

This is an electronic version of an article published in:

Journal of Early Childhood Literacy 7 (1), 5-25. (2007)

The journal is available online at:

<http://ecl.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/1/5>

**Snow White in different guises:
Interlingual and intercultural exchanges between grandparents and
young children at home in East London**

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Abstract

Grandparents play a significant role in childcare and one activity that frequently occurs within this context is story-reading. However, relatively little attention has been given to the potential part that grandparents can play in terms of language and literacy development of young children. This article reports on work investigating the interlingual and intercultural exchanges occurring in a home setting in East London. In particular, it focuses on how the traditional heritage pattern of story and rhyme reading by a grandmother of Bengali origin is fused with evident practices experienced by her six year old grandchild. The data not only reveal the multiple worlds inhabited by the grandchild during story-reading but also the syncretism of these worlds on a number of levels. This paper contributes to the small but growing body of investigation into the reading styles occurring within families from different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: grandparents; intercultural exchanges; syncretism; story-reading

Six year old Sahil is talking in English and Bengali about some of the things he likes doing with his grandmother Razia at his home in East London:

‘Researcher: *Ar ki golpo poro?* [What other stories do you read?]

Sahil: erm ... Little Red Riding Hood, ah ... yeh, then I had Snow White in Bangla, then I got it from there [a shelf in the living room with books, all in Bengali] and I saw the end and the beginning.

Researcher: It’s a book, Snow White in Bangla?

Sahil: Yes.

Researcher: Oh ... and you read it with Dadu ... very good.

Sahil: I saw her real stepmother and she had this wish come true.

Researcher: Oh ... wish came true ... Did Dadu tell you the story of Snow White in Bangla?

Sahil: Yes.

Researcher: *Ta hole apnara onek golpo bolen na?* [So you tell a lot of stories together, right?]' (Jessel et al., 2004: 19)

(Bengali speech has been transliterated and is in italics)

Grandparents are rarely considered as expert language and literacy teachers of young children at home. This is particularly the case when families have migrated and the older generation does not speak fluently the language of the host community. Even when grandparents are recognised as mediators of the heritage language and culture, it is assumed that interactions will not be in the language of the host country and that the learning practices and corresponding cognitive demands are likely to be very different

from those of the mainstream school. In Britain, such neglect of grandparenting skills may in part be due to the pressure on teachers to send school work home in order for parents to practise with their children for national tests they must sit at age seven and eleven. Within this paradigm, only activities directed by the school count as relevant and valid learning; activities that by necessity exclude different languages as well as the skill of translating and interpreting both written and oral texts.

This paper sets out to question the above paradigm. Through the detailed analysis of Sahil and his grandmother Razia reading a story together, it shows how both generations syncretise languages, texts and interaction patterns to produce dynamic and linguistically rich practices. These practices involve not only the teaching of skills needed for school, but a wealth of additional skills on the part of the grandmother. We see how grandparents modify their language and cultural practices in the light of the child's knowledge, which is very different from their own. Not only, therefore, do they hand knowledge down across generations, but they blend traditional practices, language and knowledge with the new skills in English that their grandchildren are more competent to share. Finally, we see clearly how a young child like Sahil, with the help of his grandmother, has access to multiple worlds and ways of knowing as he steps into his London school.

Learning in Cross-Cultural Contexts: A Theoretical Framework

A growing body of literature assists our understanding of what it means to grow up using different languages, literacies and practices in different day-to-day contexts.

This paper draws upon studies from three interrelated yet distinct areas in order to begin to explain the knowledge and skills illustrated by Razia and her grandson Sahil;

studies on the cultural practice of story-reading and how it takes place in different cultural groups; work on socialisation in different cultural contexts and recent research on *prolepsis* or the way in which knowledge, languages and practices are passed from one generation to another; and ways in which families who move countries '*syncretise*' or blend different languages, literacies and cultural practices according to the context in which they find themselves.

