Towards Equal Voices: Childcare Policy and Children in the Chinese and Bangladeshi Communities in an English Regional Capital

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Childcare provision in Britain has improved in terms of its quality, accessibility and affordability, but still much more has to be done, especially in meeting the needs of minority ethnic groups. Household research with Chinese and Bangladeshi families including grandparents, parents and children was conducted to account for their childcare needs. The findings indicate that, while there are a number of similarities between the two groups, there are also significant differences that influence household practices and preferences with regard to childcare. The qualitative data illustrate the diverse and dynamic nature of minority ethnic households, while also drawing out policy implications for socially inclusive childcare planning.

Introduction

In May 1998, the British Government published Meeting the Childcare Challenge (Cm 3959, 1998) which became the blueprint for the National Childcare Strategy, one of the flagship policies of New Labour. It focused on improving the quality, affordability and accessibility of childcare but was essentially part of an overall economic and welfare modernisation strategy. Local authorities throughout England were required to establish Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs), which became operational by April 1999. EYDCPs were given the task of implementing the National Childcare Strategy, which was to play a significant part in tackling poverty and social exclusion. This paper reports on in-depth household research conducted in collaboration with the Newcastle EYDCP from 2000 to 2003, looking at the childcare practices and needs of two contrasting minority ethnic groups: the Chinese and Bangladeshi communities in Newcastle upon Tyne. The impetus for the research came from a consideration of how social inclusion, especially with regard to such minority ethnic ‘hard-to reach’ groups, could be promoted through the National Childcare Strategy. Newcastle, as the regional capital of the north east of England, made a practical case study, while the two communities chosen are relatively well-established and similarly sized.

Survey data have established that the Bangladeshi community is one of the most disadvantaged groups in Britain (National Statistics Online, 2004; Modood et al., 1997), but such studies are often limited in being able to explain how decisions around paid work, childcare and bringing up children are made. The paucity of research conducted on
this subject is also partly because groups like the Chinese and Bangladeshis are difficult to access for linguistic and cultural reasons. This study makes an important contribution because it was carried out by means of in-depth interviews with members of seven Bangladeshi and eight Chinese households in each community, and included parents, grandparents, siblings and children.\textsuperscript{3} Families of different socio-economic backgrounds and family structure were chosen to reflect the wider population. In addition to this household research, there were two focus groups, one for Chinese women and one for Bangladeshi women, and interviews were conducted with community representatives.

This study highlights the fact that policy decisions are often based on a limited understanding of the transnational nature of minority ethnic communities and the effect of generational differences on family ideology resulting in variations in norms, practices and preferences. Apart from pointing out the main socio-demographic and socio-economic differences between the two communities, this article will provide a comparative analysis of the two communities concentrating on livelihoods, education and employment, religious and cultural systems, and parenting and childcare strategies. Finally, a number of policy implications arising from the research will be discussed. The article argues that the National Childcare Strategy will have an impact on the Chinese and Bangladeshi communities only through socially inclusive children’s services and childcare planning.

**The context for looking at Chinese and Bangladeshi communities**

In the United Kingdom, the Chinese population originate from all over East Asia but in recent years, there has been an increase in the proportion from Mainland China (Chan and Chan, 1997). In comparison, an estimated 95 per cent of those born in Bangladesh originate from the north-eastern district of Sylhet (House of Commons, 1986–87) and continue to do so (Gardner, 1995). Increases in the category ‘Chinese and other’, which include those of mixed parentage and smaller ethnic groups (Owen et al., 2000) have made the Chinese population more diverse than the Bangladeshi population. A range of often mutually unintelligible language varieties, including Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin, is spoken in the Chinese diaspora, while the Bangladeshis speak mainly Sylheti (Chalmers, 1996). There is also more religious diversity among the Chinese than the Bangladeshis, who are mainly Muslims.

