

look around and write about what they see and think about their own school. I also asked each girl about the school, the activities she liked, and then asked them all to write their own essays. The girls brought back their new work. It was the same essay copied all over again. When I told this to the teacher, she said, "Oh, they are supposed to write the same essay. They have no sense; they can't write anything on their own." The teacher had written the essay on the board; the girls had copied it in their notebooks and memorized it. The girls all wanted to get it right in the public exam at the end of Grade 5, the teacher explained.

My insistence that the girls use their own ideas to write the essay and my disappointment in finding out that they had neglected my directions and had copied out the teacher's essay again were based on my assumptions about the functions of writing. For me, writing in Urdu is a natural channel of self-expression and I assumed that this was so, or that it should be so, for the girls in the Chaman school as well. The girls' resistance was a message that my assumptions were unjustified in this context. Although some Grade 5 girls wrote letters outside of school, most of these letters were for parents and relatives and were dictated by others. More importantly, writing in the school was not done to express oneself but to practice and to write correctly.

Fishman (1988) reports similar resistance from children in the Amish community to writing a journal. She explains the resistance she met from the children in doing this type of writing in terms of culture specific values and functions associated with writing. Fishman (1991: 30-31) describes copying for a report writing task in the Amish school and suggests that "like workbook writing, report writing highlights what is valued and expected by the school and the community that runs it: students must work hard, stay within the lines, and get things right."

In Chaman, the school expects the children to write correctly, get the right answers, and pass the exam. For the parents as well as the community in general, passing the exam and obtaining school credentials are greatly desired goals and an expected outcome of schooling. As children repeat after the teachers and read and write only from the school text both in the Islamic school and the secular school, they learn that only what is in the text and what is expected by the teacher is right. Such belief in the authority of the text and the teacher may be explained as part of traditional Muslim education (Eickelman, 1978).

Functions associated with writing are both culture- and context-dependent. They are socially determined by cultural institutions of home, mosque, school, or village within the context of which reading and writing are practiced. Failure of children or adults to read or write according to Western assumptions does not necessarily imply

their failure, but perhaps a failure on our part to understand and acknowledge their particular context and associated practices. My observation in the school shows that the only writing that the children are asked to do in school is copying or writing from memory. There is no opportunity or encouragement for any independent expression in writing.

There were only two instances where I saw some writing that was not copied or memorized from the text. One of the girls in Grade 3 wrote "*Benazir Zindabad*" (Long Live Benazir) on the wall of the class. This was rubbed off within the day. The second instance was when the teachers found that one of the girls in Grade 4 had written some romantic verses on a piece of paper and was reading it out to a friend. Her brother, she said, had copied verses from magazines and she had gotten it from him. The teachers were very angry and threatened to report to the parents. "This is the reason your parents don't send you to school," one of the teachers said (fieldnotes, 5/30/90). Another instance of using writing at school for a purpose other than doing a lesson was observed when any of the girls was absent and sent an application for leave. These were signed in the girl's name and followed the exact format for application writing learned at school with appropriate days filled in.

An important, yet difficult point to determine within the scope of this study, is whether students (especially in the lower grades) do not understand what they read or write because they are never presented with tasks requiring textual comprehension or creative writing; or, as the teachers suggested, because they can not. In Grade 3, the children seem to have very little idea of what they are copying. Often they copy the words incorrectly or stop at half sentence, starting all over again. They do not seem to have a sense of what a sentence is. The teachers also say that the children do not understand much of what they read. This was confirmed at school when I asked the children from Grade 3 and Grade 4 questions about the text or asked them to write a word without looking in the text and they were at a loss. However, when I asked the same children outside school to read from their text and then asked them questions about it, their responses showed that they did understand several words and had at least a general idea of what the text was about. In answer to the question, "Do you understand what you read at school?" Grade 3 replied that they understood a little. Grade 4 and Grade 5 said that they understood most of the texts that they read and write.