Story-Reading at Home

The cultural practice of story-reading at home has been the subject of considerable research in both Britain and the US. Longitudinal studies of some western care-givers and young children show how the story-reading event is an organised social routine, specifically framed and separated from other daily events (Butler, 1979; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Dombey, 1983; Baghban, 1984). The separation is stressed by the terminology in analyses which refer to the activity as 'book-reading cycles' (Ninio & Bruner, 1978). Within the cycles themselves, systematic rules and patterns of discourse have been traced (Snow & Ninio, 1986), and caregivers are said to 'tutor' their children into the special rules for such literate encounters. For very young children these 'rules' comprise: accepting the symbolic nature of books; accepting that books represent an autonomous fictional world; accepting the 'picture reading procedure' i.e. that an appropriate response to a picture is saying the name of the object; accepting the book as leader of the activity and the focus of attention and accepting that books are to be 'read' not just touched or looked at (Snow & Ninio, 1986).

A number of studies detail the pattern of story-reading between western caregivers and slightly older children of two and three who are just beginning to recognise and repeat words and narrative structures. Thus Baghban (1984) in Gibson (1989) shows how her two year old daughter i) echoes phrases ii) anticipates and supplies 'key words' iii) listens to the same story over and over again iv) 'reads' the pictures as her mother reads the print v) expands the story through the illustrations. Similar patterns of interaction are given in examples by Scollon and Scollon (1981) and Dombey (1983). Dombey shows how a child of three is able to switch into complex language structures involving appropriate story collocations, use of ellipsis and the use of deictic and anaphoric reference linking picture and text. Scollon and Scollon (1981) show how their daughter, also aged three, always marked the boundaries of story-reading by standing up, using a different intonation and style and seeing the text as inviolable and absolute where she needed to create clearly bounded information or units characteristic for written text.

Most studies analysing the cultural practice of story-reading focus on western middle-class families, often written by caregivers with their own children. The few studies documenting reading at home in non-western or 'non-mainstream' (Heath, 1983) families, generally reveal different patterns of interaction. Often, the story-reading event is framed more precisely as 'teaching reading' by the caregiver and is more task than pleasure oriented. This is often typified by a 'single word method' whereby the child repeats the exact text word by word after the caregiver, who may be the mother, but in many instances, is an older sibling (Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Heath & Branscombe, 1984; Minns, 1990; Gregory, 1998; Volk & de Acosta, 2004).

In a detailed ethnographic study of two Puerto Rican origin families living in the US, Volk and de Acosta show how Julializ (aged five) and her nine year old brother, Francisco, set about reading a story with the assistance of their mother, Sra. Torres:

Francisco: *One day a pig and a dog met a frog // on a log. //*
Sra. Torres: *// Pero papi suave. // [But slowly dear]*
Julializ: *One.*
Francisco: *Day.*
Julializ: *Day.*
Francisco: *A.*
Julializ: *A.*
Francisco: *Dog. I mean a fro- I mean a pig.*
Julializ: *A pig.*
Francisco: *And a dog.*
Julializ: *And a dog.*
Francisco: *Met.*
Julializ: *Mmmat.*
Sra. Torres: *Ensenale la palabra nen, si no, no aprende. [Teach her the word, boy, if not, she doesn't learn.]*

(Volk & de Acosta, 2004: 33)

(// ... // signifies overlapping speech; translations in brackets)

A recent and comprehensive study by Hammer et al., (2005) in this journal compares the reading styles of African American and Puerto Rican caregivers with pre-schoolers and reveals a wide range of reading, labelling, questioning and answering techniques by most caregivers. As the authors of that paper suggest, however, we still need more investigations into the reading styles of caregivers from different cultural backgrounds to inform the reading tuition of teachers of young children.

Indeed, the crucial question in a number of earlier studies has been: To what extent are western patterns of story-reading important for early school literacy success?

Studies from the 1980s proposed that the story-reading practice as conducted by western caregivers provides the child with an infrastructure of the pedagogic practices

which match those met in school (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1986). More recent work, however, has begun to show how children who have not been initiated by their parents into the language of the school imitate extremely accurately the story-reading patterns practised by their teachers – often during ‘playing school’ episodes with their siblings (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Williams 2004). Although these studies begin to reveal the ways children can draw upon cultural resources from different practices and languages, we still lack work showing how the heritage pattern of story-reading might be fused with practices from the new culture in ways comprehensible and memorable for the child. The present study shows how grandparents skilfully perform this task.

