

*Conversations around the Literacy Hour in a multilingual  
London primary school*

## **Running title: Conversations around the Literacy Hour**

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#### **Abstract**

This study was conducted against the background of a British government initiative: The National Literacy Strategy, which prescribes a daily hour of formal literacy instruction for primary aged children, known as the Literacy Hour. The paper describes the developing understanding and experience of literacy of four bilingual Year Five children, studying in a multilingual London school. I recorded and analysed conversations about literacy and the

Literacy Hour with the children - two boys and two girls - for one hour a week over one school year. My focus was on the impact of the Literacy Hour on the children's understanding of literacy as revealed through their personal talk about text. I divide the conversational data into four sets, moving from relatively structured, 'on task' talk, closely aligned to the Literacy Hour, to talk which embraces more widely the children's cultural and linguistic experiences, resources and attitudes. I conclude that the Literacy Hour plays a relatively small part among the rich literacy resources, crossing both home and school boundaries, which the children make use of in everyday life.

Key words: literacy, multilingualism, schooling, text, the National Literacy Strategy, pedagogy

### **Introduction**

The study draws on the work of Bernstein (1996) and Halliday (1996) to characterise the manner in which everyday knowledge and experiences might be recontextualised within classrooms, and argues that children with multilingual resources are well placed to reconfigure these within the context of the Literacy Hour. I draw on the anthropologically influenced studies of Street, (1984) Barton (1994) and Heath (1983) to present literacy as social events which are continually constructed and played out within different sites: first within the Literacy Hour, second, beyond the confines of the Literacy Hour, in a whole range of practices and discourses in school, and, finally, in the other domains of everyday life referred to by the children.

A number of studies have looked at children's literacy practices outside the school setting, by, for instance, providing children with disposable cameras to record home literacy practices. (Burnett and Myers 2002) or showing how children draw on the Literacy Hour at home to 'perform or play schooling' (Gregory and Williams 2002). My study sees children only within the school and through my talk with them. I had a number of

discussions with the children's teachers, especially the Literacy Hour teacher, Miss R. However, my major focus was on the children's own perceptions and experiences.

In using the term 'conversation' I wanted to avoid any sense of 'interviewing' the children *about* their learning, so much as engaging in interaction with them. I was viewed as a teacher, but one where the boundaries were relatively fluid. In my talk with the children I constantly shifted footing or stance (cf. Goffman 1981), at times taking on a managerial, pedagogic role, at others participating with the children in the construction of literacy events.

My research question was in two related parts

On the evidence of the literacy conversations

1. How are the children's cultural and linguistic resources taken account of by the Literacy Hour? What spaces does the National Literacy Strategy make available for children who have additional cultural and linguistic resources to mainstream, monolingual children?
2. What use do the children make of Literacy Hour key concepts and terminology in their spontaneous uses of literacy.? At the same time what resources are revealed in their talk which have pedagogic potential, but tend to remain untapped?.

Talk of 'pedagogic potential' begs the question of the generalisability of discourses and practices across home/school domains. Bernstein (1996:170) conceptualises forms of knowledge, as 'horizontal' and 'vertical'. Horizontal knowledge is usually typified as oral, everyday and common sense; it is acquired in specific contexts. 'Vertical' discourses, which create school literacy and competencies, are linked not to context but to a whole set of other procedures within the structure of schooling. Some of the children's literacy resources are arguably 'horizontal', resisting translation into mainstream schooling. However others may have potential currency beyond existing settings. That is, they represent cultural and linguistic capital not being realised or acknowledged in school, in particular by the Literacy

Strategy. Halliday (1996: 353) describes how primary, common sense knowledge – homoglossic in that it is constructed solely out of spoken, everyday language – becomes heteroglossically reconstructed in educational contexts. One aim in this paper was to see how far children with rather different common sense knowledge to mainstream children, are enabled to reconfigure their primary knowledge and discourses into valued educational knowledge.

A further goal was to discover conceptualisations about literacy more specifically, as observed both in the children's talk about reading and writing and in their literacy practices during both the Literacy Hour and our conversations. Where does the Literacy Hour fit into the children's overall socialisation into literacy? Has it, as Moss suggests, (Moss 2001) redefined in some ways what 'counts as literacy' at school, and, one might add, at home also?. The National Literacy Strategy Framework (DfEE 1998) conceptualises literacy instruction in terms of word, sentence and text level work, acknowledging the importance of all three levels from early years schooling. However in implementation the tendency is to give priority to word level work, especially to phonics, and not usually to integrate word and sentence level study within whole text study. An innovation in the NLS text study proposals is the presentation of a wider range of genres than hitherto. However depth may be sacrificed to breadth; one criticism of the Literacy Hour has been that children may get little opportunity to read continuous authentic text, either as fact or fiction, the emphasis being on demonstration of features of genre, by way of work sheet exemplars. In its favour it should be acknowledged that the Literacy Strategy has provided a much tighter structure to a previously rather unfocused literacy curriculum. Bourne (2000:32) characterises the Literacy Hour as a 'highly centralised and interventionist programme for schools'. The notion of literacy *hour* in itself suggests a bounded event, and there are further boundaries within the hour's instruction, as it is structured so as to allow 15 minutes of whole class shared text

