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‘How Kurdish Sorani speaking children construct their identity/identities in the supplementary schools?’

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a small-scale qualitative research study and aims to explore “How Kurdish Sorani speaking children construct their identity/ identities in ‘Gulan’ supplementary school”. It seeks the views of children, teachers and parents and explores their perceptions and understanding of identity and how this is constructed. It views the process of cultural and ethnic identity formation as shifting, changeable and dynamic and recognises how Kurdish Sorani speaking children live different identities according to differing situations. It also explores the social identity of parents and teachers as refugees; enabling a better understanding of their lived experiences in the UK, their integration and future aspirations. Consequently, these factors have a significant influence on how their children construct their identities.

1. Literature Review

1.1 The history of Kurdish Migration in the UK

After the First World War, Kurdistan was divided into four countries: Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria (D’Angelo, 2008). Hence, Kurdistan has no state (Izady, 1992; Collin, 2009) and the Kurdish people lived in these countries as minority ethnic groups and their language use was suppressed. Ylidiz and Fryer (2004, p. 13) demonstrate that Kurds are an ethnic minority whereby their identity and language were perceived as a danger in these countries. Thus, this resulted in the initiation of a ‘separatist movement’. Kurds are constantly seeking to establish their identity wherever they exist. Moreover, Issa (2005) also affirms that the Kurdish identity is an issue in the UK as well.

The migration of Iraqi people to the UK started in the 1950s and 1960s (D’Angelo, 2008). They mostly settled in London, which became a lively community of Iraqi migrants including the Kurdish migrants (Ibid). The history of the Kurdish-Iraqi community migration to the UK is unclear because the community is classified as Iraqi in the official system. Therefore, exact statistics about the Kurds are unavailable (Communities and Local Government, 2009). However, Macdonald (2005, p. 5) states “the largest Kurdish community in Britain is in London, estimated to consist of about 40,000 Kurds”. Smaller groups live in other British cities, such as Cardiff, Manchester and Glasgow. According to the Census 2001 (cited in D’Angelo, 2008, p. 15), the Kurdish population in London comprises about 27,400 from Turkey; 11,200 from Iraq and 3,000 from Iran.

The main reason for the Kurd immigration was for educational purposes and to seek a better quality of life (International Organisation for Migration, 2007). D'Angelo (2008) states that in the 1970s and 1980s, the Kurdish migration gradually increased in the UK because of the political and religious suppression they faced from the regime. This led to an influx of Kurdish refugees migrating to different countries including the UK as a result of the repression of the Kurdish culture and ethnic identity (Communities and Local Government, 2009 p. 22).

Kurdish communities in London display an important core cohesion (D'Angelo, 2008) by forming cultural organisations, community centres, housing associations and women's organisations (Holgate et al, 2009). Furthermore, they also established Kurdish supplementary schools to nurture the requirements of their community and to maintain and enrich their cultural identity (D'Angelo, 2008; Moya, 2005).

1.2 The importance of Supplementary Schools

The Kurdish community in the UK, similar to the Chinese, Turkish, Bangladeshi and Somali, endeavours to maintain their cultural and group identities through encouraging the mother tongue language (Memdouh, 1981) in order to revive the Kurdish culture. Issa and Williams (2009) argued that ethnic minorities have established supplementary schools to keep their language, culture and identity. In Archer et al (2009) study on British-Chinese pupils, the importance of supplementary schools was in affirming, maintaining and preserving the mother tongue. Similarly, Francis et al (2010) found that Chinese complementary schools viewed by parents as a place to 'teach the kids Chinese culture'. Moreover, they claimed that the Chinese school is a place for Chinese pupils to meet other children and to share family experiences. It is also a place for socializing for the community and particularly for the parents. Hence, the idea of having the supplementary schools stems from that perspective to be the best location to promote identity and cultural restoration (D'Anngelo, 2008; Moya, 2005). Francis et al (2010) argued that the complementary schools encourage the Chinese children to attend when they see their friends and can develop a 'sense of belonging'.

Studies (Reay & Mirza, 1997; Hall et al, 2002; Strand, 2002) have pointed out the advantages of complementary schools for minority ethnic children include 'provision of social networks, space to negotiate identities. Transmission and celebration of aspects of 'culture', 'space' from racism; and additional education'.