Socialisation in Cross Cultural Contexts

A second field of studies informing the present work is that on early socialisation in cross-cultural contexts. We know that families across the world have different expectations of their children and of themselves as parents and grandparents. These ideas form part of patterns of behaviour referred to as ‘parental ethnotheories’ (practices that represent meaning systems within cultural groups) (Super and Harkness, 1996; Brooker, 2002; Keller, 2002). Although a number of studies stress that, within these ethnotheories, caregivers from all cultures provide a finely-tuned scaffolding or structuring of activities, it is generally agreed that the nature of the ‘curriculum’ or ‘tutoring’ (Dunn, 1989) offered to the child will be different (Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Keller, 2002).

Greenfield and her colleagues refer to different ‘cultural pathways’ (2003:471) followed by children according to the ethnotheories of their families. According to whether socialisation takes place in the economically developed or in the developing

world, socialisation, they claim, is likely to be geared towards fostering ‘independence’ or ‘interdependence’. ‘Independence’ as an aim promotes aspects such as individuality, whereby questioning, scepticism and curiosity are promoted. ‘Interdependence’ on the other hand, stresses collectivism and encourages learning through observation, attentiveness and focused listening. Romero (2004) details ways in which Pueblo Indian children, for example, learn through co-operation, mentoring and intergenerational modelling. Rather than encouraging gifted children to become individual geniuses, the Pueblo stress the special qualities of gifted children in contributing to the well-being and cohesiveness of the community. Greenfield (2003) equates interdependent conceptions of competence with an ‘apprenticeship’ model, stressing emotional and dependency aspects of learning as opposed to an independent conception of competence which she equates with an ‘equality’ model, prioritising (quasi) interactional equality in caregiver interactions in an independent environment. Greenfield and her colleagues go as far as saying ‘... an independence orientation and an interdependence orientation are on a collision course in multicultural societies.’ (2003:471).

This is certainly implicitly the argument behind a number of ethnographic studies in the field of education which aim to open teachers’ eyes to the possibilities of different interpretations of what counts as learning by families from different cultural backgrounds (Phillips, 1972; Moll et al, 1992; Reese et al., 1996; Rogoff, 2003).

From the field of educational research, various ethnographic studies from both the US and the UK investigate the impact of family belief systems (ethnotheories) on children from different cultural backgrounds. Reese et al. (1996) highlight the different understanding of ‘education’ held by Latino parents in the US whereby ‘educacion’ is

interpreted as inculcating proper and respectful social behaviour, as opposed to mere academic achievement, as viewed under this term in Europe and the US. Using audiotaped, interview and observational data, Gregory (1996) and Gregory and Williams (2000) contrast Bangladeshi British and Anglo families in London's East End at the end of the twentieth century. Bangladeshi British families stress the serious nature of school learning in both their mainstream and community classes; Anglo families, on the other hand, stressed enjoyment and freedom to choose the learning activities they most preferred. None of the above studies, however, set out to investigate ways in which grandparents might blend learning practices from their own country of origin with those of the new chosen country in which the young generation has been born.

Syncretic Literacy Studies

A third and major area of work underpinning analyses in this study is that on prolepsis, syncretism and Syncretic Literacy Studies (Gregory, Long & Volk 2004). In the 1970s, the term *prolepsis* was described by Rommetveit as 'a communicative move in which the speaker presupposes some as yet unprovided information' (Stone, 1993:171). This initiating move, if it works, sets in motion a process in which the listener recreates the speaker's presuppositions. In the 1990s, the meaning of prolepsis was further explored by researchers using a sociocultural perspective to analyse scaffolding in the zone of proximal development (Stone, 1993) and intersubjectivity (Rogoff et al.,1998). In both cases, the focus was on the dynamics of communication, as the speaker looks forward with certain presuppositions, the listener works at recreating them, and the two are drawn together in a creative process of joint meaning making.

Cole (1996: 183), in a sociocultural explanation of the cultural mediation of development, extends the meaning of prolepsis to ‘the cultural mechanism that brings “the end into the beginning”’. The adult - the mother in Cole's example - brings her idealized memory of her cultural past and her assumption of cultural continuity in the future to actual interactions with the child in the present. In this nonlinear process, the child's experience is both energized and constrained by what adults remember of their own pasts and how they imagine what the child's future will be. Cross cultural and intergenerational literacy interactions are, therefore, particularly intriguing: What role might each participant play in constructing a common understanding of the story and interpretation of the language, illustrations and text?