In terms of migration history, the Bangladeshis were the slowest among the migrant groups of the 1960s to 1980s in achieving family re-unification. This is because of the need to ensure that their women-folk were well provided for in a non-Islamic society, as the protection and seclusion of women is an important religious principle (Gardner, 1998, 1995). Chinese women, on the other hand, were more accustomed to waged work than Bangladeshis and often came to the UK with older children to join their husbands to set up family businesses. So that mothers could work, children born in the UK were often sent back to Hong Kong to be looked after by relatives until they were older (Taylor, 1987). Another significant contrast between the two communities is that the Chinese are among the most dispersed of minority ethnic groups because of their independent and competitive family business set-up, whereas the Bangladeshis are more concentrated in certain areas because of their desire to be close to other members of the community and to have convenient access to mosques, schools, *halal* food shops and medical care. To illustrate, the district with the highest percentage of Bangladeshis is...
Childcare Policy and Children in the Chinese and Bangladeshi Communities

Tower Hamlets with 33.4 per cent, in contrast to the Chinese in Westminster with only 2.2 per cent (Commission for Racial Equality, 2003). Similar contrasts are apparent within Newcastle, where the largest concentration (11.72 per cent) of Bangladeshis is in one particular deprived ward in the West End.

The implications of the above are that services catering specifically to the community have grown up around Bangladeshi neighbourhoods, whereas services for the more diverse and dispersed Chinese community are not so easily targeted. As for the development of childcare services for both communities, the nature of their labour market participation has to be taken into account.

By the time of the 1980s, both groups were mainly involved in the catering trade. However, over the years, the proportion of Chinese involved in distribution, hotels and restaurants fell in comparison to that of the Bangladeshis (Owen et al., 2000: 80). This suggests that there has been more business diversification among the Chinese than among the Bangladeshis. Another difference is that the Chinese are more likely than other groups to be self-employed (White, 2002).

According to the 2002/03 Annual Local Area Labour Force Survey, Bangladeshi men (aged 25 and over) had the highest unemployment rate at 19.3 per cent, with the figure being 4.8 per cent for Chinese men of the same age group. The percentage of Bangladeshi women who were economically inactive was 76.9 per cent, with the corresponding figure for Chinese women being 42.5 per cent. What this suggests is that the two communities differ in that the childcare needs of the Chinese community appear to be based on the economic activity of Chinese women, whereas the proportionally larger numbers of Bangladeshi children means that the childcare needs of Bangladeshi women are more likely to be based on their larger families. The research presented here will demonstrate that the situation is far more complicated than the statistics show.

As childcare policy making starts from the position that childcare needs are linked to labour market participation, we begin the comparisons between the two groups of households by looking at their livelihoods and gendered patterns of economic participation. This is followed by an examination of the impact of transnationalism on religious and cultural value systems, where cultural reproduction becomes a key concern for parents. The resultant childcare practices are dependent on whether the children are pre-school or school-going, and the part played by informal carers, particularly grandparents, is discussed. All the names used in the following account are pseudonyms.

Livelihoods, education and employment

Among the Chinese and Bangladeshi households in the research, the majority were involved in the catering trade. However, the establishment of the catering trade as the main industry for each community is such that even those who do not have a family background in catering have made it a means of livelihood at some time in their lives. In a society with structural barriers to participation in the labour market (Pang, 1993), only a small minority who had attained social mobility through education and training were able to find employment outside the catering sector and usually through self-employment.

Comparing income and employment, more of the Chinese households had dual incomes than the Bangladeshi households, and more parents were in full-time work. There were no incidences of unemployment or of part-time work among the Chinese fathers, as
there were among the Bangladeshi fathers. Among the Chinese, the majority were self-employed and one was holding two jobs and thus was both employed and self-employed. Among the Bangladeshi interviewees, only one was self-employed. This suggests that ‘being your own boss’ was achieved more among the Chinese than Bangladeshis. There was evidence that Chinese people also tended to be more competitive in their takeaway businesses, while Bangladeshis were more cooperative in the way that casual paid work was accessible through networks of kith and kin. Thus Mr Ferdousi, one of the Bangladeshi men, worked casually in a variety of roles for a friend while awaiting a business opportunity.