The language of the school text is not the first language of the child nor the language of oral communication at this school. The fact that the children are required to read and write at school in a language other than the language of oral

communication certainly contributes to their difficulties in reading and writing. However, I believe that the lack of understanding of *school ka sabaq* is also an outcome of the goals of the teaching and learning in the school. Reading and writing in the school context are done to memorize, practice and reproduce texts, not to interpret and express. The text is "the outside authority to which they [the teachers and the students] are both subject" (Street & Street, 1991:152). The purpose of reading and writing at school is the mastery of the text.

Thus, literacy at school is confined to school practices which focus on the text itself and not on what it means to the individual students. This concept of school practices is implied by parents, children, and teachers in their use of the word *sabaq*. For example, when Rubina told me about how she learned to read without going to school, she said that when her brother read "*sabaq*" at home, she would sit with him and try to read the stories. When I asked her if her brother brought story books from school, she answered, "I read the stories in his school book," (7/4/90). It is interesting to note that she refers to his reading as "reading the *sabaq*" since he is doing it for school, whereas she read for herself and therefore calls them "stories."

Language at School

All oral interaction in school is in Hindko and all writing is in Urdu. Teachers give directions, explain math problems and generally talk to the children and to each other in Hindko. However, all that comprises *school ka sabaq* (reading, writing, copying, and reciting) is in Urdu. Thus, the school has a diglossic situation in which the languages Urdu and Arabic are used exclusively for writing and Hindko for speech. Except for explanation of procedures to solve math problems, which is done in Hindko, texts were never explained in either Hindko or Urdu.

English in the primary school is confined to reading and writing numbers. The narrative part of the math problems in the textbooks are in Urdu and the numbers are written in English numerals and said in Urdu.

The children pay little attention to the content and do not understand most of what they read and write at least until Grade 5. One of the reasons for this is that the lessons are in a language that is not the home language of the children or the teachers. The level of difficulty in reading in a second or foreign language is related to competence in the second or foreign language. Since there is little Urdu language input in the village, the children's competence in Urdu is minimal on entrance to the school. However, by Grade 5 those children do learn to read in Urdu with fair comprehension.

Two factors that appear to positively influence learning to read and write in a second language in this context⁹ are the closeness of structure and vocabulary of Urdu and Hindko, as well as the similarity between the writing systems of Arabic (the children's first language of literacy) and Urdu. Support for this positive influence is found in research in Morocco which found that the introductory literacy experience in the Quranic schools positively influenced children's acquisition of literacy in a second language at least in the initial stages of reading in the public school (Wagner, 1983; Wagner, Spratt, Gal, Ezzaki, 1989).¹⁰

A second reason the children do not read or write in a semantically meaningful way is that the school does not demand semantic interpretation or explicitly connect the reading to anything that they may use outside the school. The explicit goal of reading and writing at school is to pass the exam, although the skills learned at school are transferred to literacy tasks outside school.

Interaction in Class

The fixed position of the teachers and the freedom of mobility of the students influence the pattern of interaction in class. For the lower grades who sit far away from the teacher, most of their interaction with her is on an individual basis. Directions are given to the class and requests made to the teacher through a representative of the class. These representatives may be self-selected from time to time but are also nominated by the teachers based on the height or age of the girl. Teachers scarcely leave their place at the tables to go to the different grades to either give lessons or monitor children's activities.

Students in higher grades, which sit close to the teacher, have a more direct interaction as a class with the teacher. Questions can be asked of the teacher and often the Grade 5 girls would sit around to "just talk". However, even in these classes, few questions were asked directly of the teacher. In Grade 3 and Grade 5, I regularly observed a representative make decisions, negotiate with other students, begin a lesson, or tell the teacher that they were ready to recite a lesson to the teacher or take a new lesson. Homework was collected and brought to the teacher by a representative from each class without the teacher having to ask for it.

In the absence of a formal classroom setting with the teacher in the front and the children on fixed seats in rows, the children have learned to organize themselves in different seating arrangements. One day I watched Grade 5 as it changed its position from sitting in rows facing the teacher with each girl walking up to the teacher to recite her *sabaq*, to sitting in a group around the teacher who was explaining a math

problem, to rearranging in a single row in front of the teacher to do the problem themselves.