Some recent studies are beginning to show how different generations syncretise heritage and new languages and cultural practices (Jessel et al., 2004). Although early studies from the 1920s and 1930s by anthropologists use the term syncretism in a somewhat negative sense to describe the interactions of African and European-Christian religious traditions in Caribbean cultures, more recent work on syncretism has taken on a broader and more positive connotation as the contemporary study of cultures in contact and conflict. Syncretism in these studies is understood to be more than a mixing of existing cultural forms (Apter, 1991). It is, instead, a creative process in which people reinvent culture as they draw on diverse resources, both familiar and new (Shaw and Stewart, 1994). The focus is on the activity of transformation, not on fossilized cultural forms.

In their work together and with Ta'ase (2004), Duranti and Ochs analyse the ways in which Samoan and North American cultural practices and tools are reinvented in syncretic literacy events in Samoan American contexts. For example, a Samoan alphabet poster with pictures of Western items, originally used in pastors' schools in Samoa, is used in a Samoan American church class to teach children about the Samoan language and culture. The authors argue that, in the first setting, the poster was used quite explicitly as part of an effort to Westernise Samoans. In the latter setting, the poster has been appropriated by Samoans living within the Western context and "transformed into a symbol of tradition and an instrument of cultural continuity" (Duranti, Ochs, and Ta'ase, 2004: 169). The story-reading sessions between Sahil and his grandmother analysed below, however, are very different from the alphabet poster. The story of Snow White is familiar to Sahil from his English classroom or from Disney; here he encounters a Bengali version with appropriate illustrations and style of narrative. Unlike the Samoan American teacher who understands and speaks English, Sahil's grandmother is only familiar with the Bengali text.

The studies outlined above thus provide a frame within which we might situate the interaction and the teaching and learning taking place between Sahil and his grandmother. Within this frame, we ask: How far and in what ways does Razia call upon her own experience of stories vis-a-vis what she knows about what takes place in school? How far does she encourage Sahil's independence and to what extent does he remain very dependent upon her as 'expert'? What role do both the text and the illustrations play in facilitating and reflecting different story-reading approaches?

Setting and Participants

Sahil's family lives in the East London neighbourhood of St. George's in Tower Hamlets, an economically disadvantaged area abutting the wealth of the City of London which lies directly to its west. St. George's used to be home for dock-workers, sailors and immigrants until the closure of the docks in the mid twentieth century. It is also infamous for what has become known as the 'battle of Cable Street', an historic occasion in 1936 when Mosley and his fascists were finally confronted on their march destroying Jewish shops in the area and halted not by police but by residents of the East End. Sahil's family was one of a group of nine families who participated in this one year study; six Bangladeshi and three Anglo London children. Most of the Bangladeshi Londoners had family roots in Sylhet, a largely rural area in north-east Bangladesh and were fluent speakers of Sylheti, a dialect of Bengali that has no modern written form.ⁱⁱ Sahil's grandmother was from Chittagong, and used the dialect of the area in her conversations with the family. However, during the reading activities with her grandchildren she spoke mainly Standard Bengali. She divided her time between her different children living in Canada, the US and London. All the Bangladeshi British families maintained links with their linguistic and cultural origins; older children generally attended both Qur'anic and Bengali classes and often watched videos in Hindi with their families. Nevertheless, the generation at Primary school had all been born in Britain and spoke, worked and played in English amongst themselves.

Methodology and Analysis

The portrait below of Sahil and his grandmother reading together is a small part of a much longer study on the language, learning and literacy practices of families in East London, particularly those living in the boroughs of Spitalfields and St. Georges, adjacent to the City of London.ⁱⁱⁱ Different phases of the work have focused on young children's reading with parents, siblings and in community language and religious classes. Data informing this paper are drawn from a larger scale investigation into the literacy and learning activities taking place between young children aged between three and six and their grandparents.^{iv} For the first stage of the research, a questionnaire was distributed to all the families with children of the required age in our focus school. Twenty grandparents (seventeen Bangladeshi British and three Anglo) completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire revealed a wide range of activities taking place between grandparents and young children (including, for example, reading, telling stories, talking about family histories, doing homework, cooking, going to the park, participating in religious activities, visiting others, watching TV/videos, using the computer, playing, doing housework, getting ready for and taking to school, gardening, sports, eating out and computer activities) using English, Sylheti/Bengali and, for religious purposes Arabic. Having obtained this overview from twenty-three families, nine families (six of Bangladeshi British origin and three Anglo) agreed to participate in the more detailed study. For this second stage of the work, data were collected through interviews with grandparents and children as well as collected through video-recordings, scrap-books and photographs. We used the videodata and interview material to generate a detailed understanding of the intergenerational learning exchange. Videodata were transcribed to show different channels of communication – language, gaze, touch/action.