The mothers in each community differed in the extent to which they were involved in the labour market. Unlike the Bangladeshi mothers, all the Chinese mothers had been economically active since they left school. At the time of the research, four of the Chinese mothers were in full-time paid work, while none of the Bangladeshi mothers were. Instead, most Bangladeshi mothers did casual paid work of less than 15 hours a week. While Bangladeshi husbands’ economic participation was limited because of competition within the sector and their lack of skills, as described in their accounts, their wives were seen to be attempting to contribute to the household income in small ways. However, they were constrained by the lack of employment opportunities, childcare and wider family responsibilities, although the pattern was of cooperating across generations, particularly in three-generational households.

Three Bangladeshi mothers had university degrees from their homeland but their skills were not recognised as transferable in the context of the UK labour market. Those who were brought up in the UK appeared to have better prospects, although this again depended on the constraints of family values and commitments. Most Chinese mothers did not possess enough educational qualifications or proficiency in English to participate alongside white women in the labour market. Those who received some education in Britain in their teens still felt they were limited in their skills. As such, these women depended on the catering sector for paid work, although, for some, their childcare responsibilities limited their options. Those who did work full-time alongside their husbands were only able to do so with the help of family members.

The religious and cultural systems: transnationalism and bringing up children

The childcare needs and preferences of the households were also contingent on their religious and cultural identities and value systems. The Bangladeshi households, while differing in other aspects such as class, size and composition, were held together with respect to their language and religious beliefs. In their social self-identification, individuals used a variety of terms, e.g. Bengali, Bangladeshi, Muslim and Asian. The Chinese were more diverse than the Bangladeshis in terms of their origins, but most subscribed to the ideology of the family-as-a-unit that finds its basis in Confucianism, and all except the British-born described themselves as ‘Chinese’. Children were taught to put their family first, help in the house and not be ‘irresponsible’. Both Bangladeshi and Chinese communities are patriarchal in essence, but variations exist that are the result of their migration history, the nature of their employment and the changes in their
values and lifestyles as a result of being in a Western country. For example, among the Chinese households, less hierarchical forms of family relationships were found, and the unemployment of Bangladeshi men coupled with their transnational responsibilities undermined their patriarchal role. For example, Mr Ahmed spent extended periods of time away from his family because of his ailing mother in Bangladesh, leaving much of the running of the household to his able wife.

Patriarchal beliefs originate from the traditional Chinese value system in which according to *yin-yang* philosophy, a Chinese woman is destined to please and serve her husband (Li, 2000). The patriarchal set-up in Bangladeshi households owes in part to the Islamic teaching that ‘a woman’s responsibility is to ensure her children and husband’s comfort by sacrificing her own’ (Khanum, 2001). However, with migration, a new bride, whether Chinese or Bangladeshi, is often unable to fulfil her traditional responsibilities in the new unfamiliar social environment, particularly when traditional support structures of female kin are not available. A greater sharing of roles then occurs, with the husband taking on more domestic and caring responsibilities. On the other hand, the effect of not wanting to repeat the less-than-ideal family separation as in previous generations leads to a return to more traditional home-based female roles for some Chinese women.

Another kind of variation observed comes from being brought up and educated in Britain. Bangladeshi women are perceived of by their community as needing to be ‘protected’, but those of the English-speaking ‘parent’ generation are breaking out of this traditional mould. Often, this is for practical reasons, as they are the intermediaries at the boundary between two cultures. The role of these Bangladeshi women thus went beyond housework and childcare, as they were responsible for financial matters, for fetching children to and from playgroup and school and for shopping. There was evidence that men were involved in the domestic sphere, in cooking and childcare, but this was determined largely by the nature of their employment. The development of these roles arose out of adjustment to British society, feasibility and functional necessity, rather than reified cultural norms transplanted into another context.

