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**CONTENTS**

**ARTICLES**

De-mythologising the Image of War Hero as Dominant Hegemonic Masculinity Constructed through ISAs, Covert Educational Institutions (With Special Reference to David Rabe’s Sticks and Bones)
*Roya Yaghoubi*  
1

Barriers and Enablers of Education Equality for Transgender Students
*Stephanie Burns, Ruth Leitch and Joanne Hughes*  
11

Identity Formation and Negotiation of Freedom in Coeducational Language Schools in Iran
*Alyeh Mehin Jafarabadi*  
21

The Gender Role in the Educational Empowerment of Migrant Families from Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Countries
*Nina Ivashinenko and Valentina Shatalina*  
33

Mafia Children: From Future to Past. Knowing Other Realities to Learn Freedom
*Rosella Marzullo*  
45

Gender Disparity and Cultural Impacts on Girls’ Education in Laos
*Inleusa Basengkham*  
59

**BOOK REVIEWS**

The Human Rights under State-Enforced Religious Family Laws in Israel, Egypt and India (by Sezgin Yuksel)
*Sinem Adar*  
71

Work Rules! (by Laszlo Bock)
*Nimisha Bhatnagar*  
75
De-mythologising the Image of War Hero as Dominant Hegemonic Masculinity Constructed through ISAs, Covert Educational Institutions
(With Special Reference to David Rabe’s Sticks and Bones)

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Abstract
This paper analyses how de-mythologising the image of the war hero as that of dominant hegemonic masculinity is staged in David Rabe’s play, Sticks and Bones (1969). It takes into consideration Louis Althusser’s views of ISAs (Ideological States Apparatuses) which act as covert educational institutions promulgating a theory of hegemonic masculinity as being reliant upon social discourses and gender construction. Hegemonic masculinity originates from the social and cultural settings and includes defining characteristics such as chauvinism, violence, aggression, and mental and physical strength or toughness. Family, popular culture and media, as indirect educational organisations, create systems of ideas and values. The influence of these covert educational institutions is noteworthy in Sticks and Bones. In Sticks and Bones, male subjects are depicted as figures who are trained to act according to the dominant discourse and a set of masculine traits attributed to traditional macho male roles such as soldiering, going to war, and being aggressive, violent and dominant. These attempts are in vain and ineffective since the myth of American values concerning manliness is put into question or subverted in this play.

Keywords
de-mythologising, dominant hegemonic masculinity, Ideological States Apparatuses (ISAs), covert educational institutions, sticks and bones

Introductory Remarks
The image of the war hero as that of hegemonic masculinity can be observed in the media-driven discourses and screen plays. David Rabe’s The Vietnam Trilogy: Sticks and Bones (1971), The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel (1972) and Streamers (1976) are categorised as Vietnam War dramas even though the war itself is not focused on in them. In these plays, it is portrayed that ideological state apparatuses act as educational institutions manipulating male subjects to believe that war is a path to manhood. Through his dramatic work, Rabe starts to revitalise society, giving wide awareness about false ideas and principles regarding the Vietnam War and ‘the dehumanising impact of an increasingly macho ethic’ (Adler 1988: 112). Rabe’s Vietnam plays are about men in war and the consequences that the survivors and their society encounter. These plays depict characters who in their search for manhood turn to the army. With regard to their conception of hegemonic masculinity,
soldiering is vital for them. Rabe concentrates on the military to show the popular idea of it as being an institution which makes men rather than being an institution for war. Rabe’s male characters seem mainly to be searching for macho male identity according to whatever they have learnt about manliness in the myths represented by popular culture or in the broadest sense by educational institutions.

*Sticks and Bones* (1969), a black comedy, is one of the plays David Rabe wrote about the Vietnam War and its outcomes. It is a family play rather than one set in the barracks. The play delineates how covert educational institutions such as family and media encourage individuals to involve themselves in a futile and destructive war as an expression of their manhood. The play opens with a slide show of family pictures on a dark stage. Offstage, voices of an adult couple are heard who in the darkness provide explanation about the people who appear on the screen to their children. In a flash forward to the final scene of the play, David’s slide is shown with ‘a stricken look’ (Rabe 1993: 96). David’s picture is interpreted as ‘somebody sick’ (Rabe 1993: 96). It takes the length of the entire play to reveal what that sickness means.

David is a blind veteran who has returned home to a spiritually blind and archetypical American family that cannot accept him and wishes he were dead. The characters are based on figures from a popular television sitcom family of the 1950s and 1960s, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. David’s family does not succeed in sustaining the normal version of American family life, and their home becomes a place of anxiety, violence and cruelty. This failure makes them try to ignore David’s ‘blindness, his bizarre behaviour and what they take to be the virus of an alien experience’ (Bigsby 1985: 263). They reject David since he is unable to conform to their expected model of behaviour.