Qualitative analysis was conducted to look for common themes and patterns in the data in the following ways, the first two being the current focus:

- Learning interactions were examined to find out how participants built on each other's meanings through talk and non-verbal interaction
- An inventory was drawn up of different concepts and skills featuring in the discussions and activities shared by participants
- The particular characteristics of interactions around the computer as a mediating artefact were identified.

Triangulation of participants' views with those of the research team was accomplished by inviting children and grandparents to watch the video material with the researcher and comment on aspects of the events. Grandparents commented on different facets of children's learning and on the contexts in which learning took place. Children also commented on the videos and this contributed to an all-round perspective on the activities completed. In the case of Razia and Sahil, further visits were made to discuss particularly the story-reading episodes from the video as well as to ask Razia to recall her own memories of story-reading when she was a child, her expectations for her grandchildren's story knowledge and how this might differ from her own, her views of the text etc. The analyses in Layer One presented below, therefore, are drawn to a large extent from Razia's own words and explanations.

The analyses are presented using a multi-layering approach (Bloome & Theodorou, 1986; Gregory, 1993) to explore the syncretism taking place in the practice of story-reading between the grandparent and child generations in one Bangladeshi British

household. Thus, we attempt to unpeel the different layers of interpretation of the event in the following way:

- i) *an outer layer* which explores story-reading as part of Razia's (the grandmother) repertoire of cultural practices generally; her memories of stories from her own childhood and how she translates these into expectations for her grandchild, whose life experiences are, as she knows, very different;
- ii) *a second layer* which explores the interaction between the participants as they read the story together;
- iii) *an inner layer* that examines the story and storybook themselves and discusses ways in which both text and illustrations might syncretise different styles, heritages and traditions.

The Outer Layer of Analysis. Looking Backwards and Ahead: Past and Current Practices

i) Razia's memories of stories in her own childhood

'People in those days only learned to read the religious books in Arabic. My aunties and sisters who knew how to read told me stories and choras.' I didn't have any parents or grandparents so the elders used to tell me stories. They were mostly done orally and we learned them by heart. There was hardly any written text.'

Razia herself was not taught by her grandparents but by her aunties, sisters or any older and more knowledgeable person, thus gaining access to a wide range of stories and choras, which, she said, were often about kings and queens but were more exciting than Snow White. Razia remembered precisely the way in which she listened repeatedly until she knew by heart prayers and choras, patterns of language and whole texts that she now confidently repeats with her grandchildren. However, Razia's lack of experience of written texts in her own childhood does not reflect upon her current practices where she says,

'I do enjoy reading books all the time, even when I am here I read all day. I have plenty of different types of books, yes, story-books, also Islamic books. To pass time, that's what I do. Whatever is in my reach I read with love. I read what I enjoy. If I don't enjoy something I don't read it.'

i) How Razia translates her knowledge, memories and experiences of stories for her grandchildren

'Yes, we used to learn through repeating words and phrases. But we did not learn so much as children nowadays. The way I teach them and spend time with them is different. I did not have any grandparents so I did not have this kind of attention; I did not have what I give Sahil. Also, when my sisters and aunties got married I did not get to learn much, so I did not have much contact with books as Sahil does.'

Significantly, perhaps, Razia has no grandchildren living in Bangladesh; as we have noted, they are spread out across Britain, the US and Canada. She is, therefore, highly aware that her grandchildren are becoming familiar with different cultural and literacy practices, using different materials and methods and in a different language from her

own childhood. She also hesitates when talking about her own role in ‘teaching’, saying that today’s children know far more than she, herself, does.

Within this frame, she engages particularly in two literacy practices, the reading of moral and religious rhymes in the form of the *choras* and stories, both in Bengali but using different materials, approaches and patterns of interaction. Importantly, Razia views herself consciously as mediator of both the Bengali language and the cultural practices that the children are unable to share with those living in Bangladesh:

‘I don’t blend both (English and Bengali). I like telling them about my culture. I like it that way better.’