instruction, followed by 15 minutes of whole class shared reading and writing, a further 15 minutes word or sentence level work, 20 minutes guided group and independent work, concluding with a final ten-minute plenary session. (DfEE 1998). Literacy teachers tell me that in many classrooms the earlier rigid interpretations of the event, with tight framing and strong pacing, has now been relaxed. Nonetheless the Literacy Hour continues in principle to emphasise teacher control of the overall hour and careful staging within it. (Millard 2003)

We might say that the Literacy Strategy has broadly favoured a view of literacy as ‘acts of reading and writing’ in terms used by Langer (Langer 1987). Literacy learning is judged in terms of growth of skill rather than development of particular understandings about language. An alternative notion of literacy, argued for by Langer, conceptualises it as ‘ways of thinking’. This has some parallels with Hasan’s notion of reflection literacy (Hasan 1996) which sees the role of literacy as, ultimately, a means to ‘reflect, to enquire, and to analyse.’ (Hasan 1996: 408). More recently, Langer has added contextual and cultural factors to cognitive ones. Drawing on Bakhtin (1981) she notes: ‘rather than seeing (literacy) as composed of independent skills and proficiencies that are called upon at needed moments (Bakhtin) offers us a vision in which the educated individual calls upon a multi-layered history of experiences with language and content, cutting across many contexts’ (Langer 2001: 838)

If this amplified view of literacy is favoured over a narrower definition of literacy as acts of reading and writing, several implications follow.

Firstly, talk is part of literacy. Such literacy events as bedtime story reading or writing, leaving notes, making shopping lists, or creating puns, jokes or poems all testify to the close integration of oral and literate practices in children’s lives (cf. Maybin 1990: 133). For the bilingual children in this study, able to draw on diverse traditions and cultural practices these literacy events are likely to be layered in particularly rich and complex ways.

While talk mediates in all literacy events, a distinctive kind of talk, less contingent on the immediate and everyday, helps to construct vertical literacy and becomes heteroglossically recontextualised as a tool for knowledge construction. This is reflective talk not just about but *around* text: Wells uses the term ‘epistemic literacy’, (Wells 1991), which is similar to Hasan’s notion of reflection literacy, by which children are beginning to use texts to make cognitive and critical links to their own lives. Some of the children’s talk in the conversations shows them drawing on text in this way.

Seeing texts as objects for reflection and critique means redefining and broadening the notion of text beyond the typical work sheets of the Literacy Hour, to include texts across the curriculum, those engaged with in moments of leisure and play or religious devotion and the texts – both spoken and written - created by the children themselves. Moreover, classroom texts are not just, especially in worksheet format, differently framed as pedagogic, but *used* in distinctive ways. They are, as Skidmore et al (2003) note, typically ‘recited’: the shared written text is alluded to as an authority – one moreover which is rarely challenged. Questions relevant to this study are: how might these school texts be reframed as tools for reflection, and which texts from children’s personal lives might make the crossing from personal to pedagogic use.?

## **Methodology**

**The School:** Hollyoake Primary School is a successful, well established school in a West London Borough. 98 percent of the children are from minority ethnic backgrounds. In the school the children come from settled, second or third generation Asian communities, with increasing numbers of more recent arrivals from countries such as Somalia and Kosovo. The children have varying degrees of knowledge of and proficiency in languages other than English. The children selected for the study were:

**Varsha:** Varsha was born in Britain. Her 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 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 where she says that she 'is not allowed' to speak English. She goes to the mosque every day after school.

**Fouad :** Fouad 's family are Muslim and from South Yemen. He speaks Arabic with his mother and father and cousin but mainly English with his brother and sister. He claims that he can speak Arabic but not read it. He came to England when he was three or four, - he is a little unclear how old he was.