In the UK, there are supplementary schools for both Kurmanji and Sorani dialects to help children learn the language and culture of their communities. Since a number of studies have been conducted on the Kurdish Kurmanji speaking children, the focus of this study is on the identity construction of the Kurdish Sorani speaking children. These children are 'bilinguals' because they are the offspring of Kurdish parents but born and reside in the UK. They learn English at mainstream schools and Kurdish at home and in the supplementary school.

1.3 Kurdish language

The origin of the Kurdish language is the Iranian group of Indo-European languages. This is very close to Farsi, which is the official language in Iran (D'Anngelo, 2008; Collin, 2009). The Kurdish community is a linguistic community, which uses two main languages in addition to other variations. The two main dialects spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan are Sorani and Kurmanji (Ibid). Kurmanji is mainly spoken by the Kurds in Turkey, Syria and a part of Iraq while Sorani is spoken in larger areas in Iraq and Iran. According to Stansfield (2003) the differences between the two dialects are quite substantially to the extent that it is hard for the two to understand each other. However, Hassanpour (1992, cited in Collin, 2009, p. 252) believes that Kurds are learning to understand each other with 'patience and good will'. There are also other language variations on the border between Iran and Kurdistan called Gurani/ Gorani/Hawrami. These belong to the Delmi/ Zaza speaking community in Turkey and Luri (Gordon, 2005, cited in Collin 2009).

1.4 Bilingualism, the language use and elements of code switching

Bilingualism has various definitions. According to Baker (2011) and Grosjean (2010) bilingualism is a frequent use of two languages in everyday life and multilingualism is the use of three or more languages. Similarly, Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) state that bilingualism is the power of understanding two or more languages. Edwards (2010) defines bilingualism as having some knowledge about a language on top of his/her mother tongue. Weinreich (1953) defines "bilingualism as the alternate use of two languages" (cited in Edwards, 2010, p. 236). This study has focus on Kurdish Sorani children as bilinguals who use English in mainstream school and Kurdish at home and in supplementary school, though there is an element of code switching in most contexts.

Grosjean (1992, 2010) distinguishes between two distinct types of bilinguals. These are 'monolingual mode' and 'bilingual mode'. The former utilises one of their languages with a monolingual person of that language. The latter has the opportunity to code switch the language because the other person is also bilingual. Gardner-Chloros (2009) states

"Code switching refers to the use of several languages or dialects in the same conversation or sentence by bilingual people. It affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect, to a greater or lesser extent".

For Edwards (2010) the relationship between language and identity is crucial and affirms how it changes in the presence of more than one 'variety'. For Barker (2012, p. 222) "without language the very concept of personhood and identity would be unintelligible to us". Cook (2003) maintains that the use of a second language affects the proficiency of the first language. This occurs when a person starts to learn the second language in situations where the first language is rarely used. Thus, there is a risk of weakening the acquisition of the mother tongue. Similarly, Baker (2011, p. 127) states that sometimes children from ethnic communities may lose their first language. He claims that they see

it as unattractive; because they realise that the dominant language has a powerful status especially in schools, shops and elsewhere in the host society.

1.5 Construction of identity/ identities

According to Buckingham (2008) identity is an ambiguous and slippery term, which can be understood as the way people see themselves. It is about the perception that a person has about 'who am I?' and who other people are (Woodward, 2000; Jenkins, 1996; Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). It is about other peoples' perceptions of themselves and of others. Thus, identity means how I perceive myself and how others perceive me (Jenkins, 1996; Woodward, 2000). Similarly, Buckingham (2008) suggests that identity is something we do, rather than simply something we are. Part of it is internal and subjective perception and the other part is external and relates to other peoples' views (Woodward, 2000). Thus, identity is a lengthy structure that creates interaction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

In sociology, identity has become an essential theme, which inspired many sociologists and researchers to explore the individual's identity and how it is constructed. In the past, identity has been viewed as constant, unchanging and stable (Frosh, 1999). Hence in modern sociology, identity is perceived as multiple, fluid, flexible, changeable, shifting, unstable, not fixed, an ongoing process and socially constructed through human interactions and 'linguistically coded' (Barker, 2012; Jenkins, 1996; Buckingham, 2008; Hall, 1996).