She thus regularly reads *choras* or moral rhymes from books to all the grandchildren in this family. As she reads, her voice changes and becomes low and devout. She reads one line at a time, followed closely by Sahil in repetition after her. These are rhymes that he knows to be important but whose meaning as yet escapes him. As he stands beside Razia, looking at the book, he feels the comfort of her arm around him. Although he cannot yet read the text, he realises that Razia is reading (and he repeating) word for word and that, consequently, any lack of attention would be inappropriate. His younger sisters look on, observing closely but not yet participating in the recitations. Razia clearly enjoys Sahil’s efforts at reading:

‘I love it. When he reads well, I feel really good.’

However, Razia also consciously introduces Sahil to a very different practice: European traditional tales written in Bengali. These tales, one of which is Snow White, are new to her:

‘I did not hear it before. I learn these stories when I am with my grandchildren.’

Here she is aware that Sahil and his siblings may be more expert than her in some aspects of the story since he already knows it from his English school. She thus sees herself as helping him to understand the story as a story and to be able to discuss it with her in *her* language, Bengali:

'It helps them understand. They sometimes say: "My teacher tells us what dadu (grandmother) tells us." When I explain words and phrases to them, they understand better... I read the books first, then I read it to them. Not the whole book. I explain and make the language easy for them in children's language. They find the language difficult.'

Razia's approach and teaching style when reading Snow White and other European stories is thus significantly different from her reading of choras and takes on a dynamic quality. She reads in an ordinary voice rather than a special one and simply reads on, allowing Sahil to squirm, climb or roam around whilst she reads and talks to him. Other siblings also run out of the room whilst she reads, but return with no loss of attention to the story. It is clear that the activity is highly enjoyable and that both Sahil and his sisters are listening intently. Razia explains her approach as follows:

'I love it (the children climbing over her as she reads). I don't want them just to sit straight. That's what grandchildren do: they play and learn.'

The Second Layer of Analysis: The Interaction between Razia and Sahil as they read together

Sahil: 'You read it out to me...'

Razia grew up in a village and did not experience story-book reading as a child. Rather, she listened to traditional stories being *told* to her by a variety of relatives and older members of the community. For this, she would have sat on the ground looking

at the story-teller and listening carefully. Razia's story-book reading takes place very differently. It seems clear that Razia draws upon what she *thinks should happen* during the story-book reading event. She lets Sahil sit closely beside her on the sofa, holds the book as the focus of attention between them, points to the text and begins by saying '*Read along with me..* (in Bengali)' (see Figure 1). In contrast with the 'Repeat After Me' word-by-word approach of teaching reading cited earlier in the example given by Volk and de Acosta (2004), Razia reads in the same way as school-oriented or 'mainstream' parents have been shown to start as they begin reading with their children (Heath, 1983; Unsworth and O'Toole, 1993). Indeed, Razia had seen Sahil sitting with teaching assistants when he was in the nursery (pre-school or kindergarten) and it seems that she calls upon this model as she begins to read. However, in contrast with children fluent in the language who can indeed 'read along' (Unsworth and O'Toole, 1993: 139), she very quickly realises that the Bengali text is too difficult for him to read with her as she requests and she says so to him. Not to miss out on the story, Sahil tells her firmly in Bengali '*You read it out to me..*' and this is what she does, sometimes simplifying the text when she realises that he does not understand. This in some ways resonates with the collectivist quality underlying the interdependent script suggested by Greenfield (2003).

When Sahil goes outside to get some water she simply stops and resumes upon his return, starting again at the top of the page. She continues as he climbs over her back, crawls behind her and eventually does a handstand on the sofa behind her. Between these acrobatics, however, he resumes attention, gazing down on the text.



Plate 1: Sahil engrossed in the book even though he cannot begin yet to read the print

At a certain point when Razia feels that Sahil and his younger sister's attention flags, she switches into reciting orally the well-known choras which the children recite confidently in whole chunks after her. It is clear that Razia feels less comfortable reading the text of Snow White in contrast with her confidence in initiating the chora recital. Nevertheless, her switch between the different genres of story-reading and chora, each demanding a different pattern of interaction, different tone of voice and different purpose show how she blends home and school literacies using Bengali as a medium where she herself is expert. Sahil is already able to switch between the different reading practices, though still a novice member of both. The interaction described above differs from that typifying many western families where the 'question and answer' routine is frequently adopted (Teale, 1982; Gibson, 1989).