The ease of movement for the students and lack of attention from the teacher encourages a lot of peer interaction. I observed girls in *kattchi* and grade 1 sitting in pairs as one girl read and the other listened to her while looking at the book. Girls also watch each other write. As mentioned earlier, problems in reading and writing were seldom taken to the teachers. Help was sought from another classmate or from someone from a higher grade. Even Grade 5, which sat close to the teacher and received a lot of attention, asked each other for help if they had problems. The teachers delegated disciplinary as well as teaching roles to the students. Girls from higher classes as well as a girl in each grade tried to maintain discipline and brought complaints to the teachers.

I often observed events such as: a girl dictating difficult words to the class (fieldnotes, 5/27/90); one student in Grade 2 reading out sentences from a lesson and the rest of the class repeating after her (fieldnotes, 4/1/90); all students in *kattchi* through Grade 3 standing in rows and reciting math tables after a Grade 3 student (fieldnotes, 5/27/90). These modes of interaction, in which children help each other and older children help in the care and instruction of younger children, are a reflection of interaction in the community. In the village community, from a very young age, girls are responsible for taking care of their younger siblings. People help their neighbors constantly in writing letters or doing other chores. These patterns of care-taking and providing mutual help are reflected in the interaction at school.

The Teachers

At the primary school for girls at Chaman there are two teachers. Hamida is the senior teacher. She is about forty years old and has been at this school for six years. She has a high school certificate and has done the primary school teaching course. She has taught in schools in other rural areas. Many of her relatives live in a village in the area, but she does not visit them very often. Hamida's husband used to work in the Navy and she lived in Karachi for three years. He is retired now and they have lived in the city for many years. She has three children who go to English medium private schools in the Attock. She is proud of her children and often compares them to the children at school, saying how much better her children are in behavior and school work.

Khalida is the younger teacher at the school. She has been at the school for three years. She also has the high school certificate, but has not done any kind of teacher training. She is not married and lives with her parents and a brother.

Khalida's parents also come from a village near Chaman but have lived in the city for many years. Her older sister teaches at a private college and lives in Rawalpindi, the twin city with the capital. A few of Khalida's other female relatives are also teachers in schools. Her parents are fairly poor. Her father does not work any more and her only brother is a school dropout looking for a job; they can both read and write fluently in Urdu. Her mother can read the Quran but cannot read Urdu well even though she had joined an adult literacy center for a while.

Both Hamida and Khalida hire a wagon that takes them to school every day along with many other teachers who also pay a monthly fare. The bumpy ride in the crowded wagon takes an hour. The same wagon brings them back. They both want to be transferred to the city which, they told me, is very difficult to arrange. It appears that these are not the only teachers who want to be transferred from village schools. The director for girls' schools told me, "They all want to be transferred; I am overwhelmed by requests. The phone is ringing all day" (interview. 4/5/90).

Teacher Community Relationship

"God, the families are awful, you will find out. They talk against us. They say you come to teach here all the way from Attock....Most parents are uneducated. Their children never open their books after school. Only some parents who are educated see that they study. The children fight with us and backbite" (fieldnotes, 4/1/90). "Your *baji* (older sister, here reference to the teacher) is pretty, but she doesn't teach anything". (fieldnotes, 5/27/90). "I have seen the environment at the girls' school, I won't send my daughter there" (interview, 6/25/90).

As these quotes suggest, both the female teachers and the parents in the community are critical of each other. The major topics of complaint by the teachers at the girls' school are: the parents are uneducated; they don't help their children with any school work, even if they have themselves been to school; they take their children away from the school for chores or for visiting relatives outside the village; they pressure the teachers to pass their children; they don't have good manners themselves and encourage bad manners in the children.