**Essa :** Essa was born in Britain. His parents are Muslim and Somali. His mother comes from Africa and his father lived for some years in the United States. Both English and Somali are used in the home and Essa speaks both languages but cannot read in Somali

The children were self selected; there was no selection based on perceived ability so that one of the four children in the study was among the most able children in the class, while the other three ranged from average to 'struggling'. Miss R, the school's literacy co-ordinator guided the final selection and we agreed that I should work with the four children around friendship groups. I talked to the children in pairs: the two girls were already close friends; the boys established a friendship in the course of the study. While I occasionally

talked to a child individually, it is striking that the paired conversations were much more successful in producing sustained interactions, with all children talking both more to each other and to myself. The only requirement was for them to bring a text of their own choice to our meetings. Although I occasionally devised specific literacy tasks as preparation for our meetings, the most illuminating insights and discussions emerged more spontaneously. Because I did not want to be perceived, nor did I consider myself, as the conventional ‘researcher’ who asked a set of pre-specified questions, my role was necessarily a dual, often contradictory and ambivalent one. Was I there in the school for two hours on a Thursday morning as a teacher, a nosy researcher, or someone to chat to.? What was the speech genre of these mini events? Jamila asked at one point: *Do they (referring to the boys) have fun like we do?* Overall the children appeared happy to talk about reading and writing and also occasionally to perform pedagogic tasks such as reading aloud, but tended to resent teacher-like interventions. Jamila at one point later in the year said: *Miss you ask too many questions: can she (ie her friend Varsha) get on!*

The data I draw on consists only of the children’s own talk and my lesson observations; the background information about the children and their literacy practices emerged in the course of many conversations over the year. Although I did not ask the children to keep diaries, Varsha on one occasion confides that she keeps a private diary which she has continued during the year. Included in this are accounts of our weekly conversations. She says: *when I come home and I speak to you, I write that in my diary.* Jamila, on the other hand, when I ask her later in the year about maintaining her personal home reading and writing, appears somewhat overwhelmed by the chaos of family life: *in the morning I go school and then I come back – go mosque. The minute the mosque finishes the house starts. I don’t have time.* And later when I ask her if she has done a small task we agreed on she says. *‘Miss I was very very busy. Mum - mum goes course innit to learn English and my*

*Dad goes to his friend's house. Nobody cooks and then at nine o'clock I have to go to bed.*

*The light's off.* All the children mention mediation in family literacy by siblings, uncles and cousins. Essa talks relatively more about his parents' literacy and talk around texts. He says that his parents read the newspapers 'all the time', and he can name the one they get – *the Mirror*. Fouad also talks of his uncle reading the Sunday Mirror. In fact for Fouad his uncle appears to be the major literacy broker - the one he asks for help with reading at home. However, he is only available to help in summer, when he comes to stay from his home in Yemen. Jamila says the papers '*don't come to her house*'. It appears that she means the free local paper and may not realise that one can buy newspapers. Essa is the only child who mentions library visiting : the family go to the library weekly, his sister likes writing and on one occasion his father buys a Harry Potter book for him, though book buying is not a regular activity it seems. Essa's mother reads critically: on my prompt about whether we can believe what we read in the newspapers he says: '*Sometimes it's a lie. My mum just tells me they're lying – while she's reading it*'

The study involved weekly observations of Literacy Hour classes followed by *conversations* with the four children, the boys and girls separately, for about half an hour on each occasion. The Literacy Hour class was not recorded at the teacher's request (although field notes were taken), but provided the immediate shared context for our conversations, most of which were tape-recorded and transcribed. Within the conversations some were pedagogically focused around the preceding lesson, others widened out to discuss both more abstract matters, including politics and religion and more personal ones. Permeating and crossing these discourses were influences from popular culture, religion, and references to other languages and cultural traditions. My initially more specific questions about the links between Literacy Hour discourse and the children's conceptualisations about literacy shifted and expanded to embrace these wider concerns, motivated by my theoretical interest in

literacy both as ‘ways of thinking’ (cf Langer op cit) and as ways of doing, as social and cultural practice (cf. Barton 1994 and Street 1984, 1995 ). Consequently, following the scrutiny of many hours of recorded data, four strands emerged as a way of shedding light on the conversations in different ways, moving from fairly structured ‘on task’ talk, towards more spontaneous, less pedagogically mediated talk, which, I shall argue, permits the children’s own words and worlds to emerge more clearly. Following Kenner ( 2000) I have called this final strand ‘Literacy Worlds’.

**‘On task’ talk** These episodes are where we are most closely ‘on task’, where our conversations are framed by the immediate setting, in particular the previous Literacy Hour lesson. The texts or literacy tasks alluded to are grounded in the specific lesson we have all witnessed.

**Literacy recounts** These episodes have a different point of departure: the children’s own interpretations of their out of school literacy practices and contacts with text. They show Literacy Hour language and practices impacting on the children’s description of private literacy events, and how some of the formal categories introduced in the LH take on new meanings in the context of these private texts.