In a flashback, the scene displays David’s parents, Ozzie and Harriet, as typical Americans with two sons, David and Rick. But when David returns from the Vietnam War blind and emotionally numb, he proves an embarrassment to his family, especially when he keeps talking to a ghost-like Vietnamese girl. Not knowing what else to do with David, Rick, Ozzie and Harriet convince him to commit suicide. Through picturing a war hero rejected by his family, the play demythologises the belief that fighting in a war is a manly and heroic deed.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

R. W. Connell first introduced *Hegemonic masculinity* to sociologists in 1987. This term was applied to assumptions and beliefs about masculinity that ensures the dominance of some men within the gender system. Homosexuals, women, black men, working class men or effeminate men are subordinated
to dominant hegemonic masculinity or excluded from its realm. Overall, research on hegemonic masculinity aims at identifying those types of men who have power and authority of any kind. Furthermore, it explains how social relationships which allow some men dominance and superiority appear to be legitimate and unquestioned. Masculine hegemony is shaped in popular culture. It ‘is formed from the people’s common sense by; perhaps above all, television, film, advertising and sport as relayed to and received by huge audiences. Media can, though, also help to create and bolster the audience’s common sense’ (MacKinnon 2003: 9-10). Hegemonic masculinity is continuously renegotiated within the ever changing contemporary social and cultural structure.

Dominative Hegemonic Masculinity as Ideology

‘The process of shaping and moulding’ is important because ‘we live in an age of mass communication, where the way we represent things becomes much more significant’ (Eaglestone 2002: 117). Louis Althusser (1918-1990) argues that individuals behave considering the dominant ideology which is prescribed to them through the Ideological States Apparatuses [ISAs].

A dominant system of ideology is normally projected by the ruling class as the common-sense view of things and is accepted by the other classes. Thus, the interests of the dominant class are secured. Hegemony is related to the world-view or class-outlook of the created culture of the dominant class and the resulting ideology which makes everybody feel that all of us are freely choosing what is actually imposed on us. This is a way of manufacturing consensus through immobile forms of social control such as media, the educational system, religious institutions, art and literature that mould our ideas and attitudes.

*The Vietnam Trilogy* reveals how hegemonic masculinity as ideology is shaped and constructed by ISAs, organisations that create systems of ideas and values such as religious institutions, the family and media. Fiske remarks that according to Althusser ‘we are all constituted as subject-in-ideology by the ISAs, that the ideological norms naturalised in their practices constitute not only the sense of the world for us, but also our sense of ourselves, our sense of identity, and our sense of relations to other people and to society in general’ (eds. Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 1270). It is useful to find ‘how masculinity is constructed by various programmes in various media and then ‘sold’ to viewers....’ (MacKinnon 2003: 33-34).

Myth of Military as an institution to make man, War and Soldiering

The myth of regimented military of America has fascinated young males in various historical eras. Through fighting in the war they believe they can
protect and defend their families and their country. Furthermore, war makes them feel valiant and courageous. Going or refusing to go to the war displays their masculinity. According to the American masculine ethos if they go to the war it means that they are brave and gallant, but if not then they are cowards. For men, the battlefield is the ground on which to prove their manhood. The military setting has also fascinated Rabe’s male characters. They risk their lives in the war to achieve masculine power and supremacy which military promises to deliver.

Unseen Ideological Forces as Covert Educational Institutions and Dominant Hegemonic Masculinity

Luis Althusser’s notion of the ideological states apparatuses considers ‘ideology to be a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (2004: 294). ISAs are institutions that produce ideologies that individuals adopt and later act out in behaviour. These ISAs include schools, religions, family, legal systems, politics, arts, media – organisations that create systems of ideas and values. In Sticks and Bones, family, magazine and most importantly TV are presented as the media and covert educational institutions that impose the dominant ideology of hegemonic masculinity so destructively on the male subjects. Ideological state apparatuses such as film projector, magazine, TV and most importantly family, act as discursive educational institutions and shape the popular culture and give expression to American ideology.

Media and Popular Culture

In Sticks and Bones, the typical American family takes time out from its absorption in television and magazines to observe their son, David, slit his wrists. Throughout the play, TV is focused on as a critical and educational medium of ideology. Ozzie ‘becomes reinscribed in the system of identification beyond which he cannot see’ (McDonough 1997: 111). At certain moments, Ozzie becomes frustrated and intolerant of his home situation. He tries to watch TV but it is not working or not introducing the false ideals anymore. In this context, TV serves as an apparatus that inculcates beliefs in the minds of the family members.

David is blinded and has no physical vision to view the dominant culture represented by TV. Juxtaposing the impaired TV as a visual educational device with David’s blindness may imply the falsity of the values it has represented to the family for many years. Ozzie becomes disappointed since his lifelong values and opinions concerning the machismo image of a soldier is disapproved. Thus, he attempts to repair the TV – which symbolically suggests that he wishes to bring everything to the normal condition. ‘Profound mistrust of the media pervades Sticks and Bones: Rabe attacks the
‘instant culture’ generated by television, comic books, popular magazines. ...’ (Cooper 2005: 262).

The names Rabe uses for his characters are cliché since they are taken from a television situation comedy. They imply the trite values and outlook of the archetypal American family and the triteness of television itself. Indeed, depicting these characters, Rabe criticises the ideology of American society concerning the image of a happy and perfect family. Sticks and Bones foregrounds the media images of identity while contrasting these images with a real family.