My observations confirmed that the teachers have a negative opinion of the village parents. When I asked the teachers if they sent any report cards or other written messages to the parents, one of the teachers said, "What will they know? They

are all *jahil* (ignorant). They will only put their thumb impressions. They don't know what is happening" (fieldnotes, 4/2/90). While I was observing at the school, one of the girls lost her *takhti*. Her father came to the school door and sent in a letter to the teacher complaining that the child's *takhti* had been lost.¹¹ Hamida, the older teacher, was very angry and shouted at the child, "Your father is very *parha likha* (literate/educated) that he has sent this written note. Couldn't your mother come and talk to me?" (fieldnotes, 4/20/90). Obviously, for the teacher, writing is serious and is more challenging than an oral complaint in that it suggests that the father is claiming equal status with the teacher.

Sometimes a few girls would come to school without the school uniform or with uncombed hair. The teachers would remark that these girls come to school dirty because their parents are *unparh* (illiterate), their mothers fight with each other and keep their children dirty (fieldnotes, 9/4/90). Hamida constantly compared her own children to the village children, telling me how her own children wash and iron their clothes and behave well.

The attitude of the community toward the school and the teachers is ambivalent. Almost all the people I formally interviewed, and others with whom I talked informally, said that they were happy that there was a girls' school and many said that they would like a middle school for girls in the village as well. However, the number of girls in the upper grades of the school does not support this opinion, since there are only eight girls each in Grade 4 and five and many more dropouts.

The community members criticized the teachers for being city women, working for wages outside the home, not teaching the children well, failing the children, and not promoting¹² them to a higher grade at the end of the year (fieldnotes, 7/19/90, 3/26/90). Occasionally remarks are made about teachers asking the children to bring food for them and making them do chores at school. Negative attitudes towards teachers sometimes arise because of the expenses of school or because the teachers' imposition of rules such as wearing the school uniform.

Incidents that were narrated to me by the teachers or those that occurred during the period of observation confirm the existence of friction between the parents and the teachers. The teachers told me of an incident that had occurred a year before. One of the girls at the school had been absent for a few months. Her mother had taken her to attend the marriage of a relative. When she came back, the teachers told her that her name had been struck off the register. Her mother came to the teachers and, instead of politely requesting, started fighting with them, calling them names, saying that they thought too much of themselves and that the school belonged to the village and not to

the teachers. The teachers said that after that incident, they decided not to re-admit the girl. The parents went to the councillor¹³, who talked to the teachers and then asked the mother to apologize to them.

A few incidents of conflict occurred while I was at the school. Twice, parents refused to pay the fee (two rupees which was later reduced to fifty *paisa*). A mother and a grandmother came to argue with the teachers, saying that they did not teach well, so why should they pay them any money (fieldnotes, 4/20/90).

The teachers visit only a few homes close to the school including the family of a male high school teacher in an English medium school in the city, his brother's family, and that of the councillor. Occasionally, lunch is sent to the teachers from these homes. They told me that only a few families are nice. Besides, they said, they do not want to go around the village much because people would talk.

Conflicts between the teachers at the girls' school and many of the community members have their roots in more than these particular incidents. They stem from differing concepts and attitudes associated with literacy/illiteracy, schooling, and city/village values. The teachers categorize most of the villagers as illiterate (which includes the characteristics of being uncouth, dirty, and conflict oriented) and unaware of the practices and authority of the school. On the one hand, the villagers respect the institution of school, yet, on the other hand, they associate negative-Western values with secular schools. Furthermore, they are not comfortable with the changing social scene in which the women are taking up jobs. Thus, the teachers who come from the cities to teach represent a contradiction: as teachers, they deserve respect within the cultural framework; as women who have gone out of their homes to work, they challenge the spatial and behavioral boundaries delineated for women within the community.

The Goals of Schooling

Observation and interviews with the teachers show that the literacy goals of *school ka sabaq* are for the children to learn to read the school books correctly, remember the answers to the questions at the end of each lesson in Urdu, Social Studies, Science, and Religion, be able to successfully reproduce these orally and/or in writing in the district exam, and pass the exam for promotion at the end of each school year.

