

## **Chapter 7**

### **Researching learning in and out of school: a narradigmatic approach**

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#### **Introduction: multi-layered stories of learning in and out of school**

Bruner (1987) proposed that as human beings we construct ourselves autobiographically and he asked us to give no less importance to narratives than we do to other representations of experience. Dhunpath (2000) proposes a new paradigm for research in education with the increasing use of narrative approaches and names this a “narradigm”. In this chapter I draw on a child’s and a mother’s narratives of learning to explore experiences of learning mathematics in and out of school in the context of a minority ethnic, multilingual family in a UK city. Part of this piece of research involves an interweaving of my own story as a researcher investigating others’ learning lives, as I acknowledge Squire’s (2008:16) observation that stories emerge from interactions between storyteller and listener and researcher and research participant. I also acknowledge Kohler Riessman’s (2005) attention to the value of the researcher’s reflections on the processes involved in engaging in narrative research; following in her footsteps, part of my goal here is to produce a “narrative about narrative research”.

In the chapter Saqib, his mother Farah and myself are not the only narrators, however. This layering effect is added to by the fact that the research was conducted within a multilingual home (Punjabi and English were used) and I collaborated with a community interpreter whose perspectives on the research contributed to the narrative-laden accounts generated. My focus in the chapter is therefore to explore both the insights into learning provided in the stories of Saqib and his mother Farah and also to consider the processes involved in producing the narratives which all four of us created.

The urge to recount our life stories is a strong one and it manifested itself in the stories of learning experiences which are explored in this chapter. The stories were elicited as part of a large Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) funded research project looking at Home-School Knowledge Exchange in primary education in two cities, one in England and one in Wales. The project extended over a period of 3 years and had as its goal to explore children's learning lives at home and at school and to explore the extent to which these two worlds might be brought closer together to the overall benefit of children's learning (Hughes 2002). The project focused on literacy, mathematics and the transfer from primary to secondary school, reflecting concerns within primary education at the time of the project design in the two policy contexts of England and Wales. The project team was large and our collaboration brought together teachers, children, parents, teacher-researchers, and university researchers (see acknowledgements at the end of this chapter). Only a small part of the data gathered in the project is explored here for the

reason that each research encounter provided rich opportunities for exploring learning stories and I choose to focus on a family I got to know over a period of two years. In the broader project multiple methods were used for gathering data and methods and findings are reported elsewhere e.g. Hughes and Pollard (2005), Greenhough and Feiler (2005) Feiler et al (2007) and Winter et al (2009).

Further background to the Home-School Knowledge Exchange project (HSKE) is given here to provide contextual information to explain the initial motivation to engage with children and their families about their learning in the way explained in this chapter. The research used methods such as case study, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, participant-produced videos and testing of attainment and disposition. There were two project teams: a group of 'teacher-researchers' who worked closely with schools within a loose action research paradigm to develop activities bringing school life and home life closer together. The second team consisted of educational researchers whose work involved quantitative and qualitative studies of learning and perceptions of learning on the part of teachers, children and parents.

It is a case study of one child and his family carried out by me (a member of the researcher team) that forms the basis for this chapter. Unlike the already cited works which report the HSKE project in terms of substantive and methodological findings for the academic and teaching communities, this chapter provides a personal reflection on my experience of researching home-

school knowledge exchange and learning and the opportunities it provided for me to engage with notions of power and identity in learning and researching in one family's home. As such there may be aspects of out of school learning from the case study reported which are being newly reported here and other aspects may have been written about and discussed in previously published sources.

### **Researchers and identities**

In her exploration of the definition of narrative Elliott (2005: 4) identifies that narratives, as well as being chronological and meaningful representations of events, they are recounted in a social context for an audience. The understandings then of who the audience is or are is important and raises questions of researcher roles and identities. The question of how I negotiated my positionality as a researcher in this study of learning out of school connects with other researchers' considerations of researcher roles and identities both in the field of study and in written accounts of research. As a researcher I asked myself how I should present myself to research participants and as a writer I reflected on how to report the richness of the interactions within the home setting and where my impressions of those encounters belonged within the accounts I have generated for personal and a more public readership.