It is noteworthy that David is brought first into the TV room. The room is described for him in terms of its essential feature. TV as a medium substitute for human communication. When David begins to behave weirdly in the house as an intruder, Ozzie tries anxiously to mend the broken set. Emblematically, the TV’s breakdown indicates David’s moral attitude against the values it presents to people. In Act II, as a conqueror David has power over other members of the family and Ozzie feels that David is going to dethrone him. To protect himself he wildly rushes to the TV since if it works, then the values it represents to American families may be revived. ‘David’s assault on his family and his gradual usurpation of the father-role from Ozzie drain the television set of its symbolic potency, weakening its ability to impose stereotypical values on the household’ (Cooper 2005: 262).

As the covert educational medium, the television sets values through its advertisements. Both Ozzie and Harriet use the language of advertising that shows how much they are under the influence of advertisement. David’s blindness and his relationship with his family are employed as mechanisms for examining American values, ethos and assumptions concerning the concept of war hero and masculinity.

A magazine serves as another covert educational medium for imposing the dominant ideology as it is represented in the play. When Harriet and Ozzie ask the priest, Father Donald, to assist them, he enters David’s room with a magazine in his hand to talk with him and bless him. The magazine has an article about veterans returning from Vietnam War with PVS illness, caused by sexual relations with whores of an alien race. Father Donald believes he can acquire a kind of authority other than the spiritual one through the psychological magazine which advertises racist discrimination. But David strikes his arm, leg and head repeatedly with his cane and forces him to leave his room. Father Donald tells him that ‘A man who hits a priest is in despair! ... Death! Death is your choice....’ (Rabe 1993: 147-48). His statement regarding death as David’s choice foreshadows the imminent death of David as the final choice. Magazine and TV play major roles in the play in
development of the image of a true hero and ideologies about race, war, masculinities and families.

Emasculation, Effeminacy as threats to the Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity in the Stereotypical Family

In *Sticks and Bones*, emasculation and effeminacy act as threats to the performance of dominant hegemonic masculinity in the stereotypical family. In this play, family as a microcosm exemplifies the American ethos and values. Ignorant about the consequences, David’s family encourages him to join the army. David’s family plays a significant and covert educational role in the formation of his male identity. David’s stereotypical parents are unwilling to let go of their beliefs with regard to the wholesomeness of American ideals, army service and soldiering, yet they do not dare to face the consequences of joining the army.

David is delivered ‘like a parcel’ (Rabe 1993: 102) to his family, and the Sergeant Major inquires who is the father, but it seems that Ozzie evades himself. Ozzie’s reaction reminds us of the image of absent father in Rabe’s other plays. Even though he is there, he desires to vanish from the house. David feels the family to which he is joining is not the family he has departed. David cries out ‘Noooooooo….Sergeant...; there’s something wrong here; … I don’t know these people’ (104).

In *Sticks and Bones*, the realm of masculinity is threatened and put into crisis with the entrance of David who strikes out with his cane. Harriet accuses her husband of teaching David harmful ideals regarding ‘sports and fighting’ (Rabe 1993: 105). Then Ozzie talks about war, honour and blindness. Precisely, he expresses his expectations and that everything happens is completely the opposite of what he expected. Ozzie is even unhappy that David is his son: ‘What does it mean that he is my son? How the hell is it that?’ (Rabe 1993: 118).

Ozzie is concerned about the possibility of any threat to his realm of manhood so he tries to verify his own hegemonic masculinity. In six soliloquies, his quest for acquiring authority as an ideal man and father is noticeable. McDonald argues these soliloquies are about being a runner, playing a guitar, finding himself through Harriet, discovering ‘no sign or trace’ of himself, being of no use to the family, and contemplating his ‘commercial on the value of Ozzie’. (1986: 220). Ozzie is always completely defeated in performing his masculine role. He is ‘(looking about the room like a man in deep water looking for something to keep him afloat …)’ (Rabe 1993: 115).

The connection between the violence of war and the American ethos of rivalry and violence, inculcated in the early years of boyhood, is apparent in this
play. Ozzie explains how David behaved violently in his childhood when he ‘put a knife through the skin of a cat’ and ‘cut the belly open’ (Rabe 1993: 105). But the fullest manifestation of violence and brutality can be found in Rick who horrifyingly uses his guitar as a weapon to attack David and, later on, encourages him to commit suicide.

In *Sticks and Bones*, playing guitar and singing symbolically denote masculine power. In Act I, David fights with Rick and finally grabs the guitar which emblematically indicates Rick’s emasculation by David. Dominant in his position, David plays guitar and narrates war traumatic happenings. Ozzie objects and David waves his cane which almost hits Ozzie. Ozzie’s figurative emasculation becomes evident when he expresses his fear to Harriet: ‘Do you know when he was waving that cane …? I couldn’t breathe’ (Rabe 1993: 129).

Later, David expresses his hatred toward his father and his wish that Rick were dead. David tells Ozzie why he has bought this house which resembles ‘a coffin’ (Rabe 1993: 152). David’s statement indicates that the house which is supposed to be the safety and comfort place to David is actually his coffin.