Core values for both the communities found expression mainly in the parents’ concern about the impact of Western culture on their children. For the Chinese interviewees, this was perceived to affect such values as the priority of the family, disciplined behaviour and respect for those who are older. This again comes from the teachings of Confucianism, with its hierarchy of social relationships and the ideology of familism (Song, 1997). Among Bangladeshis, on the other hand, fears that their religious beliefs, norms and practices are being eroded were more prevalent. Parental concerns were much more about the learning of bad language, drug-taking and sexual license. The transmission of religious and family value systems to the younger generation was the pre-occupation of both Chinese and Bangladeshi parents, and was incorporated into their understandings and expectations of ‘education’. The Bangladeshi parents believed that education should rightly include the cultivation of religious values through the regular reading of the *Qur’an* and prayers. At home, Bangladeshi children were also socialised into gender, domestic and caring roles. For the Chinese parents who were both at work, the only time when children were able to receive formal instruction in their cultural traditions was when they attended the Chinese language school, where Chinese dance and songs are taught, and cultural activities organised.
**Parenting and childcare strategies**

From the accounts of the childcare practices of the two communities, a number of common factors structured the way families coped with the demands of parenting and childcare in the context of paid work. Two major determining factors were the ages of the children and the size of the family. For both the communities, children under the age of three were more likely to be cared for by family members (unless their family networks were non-existent or limited). The non-proximity of relatives or their employment patterns also placed constraints on family care. Most children aged three and above attended pre-school facilities, the most common of which was the playgroup. Most popular among the Bangladeshi parents was the local playgroup, which caters specifically to the needs of minority ethnic children and their parents.

In the context of increased expectations of the role of parents in their children’s education, Chinese and Bangladeshi parents often struggle because of their minority ethnic status. There were some parents with resources to support their children but others were limited by their class and educational background. To make up for this, in a further commitment to see their children succeed, some parents from both groups invested in private home tuition for their children. After school hours, children participated in various community activities, but with the Chinese children, because of their greater dispersal in the city, such community specific services were not so readily accessible.

With large families, the burden of care for Bangladeshi parents was greater when the children were young. When children reached primary school, however, older siblings were trained to take on household responsibilities and childcare. The Chinese families in the study had fewer children and their involvement in housework and sibling care was not as common as in the Bangladeshi families. Apart from family size, other differences that were the result of inter-generational relationships were also interwoven as factors in parenting and childcare practices. This was observed both among the Chinese and the Bangladeshi families. With the nature of the catering trade operating during unsocial hours, the negative impact on working parents’ relationships with their children was a matter of concern for both communities. For the Chinese, the relationship between children and their grandparents, particularly grandmothers, thus was more significant in the three-generational household, where both parents were involved in the family business (Baines *et al.*, 2003; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). This was different among the Bangladeshis where mothers were less involved in paid work. As Anisa (aged nine) in the household interview confided:

‘I wish our mum went to work and our dad spent more time (at home) and they’ll swap over.’

Apart from their dependence on grandparental care, one characteristic of Chinese mothers in paid work was their ability to manage the care of their children by exercising *creative flexibility* in their workplaces, where children were sometimes cared for by employees, or put to sleep close by in adapted work environments. Sometimes, safety was an issue, as leaving children under the age of five upstairs while the parents worked downstairs in the takeaway could pose serious hazards. On the other hand, Bangladeshi women had heavier family responsibilities with their larger nuclear and extended family networks. When out of work or in part-time or casual employment, Bangladeshi husbands were then available to assume some household and childcare responsibilities.
Making choices about childcare and children's development

Both the Chinese and Bangladeshi communities agreed on basic issues about childcare, particularly the ability to trust their children to the care of providers, and whether it was worth paying for. As one respondent from the Chinese focus group said:

‘You have to think of the financial situation, if you have enough, then you can look after the children yourself, but, if you have to go and work, then somebody has to look after the children. But, if you give the children to somebody to look after, then you have to pay. The income and expenses is equal… In England, what you earn is just enough to cover the childcare costs.’ (Chinese focus group)

Even so, some parents of both communities allowed infants to be cared for by formal carers, but these cases were restricted to circumstances where there was no family carer available. For one Bangladeshi and one Chinese family, the paid childminders were neighbours who were trusted to care for the children. In another instance, because of the mother’s hospitalisation, the carer was accessed via a health professional. A minority of Chinese families also used formal registered childcare providers such as registered childminders, a nanny and private nurseries. Of both sets of the parents, only one lone Chinese mother claimed Working Families Tax Credit and Childcare Tax Credit to help pay for childcare.