Examples of other researchers' work that have stimulated my reflections in this area include Crozier (2003) who discusses being a white, middle class

female and a parent of a mixed race child investigating black parents' views of their children's education. Crozier questions the rights of researchers to explore their participants' lives and experiences and considers the responsibilities of researchers in representing others' lives in their writings. Frankham (2001) gives consideration in her research into young gay people's stories of coming out, to her position as a heterosexual female, albeit one with insights into so-called marginalised experience. Within the research accounts I present here, my identities as a parent, as a former teacher, as a university researcher, as a white female, emerged for me as factors framing issues being studied as well as ethical issues. Questions I asked myself at various stages of the research process, that is to say during interviews, while reading through transcripts, reflecting on encounters and writing about the encounters included:

- *How do we perceive each other?*
- *Which of our multiple identities are we foregrounding?*
- *Why are we telling each other these stories?*
- *How are our perceptions of the encounters shaping what we are telling each other?*

While I primarily engaged with Saqib and Farah about issues relating to the learning of mathematics (due to the focus of this part of the HSKE project) and learning in and out of school in general, the question of how each of us constructed ourselves emerges as influential on the stories told. Similarly the role taken by the community interpreter as an additional participant within the

research demands consideration in terms of her influence on the stories generated, in particular linguistically. Her answers to the questions above present themselves as important in addition to my own and the research participants' responses.

The opportunities for varying identities to be explored and displayed when research encounters take place is an area I have explored elsewhere with a co-researcher (Yee and Andrews 2005). In that paper we propose that the location of a research encounter can shape interactions within it and in our research on the HSKE project the home environment played a distinctive role in this shaping, according to our perceptions. Researchers' impact on data and their research participants, in particular when the research takes place in an authentic setting such as the home, is explored in the work of other writers. Shah (2004) discusses the ways in which an interviewer may be conceptualised as an *intercultural intruder* by their intervention within a specific setting in order to engage with their research participants by asking questions which may involve interactions crossing unseen cultural boundaries. In the case of the HSKE project all homes could be seen to have their own cultural characteristics or to be "small cultures" in the sense defined in the applied linguistics literature by Holliday (1999) thus having their own norms which may not be apparent or familiar to the researcher. Heath (1983) has also had a particular effect on my reflections of working on the HSKE project by her observations of the effects a researcher may have on their research participants in a particular setting as she expresses below:

Every anthropologist involved in long term fieldwork has to recognise that his presence affects in some ways the on-going stream of behaviour of those with whom he has a long term association.

(Heath 1983: 357)

Bearing in mind these influences, when I explore Saqib's and Farah's stories of out of school learning I will take the opportunity to reflect on myself as an intercultural intruder and the cultural specificities of the home setting.

### **Eliciting Saqib's and Farah' learning stories**

In this section I present a case study of Saqib, a child in year 5 ( 9-10 years) at a UK primary school and his mother, Farah. The relationship between me and the family developed over a period of two years. As already stated Saqib appears in previous accounts of the HSKE project (see e.g. Andrews et al 2005, Winter et al 2009). Here, in addition, Farah's educational story is explored as a way of understanding Saqib's learning experiences both in and out of school.

Saqib was in year 5 (aged 10) at the beginning of the period of study and the focus of the study was his engagement in mathematics both in and out of school. I am drawing on conversations I had with Saqib and Farah and the other children in their home. A layer of complexity to these interactions and relationships was provided by the presence at my invitation of a city council-

employed interpreter who facilitated interactions between me as an English-speaking researcher and Saqib's mother Farah whose preferred language of communication was Punjabi. The literature on educational research methods has grappled with the impact and position of interpreters on data gathered and following Temple and Edwards (2002) I recognised the interpreter as part of my research process rather than denying her impact on the research stories generated. Social researchers in areas outside education have also explored issues and challenges in cross-linguistic research e.g. Bradby's (2002) work in health with Punjabi speakers in Scotland. Some of Bradby's issues such as the ways in which terms and concepts translate between different languages were relevant in the HSKE study but will not be explored in depth here.