Undergoing emasculation by David and to protect his masculine strength, Ozzie calls police. Ozzie’s failure becomes evident when he turns to the audience and says ‘I ended up in goddamn Depression …’ (Rabe 1993: 132). Then he asks Rick to teach him how to play the guitar to reestablish his lost hegemonic dominance. His strong indignation in the loss of his true manhood is manifested in his dream. He says he had ‘a dream of the guitar as huge as a building’ (Rabe 1993: 162).

Thinking that he has lost to David, Ozzie roars down at David and slaps him with one hand over and over. In Act II, Ozzie apologises to David and states his misery: ‘there’s no evidence in the world of me—no sign or trace, as if everything I’ve ever done were no more than smoke. My life has closed behind me like water. … I break on the bone. I am …lonely’ (Rabe 1993: 151). It is implied that Ozzie’s bone has been broken by a stick which might be David’s cane or power, which leads to Ozzie’s emasculation.

Rummaging in David’s stuff, Ozzie has found a cap with razors sewn inside. He asks David about its use and David tells that it is ‘to cut people. … In time I’ll show you some things. … I will be your father. (*Tossing the cap at OZZIE*)’ (Rabe 1993: 152-53). Throwing the hat to his father, David intends to dethrone his father and replace him.

Emasculation of Ozzie is portrayed in another scene when somebody throws an egg at him while walking down the street. Ozzie feels bitter and accuses David to have thrown the egg at him. Although Ozzie and David dispute, Harriet is happy ‘to hear men’s voice in the house again’ (Rabe 1993: 159).
Ozzie’s intensified effeminacy is delineated by his fear, vulnerability and feebleness. Having lost his supremacy at home, he confesses to David that he is afraid of his family. He believes he is ‘beguiled and deceived’ giving his family ‘the love that was to return in time as flesh to imprison, detain, disarm and begin … to kill’ (Rabe 1993: 159).

Near to the end of the play, in a long soliloquy, Ozzie is deftly staged as a man who arrogantly addresses three pieces of furniture as his family members for self-assertion. He calls the large chair as Harriet, second chair as David and the footstool as Ricky. This metaphorical scene is very noteworthy indicating how much Ozzie’s pride as a man has been shattered and the extent he desires to be obeyed by his family. Confessing that he is going to experience a downfall, a demise to his masculine power and authority, he introduces his whole property as a resolution. At least for a moment he can fancy his family as a part of his property to recover from emasculation or effeminacy. Ozzie’s mirage is pricked with Harriet’s voice who says she is not feeling well since crazy David has poked her with his cane. Worried and vexed, Ozzie and Harriet kneel and pray.

The fight is complete when ‘(a downstairs closet door burst open, and DAVID steps out, dressed in ragged combat fatigues)’ (Rabe 1993: 168). David calls his mother garbage and filth and tells his father that he has to get her back if he wishes to live. Ozzie is troubled: ‘I don’t want to disappear. … I will be blind. I will disappear’ (Rabe 1993: 170). Rick savagely smashes his guitar down upon David saying ‘we hate you’ (Rabe 1993: 171). Guitar is used by Rick as the tool of violence. At last, in the fear of emasculation by David and attaining effeminate traits, Ozzie and Rick push David to cut his wrists. Female masculinity is shown in the character of Harriet who persuades David to slit his wrists: ‘Go ahead … You don’t have to be afraid. …’ (Rabe 1993: 173). Apparently, alienated David first cuts one of his wrists and then the other one. The final lines of the play tell us that the family, feeling the sense of relief, rejoices. Robert Skloot (as cited in Altwein 2008: 71) states that David’s suicide is ‘an American exorcism, destructive of both family and myth’.

Demythologising the Image of War Hero as Dominant Hegemonic Masculinity Constructed through Covert Educational Institutions

The myth of the war hero as symbolic of hegemonic masculinity represented through covert institutional institutions is subverted in Sticks and Bones. According to the deep-seated beliefs of David’s family, joining the army was supposed to make him a hero. David’s photograph is seen at the beginning and the end of the play as ‘somebody sick’ (Rabe 1993: 96 and 175). It reminds us of what David says to his parents in Act I: ‘a young … blind man … in a house in the dark, raising nothing in a gesture of no meaning toward two voices who are not speaking of a certain … incredible … CONNECTION!’
As opposed to David’s inner insight, the family members’ inner blindness leads David to despair, emptiness and death. David is not rewarded for his courage, devotion and self-sacrifice in the war instead he is tremendously blamed, punished and finally murdered by his family. At the end of Act I, David tells Zung, his ghost-like Asian girlfriend, that his family has misled him to nothingness: ‘I did as they told; ... and now I know that I am not awake but asleep, and in my sleep ... there is nothing ...!’ (Rabe 1993: 138). Between David’s delivery to his family and his suicidal action, his family discloses shallow materialistic ideals that stand in contrast to American images of the war hero.