Although Chinese and Bangladeshi parents value education highly, most did not recognise the educational element available in childcare provision. Because of their minority status, they were particularly suspicious of one-to-one childcare settings because of the element of ‘stranger danger’. According to the Chinese and Bangladeshi parents and those in the focus groups, there was a preference for younger pre-school children to be looked after by family members or relatives. In some cases, apart from grandparents, this took the form of older siblings, cousins and aunts. Institutional group settings such as the playgroup and nursery were the more preferred option when the child is older. Together with employees in workplaces who watch children, what we have is a spectrum of formal to informal care for pre-school children.

If grandparents or other kin were not available, Chinese and Bangladeshi school-going children were left home alone for periods of time and this was especially so during the holidays. Otherwise, they were ‘looked after’ by a family member, who might even be asleep after a late shift. Other than that, children had generally been able to access opportunities for extra-curricular activities and recreation through their schools and supplementary classes through their respective communities. However, many parents especially the Chinese were not willing for their school-age children to attend out-of-school clubs, youth clubs and activities. This was because of their fears about the neighbourhood and of habits their children would pick up. Some who lived in more deprived areas had fears about their children being abducted and therefore would only allow their children to attend activities if they were nearby or when private transport could be arranged.

As transnational households, the responsibility of bringing up children who knew their roots and did not stray too far away from their cultural heritage was a challenging one and a commonly recurring theme. For the Chinese parents, the key to success in this endeavour was mother-tongue maintenance, whereas for the Bangladeshis, it was the
reading of the Qur’an and the practice of Islam. For this purpose, most of the parents from both communities made efforts to send school-going children to supplementary schools, but this had not been without difficulty and extra expense, and often not with the desired results. Mr Ho for example was disappointed that after five years of his son attending Chinese classes on Sundays, he was still unable to write in sentences. Because of this, parents were forced to consider alternatives such as more visits back to their ‘home’ countries. Others resisted moving back to their country of origin and were resigned to their children losing their mother-tongue altogether. For the Bangladeshi parents, dissatisfaction with statutory provision led to efforts to send children to local Catholic single-sex schools or private schools, or Islamic boarding schools in other major cities. Thus, such Bangladeshi parents were willing to endure separation from their children for religious reasons, while Chinese parents resisted this for family cohesion.

**Policy implications**

The National Childcare Strategy was based on the assumption that childcare provision would improve labour market participation and thus social exclusion. However, the research established that Chinese and Bangladeshi parents were largely restricted to working in the catering sector with many facing structural barriers to social mobility. Most of the Chinese parents in the study were in paid work but still suffered serious forms of social exclusion such as limited access to information, health and social services. Thus, the political principle of ‘paid work’ as an answer to social exclusion is flawed. The cost of childcare was a great hindrance especially for mothers in the two communities whose work was often restricted to low-skilled poorly paid jobs in traditional economies. Chinese and Bangladeshi parents were often already paying for religious instruction and language classes as well as tuition because of the demands of education. This did not leave much for childcare, especially if there were a number of children in the family. Thus, the research findings lend a further argument for free universal childcare provision. The goal of free high-quality care for all 3–4 year olds by 2010 in the government’s latest childcare strategy is a step in the right direction (HM Treasury, 2004).

