⁱⁱⁱ That literacy is strongly implicated is evident in the comment by one of the girls in Hall's study:

My dad's got lots of religious books, he wraps them all up and he's got them locked awaywe've got a Janam-sakhis, its kind of like the birth and the life of Guru Nanak Sahib and everything he said, you know, because he wrote it himself... Its all written down. (Hall 2002:111)

Overall, religious identity has received relatively little attention in discussion on language and literacy, with notable exceptions such as the Special Issue of Language Identity and Education (2005)which considered specifically the links between Islam and English in the post 9/11 era. And yet for many Londoners religion is a salient –even defining – identity marker. In the case of Southall, one of the sites for my study, Baumann (1996) notes that of the five communities identified by Southallians within the larger community of Southall three are religious groups: the Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus (the other two being: Afrocaribbeans and Whites). Moreover, religious identity is signalled by a number of specific concrete practices and sets of beliefs, such as dietary requirements and dress. Arguably, it therefore fits less well with hybridity, plurality and ambivalence.

In short, a strong emphasis on fluidity and contingency may not resonate with minority students own social maps or identity allegiances. Nonetheless, the young people in this study chart the territory in which family adherence to beliefs and practices may be open to question within school and the wider society. We see them navigating the boundaries between certainties and negotiability, the ascribed versus the chosen (cf. Blommaert 2005), as is evident in statements such as: 'I believe in our God but.' and 'I'm a Hindu but'.

Literacy and identity:

Identity has traditionally been seen as emerging in talk. (cf Rampton 1995, Gumperz 1982). However, literacy, as much as talk, is woven into our social lives. Literacy acts are, like speech acts, acts of identity (Le Page and Tabouret Keller: 1985). Written texts are more visible concrete and memorable than spoken ones, and, especially in the case of religious texts, carry important symbolic and cultural weight.

Identity allegiances, linked to gender, social class or religion, come into play both in what we opt to read in the first place and how we process text. What is salient for a reader is in part related to the identities invoked. The two boys in this study, when asked about whether one might sympathise in some degree with the character of Shylock in the Merchant of Venice, note the moment when Bassanio encourages Shylock to eat pork as of particular significance^{iv}. What is memorable for the boys, and likely to elude the majority readership, is what they see as insensitivity to dietary observance in religion.

The Study

The overall question which motivates this paper is: what does children's literacy talk reveal about their identities as bilingual learners in London schools? More specifically my questions are:

What are the literacy practices with which children engage in everyday life, at school and home?

How do these practices reflect emerging identities linked both to 'back home' and to their lives in contemporary London?

What are the educational implications: how can bilingual children and their teachers manage or exploit their literacy resources?

I aim to address the first two questions in the course of my analysis of two conversations with each pair of children. The third question is tentatively responded to by way of conclusion to my paper

All four of the children in this study are at schools in West London. The primary school, attended by the girls, called here Hollyoake, is in Southall, the Westernmost part of the London Borough of Ealing, one of the most multilingual and multicultural London Boroughs in an area which received the first wave of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent in the late sixties and has since seen subsequent groups, from Somalia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka settle there. It is a thriving, lively place which is captured by Gerd Baumann in his book-length study of the community (Baumann 1996). The school's head teacher, D.B. now retired, had not only been head teacher of this school for many years, but knew the community very well and had visited the Punjab - the original home of most of the community, at least in the early days of settlement. This continuity provided stability and trust. Hollyoake, serving a largely working class and Black and Asian community, is a confident and successful school. Hayes, the location of the boys' secondary school, called here Manor House, is in many ways a more middle class area - indeed a destination of choice for second or third generation, upwardly aspiring Southallians. However, unlike Hollyoake, Manor House School is a low achieving school which is located in a forgotten part of the Borough. Like Hollyoake, there are very few White British children in the school; unlike Hollyoake there is great mobility, with new children arriving daily from all

parts of the globe. The proximity to Heathrow Airport makes this the first port of call for many. The school is in the process of rebranding in the hope of making a fresh start. Certainly, there is a slightly neglected feel about the school, but there is also strong commitment from staff and Head and Gervase Blake, a language specialist who supports the language development of the two boys, says firmly that 'he loves this school'.