The Inner Layer of Analysis: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The syncretism of Asian and European approaches to child-rearing and learning styles revealed in the two layers above is also reflected in the book itself read by Sahil and his grandmother. Here we see elements of the Disney text from 1937 (www.filmsite.org/snow.html) grafted onto the original Grimm story (Grimm & Grimm, 1857) before being presented in translation. However, the Bengali version of

Snow White is by no means simply a direct translation of the European story. Rather, there is a transmogrification of the text, illustrations and cultural values to correspond to the expectations of Bengali readers whilst still remaining inherently European in content and nature.

Perhaps the most crucial contrast between the western and Bengali versions is the different focus on physical or moral aspects throughout the texts. The European versions (both Grimm and Disney) emphasise the physical beauty of both Snow White and the Queen (indeed, the story revolves entirely around the jealousy of physical attributes of one woman for another). The huntsman spares Snow White because of her beauty. Indeed, her beauty transcends and forgives all childish behaviour, as, for example, trying out the dwarfs' food, chairs and bed etc. as well as falling prey to the Queen on three different occasions, in spite of constant warnings by the dwarfs! Finally, both the original and Disney versions show Snow White being brought back to life by a kiss from the Prince who has fallen deeply in love with her.

In contrast, the Bengali version focuses very clearly on the moral attributes and artistic skills shown by Snow White, as well as the unwarranted cruelty and bad character of the Queen demonstrated throughout her life. Thus, Snow White follows the traditional pattern of how a modest and diligent woman should be. In contrast with the Queen who is depicted as 'wicked, cruel, boastful and angry', she is *morally* beautiful. We read that 'her character is as good as her looks', 'she has a sweet voice matching her character', she is 'harmonious with the natural world'. When the huntsman takes her to the forest to be killed, he is impressed not by her beauty, but by the fact that she naively wants to pick flowers to take back to the Queen. Instead of

rather foolishly trying out all the beds of the dwarfs, she sets to and scrubs and cleans their house before their return (this occurs in the Disney version although not in the original Grimm). She constantly interacts with nature in that the animals help her to tidy the house and she has a dialogue with the birds. Unlike the European and Disney versions mentioned previously, she does not succumb three times to the Queen's tricks. The Queen appears only once with an apple. Snow White eats it, passes away and the Queen vanishes like an evil spirit. Finally, instead of the kiss waking Snow White out of her death-like sleep, the Bengali version shows the Prince simply laying his hand on her forehead in order to bring her back to life. We are, therefore, constantly reminded of the importance of moral values in the story.

The illustrations in Razia and Sahil's Bengali storybook also reveal an intricate blending of Asian and western styles, epitomising the contrast in emphasis between the two. Thus, the wicked queen always appears western through her sharp features, western clothes and eye make-up (Plate 2).



Plate 2: The Queen looking very western and Disney-like in her features (this and remaining illustrations are redrawn from the originals)

Snow White, on the other hand looks very Asian in her dress and posture (Plate 3) except for one particular illustration (Plate 4) in which her physical beauty is stressed. In this illustration alone, she becomes western and Disney-like, wearing eye shadow over huge blue eyes, her small waist also emphasised.



Plate 3: Snow White as an Asian girl



Plate 4: Snow White in western guise

The most striking illustration setting the story apart from its western counterpart is the remarkable dwarfs' house which combines a traditional European cottage (as in the Disney version) with a large and impressive looking mosque.



Plate 5: The little dwarfs' cottage with a large mosque attached

This illustration (Plate 5) perhaps symbolises the blending of east and west, moral and earthly interests. The dwarfs' cottage, rather than simply being a statement relating to an isolated group of individuals, becomes a broader socially collective statement. In this way the text also brings with it its own mark of interdependence. To an outsider, this blending of different styles and behaviour might seem confusing. Yet Razia and Sahil have no difficulty in both making sense of and enjoying the story together.