The goals of the parents are more diverse. They share with the teachers the goals of attainment of school credentials and promotion to higher grades, but express other beyond-the-school goals. The literacy goals of the parents for their daughters,

mentioned in formal interviews and informal conversations, are for them to be able to read and write letters and to understand things better. "She wanted to leave school when she failed Grade 4, but I sent her back. At least she will be able to read and write letters," (4/13/90) says Karon's mother who reads the Quran regularly, but who can not read and write in Urdu, calling herself *unparh*. Nazma's mother cannot read or write either, but she sent Nazma to school. "I made sure that Nazma went to school so I could have someone to read and write letters and read the bills for me" (fieldnotes, 4/6/90). Mohammad Riaz' daughter is in Grade 6 at a middle school in a nearby village. "I allow her to go to school and study so that she can read and write letters and understand things" (Interview with Mohammad Riaz, 4/12/90). All the individuals interviewed who sent their daughters to school in the village said that they (both the girls and their families) expected the girls to learn to read and write so that they would not have to depend on others for everyday tasks such as writing letters. Thus, the immediate goal of sending girls to the school is for them to become able to read and write letters in Urdu.

The community strongly associates schooling with jobs. This is apparent in both positive and negative remarks about the goals of schooling. Girls who had dropped out of school reported that their parents, brothers, or other relatives had objected to their going to school, saying that the girls did not have to get jobs and become teachers so why should they go to school. Schooling beyond primary Grade 5 is not considered very important for girls because they are not expected to work outside of their homes. When asked if being school literate is important for them, women said that there is no need for literacy in the village because there are no offices.

To summarize, *school ka sabaq* is recognized as a special literacy practice by the teacher, the students, and the community members. It involves specific types of reading and writing skills, specific texts, and appropriate behavior supported by and practiced within the context of the school. This context is reflected in the division of time and space, and in the type of interaction between teachers and students and among the students at school. The goals of *school ka sabaq*, which are to pass exams and acquire credentials, are also determined by and limited to the institution of schooling. These goals are shared by the teachers and the community. However, although the teachers do not include in their goals the transfer of skills learned at school to reading and writing needs in everyday life, the community members mention these as an expected/desired outcome of *school ka sabaq*. These beyond-school-goals (extra-curricular) explain the negative attitude of some community members

towards schooling. A higher level of schooling is associated with women's work outside the home and is therefore rejected as against the community's social values.

¹ This paper is a modified version of one chapter from the author's doctoral dissertation, Becoming literate: A study of literacy practices and goals in a rural community in Pakistan.

² *School ka sabaq* literally means school lesson. The villagers perceived the school as a separate domain. All reading and writing done at school through school texts as well as non-textual lessons learned at school were referred to as *school ka sabaq*.

³ *Islami sabaq*, or Islamic lesson, includes the reading of the Quran and/or other religious books and learning behaviors appropriate to an Islamic way of life.

⁴ The *Islami ustad* are woman religious teachers who teach the Quran in their homes. They do this as a service to Islam and receive no payment for it. Their remuneration is the respect and service of the community.

⁵ This manner of conducting the assembly varies across schools.

⁶ I am not making a claim that none of these children have ever interacted orally or with a written text in Urdu since I did not follow all children all the time, but my report here is based on what I generally found to be the case.

⁷ *Qaida* (from Arabic) means a reader or a primer. It is used for the initial introduction of the writing system.

⁸ A similar manner of learning through practice is found in the Islamic school.

⁹ In the context of the village, Urdu is never used for oral communication (except with the rare outsider who does not know Hindko) and all writing is done in Urdu. The only oral input is through the radio and television.

¹⁰ The two sites have similar contexts: neither Berber or Hindko is widely used as languages of literacy. In both countries, initial literacy takes place in Quranic schools, after which standard Arabic in Morocco and Urdu in Pakistan are learned as literary media in the schools.

¹¹ Another girl had taken the *takhti* home by mistake.

¹² Promotion to the next grade is based upon in-school exams prepared by the school's teachers and given at the end of each year. Upon completion of primary school (in Grade 5), the students take public exams. These exams are district-wide and are administered at designated schools. The students are tested in Urdu, Math, Science, Religion, Social Studies, and Art. The percentage of students who pass the exams is considered a reflection of the level of competence of their teachers.

¹³ A person elected by the village to represent it to the district council.

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