This paper comes from a social constructionist perspective whereby identity is seen as socially constructed, being fluid, changing and dynamic. As Fass (2008) states, "identity is not fixed or of a binary nature and it is discursively negotiated and renegotiated". To Barker (2012, p. 229) "Identities are discursive constructions that are both unstable and temporarily stabilized by social practice and regular predictable behaviour". According to Fülöp and Ross (2005), the process of identity construction is determined by the interactions people form in a social context and situation. Thus, identity is viewed as a 'social and cultural' practice (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) and shaped by interactions in the social world through the use of 'language'. As stated by Siraj-Blatchford (1996), children construct their identities in a process, which is connected with their 'culture heritage'. Identity construction is not inborn or genetic (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000), it is a complex and everlasting process that happens in the individual's life (Foucault, 1978). According to (Brown, 1998) children construct their identity by copying grown-ups. Similarly, Bulcholtz and Hall (2005) also state that identity construction is constantly fluid and changeable in interaction practice and through the discourse situation.

According to Jenkin (1996), identity is a distinguishable characteristic of each individual. It is created through their involvement in the social world and interactions with social groups. This contributes to identity formation and the acquisition of similarities and differences that group or distinguish people from others. Similarly, Barker and Galasinski (2001) state that an ethnic group's construction of identity depends on shared cultural values, which provide individuals with a sense of belonging. Therefore, group identity is about the cultural view (Kramsch, 1998) and own

assumptions about someone's group identity. Thus, it is greatly influenced by culture. Identity is, therefore, a vital assessment of social life, and societies are based on the social identity (Griffiths, 2002; Jenkins, 1996).

1.6 Inter-generational differences

There are always different perspectives among generations regarding lifestyle, culture and the manner by which they interpret the social world. The disparities that exist between parents and young people can lead to 'conflicts' and 'disagreement' (Coleman, 2011). The conflicts include subjects of sexual activity, relationships, drugs, dressing styles and music preference. Coleman (2011, p. 87) claims that the friends' effect on young people's choice and actions is more influential than the community and the family. Fogelman's (1976) research shows that a good relationship between parents and their teenagers is crucial, as many children tend to seek the support and advice of their parents when difficulties arise in their lives. Similarly, Coleman (2011, p. 87) asserts, "researchers report that for the majority there are broadly positive relationships between parents and teenagers, with little evidence of a generation gap in attitudes to careers, education, values and morality". However, Coleman (2011) argues that these disagreements do not affect the unity and relationship between the parents and young people. Coleman et al (2004) argues that a number of studies have also shown that if the parents and young people have a strong relationship based on healthy interactions, then conflicts are easily resolved. The literature review has served to highlight the fluidity and flexibility of identity construction for various ethnic minority groups including the Kurdish Sorani children in supplementary schools.

2. Methodology

This section seeks to explain the research design and explore the methodological process employed to gather data regarding identity construction of Kurdish Sorani children in 'Gulan' supplementary school.

2.1 Setting

A supplementary school in East Croydon, Gulan is one of the five sister schools, based in London, Nottingham and Belfast. The school caters for forty eight Kurdish Sorani children. Although the school is principally involved with teaching Kurdish language, its ethos also extends to teaching about Kurdish culture. The school has three classrooms and three teachers. It follows a text from Kurdistan as a curriculum guide with additional materials printed in Sweden. Gulan is currently funded by one of the political parties in Kurdistan (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and from parental contribution.

2.2 Methods

The methods used were varied and included focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and observations. We used focus group discussions with children and observed their use of the Kurdish language and interactions with others in the school.

We interviewed and observed the parents to understand their perceptions. We also interviewed teachers and employed observations to explore the strategies and approaches employed in the school.