Access to Hollyoake Primary School was helped by my having worked for many years ago in a neighbouring college, on the same site. I could claim some shared knowledge of the community with the head teacher. The four children in the original study (Wallace 2005), two of whom are presented here, were chosen at random, self selected on the basis of interest in 'talking about literacy and the Literacy Hour'. Over one school year we met weekly for half-hour conversations, following the Literacy Hour which I also observed. In the case of the two boys in the secondary school, the conversation featured here is the first in an ongoing small study on reading and identity in which the boy's language teacher Gervase Blake collaborates.

The Children

Varsha and Jamila are nine year olds in Year 5 at Hollyoake School. Jay and Suresh are in Year 10 at Manor Park School. All the names of the children have been changed (Jay is a nickname for his much longer Tamil name)

Varsha: Varsha's family is Hindu and mainly English speaking, although some Punjabi is used in the home. Varsha says that her mother uses Punjabi for food items but not other things. Her father speaks a number of languages and is literate in Hindi. Varsha says that she understands Punjabi but cannot speak it.

Jamila: Jamila's family is Muslim. Her family came as refugees from Kabul in Afghanistan when she was four months old. She speaks Pashto at home and 'is not allowed' to speak English. She goes to the mosque every day after school.

Jay: Jay came to the United Kingdom from Sri Lanka two and a half years ago. He lives with an uncle and aunt as his parents remained in Sri Lanka.. He learned some English at school in Sri Lanka. . His hope is to go on to the local University to study computer engineering,

Suresh: Suresh came to the United Kingdom two years ago from Germany. His family are Sri Lankan but he was born in Germany. Although now still only 15 he, like Jay, came to the UK unaccompanied by his parents. They joined him later. Suresh speaks Tamil with his mother, but German with the rest of his family. Like Jay he wants to study engineering at University in London

The journeys the children have made, the younger ones with families, the two older ones unaccompanied, are a good example of how human affairs cross continents and so representative of population movements in the twenty first century. Several have been affected by the experience of war in their countries of origin. War in Afghanistan has directly led to Jamila's period of stay in the UK. She quotes her father's journey.:

Miss my dad was an officer miss. He was running and they were trying to kill him. And he had to travel from there to another country. Miss you know big mountains - he used to run in them, he had to run in them. He couldn't go airplanes or cars and his feet were like fat (I offer the word 'swollen' here).

Jay specifically mentions the continuing conflict in Sri Lanka as the major reason why his parents have sent him to London to study. We see how events in far flung parts of the globe trigger movements and eventual settlement elsewhere. (Giddens 2000)

It is possible to identify several major strands which emerge from the children's narratives woven through my conversations with them and embedded

in literacy events either performed or alluded to. I refer to these as: 'I come from here' identity, 'Back home' identity, Language identity and Religious identity

'I come from here' identity

Much of the children's talk testifies to affiliation with majority cultural practices. The practices which the children describe or the literacy activities they enjoy invoke gender roles, popular culture preferences as well as sport, especially football. (Suresh is a keen footballer – even considering a professional career). The discourses and narratives about favourite texts such as *Harry Potter* or TV- inspired fiction such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* are shared with mainstream monolingual children, as is popular music. 'We listen to the same music as English people' (Rap mainly, it emerges) agree Jay and Suresh, although Tamil music is also part of their lives.

Back Home identity

The journeys the children and their families have made are reflected in the discourses they use to talk about experiences. For example Jamila says: 'in our country they are having a war'. For her Afghanistan is still 'our country'. This is in contrast to Essa a boy from Somalia in Jamila's class who says firmly: 'I come from here'. The notion of 'back home' itself can be disputed. Essa's father had spent time in Malta and the United States before settling in the United Kingdom, demonstrating the increasingly circuitous route of migration. For Suresh too what counts as 'back home' is not straightforward. When asked what 'his culture' is by one of the teachers he answers 'German'.

