

## **Tri-lingual 11 year olds in Hackney outperform monolinguals in reading tests and tell more elaborate stories**

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A study of language and literacy use in the Gujarati Muslim community shows that children in multilingual families have complex patterns of language use and literacy development. They speak a dialect of Gujarati in the home and the community but have very little access to literacy in that language. They become literate in Urdu to interpret religious texts, but use the language little outside religious contexts. They study the Qur'an in Arabic. Far from being confused by these experiences, by age 11 the children perform above age norms for children of a similar social background in the borough. Unusually, boys are ahead of girls in their reading performance.

The children who have encountered traditional stories through two languages rather than one tell more elaborate stories. The children who tell good stories in the community's dialect of Gujarati also tell good stories in English. However due to the lack of access to literacy in Gujarati, the children find access to literary Gujarati difficult.

The study was carried out in Hackney between 1996 and 2000. It investigated the language use and literacy practices of 36 children (aged three and a half, seven and eleven) from a Gujarati and Urdu speaking community. The study also found that cultural community centres play a crucial role in slowing down inter-generational language shift

Families who use a community centre have more literacy materials in Gujarati and tell more stories to their children.

Access to leisure activities with children who share their first language helps children maintain the use of the family language with siblings and friends.

Dr Raymonde Sneddon, who carried out the study, notes that contrary to the expectation of many English teachers, children can thrive on a complex diet of language and literacy. The children in the study demonstrated a strong awareness of their different languages and considerable insight into their different uses in their every day life. Children would benefit from having their language awareness skills more readily recognised and developed in school.

The study was carried out with 36 children and their families through:

Questionnaires and extended interviews of children and their families / observations in school, home and community settings / tape recordings in the home and in school / analyses of children's drawings, writing and story telling in Gujarati and English / interviews with elders of the community