**Literacy performances.** These episodes show several of the children producing different literacy genres, what I have called ‘performing literacy’. The events are oral genres such as stories and recounts, but they have been mediated by literacy experiences and have the potential to be recreated in written form. I call them performances, because they constitute not just talk *about* practices but ‘doing literacy’, in its wider sense. For instance on one

occasion the two boys and myself created limericks ( a practice to which Essa alludes in a letter which he sent to me during the following year, cf. p. 27 below)

**Literacy worlds:** In these conversations reading and writing are located in the children's literacy worlds. I move out to the wider parameters of the children's literacy experiences, in order to capture the range of their cultural and linguistic experiences and resources. These conversations are, on a narrow interpretation of literacy, little to do with specific acts of reading and writing, but they represent emerging beliefs and values of the children, which have implications for a literacy curriculum, in suggesting the genres and topics which might resonate with and do justice to the children's life experiences.

One needs to place these vignettes within the wider context of Literacy Hour lessons which were observed over a whole school year. In the case of the 'on task' talk I have also included some field notes from the preceding lessons, as the talk relates closely to the Literacy Hour lesson.

## 1. On task talk

### *The Titanic*

This is an extract from my notes on this lesson:

*'The text of today is a ready prepared bit of teaching material which features two text types in work sheet format around the Titanic disaster. One gives a descriptive account of the ship; the parallel one is a series of journalistic accounts of the disaster with headlines and subheadings. Miss R. introduces these cuttings by talk of 'a new kind of writing'. She asks: 'What do you know about the Titanic.?' Children share experiences of the film, which brings in new terms, such as 'flashback'. The children offer their memories of the film,*

*occasionally at some length. The children are asked to imagine that they are producing a report of the event. Jamila and Varsha take a long time to get the first sentence down. On the other hand, on the next table of boys, Essa quickly produces a long account. Another boy has written an excellent piece, making appropriate use of past continuous tense to set the scene: eg. 'people were running around, screaming'. Jamila and Varsha finally produce jointly: 'I was on the Titanic. I woke up and then someone opened the door'. The notion of putting together an account with a climax or memorable point seems difficult for some of the children. Amandeep writes: 'Hi my name is Amandeep. I've survived in the Titanic. It was a disaster'*

The dialogue below shows me, identified throughout as C, thematising the Literacy Hour right at the start of my conversation with Essa and Fouad which directly follows the lesson

Notes on transcription:

Pauses over one second: (.), the number of dots indicating the number of seconds

Emphasis: \_

Omitted sections: xxx

*C: So what were you doing in Literacy Hour?.*

*Fouad: Its about Titanic... we had to write messages.*

*E: Its like an account of what happened when you were there.*

*C: Would you say it was a message or an account?*

*E: Miss said it was an account.*

*C: Right she did call it an account. What would you call a message? A message is.. is a bit different isn't it?.*

*E: You go and tell people. Somebody gives you a message and you go...*

*C: What's the difference between all these words? Any idea? (.) Well a message is a very simple thing. It may be like three lines. Or you might leave a message. Perhaps your parents sometimes leave a message at home do they?*

*F: Yeh if miss we're out and they're out and miss when we come back they leave a message like I went out and my mum and dad went out and my whole family went out and they left me a message and they said don't open the door to no-one.*

*C: Getting back to the Titanic account. We can call that a report as well but the report is what comes in the newspaper when it is written up. I think Miss R used this word. What do we call the man or woman who writes up the story in the newspaper?*

*E: The journalist.*

*C: The journalist is a good word. Or the reporter. There's a slight difference - a journalist is like picking up more information.*

The interaction is very strongly centred around the LH class: my pedagogic style echoes the class teacher's. I use the opportunity to do a mini 'genre' lesson pointing to the difference between message, account, and report. Characteristically this triggers, in several sequences, a classic three part exchange of initiation, response and feedback, as in:

*C: Would you say it was a message or an account?*

*E: Miss said it was an account*

*C: Right she did call it an account*

A feature less typical of whole class interaction follows in the turn beginning 'Yeh if miss, we're out and they're out' where Fouad's response is expanded from the minimally necessary 'yes' to produce what might have been the start of a narrative. His extended

response suggests that he is seeking out opportunities to interact with an adult, seldom exercised in class. However, I maintain managerial control and Fouad is denied this rare opportunity to complete his story.