Language identity

Three of the children, Jay, Suresh, and Jamila, actively use two or three languages on a day to day basis. Varsha's language environment, on the other hand, is almost exclusively English, although Hindi serves as a symbolically important language, as emerges in several of our conversations. In Jamila's household English is vetoed. She says at one point that if she speaks English her Dad will 'kill her', qualifying later to say: 'well my Uncle will'. Jamila like the other children, considers her English is best. Even Suresh who has been in the United Kingdom for a mere two years, claims his English is better than German, which is his dominant language. For Jamila Arabic, used for Koranic study, is reserved for religious contexts. She is emphatic that 'Arabic doesn't help English'. Moreover she claims: 'I don't know Arabic, I just read it.'

Jamila is the only one of the children who switches readily into Pashto, her home language, and at one point is able to tell a funny story first in Pashto, immediately after translating it into English for the benefit of Varsha and myself.

Religious Identity

Baumann (1996) in his ethnography of the Southall community notes that 'religious identity is more specifically alluded to than any other kind', and religious Identity emerges strongly in these narratives. This is especially so with Jamila, who alludes to religion on many occasions over the course of our conversations. She brings it up as the criterion by which I should have chosen which children to talk to during the study at Hollyoake School, saying at one point that I should choose a further girl, Ramandeep, to be part of our conversations, as I have Muslims and a Hindu already represented but not a Sikh. On another occasion she opts to read a book about Vishnu, giving the reason: 'because he is Varsha's god'. Jamila's strong awareness of her religious identity is not accompanied by hostility or separateness, quite the reverse. Commonality is also emphasised by Jay when he says: 'I'm Hindu but I like all religions'. The discourse emphasises harmony, unity and commonality rather than discord or difference.

In my study, religious identity impacts strongly on literacy practices either alluded to or carried out in class. Varsha and Jamila's reading of choice – as reading to bring along to our literacy conversations - is often 'Bible stories'.

Jamila claims a common narrative in the stories of Islam and Christianity:

'Miss in our language we call Adam Bibi ordan and Eve we call Bibi Awa and miss they were very very very happy and they got punished and all that.'

This predisposition to cross the boundaries of dogmatic faith is also reflected in this part of a conversation I have with both girls about religion

J: Miss are you a Christian?

C: Well to be honest I don't really have a religion. I'm a...er a humanist.

J: Miss, I want to be plain as well.

C: You want to be plain?. You mean you don't want to have a religion. Why not?

V. Miss, what religion were you before, when you decide this?

C: Well I was...

J: Did you decide this?

C: I was brought up in the Church of England but my parents were not very religious...

J.: Miss I believe in God.. I believe in our God.. but I do sometimes when some people ask you what religion are you you just say anyone or every one.

Literacy Talk around Text

In this second part of my paper I have extracted moments of literacy talk from tapes of a meeting with each pair of children. In the first section, which I call 'bridging talk' we explore aspects of the children's identities which help to set the scene for the more text focused talk which follows. This centres respectively around two texts: a school newspaper produced by the London Borough of Ealing for schools to commemorate Holocaust week, and Arthur Miller's play: *A View from the Bridge*.

Varsha and Jamila: Bridging Talk. This conversation takes place just after the daily Literacy Hour. I have brought in newspaper texts which refer to the recent Indian earthquake, as a focus for our meeting. However the girls' agenda is rather different and they eventually refocus the discussion on to the 'Holocaust text'.