Focus group discussions:

The sample was made out of 33 children between the ages of 6-17. The first focus group consisted of 13 children (6 boys and 7 girls) between the ages of 11-17. Four of them were born in Kurdistan/ Iraq, nine in the UK and one in Sweden. A second group consisted of 10 children (6 boys and 4 girls) aged 8 and 9. Nine were born in the UK and one in Poland. While the last group consisted of 10 children (8 boys and 2 girls) aged 6 and 7 and nine of them were born in the UK and one in Poland.

Some of the prompting questions asked were: How do you describe yourself? Do you see yourself as Kurdish, British, a bit of Kurdish and a bit of British? A mixture of both? How do you feel being in the UK? And to what extent does the Kurdish Sorani language relate to your identity?

Interviews:

The sample included parents and teachers. A total of seven Kurdish Sorani parents (2 fathers and 5 mothers) were interviewed between the ages of 34-45. Additionally, three female Kurdish Sorani teachers were interviewed between the ages of 42-52.

Observation

Children were observed to look closely at their interactions, how they were constructing their identities, their reflections on Kurdish identity through the use of Kurdish Sorani language, the use of English and code switching as bilinguals. Furthermore, teachers' practice was observed because they implicitly had an indirect influence on the children's identity construction. Parents were also observed and discussed their perceptions of identity, language use and sense of belonging.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

There were two stages for a researcher to gain informed consent from children. Firstly, seeking permission from parents or guardians and secondly, seeking permission from the children themselves (Fine and Sandstorm, 1988). As the participants were under the age of 18, permission was sought from their parents. Children were approached to know whether or not they were willing to take part in the study, as Cohen et al (2011, p. 77) state "the principle of informed consent arises from the subject's right to freedom and self-determination which gives children the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw in any stage of the research".

3. Findings and Analysis

Data from the focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers as well as observations are presented. Four main inter-related themes relevant to the research question emerged, namely a sense of belonging; language use; the role of supplementary school; intergenerational differences.

3.1 A sense of belonging

The majority of children in this study were born in the UK, the others in Kurdistan. One child was born in Sweden and two were born in Poland. All the parents and teachers were born in Kurdistan but immigrated to the UK for the purpose of education, to seek a better life and for political reasons.

In focus groups some of the children described themselves as Kurdish. Barker and Galasinski (2001) stated, "An ethnic group's construction depends on shared cultural values among individuals who have a sense of belonging".

"I see myself as Kurdish. Although I live in England and have a British citizenship but my family is Kurdish.... I am not English and I don't see myself as English though" Adam (boy, aged 16)

"I think I am Kurdish.... Kurdish language is important because it is my parents' language and because my parents are Kurdish" Marwan (boy, aged 9)

During the discussions, the children talked about their perceptions and described their Kurdish and English identities. They related their identities to the settings they found themselves in and the frequency of using the Kurdish and English languages

"In school I feel I am 95% English and 5% Kurdish because I am learning English but at home I feel I am 95% Kurdish and 5% English because of the way we eat, the food we eat and our language so in my home environment I feel more Kurdish" Shara (girl, aged 14)

On the other hand, most of the children associated themselves with the English culture more than the Kurdish while others expressed difficulties in adapting to being part of the host society. Therefore, culture played an important role in heightening a sense of belonging among ethnic communities and this supported the findings.

3.2 The language use

Children used English to interact with peers and siblings, while they used Kurdish constantly with parents at home. Being bilinguals helped them to alternate between the languages and code switch especially at home with parents and others in the community who share the same language. So, it seemed that code switching had multiple purposes and was used to facilitate understanding and was used for private conversations. As Baker (2011, p. 108) states that "code switching may be used to express identity, shorten

distances, communicate friendship or family bonding... a person may deliberately use code switching to be accepted by a peer group”.

“it is easier sometimes if I mix it a little bit. If I don’t know a word in Kurdish or English I use it because I don’t want to search for the right word it is easier for me to borrow it” Aryan (boy, aged 17)

The differentiation between language use among generations and the reasons behind their choices were found in the data. Children expressed the importance of Kurdish language but stated that their competence in English made it easier for them to communicate with others.