Conclusion

Briefly speaking, both at the end of Act I and Act II of Sticks and Bones, Rabe skilfully stages how the image of the war hero as a heroic macho male represented by covert educational institutions like family and media is subverted and de-mythologised in the western world. In this play, emasculation, effeminacy and female masculinity are portrayed as threats to the performance of dominating hegemonic masculinity in the stereotypical family. Reversion of the myths of the war hero as dominative hegemonic masculinity is deftly depicted at the final distressing scene of the play when David’s family encourage him to slit his wrists and commit suicide. Faced with an irresolvable problem, David chooses to end his life. The play ends with David’s defeat in usurping his father’s authority and proving himself as a macho male hero. The final stage direction implies that Ozzie and Ricky are victorious men at the house ‘(And RICK, sitting, begins to play his guitar for DAVID, and the music is alive and fast. It has a rhythm, a drive of happiness that is contagious. The lights slowly fade to black)’ (Rabe 1993: 175) which ironically represents the failure of their own ideals regarding the image of the macho male.

References


De-mythologising the Image of War Hero as Dominant Hegemonic Masculinity, Yaghoubi


Barriers and Enablers of Education Equality for Transgender Students

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of research on education inequalities in Northern Ireland, carried out by a team from Queen’s University Belfast on behalf of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. A focus group and individual interviews were carried out with key stakeholders (transgender individuals, parents of transgender students, and advocates from organisations that support transgender students) to explore and understand the contributory factors and manifestation of educational inequalities for transgender students at different stages of their education, along with potential enablers of equality. The main barriers found were: gender stereotyping in schools; a lack of awareness and understanding of trans issues; a lack of guidance for schools; inflexibility around school rules; exclusion (including self-exclusion due to feelings of not being accepted); the timing of transition; difficult enrolment processes; moving away from home; and inappropriate facilities. Enablers of education equality for transgender students included: central directives and joined-up working between government departments; training for school staff; flexibility in school practices; and a systematic approach to data collection concerning the experiences of transgender students.

Keywords

transgender, inequality, inclusion, attainment, access

Introduction

Over the last several decades, a groundswell of research, policymaking and practical resources for education institutions has emerged regarding the identification and response to inequalities faced by school pupils and college students who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB). What has been lacking in this progression are studies, policies and resources that explore the experiences of transgender (‘T’, or trans) individuals and the challenges they face in educational settings. Schneider (2010) describes how the common ‘LGBT’ acronym was derived from the merging of transgender (T) activism with the already-established LGB movement, due to the perceived connection between gender identity and sexual orientation. Schneider argues that in order to more effectively meet the needs of transgender students (identified, according to Monro (2003: 433) as ‘cross-dressers, transsexuals, androgynies, intersexes (people born with a mixture of male and female
Barriers and Enablers of Education Equality for Transgender Students, Burns et al.

physiological characteristics), drag queens and kings, third gender people and other transgender people’), the individual identities and needs of this marginalised community must be investigated and understood separately from the LGB community. The overarching aim of the research study from which this paper draws was to identify education inequalities in Northern Ireland with regard to educational access, attainment, progression and destination across nine ‘equality’ grounds, of which gender was one (sexual orientation was treated as a separate equality ground). This paper presents the findings for transgender individuals in particular.

In the UK, research by Whittle, Turner and Al-Alami (2007) on transgender people’s experiences of discrimination looked at the school experience as one arena in which inequality for trans people occurs. They found that 64% of young trans men and 44% of young trans women experience harassment or bullying at school, not just from their fellow pupils but also from school staff including teachers. In regard to educational attainment, the report found large differences between achievement levels in the trans population compared to the UK average; while many trans people leave school after completing Level 2, 34% obtain a degree or higher degree (later in life), compared to the UK national average of only 27%. In attempting to explain this discrepancy, the authors make two suggestions. Firstly, while some trans individuals leave school early due to negative experiences such as bullying, they may return to education as mature students and do particularly well, given the life skills necessary to re-enter the system and fully transition as an adult. Secondly, given that gender reassignment is a complex and difficult undertaking, it may be the case that those who are more highly educated find it easier to navigate the process.

A report commissioned by the government in Northern Ireland (McBride 2013) highlighted the challenges faced by gender variant and transgender young people (age 25 and under) in their education. The report revealed that issues of gender identity, gender dysphoria and transgender issues are absent from Northern Ireland’s national curriculum for schools. As a result, McBride argues that this has led to a lack of awareness in Northern Ireland as a whole about trans issues and ‘disempowers young trans people from having the necessary awareness to understand their gender identity’ (McBride 2013: 4). The report further states that the strict dress codes set by many Northern Irish schools often do not match the gender identity of transgender students, which can cause stress, anxiety and discomfort, and may lead to truancy; missing school time, in turn, has for many years been negatively correlated with educational attainment (Wiley and Harnischfeger 1974; Buscha and Conte 2014). Furthermore, some young people included in McBride’s report (2013) claimed that they had heard their teachers expressing prejudiced views, or that their schools had reacted with disbelief and insensitivity to
their situation. McBride’s qualitative study also found that transphobic bullying was a problem in school settings, sometimes leading to trans pupils feeling isolated to the extent that they suffer poor mental health, which again has a negative influence on their learning. All of these issues may combine to lead to educational inequalities via the hindrance of trans young people’s personal, social and emotional development.