The talk which leads up to the introduction of 'The Holocaust text' is wide ranging. Identity allegiances emerge through the girls' own words and the literacy practices they allude to. They create and recite poems, reproduce vivid family narratives which are in many ways elaborated to serve as public performance, and so begin to make the bridge from contextualised intimate talk to more 'literate like' talk (cf, Wallace 2002, Gibbons 2002). These literacy events cross home and school: school initiated literacy events are creatively refashioned and extended by the children in private time and space. For instance, parents frequently mediate in the writing of texts such as poems, which start life as a school activity: 'My Mum says try to write another verse', says Varsha as she describes the creative process. Private genres such as diaries make the reverse journey from home to school, as when Varsha says: 'because when girls ..get a new diary they show it' The diaries written at home in private time are later displayed at school – shown off, as valued artefacts. Jamila has a special diary which contains two sections, one for 'bad news' and another for 'good news'. This is an idea, it emerges, which she has adapted from her sister and a friend of hers, showing the mediation of siblings which Gregory (1996) recounts.

The identities articulated here largely testify to 'I come from here' allegiances. And literacy expertise is displayed in English, apart from in religious domains. Yet home languages continue to retain value for heritage identity as we see in Varsha's comments:

V: My dad was saying – my dad said on your holidays I'll give you like writing and then I write it: My dad said: first write like our symbol. He taught me how

to write 'India' in Hindi. But I spent so long because my dad goes to work and all that and.....and then I forgot everything he teaches me.

Writing in the heritage language here becomes an act of identity, which takes on a significance as Varsha's Dad promises special tuition in holiday time, with the family freed from day to day chores. The use of 'our' signals affiliation although the value of Hindi is entirely symbolic, as Varsha uses only English at home.

The Holocaust Text

The Holocaust story is introduced by Jamila in this segment, leading on to the following one which introduces mention of the text which the children had previously studied with their class teacher. Here I open with my comment on a recent news item:

C: A very sad thing happened in India.

V: An earthquake. An earthquake. My dad's mum she lives in India and her house is you know where it hit - Inderbad. And she lives there but she wasn't there. She went to my dad's brother's house and then after when they heard it on the news it said there's going to be some warnings. They had to turn back to the seaside because there's no buildings there. 2000 people died and they're still picking out dead bodies.

J: You know yesterday our teacher gave us a newspaper about all the Jews that were dead and the people who buried them and the skeletons were there.

Events which happen on the other side of the world have a particular immediacy for these children. This recent catastrophe which Varsha is describing, and to which she returns on several occasions, resonates with the events of the Holocaust which the class had been discussing the previous Friday on Holocaust Day. This seems to motivate Jamila's introduction to the specially produced

newspaper and leads to the next segment where we turn our attention to this text and the themes it raises:

J: You know on the news it said they came and they got the baby's hand and they burned it

C: Who was this?

J/V: Hitler

V: He was in World War One and Two and World War Three but he killed himself in World War Three.

(here I intervene, pointing out that World War Three has not yet happened, at which point Varsha qualifies and continues)

V: Hitler killed himself in World War Two because Russian and England came together and he done so many bad things and they were going to kill him so he just killed himself ...

V: They were hiding in a secret annex.

C: Who were?

V: Like Anne Frank and..

V: Otto Frank survived it all.

C: Have you read the diary of Anne Frank?

V/J: No

J: I wanna read it

V: You know Otto Frank when he went back to the secret annex he saw Anne Frank's diary and he read it and it took a couple of days to read it and then he published it because it was so good.

C: Yes, it was published yes.

V: You know when the earthquake happened in India I thought my Dad's Mum's house would go down but it didn't.

C: Lets look at the newspaper. (turning to a newspaper which I have brought in to the meeting, which features the Indian earthquake) Do you know when you talk about 'bad news' (to Jamila)

J: Yes that's what I put under 'bad news' (in her diary)

Disparate narratives get woven rather confusedly into the Holocaust story, to include the story of Anne Frank and the other bad news story of the recent earthquake. What is striking is the degree of detail in Varsha's recall of the Anne Frank narrative, even though she has not read the actual diary. Later she adds more detail as we revert to this theme: 'Anne Frank and her sister died by a disease'. This story is more vividly recollected than most of the literacy texts studied during the year and is reproduced in a much more literate register, with expressions such as 'the secret annex', almost certainly lifted from the original text which the class had studied about the diary. Jamila comes back to her 'good news/bad news' diary to volunteer the information that this is just the kind of story which she would put in the 'bad news' section.