The Titanic was a class where the learners were engaged with topic and text. Frequently, however, this was not the case, and Essa had this to say on another text about bats, later in the year:

*C: Did you find the text interesting?*

*E: No not at all, because I don't hardly see no bats. There's no point in me taking this advice*

*C: (laughs) Have you ever seen bats?*

*E: Only in TV, not in person*

*C: Can you imagine a situation where you would be interested?*

*E: If I had several bats around my house I would be interesting in calling that hot line.*

Essa resists the text but in doing so produces a discourse of critique. That is, he spontaneously elaborates and justifies his response, at the same time as producing a more formal register than he would use with his peers, as in 'not in person' and 'there is no point in...' He skilfully handles the dialectic between the spoken and the written, which Halliday (op cit) talks of as 'heteroglossic'. *The Titanic* and *Bats* were pedagogic, work sheet format texts designed for teaching specific aspects of the NLS. They were 'authentic like' rather than actually occurring texts, in that they represented recognisable genres such as 'report' and 'recount'. In the next section, *Literacy Recounts* Varsha and Jamila talk about the texts they encounter or create in leisure time outside school. In these interactions the point of departure is not the LH but the children's private literacy experiences.

## 2. Literacy recounts

### *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*

*C: Is it fiction or non-fiction (ie. Sabrina and the Teenage Witch)?*

*J: Its fiction and they make a bit up*

*V: Sabrina is real. She's a real girl.*

*C: Hang on, why do you say she's real?*

*V: Cos she came on Nickelodeon. They showed these series on Nickelodeon, and when they voting on which ones you want to see, the ones you voted for they come on the show. That's how I know the characters in here are real.*

*J: Miss I wanted to say. This is fiction because its not in computer its not in internet - its real girl xxxxx*

*C: Well let's think about this in terms of fiction and non fiction. Are there witches in the real world?*

*V: No*

*J: There is! (hesitates) Is there?*

*C: I don't think so. The actors are real*

*V: but what they're doing is not real...magic*

*C: They are actors and they are playing - what do we call them when they are playing someone?*

*J: Drama*

*C: Its a drama and... what do we call the people?*

*J: Characters.*

*C: So is Sabrina a real person or a character?*

*V: She's a real person but what she does is fake*

*J: Yes she's a person . She doesn't do magic but she is a real girl. She lives in America. She's a real girl like you Miss.*

This conversation has arisen from the girls' personal reading of a text *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. This text derives from a TV series and is therefore not a novel with an original, invented story which the girls would understand as unequivocally fiction; on the other hand it has fictional elements such as magic and witches, interwoven with a photonovella like realism, suggested by the reproduction of images of characters seen on the TV screen. It is an example of what Buckingham (2000) calls 'trans-media intertextuality'. For this reason my insistence on focusing on the conventional distinction between fiction and non-fiction, much discussed in the NLS, leads to confusion. Some years ago Applebee (1978) in a classic study of the child's concept of story, talked of the emerging and changing understandings of fact, fiction and fantasy in children's lives. Here it becomes clear that many contemporary genres resist these traditional classifications. Texts like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* are hybrid texts. As another ten year old said at the time: 'they are a cross between the two, (that is, fact and fiction) like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, - started on TV and then they make a book out of it'. The hybridity is not simply across different media, - screen and printed linear text- but relates to authorship. These are multiply authored texts. In one earlier *Sabrina* text we found it hard to discuss authorship – the pedagogic task I had embarked on - because of the long list of names who had contributed to the production of the *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* text, which was described as a *novelization* - a text derived from a TV show. A further example of the fact/fiction dilemma, this time from a conversation with Fouad and Essa, shows other kinds of difficulties with conventional genre classifications.

*C : We need to make a difference between fact and fiction*

*Fouad: Harry Potter is fiction - I mean non-fiction*

*C: Non fiction or fiction?*

*Essa: Confusing!*

*C: In fact I gave you another word. 'Fantasy'. Because wizards don't exist at all.*

*F: There's no such as wizards.*

*E: This other movie I went to see it was about fairies and they said it was a true story. It wasn't a tale.*

*C : Do you think fairies exist?*

*F : They are real Miss.*

*C: Are they. Fairies are?*

*F: Yeh Miss - because in our Koran...*

*E: That's angels!*

Applebee ( op cit) notes how children might draw on biblical narratives to interpret stories and here, similarly, the Koran provides Fouad with an interpretative framework. Essa appears to resolve Fouad's terminological confusion in 'That's angels'!. Yet the dilemma regarding the status of religious texts recurred on several occasions during our conversations. For two of the four children- Fouad and Jamila - the Koran played a major role in daily life. While religious texts may not be culturally viewed as 'fact' in the manner normally understood, to call them 'fiction' is likely to seem disrespectful.

All the children created their own texts in leisure time, either jointly or individually. Essa wrote lengthy stories, influenced by TV dramas, and as the boys developed a closer friendship over the year they collaborated at home to produce computer generated texts. Here

Varsha and Jamila recount the experience of creating their own texts, for pleasure and relaxation.