Secondly, the research shows that the National Childcare Strategy as a means of reducing social exclusion is contingent upon the cultural values, norms and aspirations of the families concerned. While understanding the core elements of these values and beliefs is important, they in turn are dynamic and variable, mediated by differences in migration histories and between generations. Social inclusion should seek to reach beyond economic goals to encompass diversity and equality (Lister, 1997). However, childcare that is available often does not fit in with the unsocial hours of the catering industry and parental aspirations. Parents assume they are not eligible for, or lack proper information about help with childcare. On the other hand, Chinese people are also more likely to prefer to be self-sufficient. Many would see tax credits as a kind of benefit and not want to accept a government handout. Also, in both communities, the nature of their livelihoods, with their informal employment of family labour, means that declaring their incomes is more problematic than in mainstream sectors.

Thirdly, this research shows that the variety of practices and preferences in the two sets of households reveals a need for a greater understanding of the role of migration and transnationalism in shaping parents’ views towards Western society and what is on offer in childcare services. Some degree of joined-up thinking with Sure Start, as well as through the setting up of Children’s Centres and Extended Schools will hopefully see that
the cultural needs of minority ethnic children are put firmly on the agenda to improve and enrich the lives of all children, whether white or minority ethnic. The setting up of the Supplementary Schools Support Service\(^6\) in 2001 has supported community and language schools in some areas and it is hoped that this will be extended to the rest of the country.

Fourthly, while the particular needs of different communities need to be respected, local authorities have a responsibility for the care and safety of children in community settings. While the use of informal childcare in these communities is to be acknowledged and valued, there are concerns around those situations in which young children are left to look after themselves, albeit in the home. Respondents seemed to regard the ‘home’ as safe space, but the Home Safety Network (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999) has reported that more accidents occur in the home than on the streets. In the interviews, there were also concerns expressed about the adult–child ratios and problems with discipline in some Qur’an reading classes held in mosques. This is a sensitive issue that needs careful negotiation.\(^7\) In addition, improved community safety in neighbourhoods could encourage attendance at out-of-school activities.

**Conclusion**

This study has shown that minority ethnic households can differ significantly between and within communities according to such dimensions as socio-demographic characteristics, socio-economic positions, livelihoods and household compositions, and family values that vary with migration histories. As for ‘childcare’ within these households, it is but one of many issues around bringing up children that Chinese and Bangladeshi parents deal with, which include child safety, educational achievement, language maintenance, and moral and religious development. Childcare as it is offered from a Western perspective, with the aim of increasing opportunities for paid work, initially did not seem relevant to many of these parents. There are, however, opportunities where families can indeed benefit, but only insofar as their concerns and views are taken into account in all seriousness. Childcare provision could aim at meeting the language and religious needs of minority ethnic children. Then again, one implication that can be drawn from this is that minority ethnic communities are not only clients whose needs have to be met, but a possible pool of labour for such services, contributing to the sustainability of childcare services, as well as a truly multicultural Britain. Such is the potential for socially inclusive childcare planning, but as long as mainstream services continue to be preoccupied with Western perspectives of education and childcare, there will be little progress along these lines.

**Notes**

1 There are altogether 150 such Partnerships with representatives from the private, voluntary, statutory and business sectors. Their main role is to produce and implement an Early Years Development and Childcare Plan to meet the needs of children aged 0–14 and their families, and to do so through the participation of parents and providers and by using the best available evidence. As the ESRC CASE student working in collaboration with the EYDCP in Newcastle, my research has largely been carried out within these terms of reference.

2 Thanks go to Jane Wheelock, Susan Baines, Andy Lie and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on this article.

3 The topic guide covered the background information of the interviewees, childcare used in the past and present, household routines, and their childcare needs and preferences.

4 Chau and Yu (2001) argue that among the Chinese in Britain, participation in the private market is the main cause of social exclusion, particularly their inadequate social participation and integration.
5 In the EYDCP Parental Childcare Needs Survey (2001), only 26 per cent of Chinese had heard of Working Families Tax Credit, and 21 per cent had heard of Childcare Tax Credit. In a similar survey among Bangladeshis the following year, the figure was 86.4 per cent for those who had heard of WFTC and 66 per cent for those who had heard of CTC.

6 http://www.supplementaryschools.org.uk

7 This is especially pertinent in the current national political climate, where concerns have been expressed regarding how Islamic teaching is passed from one generation to the next.

References


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