A word is needed about the various sources of data on which I reflect and quote from in this chapter. A further word is also needed on the languages used within the interactions and texts produced as part of this research. The extracts explored in my account include audio recorded interaction which has been transcribed. In addition, I refer to a text written up by me shortly after each visit to Saqib's home and to his school which was produced for the research team in order to feed into thinking and discussion of learning in and out of school and I refer to this source as my field notes. I use the field notes together with transcribed interaction to build the narrative account here.

Discussions about the research encounters between me and the community interpreter written up as field notes are also drawn upon in this chapter as they contributed to the research stories presented here.



The interviews which took place within the home of Saqib and Farah could be said to have emerged from what Squire (2008: 16) refers to as 'story-eliciting questions'. These questions were open in nature given that I as the interviewer (speaking to Farah via an interpreter) did not know the answers to the questions I was asking. This meant that I was not, as Squire (2008: 30) terms it eliciting "obvious" stories and thus risking 'skewing' the data I gathered by applying a bias towards certain aspects of experience.

### **Where's the beginning of the story?**

The story of my encounters with Saqib and Farah needs a prologue in that contact with the family was not as straightforward as had been the case in my research encounters with other families in the HSKE project. My field notes reflected my experience and reflections:

*My early contacts with this family were via the telephone and involved leaving my desk to use a public telephone box elsewhere in the building as the family telephone number would not accept "anonymous" calls i.e. from phone numbers which could not be traced. My first thoughts were whether this could have been due to the family's experience of racism.*

In order to develop my strategy in contacting Saqib and his family, who had, via his school teacher, indicated their willingness to participate in the project

prior to my contacts, I consulted the class teacher to ask for her advice at a practical level. This seemed to me at the time to be a valuable move given that she shared the linguistic and cultural heritage of Saqib's family and might, given that I did not share these background factors, had additional insights. This did emerge to be the case however it was in an unanticipated way. The class teacher (whose beliefs about learning in and out of school were explored in Andrews and Yee 2005) gave her advice which added a new perspective to my understanding of Saqib and his family. Saqib's family in the view of his class teacher were not as supportive of him and his education as she would have wished them to be. She concluded that when contacting the family this school-oriented agenda regarding Saqib's learning could be brought up in addition. The class teacher's own professional agenda seemed at odds with my purpose as a researcher into learning. The potential pitfalls of my aligning myself with the school through the well-meaning goals of the teacher were stark at this stage in my encounters with Saqib and his family. The question of identity and my position with regard to the research participants had raised itself from this early stage in the research process.

### **Whose story?**

The prologue to this story continues with questions which were in my mind at the time as to not only how to contact the family but *who* to engage with in relation to learning in the home. Given the linguistic gap between myself and Farah this issue emerged as important. Also stories of learning in the home and other out of school settings could be recounted differently depending on

childcare and parental roles within families. The next instalment of my field notes indicates further complexities relating to who to contact and how to contact them.

*My early conversations with the family were on the telephone and if a female voice answered then a male family member was sought so that the interaction could proceed in English. The response was always positive when I asked about setting up a visit. ...*

*When I arrived at the house at the first agreed time, (in a road adjoining the road where Saqib's school is) Farah answered the door and said that she didn't speak English and, although she was smiling, she was on the verge of closing the door. I asked if there was another family member who could help us to communicate in English and she went back into the house to check. When she returned she said sorry but there wasn't anyone there who could or who was willing to interpret for us. I arranged another visit, again over the phone, and was reassured that at the time we had arranged, Saqib's dad would be there and ready to talk about Saqib and maths (in English). Although arranging visits turned out to be long-winded process for me I always felt that the family was willing to be involved in the research.*