Pugh (2010) has offered guidance on the promotion of trans equality within higher education institutions. The steps include ensuring awareness of gender identity issues and developing proactive policies and procedures that are inclusive of trans people, for example in considerations of: accommodation and single-sex facilities; confidentiality; criminal record checks; the wording and process of awarding degree certificates; dress codes; the wording of forms and questionnaires; all records; recruitment; sports; and support groups. The report also recommends that policies should protect the rights of trans people to dignity at work and in educational settings, and that any decision to monitor gender identity, while potentially useful in analysing patterns of inequality and identifying ways to support trans staff and students, should be taken in consultation with them in order to gauge support for doing so.

At this time, the UK has no official statistics relating to the number of transgender people; this deficit of information forms the backdrop to the present study. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (an independent public body established in the wake of the Northern Irish peace process with responsibility to promote equality of opportunity and challenge discrimination) commissioned this research with a view to illuminating (where possible) current education inequalities, as well as barriers and enablers of equality for particular groups.

**Methods**

To explore barriers and enablers of education inequality for transgender students, specifically in terms of access issues, progression through school, achievement, and destinations after compulsory schooling, one focus group and two individual interviews were carried out with key stakeholders (two transgender individuals, three parents of transgender students, and two advocates from organisations that support transgender students) between October 2013 and December 2013. The participants (most of whom had previously met and were familiar to each other) were identified through snowball sampling via the research funder’s contacts. The participants were assured of anonymity as their names and their roles within organisations were removed from raw data and the resultant reports, and pseudonyms were used where necessary. The focus group and interviews were audio-
recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

**Results**

The themes that emerged from the data analysis were identified as barriers at the different stages of education, or as general enablers of education equality. Each is outlined in turn below.

1. **Barriers at Primary and Post-Primary School**

   The research participants identified six barriers to equality during compulsory schooling (primary and post-primary school); gender stereotyping; a lack of awareness; a lack of central guidance; inflexibility; exclusion; and the timing of transition.

   a. **Gender Stereotyping**

   Parents of gender variant children reported that the gender binary and gender stereotyping that exists in schools can make children feel like they do not belong in their school and contribute to their disengagement:

   In nursery school, the things you need to look at are the dress-up boxes, where if a boy comes out in a princess dress, other kids will say something e.g. [name] dressed up as a girl today’. Even things like stickers for hanging your coat – it will be a fire engine for guys, a fairy for girls. Even practical things would help – let the young person select their own sticker (Parent).

   b. **Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Trans Issues**

   It was reported that there is also a general lack of understanding in educational institutions of what transgender issues are, including a lack of understanding around terminology and what trans issues can mean for different people. This can result in sensitive issues not being dealt with properly; for example, one parent claimed that some teachers view gender variance as ‘just part of their development – they’ll grow out of it’. Similarly, another parent argued:

   There are some teachers who think it is ‘good’ for someone who presents as a boy to be reinforced in that male role, and the same for females as well. The lack of understanding there amongst male teachers is a real problem. If they can’t recognise it, then they can’t deal with it (Parent).

   c. **Lack of Central Guidance and Policy**

   The decentralisation of policy in education in Northern Ireland and the lack of any central guidance for schools as to how they can provide support to gender variant children was identified as another key barrier as it can add to the marginalisation of individual pupils:
The likelihood is that they are going to be presented with a gender variant child, at some point. That will inform the reaction to what happens. It is reactive, and not proactive, because then, whenever it does happen, it becomes about that person. It’s not about the general issue, it is very personalised on one person (Transgender individual).

This marginalisation can have a direct impact on young people’s progression and learning:

Because there are no guidelines, it’s the teacher’s personal feelings and opinion on it. And if you’re not lucky enough to get someone who knows or understands or is open-minded, then the child suffers. We have had cases where a teacher has not been supportive, and is insisting on using former names, the wrong pronoun, and is insistent on that. And then the child’s learning starts to be affected by that because they don’t want to go to school because of the distress it causes (Advocate).

However, there was recognition amongst representatives and stakeholders that even supportive schools and teachers are in a difficult position when there is no guidance. ‘Fear’ was mentioned frequently in the focus group; one participant claimed that teachers ‘fear legal action because there is no policy…they don’t know what to say…so they [don’t] say anything’:

Teachers can also be fearful. They said to me it is the lack of guidance – there may be a child presenting to them, and no matter what they feel about it, the governors and the senior management at the school don’t have a policy on it, and there’s no policy on it from the [local education authority], so the teachers themselves are caught between a rock and a hard place. They don’t know the positive benefits of treating the child as who they are against the trouble that they may get into for doing that…a supportive teacher can be very fearful of what to do…The head teachers we were talking to want so much to know how to deal with these things. They wanted the Department [of Education] to tell them what is our policy supposed to look like, how do we enforce these and what training can we access (Advocate).