In the opening to the next short segment I am pursuing the theme of the Holocaust preparatory to introducing the word 'genocide'. However Jamila deflects my pedagogic discourse with a direct question to me: Are you a Jew or a Christian?

C: Usually we use a word – a special kind of word...

F: Miss, are you a Jew or a Christian?

C: (hesitates) I'm a Christian - sort of - but my family are not very religious

V: Some peoples are not religious

J: But do you celebrate like Christmas?

C: O yes. Originally my family is Christian – Protestant - I suppose

(I then change the subject to present the on-task activity: looking at newspapers which include the recent earthquake disaster, at which point Jamila again takes the initiative):

J: Miss did you get the one about Hitler? - That's the one over there – in a pile (referring to a pile of newspapers in the corner of the library where we are talking. This is the set of specially prepared material which the girls had already studied on Holocaust day)

What is striking is my embarrassment about being asked about my religion. Echoing our previous interaction on this theme, noted above, it testifies to what Richard Harries, The Bishop of Oxford, calls 'the British suspicion of religious enthusiasm' (BBC Radio 4 March 4th 2006). Interesting too is Varsha's empathetic response in the acknowledgement that not to be religious is an acceptable identity option. This echoes her previous comment that religious identity might be a matter of considered choice, conscious allegiance, rather than inherited: 'Miss what religion were you before, when you decide this?'. Jamila's question here, which appears to come out of the blue, is part of her attempt to understand the evil of Hitler, which has strongly affected both girls. In speculating on his religious affiliation she aims to make sense of this historical event in terms of religious conflict. This, at least, is one possible interpretation of her later question:

The person that killed the Jews what religion was he?

Again there is evidence of the preoccupation with religion as a salient marker of identity and a way of making sense of conflict. This idea of conflict is linked in the girls' mind to conflict 'back home' as we see in the final segment, which follows on from Jamila's question:

C: Christian

V: Hitler was a Christian? I thought he was German.

C: Actually he was Austrian. But his religion was Christian. Religious people kill each other you know.

J: Miss do you know in our country there's a war?

V: Miss do you know long time ago did they have a gap between India and Pakistan?

F: Long long long time ago Pakistan and India they were together and they made it separate – they halved it.

As well as the continuing theme of religion, there are fragments of the 'back home' stories. Both girls have points of reference, a sense of family history which may elude monolingual and culturally mainstream nine year olds. For Jamila, this history is vivid; the events from which her father so dramatically escaped are still seen as continuing war, in 'our' country. But there is also allusion to what is likely to be another family story, shared with Varsha, - for both girls have relatives in India - the partition of a once united country. This narrative recalls Sardar's account of the impact of this event on his identity: 'Partition of India was a cause that involved me in a complex history of contentious identities long before I was born' (Sardar 2004:21). The use of folk story genre by Jamila echoes this sense of culturally shared stories of the past. The opening to her narrative: 'a long, long long time ago' is part of her dramatic personal style. It echoes her vivid story telling on other occasions, a narrative style nurtured by her knowledge of many stories from back home, stories which may find little space in the mainstream classroom.

Jay and Suresh: Bridging Talk This episode consists of an exchange between Jay and Suresh and myself. Gervase Blake, is present. My meeting with the boys was triggered by Gervase's assignment, as part of an in-service teachers' course, on the boys' response to a school set text: *A view from the Bridge*. My initial reaction to this choice of text had been sceptical. I doubted that relatively new arrivals, albeit coming to the UK with some English, would make sense of this text, first because of its language, as a North American text, the genre, as a play text which needed to be performed to be best understood and also because of an underlying theme of incestuous love.