The approach to communicating across linguistic boundaries in the HSKE project had tended to be to use project families' social contacts or resources at hand for interpretation where it was needed. This was relevant in several

families' cases given the commitment of the project to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the schools in the project and the children in those schools. In the study of Saqib I found that using the resources at hand for interpretation did not function in a way which seemed valuable:

*In December I arrived at the house on my second visit and Saqib's mum answered the door again. She said that Saqib's dad was not there but Saqib was as he was off school ill that day. I asked if we could ask Saqib to interpret for us which she agreed to. Saqib, his mum and younger brother (a toddler) and I sat together in the front room of the house where two large photos of pilgrims at Mecca were hanging on the wall. I embarked on asking Saqib to ask his mum the questions on the first target interview schedule (re home numeracy practices). It quickly became obvious that this was a less than ideal situation given that the questions Saqib was interpreting for his mum were all about him! E.g. Saqib asks his mum "what am I like?" etc. Mum and Saqib both laughed at this situation which seemed to reflect a warm relationship between them and in this context there seemed to be a camaraderie between them. As Saqib began to see where the questions were leading he added in his own answers as we progressed through the schedule. This made for an interesting meeting between myself and Saqib and his mum but meant that the data for the target interview was not exactly what had been anticipated, i.e. reflections from parents about their children's numeracy learning in and out of school.*

Reflecting on the challenges of meeting with a family member as well as Saqib who I would be able to communicate with led to the approach I eventually took. This involved recognising that Saqib's father tended to be working during the daytime so although he had the skills in English which would enable me to discuss Saqib and his learning experiences, he would be unlikely to be available. Therefore I decided to develop my relationship with Farah and approached a community interpreter who could join me for future research encounters. After gaining Farah's agreement to this idea a further meeting was set up between myself, Farah and Aisha, a community interpreter.

### **Multilingual Storying: Farah's story**

A process central to a narrative approach to social and educational research is referred to as storying and it took on a distinctive note in encounters with Saqib's family due to the presence of the interpreter who was taking an equal part in the interviewing process along with me. Our process involved the interpreter posing questions in Punjabi to Farah which had been designed in a semi-structured format by the HSKE team. The interpreter then relayed Farah's responses to me and the whole bilingual interaction was tape recorded in order for transcription to take place. Clearly this interaction could have taken place in different ways, for example, with the interpreter conveying the questions I asked and thus taking a more functional role within the interaction. My choice to ask the interpreter to work with the interview themes

and questions was to enable her to develop a more direct rapport with the research participants and thus foreground her as an active contributor to the process.

Farah's beliefs about her own and her children's education were explored within the research as a way of gaining an understanding of the wider goal of the project to seek to bring children's home and school lives closer together in order to promote their learning. The premise was that if children's learning lives in or out of school are recognised in the other setting and valued in both settings then benefits in their learning and motivation will result. Against this backdrop Farah's beliefs on education were deemed important and were recounted through narratives she offered about her past and current life, beginning with a reflection on her ability to help her four children with mathematics:

Farah (via the interpreter):

*The simple questions I understand because it's adding, subtracting, multiplication. But when it's a question written in English, I don't understand. I've studied maths up to 6 or 7 class – junior/infants, isn't it? But after that I didn't go to school but I was taught how to do basic maths. I've been here thirteen years and I've learnt a lot even in that time. Things have changed back home now. My younger sisters are doing very well in English and maths.*

Interviewer (JA through the interpreter):

*Are they here or back in Pakistan?*

Farah:

*Pakistan. I feel very bad that I've missed out on that. They're doing quite well nowadays you know about maths. It's very important to learn maths, it's their future. I want my children to learn what I missed out on.*