“I think both languages are important for us but we know English better that is why we use English more than Kurdish” Lina (girl, aged 15)

“I always use Kurdish at home but mixed it with English because I know English more and I feel Kurdish is part of me because of my background” Rebin (boy, aged 7)

The children showed interest in learning about Kurdish as it was their parents’ language, important to communicate with relatives and extended family back in Kurdistan, to facilitate future employment and avoid isolation in Kurdistan. For Barker (2012, p. 222) “without language the very concept of personhood and identity would be unintelligible to us”.

“In the future, if you want to go back to Kurdistan and open a shop, you should know Kurdish because if a customer come and say I want that, you should understand” Pepa (girl, aged 11)

It is evident from these quotes that the children were aware of the advantages of mastering Kurdish as a necessary skill for employment and living among Kurdish people. They also discussed that communication with their relatives and perhaps even living for good in Kurdistan could be facilitated through the acquisition of the Kurdish language.

Furthermore, children expressed different attitudes about whether the Kurdish Sorani language reflects their Kurdish identity. To Kramersch (1998, p. 65) “there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group’s identity”. This claim was backed up by the finding that the majority of children thought there was a link between the language and their identity.

“I think if you do not know the language you feel you are not belonging to the Kurdish people and culture therefore you cannot claim your Kurdish identity” Shara (girl, aged 14)

The findings showed that it was a prerequisite for some children that knowing the language equated with Kurdish identity and pride of being Kurdish. Thus, they associated incompetence with speaking Kurdish to feelings of shame, embarrassment and inadequacy. They thought as Kurdish people they were supposed to be able to speak

Kurdish and to feel proud of their language and heritage. However, others thought that Kurdish identity and the language were unrelated and two separate things.

“it is important because imagine you are in France, imagine you wear a French flag and somebody approaches you and thinks you know French, if you do not know you will be embarrassed” Rawshan (girl, aged 11)

“...if you are Kurdish, you see yourself as Kurdish, even if you cannot speak Kurdish you still feel proud. You can use another language but still feel proud of being Kurdish” Sam (boy, aged 13)

To Gardner- Chloros (2009) language acts as an essential symbol of ‘group identity’ and promotes a feeling of cohesion and ‘belonging’ among those who experience the same variation. Therefore, during the focus groups, children assigned high importance to learning the Kurdish language. They explained that they attended ‘Gulan’ supplementary school to learn more about their language and culture. Moreover, the majority of them thought that they wanted to learn the Kurdish language because they are Kurdish.

“this school helps me to learn Kurdish so everything here helps you to feel Kurdish” (focus group on 2nd of March 2013).

And Adam (boy, aged 16) thought that “a language is an identity of anyone. If you come from France, your mother tongue should be French and you should know that. It should be a part of your identity. I think language is part of your heritage, you should know it” Rastin (boy, aged 9)

The importance of the Kurdish language for parents was underlined by its constant use at home. Therefore, they encouraged their children to attend ‘Gulan’ supplementary school and to learn the language. This was intended to ensure that their children do not lose their sense of belonging.

“I think when you are talking about Kurdish identity, it automatically means Kurdish language. If you do not know the language; you cannot be proud of yourself and describe yourself as Kurdish” Dlsoz (mother, aged 39)

Similarly, the three teachers emphasised the importance of the Kurdish language and encouraged the children to communicate in Kurdish rather than English. Therefore, the research findings highlighted that acquisition of the Kurdish language was important to children, parents and teachers. Furthermore, parents and teachers felt obliged and responsible for preserving the Kurdish language; which is considered a vital characteristic of Kurdish identity.

3.3 The role of supplementary school

Children, parents and teachers have highlighted the values of Gulan supplementary school which offered them not only the opportunity to learn their home language but also influenced their sense of belonging. Hence, engaging children with their cultural and traditional beliefs helped them to recognise their self-identity among their people and to promote community cohesion. Issa and Williams (2009) argued that ethnic minorities have established supplementary schools to keep their language, culture and identity.

Similarly, Francis et al (2010) found that Chinese complementary schools viewed by parents as a place to ‘teach the kids Chinese culture’.... a place for Chinese pupils to meet other children and to share family experiences. It is also a place for socialising in the community and particularly for the parents.

During the focus group, children mentioned the values of the school in contributing to their sense of being. Further, they felt that it facilitated friendship formation and allowed them the scope to meet others with similar background and interests.