### ***Writing Stories***

*C: Do you ever do any writing yourself? Do you write stories yourself?*

*V: Yeh at home in my note pad*

*C: What kind of stories would you write?*

*J: I write - I got a pad*

*C: Let Varsha finish. What sort of stories do you write?*

*V: Ghost stories*

*C: And what sort of stories to you write Jamila?*

*J: Miss do you know everyday when I'm like not sleeping but I go every day nine o'clock to bed cos my house is just past the road and I go nine o'clock to bed and at eight o'clock I start writing. I got a little pad - a book and miss I write ghost stories, creepy stories and...?*

*C: How long are these stories you write?*

*J: About, ...just a page or something - no like two or two and a half pages.*

*V: I like to write my stories. If they're ones that I like, really like, then I write about five or six pages. If I don't like the story I just make a short ending.*

*C: You don't show these to Miss R at school do you? No? Why not?*

*J: I don't ....?(laughs)*

*C: These are just stories for you that you write for yourself?*

*J: Miss at home yes. If I just write my story and I don't have time to rub it out and I just hate it I quick end it. And then I write it again. No I do it and then when I write my story really nicely, really long and nice. But I don't write it like... 'and then the bears (?)' - .*

*something like that . I just do it exciting and then at the end I just do a quick poem and I do the blurb next to the poem.*

*V: Yeh, blurb at the back I do it. I get my papers and when it is at the back I don't do a picture - I just do the blurb.*

*J: When my sister cries I have to read it to her*

*C: So you write a story that you read to your sister*

*J: Yeh I write and then she - I say 'I don't have time to read it cos I 'm gonna get late for bed' but she just cries, 'I want to listen to it'*

As with the viewing/reading of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the children are talking about personal, contextually embedded literacy events. Writing here serves a private function. Jamila is writing the stories for herself; it is her sister who demands they be read aloud to her, showing incidentally the role of siblings as co-constructors of literacy events described by Gregory (1996). Secondly, although English was, it will be recalled, vetoed in Jamila's home, in its written mode it serves as a private language in that domain of use. That is, there is not a readily predictable home/school differentiation of function by language. Moreover, even though spontaneous and personal, the event is nonetheless mediated in its recounting by the Literacy Hour discourse, although I as pedagogue and the girls pursue different agendas. My interest is in genre: 'what *kind of*, what *sort of* stories do you write?' What is salient for the girls are, however, more contextually specific genres such as 'blurbs'. Finally, this vignette can be read against the very different school literacy practices which are being compared here, by implication: 'I don't have time to rub out'; 'I just do it exciting'. It is noticeable that the girls produce far more writing than the laboriously produced and brief text in the *Titanic* lesson

### 3. Literacy Performances

In this section two literacy vignettes show two of the children Essa and Jamila producing what I call literacy performances. Though produced without planning or rehearsal, unlike conventional performances, they are generically distinctive monologues which draw on some of the more fully structured language we associate with written texts.

Here Essa is describing how he learnt about poaching, a new word/concept before he came across a story by Roald Dahl on which his own text here is heavily dependent.

#### *Poaching*

*Essa: In poaching there's an art to it. You know they're catching pheasants – birds and you can't use a gun because the keepers will catch you in the woods so there has to be, you know, another way. So one of the method is – pheasants like they really like raisins*

*C: like....?*

*Essa: raisins*

*C: raisins?*

*Essa: Type of fruit*

*Fuad: They come in Cadbury Fruit and Nuts*

*C: Oh I misunderstood I thought you said: Pheasants are like raisins. ...(they laugh)*

*E: Method number one is you know get a horse hair out of a horse's tail and then you put like you get the string and you put raisins through them so that when the pheasants eat one you pull it and then just grab it. I like method number two cos method number one's complicated, so number two is a type of a paper cone and then you put glue inside it and you stick the raisins on it and then the pheasant sticks his head into it and then it gets stuck and his eyes are glued to the paper and they just stand there.*

*CW: (to Fouad) Do you know what pheasants are?*

*F: No.*

*C: (to Essa) Could you explain what pheasants are?*

*E: They're some type of pigeons – birds. They're related to the bird family. A type of bird.*

*C: It's a rather beautiful bird*

*E: Yes its red and green.*

Essa here performs the genre of explanation, incidentally doing a bit of poaching himself as he draws closely on Roald Dahl's original story. However he recontextualises it to produce academic, school specific register, as he responds to my query about raisins with 'type of fruit', and similarly volunteers 'type of pigeons –birds' where the particular case is linked to the general category. Essa draws on a classificatory system of the kind which Bernstein claims is typical of middle class rather than working class children (Bernstein 1996: 33/34). Fouad, on the other hand, answers- more typically of the four children -experientially, by referring to a popular chocolate bar.