The interpreter below is relating to me in English what Farah has just told her about her attitude towards and confidence in mathematics in an interview which takes place a year later than the one quoted above. It is also worth pausing to note the style of reporting used by the interpreter in her interpretation of Farah's own account. The interpreter appears to fall comfortably into a storying mode by telling Farah's story for me rather than interpreting word for word what Farah says:

*Interpreter: Just basically, she feels a lot of confidence in dealing with numeracy when out shopping with friends and things. What mum is saying is that the early days were very, very difficult. But over the years she's picked up maths and English and now she's very confident. The dad's away for three months holidays and she feels she's coped very well in his absence*

Insights into the life experiences of Farah were thus conveyed through this three-way interaction between myself, Farah and Aisha in our efforts to explore Saqib's home life and the environment in which he lived.

A focus on Saqib himself and his learning stories follows.

### **Saqib's learning out of school**

As already outlined the goal of the HSKE project was to talk to children and their families about what they did in their time out of school which involved learning of some kind, formal or informal. Work in this area by writers such as Luis Moll in the USA (e.g. Moll and Greenberg 1990) has established the richness of minority ethnic children's lives which may not be recognised by schools and teachers. Moll and Greenberg use the concept of 'funds of knowledge' to describe and give respect to community knowledge and values which may differ from those espoused within schools. This concept presents a powerful challenge to the continued application of deficit models to children and families with diverse linguistic and cultural practices which are raised within mainstream education such as the UK politician David Blunkett who advocated the use of 'English-only' in the home (cited in Edwards 2004: 43).

Using a similar philosophy of valuing diversity, in the UK, Gregory and colleagues (e.g. 2004) have explored both formal and informal learning of minority ethnic children in London and raised awareness of linguistic richness in home settings and the involvement of extended family members in supporting children's learning e.g. grandparents as well as siblings. A



discussion of the possible impact of differences between home lives and learning practices and practices in schools with a particular focus on the lives of South Asian children and young people is given in Abbas (2002).

In Saqib's life out of school both notions referred to above – that of funds of knowledge residing in communities and the importance of support from the extended family played a part in Saqib's story. The richness and diversity of children's out of school lives and activities become important in a consideration of home-school knowledge exchange and relationships between home and school generally.

Saqib's father worked as a taxi driver and his class teacher commented in an interview that he was "obsessed" with cars. During the research encounters Farah talked proudly about how Saqib had collected coins dropped by passengers in his father's taxi. This insight into Saqib's out of school persona is at odds with the messages coming from school from his teacher which Farah alludes to in the following comments:

*He's got a bit naughty over the last year, there's been a lot changes, a lot of lectures and things.*

*He seems OK at home, but it's at school, especially with other children.*

Farah and Saqib recount how support for his more formal learning takes place and who is involved. Farah explains that Saqib's father tends to be the person who helps with homework when help is needed. Via Aisha, the interpreter she conveys the following:

*Because I don't understand much English, he asks dad if he gets into difficulties with schoolwork or homework.*

Saqib himself reports that his aunt who lives nearby often helps him with mathematics. Farah adds that because Saqib's aunt, her sister-in-law, attended school in the UK she was better placed to support Saqib and his siblings with their school work. Formal learning also featured in Saqib's out of school life through his attendance at his local mosque which he spent time at each day after school.

Over the period of the study lasting three years clearly the lives and interests of participants are likely to change and in the final visit to the family home I learnt of new interests that Saqib had developed. Farah explained how, under the influence of his uncles, Saqib had begun to take an interest in fashion and was expressing an interest in working as a model.

To summarise Saqib's story of learning out of school from talking to Saqib himself and his mother I gathered a picture of a lively young boy engaged in a variety of interests who was strongly supported by an extended family both in the UK and in Pakistan. As I have already stated Saqib's learning story has

been explored in other publications which set out a different image of Saqib as a learner. This alternative image of Saqib is alluded to by Farah (his being 'a bit naughty') and also by Saqib himself but features only briefly within a richer picture of his life.