Unlike the two girls, the boys Suresh and Jay, are relatively new arrivals in the U.K. Each boy tells a similar story, one which sees England as a land of educational opportunity:

Suresh: When I was about 12 years old my uncle and aunty and my grandfather lived there so Mum said why don't I just come here and study with them like be a part with them and try innit for life? I said yes and then we lived around the corner –so I came here and then they had me to this school. That's how I came here.....So I lived here for three years and then my mum and dad and my little two brothers came and joined me - ...I live with my parents now.

Jay: When I was thirteen I came here for study. My mum sent me. My uncle is living here. My mum sent me to study here. In my country is war sometime so my mum sent me here to study.

What emerges here is the fact of the boys' voluntary immigration to the UK. Their parents are not wealthy cosmopolitans who might put their children in private schools or at least have access to the known more successful state schools, but nor are they, like Jamila's parents escaping from persecution. Three languages are in play for Suresh: he speaks fluent German, some Tamil as the heritage language, mainly to his mother at home, and has strong affiliation to English, indicated by his claim that English is his 'best language'. This is unlikely; while his English is fluent it shows some non-native features. His claim may testify to a strong aspiration to be seen as a competent English speaker, an affiliative language identity in Rampton's (1991) terms. His accent represents a version of London English, with the characteristic heavy glottalisation of all the children and is much closer to the local variety than Jay's, which is recognisably South Asian, although both boys make use of the ubiquitous London-wide tag, among young people: 'innit'.

In the brief extract below we discuss differences in schooling between 'back home' and Manor House. Both boys, especially Jay, resist the positioning by myself and Gervase that school 'back home' in Sri Lanka or Germany must be 'different'. It is likely that as fairly new arrivals who have come specifically to receive an education, they wish to emphasise commonality rather than difference.

C: So, you have come to Manor House school. What do you find is the difference between your school back home and this school?. – you don't have to be polite (laughs)

J: I didn't find anything different. It's the same.

(G and I indicate some incredulity as Manor House School is known to have some behavioural problems)

G: What about the behaviour in class?

J: That's all right, Its not bad – talking with friends like, friendly. Not bad.

C: You don't think the children are more.. erm not so well behaved here?

J: No they're good.

C: There is not bullying or anything like that?

J: No

C: So Suresh you went to school in Germany There must be some difference, don't you think?

S: It's a lot easier here cos the German language is difficult as well. Erm. Everything else the same.

C: Really? What about the way of teaching?

S: Its very easy to understand down here than Germany. Here they teach science as one lesson and in Germany its different, like biology, physics and history its like different lessons ...

In the next segment I express my particular interest in literacy and ask them about their literacy practices and allegiances

C: *When it comes to reading what sorts of things do you read at home?*

S: *I love Harry Potter. Sometimes I read other books as well*

C: *Have you read all the Harry Potter books?*

S: *Yeh*

C: *Which one do you like best?*

S: *I like the fourth one cos' its got lots of events*

C: *What is it called?*

S: *The Goblet of Fire*

C: *Anything more you want to say about that?*

S: *There's a tournament happening in that Hogwart's school and Harry came as a champion for Hogwart's to compete in the tournament and he got through and there's three tasks and he has to pass and he passed all of them.*

C: *(to J) What kind of reading would you do in your free time?*

J: *Reading about computer books*

C: *So if you are sitting at home and you're reading you would be reading computer books.?*

J: *Yes*

C: *In what language?*

J: *English*

C: *(to S) Do you ever read at home in German or Tamil?*

S: *I got all the Harry Potter books in German and in English and sometimes I read the Tamil newspaper. I can read a little bit of Tamil but its not that good...*

C: *When you read the Tamil newspaper what kinds of things are you interested in?*

S: *I like sports - Tamil sports. Sometimes there's like little stories- religious stories and I like in Tamil newspapers - Sudoko or the games.*

C: *Would you read it (the Tamil newspaper) everyday or once a week?*

J/S: *Once a week ...*

C: *And you said religion. What kind of religious things would they be talking about that are happening in Sri Lanka, Jay?*

J: *Hindus and Christian sometimes Muslims.*

C: Are you both Muslims?

