

ASIAN CHILDREN AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL

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CONTEXT



This book is a study of the experiences both at home and at school of Asian children. The relationship between the two areas of children's experiences has been a subject of interest to sociologists as far back as J W B Douglas' *The Home and The School*. However, recent ethnographic studies such as M. Mac an Ghaill's *Young, Gifted and Black* have tended to focus on school experiences and on pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher interaction. Bhatti wanted to widen this picture by focusing on the relationship between home and school rather than treating them as different spheres.

The research was carried out in the late 1980s, and is a study of the first generation of Asian children educated in Britain. Asian communities had by this time been established in Britain for some twenty years. Asian men had often arrived in Britain as economic migrants well before their wives and children joined them. Many of them had little or no education.

There have been a number of anthropological studies of the cultural aspects of Asian migration and settlement in Britain, and others looking at the 'race relations' aspect of the consequences of settlement. Such studies are often based on a geographical area, such as Anwar's study in Rochdale and Shaw's in Oxford. From this earlier research, Bhatti takes two concepts. She points out that previous studies have tended to portray Asian communities as *encapsulated*, that is, that most of people's needs could be met within the community. This meant that contact with wider society was limited. It also provided some protection from racism and strengthened ties based on kinship, religion and language. However, 'encapsulation' is clearly less of an option for the young generation, obliged to experience compulsory schooling in a setting where their cultural differences are highly visible. The second concept is the *myth of return*. Earlier researchers had noted that many migrants said they intended to return 'home', but that somehow the date is postponed far into an indefinite future. This contributes to a sense of existing between two worlds.

With regard to education, some Asian children, notably from Indian backgrounds, do better than the national average, while others, especially Bangladeshi children, on average do worse. These statements are based on quantitative, national data. Bhatti wanted to question this data and explore the meanings behind it using the findings from her ethnographic research. In particular she wanted to see if the reasons for differential achievement were related to factors other than ethnicity. For example, whether the lower attainment of Bangladeshi children was due to their predominantly working class backgrounds.

METHODS



This is an ethnographic study. The children who formed the sample attended a mixed comprehensive school in the south of England which Bhatti calls 'Cherrydale' School in 'Cherrytown'. Bhatti had to negotiate access to the school herself after being turned away by two other schools. Bhatti had been living in Cherrytown for two years and partly chose Cherrydale because of informal conversations with parents whom she met through her part-time work in community education. She had a one hour interview with the deputy head before being given permission to use the school in her study. The fact that she was a qualified teacher and had taught in a secondary school were decisive in the school's positive response to her request.

Data was collected between 1987 and 1989, mainly through detailed interviews in schools supplemented by participant observation in classrooms. Bhatti also collected data from white, African-Caribbean and Asian teachers at Cherrydale. The research in school also

used questionnaires, but that with parents did not. This was because the majority of parents could not read or write English, and some could not read or write Urdu or Bengali either. For the children's home experiences, Bhatti used a sample of fifty families, interviewing one or both parents in their homes, making at least two visits to each family. The content of the interviews was negotiated, and Bhatti used a tape recorder when the respondent agreed, making notes when they did not.

The children of these families comprised 25 boys and 25 girls, from Years 9, 10, 11 and the sixth form. She chose this age group because she wanted to study children who were old enough to talk articulately about home and school. Forty four of the families were Muslim families from Bangladesh and Pakistan, and there were six Indian families, two Sikh and four Hindu. The sample contained almost all the Bangladeshi children in the school, half the Indian pupils and about a third of the Pakistani pupils. Asian children made up about 10% of Cherrydale's pupils. She gathered information from the children through questionnaires, casual conversations, observation and detailed field notes. All of the children were from families where the father was in a working class occupation or was unemployed.

As an adult in school who was not a teacher or member of staff, Bhatti was, as she puts it, 'an unknown specimen'. She spent about two and a half days a week in the school over two years. She was therefore able to witness what happened in response to both national changes, for example how teachers dealt with the new National Curriculum, and school changes, such as the loss of a third of the teaching staff over the first four terms of the research. Some, but not all, teachers expected her to act as an assistant, helping with small groups for example, and she did this rather than become an unwelcome visitor.