### **Reflecting on using narrative methods in research into home-school knowledge exchange and learning out of school**

Dhunpath (2000: 545) reflects on the popularity of using narrative methods within educational research. She considers this to be a potential risk if the focus on the personal and individual excludes the social, political and historical issues at play in a given educational context. Hence my question to myself is whether I have overloaded the stories of Saqib and Farah with meaning and by presenting these I run the risk of inviting unwarranted generalisations being made to children and parents in similar circumstances. Dhunpath's solution to this risk is to locate biography within the larger "tapestry" of individual, community and institutional inquiry.

The way in which I address the risk and temptation to over generalise from two people's stories is explored here. Firstly, the methods used within the HSKE project sought to provide multiple participants' perspectives to come to light in the following ways. Heath's work (1983), referred to earlier, sought to bring families, teachers and researchers together as inquirers as has Moll in his work investigating community funds of knowledge. In the HSKE project a degree of collaborative inquiry was incorporated into the full study with the

use of teacher-researchers as initiators of action-based research into home-school knowledge exchange. So, a teacher researcher engaged with Saqib's class on activities which sought to increase the flow of communication between home and school. Also the use of technology by children and families (e.g. video and disposable cameras) to document their out of school learning was designed to empower them in exploring and sharing aspects of their lives that they chose to share.

In her review of the use of narratives in social science research, Squire (2008: 8) also sounds a note of caution to the narrative researcher community that we should question ourselves as to:

*Whether life events, or even life progress, can be 'read off' from the structure and contents of stories and what, in general, is the possible and allowable extent of interpretation.*

Squire asks us to reflect on the feasibility or desirability of learning from narrative data and in doing so reminds us as readers to heighten our critical reading faculties when engaging in narratives within social research.

These lines of argument become very relevant to me when considering parents' experiences of learning and any associations with their children's learning. The tapestry of Saqib's and Farah's lives comes across as complex and challenging and the encounters I had with each of them need to be considered in a non-essentialising way so that invalid perceptions of families

in similar circumstances (in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status, for example) are not generated. In terms of the wider concept of home-school relations, the stories of Saqib and Farah seem to demand to me that we cannot take a linear or unproblematic model of what communication between these two domains is applied. Questions emerge from these stories such as where family priorities lie when school plays only a small part in the busy lives of a family and where home is conceptualised given regular visits to the family's heritage country.

Research into parents and their involvement in their children's learning has been undertaken in a variety of ways, a distinctive example is the survey of quantitative research studies into parental involvement carried out by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England. Their study illustrates, for me, the strong argument for exploring issues from a range of perspectives given that method and outcome are strongly associated. The outcome of their survey was to recommend a postcode approach to targeting support for parental involvement. While the demands of policy making may be satisfied with such broad brush approaches, I remain convinced of the importance of learning from individual lives and the experiences of parents and children.

To conclude on a reflective note, I return to the questions I posed earlier regarding my positionality within the research. I questioned how Farah and Saqib perceived me and how my perceptions of them shaped the interactions we engaged in over a period of time. As Yee and Andrews (2005) proposed, it

is clear that being in research participants' homes changes the relationship between the researcher and participants as compared to, for instance, meeting in a community centre or a school. The interaction, which was planned to focus upon family practices given the nature of the HSKE research, took a personal tone with the interpreter Aisha and myself sharing family stories with Farah and Saqib in the way that our questions invited them to share their stories. In this way our sharing of learning experiences and interests and motivations allowed us to explore an aspect of the life of Saqib beyond the perception of him as 'naughty' which was one of the few glimpses of his school life which Farah and Saqib alluded to in their interactions. The goal of the HSKE project was to develop understandings of children's lives and learning out of school with the goal of bringing different aspects of their lives closer together. The complexities and richness of a narradigmatic approach provide both challenges for researchers but also allow otherwise absent insights into learning to take their place in research into learning.

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