“it is good because we get socialised with people who share language, religion and the same culture and basically the same life. I don’t think myself as proper British I still feel myself as Kurdish” Lina (girl, aged 15)

“I like learning in this Kurdish school because I learn Kurdish and it makes me feel part of the generation. I feel more Kurdish because I learn Kurdish” Zewa (girl, aged 9)

Teachers and parents discussed the benefits of the school for the children and its role in enhancing their knowledge about the Kurdish culture. Moreover, the school encouraged the community to get together not only for the sake of the language but also for identity cohesion. Further, Kurdish children saw the purpose of the school as enabling proficiency in the Kurdish language and providing an important service in their mother tongue. Thus, this school functioned as a source of Kurdish culture and identity.

3.4 Intergenerational differences

Intergenerational differences were found between children and parents which shaped by the age range and backgrounds. Coleman (2011, p. 87) asserts that “...disparities that exist between parents and young people can lead to ‘conflicts’ and ‘disagreement....the conflicts include subjects of sexual activity, relationships, drugs, dressing styles and music preference”. However, in this study, children expressed positive relationships with parents on issues of clubbing, sexual activity, drinking and the use of drugs. They affirmed that they agreed with the parents’ opinions on clubbing and substance use and considered these issues to belong to the English culture and supported the parents’ views on the real need to be united with their community.

“our parents are better than English people because they let them do everything and when their children take drugs and get ill, they say it is ok you live only once” Lina (girl, aged 15)

“clubbing and having a boyfriend are more English culture and we have our own culture and it is not like this, we are half and half, we don’t do stuff like them. However, I like certain things about English culture such as the freedom of wearing clothes” Pepa (girl, aged 11)

However, Pepa’s comment alludes to the existence of conflict. This is also evidenced in Dloz’s (mother, aged 39) view on relationships and clubbing which was gender based. She thought that her son could handle these activities but forbade her daughter.

Similarly, children showed their divergences on issues such as, going out, eating late at night, sleeping over at friends' houses, buying action games, following parents' religious belief, using computers and play station games.

“there are always problems about using computers. My mother does not allow me to be on computer because it will affect my health” Mazin (boy, aged 6)

During the focus group, some children talked about the differences between the Kurdish and the English culture. They revealed that they liked to be disciplined and joked that discipline was better than clubbing.

Kajal (girl, aged 14): ‘I think Kurdish culture is much better than English because you are more respectful of other people and your lifestyle is so much better.’

Diyar (boy, aged 15): ‘you are more disciplined’.

Researcher: ‘Do you like to be disciplined?’

Diyar: ‘Yeah’

Kajal: ‘...yeah it is better than clubbing’

Others were happy with moderate discipline but not to the extent that it would deprive them of their freedom.

“I think if you are too disciplined and your parents took so many freedoms, then you sometimes backfire and you will feel rebellious and never do what your parents are saying. So in a way if it is not moderated discipline, they push on you too much then you will be bad” Aryan (boy, aged 17)

Shene (mother, aged 34) liked her children to be disciplined by teachers because she recalled her experience when she was in school in Kurdistan. The parents were eager to involve their offspring in the Kurdish community to learn the culture and lifestyle to promote their identity and self-belonging to their community in order to influence their perceptions as to who they are.

The Kurdish Sorani speaking children described and interpreted their identity construction as changing, complex and dynamic. They also expressed appreciation to their cultural heritage and displayed a higher sense of belonging. The school ethos endeavoured to provide the children and the parents alike with opportunity to meet, learn and socialise. Thus, such schools play a major role and augment a sense of identity among the Kurdish families.

Conclusion

This research project explored the identity construction of Kurdish Sorani speaking children in ‘Gulan’ supplementary school. The views of children, teachers and parents were elicited through qualitative methods of focus groups, interviews and observations in order to examine their perceptions on identity construction. This was investigated

through their use of the language and perceptions about citizenship and belonging. Furthermore, the study explored the role of 'Gulan' supplementary school in enabling and nurturing the identity of these children. It also investigated the generational differences between the parents and children, and revealed the complexity and the changing nature of identity with the diverse age range of children.

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