J/S: No, we're Hindus.

C: So do you think religion is very important in Sri Lanka? - which religion you are?

J: I'm Hindu but I like all religion...

C: Do you want to say more?

J: I think every religion the same but we call it different name.

What is first noticeable in terms of 'I come from here' literacy identities is the boys' enjoyment of Harry Potter in Suresh's case and computer manuals for Jay, who claims to read no fiction. Suresh collects the Harry Potter books in both German and English. It seems that culturally mainstream literacy activities such as reading Harry Potter and doing Sudoko coexist with links back home, maintained patchily but regularly by reading the Tamil newspaper – even for Suresh who has visited Sri Lanka only once. It is Suresh who brings up religion, specifying the stories he enjoys in the Tamil newspaper: 'little stories, religious stories'. On a later occasion he specifically mentions his Hindu identity as important to him, while adding that he does not go to the Hindu Temple, as his mother strongly urges, as it clashes with football practice.

A View from the Bridge The final segment of conversation centres specifically on the text: *A view from the Bridge* ^v

C: When I read what Mr Blake wrote about your work, I thought you both said brilliant things about a View From the Bridge. You seemed to understand and enjoy the play a lot. I mean can I ask you Suresh, why did you like it?

S: Because it was interesting and it wasn't boring like other plays, like Macbeth.

J: Yes that was boring ...

C: Do you want to say a bit more about why you enjoyed it (A View from the Bridge)?

J: *The story was fastly moving, the story was interesting. Everybody liked it*

C: *Was it the characters - was it the plot?*

J: *The drama is about – somewhere happened really - the drama. The characters are real. ...*

G: *I remember you had different ideas about who was the hero.*

J: *I said Eddy. He said Rodolpho.*

S: *I said Rodolpho.*

G: *And the villain?*

J: *I think it was Eddy.*

G: *Same person. Is that possible?*

J: *Yes Catherine she didn't have parents so he look after her but still he done some bad things like he didn't allow her cousin to marry her ...and you know he called the immigration services because Marco and Rodolpho come illegally to New York - when the immigration officers asked Marco so Marco family in Italia so he can't send money back to them so they don't have food to eat. ...*

G: *Who would you like to be (in the play)?*

J: *I'd like to be Marco*

G: *Why would you like to be Marco?*

J: *You know his family - he needs to help his family. He's helping his family*

S: *I' ll be Eddy.... Cos he's an interesting character. He comes up in most of the scenes. He changes the story by calling the immigration office to arrest Marco and Rodolfo ...*

C: *Can I ask I mean you've come to another country and you have to settle into a different way of life . Did you feel that in some ways you could share the experience of Rodolpho and Marco cos they are the immigrants? Did you feel you could understand their feelings or not?*

J: *I can understand their feelings, because they come really to New York When they come here they need citizenship. Same here, I need citizenship to stay here to study. I haven't got citizenship yet. I've got yearly visa.*

The story in a *View from the Bridge* speaks to Jay in particular on several levels. First he recognises that it is a story about immigrants. The fact of its setting in New York matters little. The experiences of Rodolpho and Marco in the play, immigrants from Italy, resonate with his own. Jay is not an illegal immigrant but his status is insecure; he has just a yearly visa, as he acknowledges: 'same here, I need citizenship'. A linked theme is the duties of immigrants to those back home. Jay is aware that his family is making a sacrifice to fund his education in London: the sending of money by Rodolpho and Marco to relatives in Italy again echoes Jay's own related sense of debt to those 'back home'. It seems clear that the boys can handle the underlying incest theme quite comfortably, allowing them to acknowledge the ambivalence of character: Eddie is both villain and hero. But most important for Jay is that the story has a reality: 'it happened somewhere really. The characters are real'. This recalls one of Miller's own anecdotes about *A View from the Bridge*. Miller in his autobiography (Miller 1999) describes a man coming to a production of the play night after night. He was always deeply moved. When asked why, the man says: 'I knew that family. They lived in the Bronx'.