Conclusion

This example of story-reading between Sahil and his grandmother reveals not just the multiple worlds he inhabits but the syncretism of these worlds on a number of levels. The complex blending of different literacy practices in which he participates at home and in school, involving different texts, languages, scripts and illustrations alongside the fusion of western and traditional Bengali teaching styles provide Sahil with a wealth of knowledge upon which to draw as he interprets this particular story. The example also shows that the story-reading practice that we have witnessed in the home (like other cultural practices), is likely to be different from one family to the next as well as one generation to another. Every home is very different and, of course, we must be very careful not to overgeneralise or typecast families according to their cultural or ethnic group. Our work concurs with that of Volk and de Acosta, Hammer et al. and Keller et al. cited earlier in this paper who highlight the need for a recognition of the different ways of socialisation of young children, regardless to what extent these may be tied to separate cultural groups. We should like to join these authors in stressing the need for detailed ethnographic studies in collaboration with families across different cultural backgrounds. Such studies will do much to inform teachers in both their classroom practice and home reading programmes. They will

also help shift the question quoted earlier of: How important is the western story-reading practice for success? to: What knowledge do bilingual or emergent bilingual children bring with them from home? How far does this blend traditional and western practices? How does this knowledge enhance their skills? and How can we best draw upon this knowledge in a mainstream classroom?

Razia's story-reading does not concur exactly with the approaches in western families outlined in the theoretical framework of this paper since there are no questions posed on either the text or the illustrations. Nor, however, do they correspond to the word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase repetition apparent in other studies on non-mainstream homes. This latter approach is apparent in the chora or rhyme reading where Razia feels on secure ground from her own memories of reciting these as a child. Her reading of Snow White rather bears the hallmark of Sahil's classroom story experience, since she keeps up the flow of speech, simplifying the content as she goes along. Her expectations in Snow White are of Sahil as a good listener; very different from her expectations in the chora, which are of repetition and accuracy in vocabulary, intonation and style. These two very different interaction patterns in the western and traditional practices also reflect to some extent the independent and interdependent socialisation practices outlined in the theoretical framework underpinning this work. As far as Razia and Sahil are concerned, however, the two sit comfortably together rather than being on the 'collision course' hypothesised by Greenfield and her colleagues (2003). Finally, we see the way in which Razia syncretises both practices into a single repertoire of teaching offered to Sahil in his home literacy life. The three layers of analysis themselves interact to form a coherent whole; the syncretism of traditional and Disney illustrations may well have been the

reason why Razia chose to buy the book in the first place. Likewise, the underpinning of the western story with traditional moral themes may have reminded her of oral stories from her own childhood and enabled her to step smoothly and easily into the chora recitations with their corresponding narrative style.

Razia's grandchildren are spread out widely across the English speaking world. She visits them all regularly, carrying her own repertoire of linguistic, cultural and literacy skills with her. This story-reading episode analysed above shows a) her acute awareness of the different literacy and learning practices with which her grandchildren are growing up; b) what she can give to her grandchildren as well as what she needs to adapt. It thus adds to the growing body of work in Syncretic Literacy Studies of intergenerational and intercultural encounters between young children and their friends and families (Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004). Razia certainly learns as much from her grandchildren as she gives to them and, importantly, each gives something towards constructing a collective understanding and interpretation. However, the interaction between Razia and Sahil shows that the dynamic quality of learning does not diminish with age – nor does Razia subscribe to the belief that she has unquestionable wisdom through her age. Razia is, in fact, the lynch-pin of her grandchildren's heritage language and identity and it may well be that she shares more with each of her grandchildren than, living in very different countries, they will do with each other. However, through practices such as the reading of choras, she unites them all into a deep cultural knowledge and heritage that they might retain for life.

This work was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-0131). Our thanks also go to the families who participated in the project and to Hermitage Primary School.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Sylheti is sometimes referred to as a dialect and sometimes a local language.

ⁱ This work began in 1993 and has been funded by Goldsmiths College, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, The Leverhulme Trust and the ESRC. For details on other parts of the work and publications, see particularly Gregory, 1996; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Williams, 2004; Jessel et al. 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ See final report for ESRC (RES-000-22-0131) Intergenerational Learning between Children and Grandparents in East London (2005), (Kenner, C., Gregory, E., Jessel, J. Arju, T. and Ruby, M.) for full results of this study.

^{iv} A chora is a rhyme in Bengali with a moral or religious meaning.

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