As a young Asian woman, Bhatti had a different standing with the various categories of people involved in the research. For parents, she was a younger woman who had daily access to their children and their children's school and was known to be bilingual. She was trusted with knowledge of some confidential family matters, and was often asked for information not only about the education system, but also about social services, health, housing and so on.

For teachers, she was a researcher whose position in the school was never formally made clear by the senior staff; as a Pakistani woman as well, she was regarded at least at first with curiosity and suspicion by some (for example, when seen speaking Urdu and Punjabi with children at break times). However, her presence was gradually accepted, and she got on well with some younger white teachers and the African-Caribbean and Asian teachers.

Her age, sex and ethnicity helped her befriend children from different backgrounds, truants and 'deviants' (including a group experimenting with drugs) as well as those on the path to degrees at universities. Some visited her at home after their exam results, and others told her that they could talk to her about things they could not discuss with their teachers, not even the Asian teachers. The children saw Bhatti both in school with themselves and with teachers, and at home with their parents, and so perhaps got to know her better than parents or teachers.

KEY FINDINGS



Bhatti did not reach any single explanation of the relationship between home and school in Asian children's lives; that was not her intention and would be a simplification anyway. Rather, she shows some of the ways in which home and school are connected, and some of the ways in which Asian children negotiate their way between them. In doing so she gives a voice to Asian children.

THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS

All the parents felt they lived in two worlds, one in Britain and another 'back home'. They had many financial commitments, including providing dowries for daughters, but those who could afford to visit 'home' did so as often as possible. They valued their culture, language and religion and felt that these were not respected in Britain.

Asian parents had a high level of respect for teachers, an attitude derived from their home countries and transferred to Britain. It did not always extend to the Asian heritage language teachers at Cherrydale who were thought of as not 'real' teachers. Parents felt they were not informed properly about their children's progress at school, and wanted guidance on how to help their children with school work. They also wanted to see their

children's work, to see what was being taught daily or weekly. Some were surprised by poor test and exam results after reports that were generally positive. They wanted the school to concentrate on reading, writing, speaking 'properly' and subjects that would help the children find a job, and also to provide moral education. The help they could offer their children with school work when they had had little or no opportunity for schooling themselves was limited. Parents would have liked to be able to contact an Asian teacher during school time. Often their children did not give them letters and invitations from school, tearing them up on the way home because they would 'not be understood'.

Overall, Asian parents knew almost nothing about their children's daily experience of schooling. They did not know about setting and streaming, about governing bodies, or understand the discipline code, or know about the existence or role of careers teachers. However, they continued to believe the school was basically a force for good in their children's lives.

They did not know how to approach the school or teachers, so avoided contact unless it was essential. Those who did visit the school found it unwelcoming, and often began to discover the extent to which they had been, as they would see it, too trusting of the school. This mother found her son in a shopping centre during school time:

'I nearly cried. I just took him back to school on the next bus and asked to see his from teacher. And do you know something terrible, they did not even know he was missing! I was shocked, so shocked! They didn't care about him and he is only a child and he needs help. Can you imagine what I felt?'

(page 92)

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDREN

The Asian children had often had very positive experiences of primary school. They spoke warmly of particular teachers and of white friends. Often they had lived close to their primary school, making it possible to go home for lunch. Secondary school meant longer travel distances and the possibility of unpleasant experiences. One cause of unease at primary school had been religious assemblies (all had attended Church of England schools). They had learned that schools had no interest in their parents' culture and religion. Almost all the Muslim children had been, or still were, going to a mosque and they valued it as a place where they could be themselves, although they did not always enjoy the religious teachings.