Conclusion: Implications for schooling:

What conclusions can be drawn about schooling from these portraits? What spaces do schools afford for young bilinguals to articulate and reshape, if they wish, their multifaceted identities? Many of the literacy practices documented here embrace mainstream ones. Other narratives and discourses however point to more particular identity allegiances.

Religious identity emerged more frequently than gender or ethnicity and was frequently raised by the children themselves. However, care needs to be exercised in the appropriation by school of discourses and practices from home. There are bridges to be crossed but clear boundaries too. For instance when I ask Jamila if she could bring something in Arabic to read the following week she

replies, clearly alluding to the Koran: 'You're supposed to take lots of care of it. Its supposed to be above you, above your legs. I have to go somewhere else to read. I go to this lady's house'. We see that Jamila's ways of reading are context specific and closely linked to the salience of distinct identities in different social settings.

The response from schooling may not be to directly address these 'back home' narratives, as this is likely to be culturally intrusive, but perhaps to take the route which *A View from the Bridge* seemed to offer for the two older boys. This was a text which on the face of it had little relevance for two boys originally from a very different part of the world to that depicted in Miller's play. But its story of the lives of immigrants, their dangers, their responsibilities spoke to their situation. Similarly the girls wanted to read not texts about their own religions but about Christianity. What seems important is to offer access to texts which mediate in different kinds of identity expression. These texts are in part created by the students themselves, through their own talk. This was the case of a Drama Class I observed in which Jay and Suresh participated. One new arrival from Somalia narrated a story from 'back home' in the limited English which was available to him. While I had difficulty understanding this, none of the other children, or the teachers appeared to. They listened intently with clear pleasure and interest. Moreover, this and other narratives produced by different students in the lesson were accurately and vividly recalled and recounted in the follow up talk on this occasion between Gervase, myself and Suresh and Jay.

Both Manor House and Holyoake schools provide space for literacy practices and literacy talk which support identity assertion, in ways which aim to avoid cultural intrusiveness or stereotyping. Thus, in Holyoake School I note on one visit: 'D. B. is doing a Christian assembly. He is showing mosaics from Ravenna, . which show 'Jesus the shepherd with his sheep'. He adds: 'Look and find out how in Islam too mosaics were used to decorate mosques. If the stones stay in place the colours remain bright for hundreds of years. Some of you might like to think about that as a way of making pictures. Mr B. concludes by referring to the picture of Guru Nanak which the students looked at a few weeks ago'.

This kind of interweaving of cultural references offers cues for the children themselves to both gain distance on their own cultural and faith allegiances and to make connections with others in the multicultural spaces of contemporary London.

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End notes

- ⁱ I am indebted to Brian Morgan for the suggestion of using the term ‘bridging discourse’ in this way
- ⁱⁱ The National Literacy Strategy, established in 1998, implemented an hour of daily literacy instruction for all pupils, initially in Primary School and subsequently in Secondary School. It sets out a structured framework for what should be taught within this hour.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Sikh Website notes: ‘Sikhs are expected to make an effort at learning the Gurmukhi script and teaching it to their children in order to read the Guru Granit Sahib in its original written form’
- ^{iv} The boys seem to refer to the section where Bassanio invites Shylock to dinner in the following exchange:
Shylock : May I speak with Antonio
Bassanio: If it please you to dine with us.
Shylock: Yes to smell pork; to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite led the devil into. (Merchant of Venice Act 1, scene 3)
- ^v A View from the Bridge published in 1955 is the story of Brooklyn longshoreman Eddy Carbone who accepts into his home two illegal immigrants. Jealous of the growing relationship between one of them, Rodolpho and his niece Catherine, Eddy betrays them to the immigration authority.