One parent of a transgender young person stated that this barrier applies to non-teaching staff too - school counsellors also need more guidance in how to help and support trans young people:

My child is seeing a counsellor now, and the counsellor will not go into anything about transgender. They want to go into past family life, daddy issues, all that, but they won’t go into transgender because it’s something that she’s not trained in – but that’s what my child needs…she needs someone who has training and has experience to talk to. That’s where the difficulty is (Parent).

d. Inflexibility in School Rules

Strict school rules (along with a lack of central guidance on dealing with transgender issues) can place further hurdles in front of gender variant young people such as social exclusion and school exclusion:

If you are dealing with this as a person on your own, there are so many rules about what classes you take, what uniform you wear, where you get changed, what toilets
you use – it is a minefield. It is one person trying to pick their way through a minefield that at any moment could go horrendously wrong (Transgender individual).

A parent explained the difficulties that can arise from the common segregation of pupils at the post-primary level in Northern Ireland by biological sex (approximately one fifth of post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland attend single-sex schools): ‘I am scared that if I say, my child is a boy, they will say “well, this is a girls’ school – get her out.”’

e. Exclusion

Another identified barrier to transgender people’s attainment and enjoyment of school was exclusion. One form of this was self-exclusion from certain classes or from school altogether due to feelings of not being accepted, which reduces the breadth of learning experienced by transgender children:

What you find then is that the children exclude themselves from things that other children take for granted. You’ll find that many gender variant children don’t do PE. And then there’s all the facts about mental health and wellbeing being related to exercise. Then you also have the issue of school trips, and overnights. A gender variant child will tend not to go on the school trip (Advocate).

When my child is at PE, she is left standing in the corridor for an hour. [Name] won’t even go to RE now, so that’s another class she’s skipped. It is compulsory, but she hangs about in the corridors for half an hour... There’s an issue there that the schools aren’t providing an alternative to that – some study time or something (Parent).

Social exclusion by peers was also a commonly reported issue, often leading to a child moving from one school to another – this was the case with ‘most of the children’ who had contacted one of the LGB&T support groups represented in the focus group. As one parent explained, ‘The girls always excluded [name] – she was always with the boys. If only I’d known, or if only a teacher had have known, then the child could have been helped from [Year 6]. Instead, I had to move her school.’

f. The Timing of Transition

It was reported that gender variant young people will often wait until they can leave school to start their transition – no matter how unhappy this makes them and how much stress this adds to their lives - just to try to get through school without being bullied or excluded:

Often a parent will make a decision – the child will just go to school as this other gender – for the sake of not being bullied, just to not rock the boat; just to get them through their [post primary exams] or whatever, and get them out the other side. Then what you’ll find is, they’ll go to a [college], and then they’ll change. (Advocate).
One transgender individual argued that current ‘society’ is not conducive to transitioning any earlier: ‘we can tinker around with toilets, badges and all that, but this is fundamentally what we are talking about - you cannot transition in school. The timing is not right, and society is not right’.

### ii. Barriers at third level education

While going to college or university was considered by some participants to be a potential refuge for transgender people in the face of unwelcoming workplaces, three further barriers to equality were identified which were specific to entering third level education: enrolment processes; the move away from home; and inappropriate facilities.

#### a. Enrolment processes

It was claimed that individuals who are in the process of transitioning can face varying levels of difficulty when enrolling in college or university depending on ID requirements and the straightforwardness of altering official qualifications documents.

#### b. Moving Away from Home

Some parents reported that their children were very keen to move away after compulsory education because of the ‘fresh start’ they hoped this would give them, despite the ‘support structure’ at home offered by parents or family: ‘[My child is] talking about living in America, and she just wants to escape everything that is to do with her life now. Where nobody knows her as a girl. She was looking at London to go to college.’

#### c. Inappropriate Facilities

Universities and colleges may have single-sex halls of residence or inadequate facilities which can place barriers on transgender individuals who have plans to go on to further study:

Quite a few do go away, but again, we have one comment from a young trans person who did go away, and they were in female halls, and found that experience very negative...That person ended up leaving after two weeks and coming home. But then it’s about questions around passing, you know. It depends on the college or university, and whether they have the right facilities or whatever (Advocate).
iii. Enablers of Education Equality

The enablers of educational equality for transgender students were grouped into four key thematic areas: the establishment of central directives and coordinated government approaches; additional training for school staff; increased flexibility in school practices; and increased monitoring and data collection on the experience of transgender students.

a. Central Directives and Coordinated Approaches

Representatives of the transgender community interviewed for this study believed that schools should be required to include measures to address transphobic and homophobic bullying in their anti-bullying policies. The current legislation (from The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003) was deemed too vague. Furthermore, they stated they would like to see better mechanisms of feedback to parents when bullying occurs:

Schools should be required to monitor and report the different forms of bullying that pupils report, and that should be available to parents so that they can see how things are progressing. Rather than parents constantly trying to ring the school and say “how is that going? I last spoke to you 6 months ago and am waiting for a response back” (Advocate).

Schools in Northern Ireland are not currently deemed ‘public authorities’; as such, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the duty of public authorities to promote equality of opportunity) does not apply to them. Some participants believed that both curriculum reform and the designation of schools as public authorities under the Section 75 equality legislation would help to raise awareness of transgender issues:

Why is it that the only time gender is raised in a school is when it is raised by a child, rather than pupils being educated about what it means to be trans or gender variant? Section 75 applying to schools and the curriculum would really help that (Advocate).