My second example of skilled literacy performance gives the floor to Jamila as a story teller. She has just told the story below in Pashto and now immediately renders it in English as follows

***The story of Mullah Masadeen***

*“There was once a man called Mullah Masadeen. His wife told him go and buy some rice. He got it and he was passing the road to go home and the car goes deed deed deed (beep beep beep) for him to move – and in our language deed deed means ‘throw it on the ground’. So he just made it fall everywhere and when he went home his wife goes : Where’s my rice ? and he said ‘ Well the car told me to deed deed it and I had to deed it.’ And his wife told him to go and get rice again”*

Jamila's fluent bilingualism and knowledge of stories enables her to provide a skilled rendering first in her own language, immediately followed by a spontaneous translation, incidentally making her text meaningful to her monolingual addressee, with 'and in our language ... means..' Her cultural and linguistic resource comes from a home where stories from the country of origin continue to be retold. However, the skill evidenced in Jamila's performance is liable to go unacknowledged in mainstream schooling. I did not see this kind of skill and resource being exploited by school and certainly not within the Literacy Hour. In contrast, Essa's extensive personal reading and writing is more visible in class, more clearly acknowledged within LH discourses and practices and the cultural and linguistic capital to which his skilled performance testifies is fully acknowledged by his class teacher.

In the final set of vignettes I look at cases where the children draw more particularly on their resources as members of non mainstream language and cultural groups. They are engaged in literacy events but not talking about the Literacy Hour or even school literacy directly. I call this section: *Literacy Worlds*, as it presents a wider picture on some views of the children on matters of religion, race and politics

#### **4. Literacy Worlds**

Much of our discussion during the conversations was about the kinds of things the children wanted to read- not so much specific texts as text genres. The matter of genre is given much emphasis in the Literacy Strategy, so it is suggested that, in year five for instance, children should be introduced to myths, legends, letters, commentaries and persuasive writing. On the matter of topic, however, judgements are left to teachers. Early in the school year the children had been reading *Journey to Joburg*, by Beverly Naidoo. At the time I noted that when Miss R, mentioned the pass laws in South Africa, Essa had

responded sotto voce with 'is that true'? I interpreted this to mean: Can this really be true.? – an invitation or opening arguably to the addressing of political issues. Recalling this and the fact that the two boys, especially Essa, are very well informed about world events I brought in a copy of a simplified version of Cry Freedom about Steve Biko. This was the boys' response:

*Essa: Its kind of rude about black people*

*Fouad: It happened ( ? ) time ago*

*E: reads 'Black people must not give in.. they must find a way to develop'...*

*C: In what way? ( meaning in what way is it rude about black people)*

*E (reads) 'Black people....'*

*E: I just don't like these comments*

*C: Do you want to say why not?*

*Essa: no*

In view of the level of Essa's response to other texts and situations it is unlikely that he has not understood the text he reads, even at first sight. I take him to be saying that he does not want to be positioned by me as 'black', or as *only* black. I quote the example here to make the point about the importance of allowing children spaces to take up different kinds of identities through the reading and writing they are presented with. On this occasion I misjudged what Essa would respond well to. There was no hostility, just resistance and we moved on to consider other kinds of texts. There were surprises of another kind: I had not expected Jamila and Varsha to be as interested as they were in bible stories. On one occasion, after their reading of a collection of abridged bible stories which the girls had chosen to read and to talk about, I asked:

*C: Do you think its important to read about other religions?*

*J: Yes, its very important.*

*C: Why' s that?*

*J... Its sad to be like rude to somebody... miss when you learn about other religions its good when you grow up, Miss.. teach you to respect other religions ... and you shouldn't be racist.*

*V: Respect all religions*

.....

*J: We've been to the Gurdwara. We're going to the Church.....I wanted to go to the church and then to Thorpe Park ( Thorpe Park is a popular fun fair near London)*

*C: Have you never visited a church?*

*J: I haven't visited.*

*C: But you've been to the Gurdwara*

*J: Miss I've been there lots of times.. they tell me to eat Roti.....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.*

Elements of reflection, enquiry and analysis, central to the wider view of literacy

argued for by Langer (op cit) , are embedded in this abstract discussion, While the girls are struggling to find a foothold in a relatively unfamiliar kind of discourse, Varsha shows an understanding that religious belief might be a matter of choice in ‘what religion were you... when you decide this?’ Jamila’s final comment reveals an ambivalence between wishing to assert strong core beliefs at the same time as respecting other religious and ethical positions. Jamila also shows an ability to move between her own religious experience and affiliation and Christianity, at one point translating between the Christian version of Adam and Eve and the Muslim one: *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 Miss.*