Some Asian children felt they were not understood by their parents. For example, parents (especially fathers) might talk about their experiences in schools 'back home' and draw lessons from this for their children, but their children struggled to see the relevance of this for them. Visits to the Indian sub-continent could not be the same for the children as for their parents, who were able to show their success and achievement in settling in Britain. They felt they could not talk about their holidays 'back home' with teachers or non-Asian school friends. The contrast between Cherrytown and 'home' was too stark, and the experience often a confusing one:

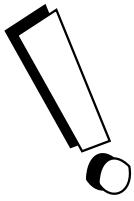
'There are lots and lots of you and they don't call you Paki. But you don't speak proper language and the children look at you when you talk Punjabi with an English accent.'

(page 125)

Only two of the fifty children have ever been abroad except to their families' countries of origin, and both of these were school trips.

The children had to cope on their own with racism because the school failed to acknowledge it and they felt they could not tell their parents about it. Both sexes felt that unless there was actual violence there was no point telling teachers, boys talked about 'sorting it out on their own' while girls tended to hide their worries and become even more anxious. Girls were expected to help their mothers, and later to work and go to the sixth form. They often went into jobs they were unprepared for, and Bhatti suggests they might have been better prepared for the world of work had they socialized more with the white working class girls at school who looked forward to entering employment.

IMPORTANCE



Bhatti brings to light the hidden damage done to young Asian people's lives by an education system that fails to recognize what is needed to provide them with equal opportunities. Bhatti says, 'If the sixty teachers at Cherrydale School are taken as a random sample of teachers in British comprehensive schools, they show with a very few exceptions a remarkable lack of interest and support for Asian children'. This needs to be addressed, suggests Bhatti, through teacher education, and through recruiting teachers from the Asian communities. At present, the experience of schooling is unlikely to lead to many young Asian people considering teaching as a worthwhile profession, and so there are very few role models. Bhatti also draws attention to the problems Asian parents face in dealing with schools and in trying to support their children through education.

Above all, Bhatti gives us the point of view of both Asian parents and their children. The parents, often poorly educated themselves and in low paid employment if working, come across as eager to support their children and help them build better lives, yet frustrated by their lack of knowledge of school, the school's lack of interest in them, and the gap between their own experiences and their children's. The children move between different worlds, adopting different images for different contexts, somehow negotiating a path through a school system that thinks 'equal opportunities' means not acknowledging their families and communities, and the expectations of parents who find it hard to understand their daily experiences.

EVALUATION



This is a powerful and moving book because the voices of the parents, children and teachers come through so clearly. Bhatti is too modest about her own achievements, holding back at times from pointing out the real consequences of the situations she describes. The issues that might be assumed to dominate discussions of the schooling of Asian children in Britain – Islam, single-sex schools and uniform issues – are shown to be relevant but of consequence only as part of a far more complex picture of conflicting demands on Asian children. In studying children, Bhatti also provides illuminating insights into the lives of their parents too.

Although the book is about Asian parents and children, there are several occasions on which Bhatti points out that the problems described apply to other people too. It is not only Asian parents who are made to feel unwelcome and ignorant when they visit schools, for example. There are more general issues raised here about the culture of British schools, the assumptions they make and the kind of interactions they have with children's parents.

This research took a long time to reach print in book form, and some of the situations and relationships described here will have changed. There are, for example, probably fewer children entering school with no knowledge of English; on the other hand, there had been no great increase in the number of Asian teachers. Government changes designed to empower parents will have been of limited use to many Asian parents. This remains a highly relevant book.



QUESTIONS

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 What is meant by 'the myth of return'?
- 2 What does it mean to say that a community is 'encapsulated'?
- 3 How did the role taken by the researcher vary according to the groups she was studying?
- 4 Why were questionnaires not used with Asian parents?
- 5 What methods were used with Asian children?
- 6 Why did Asian parents have considerable respect for teachers?
- 7 What problems did Asian parents face in trying to understand their children's experience of school?

ANALYSIS

- 1 Discuss the effect of a 'negotiated' interview schedule on the reliability and validity of the study.
- 2 Suggest reasons why Bhatti's request to carry out her research was turned down by two schools.
- 3 How might Bhatti's sex, age and ethnicity have affected the research?

- References
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