## **Conclusions**

The answer to the first part of my research question: how are the children’s cultural and linguistic resources taken account of by the Literacy Hour can only be tentative. In this paper I have focused on the children’s own perceptions and talk about literacy and literacy events rather than their participation in class, although I observed this on many occasions. However it was clear that the tight framing of the National Literacy Strategy, aiming as it does for comprehensive coverage of what are seen as necessary components of literacy as ‘acts of reading and writing’, allows space for only partial acknowledgement of the multi-layered history of experiences with language and content which Langer (2001) conceptualises as key to the version of literacy she proposes and which I have subscribed to here. It does not readily permit children like Jamila to display the range of her skills as a translator - both linguistically and culturally - and as a story teller and bedtime story writer. In class we see her frequently engaged with the micro elements of the Literacy Hour and such practices as ‘rubbing out’. This study suggests that it may be possible to tap more fully into the children’s particular skills as bilinguals, especially when they can move fairly comfortably

between languages, as can three of the four children presented here. Moreover all the children, as evidenced in literacy recounts and performances responded well to opportunities to be creative with language and it is likely that children in multilingual environments, and therefore more language aware, are particularly open to linguistic creativity and play. In short, while one must be careful about importing literacy practices from one setting to another, cf Moss (2001) and Burnett and Myers (2002) some skills of the children have the potential to be refashioned as part of the vertical discourse of schooling, to make the crossing from home to school. And although my study was located in one particular London school, children in migrant and ESL school contexts beyond the UK will bring equally rich linguistic, cultural and cognitive resources to mainstream schooling

Even though the conversations were framed by the Literacy Hour within school, the children's talk, especially where spontaneous and unprompted, reveals only rather elusive and fleeting evidence of impact from the NLS. Among their use of a wide range of points of reference, from traditional religious cultures, mainstream popular culture and school pedagogy, we can detect NLS influence in the use of certain metalanguage and related concepts, particularly at the level of text, which seem to have captured the children's interest and imagination. The children each had their own favoured LH talk – *blurbs* were particularly popular along with *dedications*, and references to all kinds of poetry, including rather obscure ones such as *acrostics*! On the other hand, Essa, who among the children handles the language of schooling most confidently and was judged to be a very able learner, makes less use of LH metalanguage than the other children. When I asked him directly on one occasion about the source of influences on his own literacy, he replied that the school gives him punctuation but stories he gets '*from reading and ideas in my head*'. Children might be given more public opportunities to offer views on how the Literacy Hour texts could offer stronger support to their overall literacy growth, even opportunity to critique and

evaluate, in ways which Essa volunteers in his comment on the text about bats.

So what tentative conclusions might be drawn about the literacy futures of these children? While the specific impact of the Literacy Hour remained uncertain, much clearer was the wider role of the school. School was a powerful part of children's cultural life allowing them to rearticulate values drawn from home and street. On one occasion Fouad confided to me that his mother '*is angry with the Israelis*', and yet a few weeks later he offered this reflection on his project on religion: *Miss said to us to do a project and I got a library book and it said Mohammed hated Jews and Muslims fighting each other*. Here Fouad is indeed reconfiguring and rethinking home and school knowledge and values, at the same time as using text reflectively, but this has been facilitated by project work in Religious Studies rather than the Literacy Hour.

Although my focus has been on one small group of children within one London school against the background of a relatively new educational initiative, I would suggest that links might be made with other current literacy ideologies and regimes which take reductive views of literacy and may fail to do justice to the full range of children's cultural and cognitive resources, especially when children are not from mainstream social groups. My overall impression was that for the four children in this study the Literacy Hour was a relatively minor strand in their socialisation into literacy. The complexity of this is perhaps suggested by a letter which Essa wrote to me, part of which I reproduce below, when he had just completed a term in Year Six. Here Essa weaves into the personal letter genre references to home and school literacy practices and allusions to both mainstream and minority cultural practices and tastes.

**Dear Mrs Wallace**

Hello, this is Essa writing to you. How are things, I'm felling great because Ive just got Shrek and Cats and Dogs films for Eid 😊

The[ homework we got was sooo easy and I thought year six homework was going to be difficult, did you? I remembered one night about the conversation we had about limerics and I made one up about my friend Kuldip, Kuldips, Kuldips exelent for fish and chips, did you like that? from Essa

p.s. Eid Mubarak and Merry Christmas and a happy new year! 😊.

8.080 words

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