Coordinated approaches between government departments and also between child and adult mental health and psychology services were likewise viewed as strategies which could help support children who are still at school:

At the minute you hear when they are finished with the CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] team they are sort of dropped, and then expected to engage with the adult services from the start...We need to put something in place a lot sooner...It’s not good enough to say, what do we do when they turn 18? By that stage the person has already been bullied, already lived 16/17 years in the wrong gender...it has already affected their mental health (Parent).
b. **Training for School Staff**

Participants spoke of the positive impact of supplementary training on transgender issues for school staff in terms of aiding understanding and giving advice for schools on how to support trans young people:

> Of course training would help for all staff, including administrators, because they are party to some very sensitive information. A lot of the young people I work with have a really good rapport built up with the administrative staff. That’s who they’ll go and speak to or have a yarn with (Advocate).

One participant stressed that it is not helpful if schools persistently refer to outside agencies to deal with transgender issues within a school; the capacity to deal with these issues needs to built from within. As one advocate for transgender students explained, ‘bringing in statutory services – “it is out of our hands” – it is maybe not the most appropriate response...Rather than come out and engage...it removes the responsibility for dealing with it.’

c. **Flexibility in School Practices**

Some participants in these interviews reported how small practical changes and increased flexibility in school practices can have a big influence on the extent to which a young person feels accepted and comfortable in school. One advocate gave the example of an all-girls school they worked with, where ‘two pupils [are] presenting as male. The teachers have all been told to use male names and pronouns, and they are allowed to wear trousers into school.’

d. **Increased Monitoring of the Experiences of Transgender Young People**

Representatives of the transgender community stressed that knowing more about the school experiences of transgender young people was necessary to begin tackling inequalities. According to an advocate, ’[Local government research studies] should include questions on transphobic bullying or gender-based bullying. Because at the minute, we don’t know. There’s no data.’

**Conclusions**

The qualitative data reported in this paper reveal the barriers to education equality that transgender people in schools and colleges in Northern Ireland are confronted with, as well as enablers which may help to overcome these challenges. With no quantitative data available to analyse, it is impossible to know trends in attainment, rates of entry to third level education and beyond, or other statistical educational indicators for transgender students. These omissions represent an inequality in themselves.
The barriers and enablers of education equality for transgender students reported here reflect those that have been reported in previous literature, particularly the findings regarding gender stereotyping and transphobic bullying, exclusion, and the need for central directives, policies, and training for school staff. Structural-level changes (equality legislation, revision of school curricula, policy guidance, and teacher/staff training) are vital for addressing fundamental challenges, while changes in day-to-day classroom practice and school-level structures can help to overcome daily experiences of discrimination and distress. Increasing the current levels of data collection on the experiences of transgender individuals (and having data collection processes that are devised in consultation with them) would be useful for the identification of trends in inequalities as well as the identification of promising practices that support trans staff and students.

References


Identity Formation and Negotiation of Freedom in Coeducational Language Schools in Iran

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Abstract

This study seeks to describe the dynamics of identity formation and negotiation of freedom and coeducation in the shadow of dominant discourses of Islamic hijab and segregation, in an English language college in Iran. A brief historical view of the cultural concerns of the Islamic state vis-à-vis the existing economic and socio-political contexts indicates a shift from the original discourses of segregation and Islamic hijab by state agents in the early 1980s (known as the ideals of Imam), arguably negotiated through the post-war period, i.e. since the 1990s. Language learning is viewed as parallel to higher education, legitimising the presence of women in social spheres, and their interaction with men: in the segregated and policed society of Iran, such schools are viewed as mixed spheres both by the students and by the programme designers who develop the businesses. The ethnography of a language school in Mashhad takes the alternative discourses, indicating the learners’ giving precedence to the socialising aspect of the classes rather than the educational quality in these classes; the female learners’ concern about how empowering the oral production of the foreign language is vis-à-vis their male counterparts, not only in language education but also for their future professional milieus; and how they are prepared, as prospective students in English speaking universities and immigrants for their lives in the ‘imaginary world of abroad’. Both teachers and learners participating in this study see the language classes as a liminal space between their present identity, their ideas, entertainments and jobs, and their ideal identity, relationships and ideas, which is imagined in the fancy world created mostly through the English language textbooks. In conclusion, other than the shift of the dominant discourses, this study demonstrates the divergence between the ideals of the Islamic state for the identity and role of the people, and the alternative voices that have negotiated their freedom with such strategies as paying tuitions and language learning in mixed spaces.

Keywords

language classes, coeducation, liminality, identity, negotiation

Backdrop

Right after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and Islamisation of the public spheres, which meant gender segregation in public places as well as the compulsory hijab for women (Mirhosseini 1999: 7), i.e., dark coloured long and loose uniforms, pants, and headscarves, the Islamic state started to eliminate private and international schools, under the title of ‘Islamic Cultural Revolution’ in 1980. Because women and their bodies continue to be central markers of legitimacy and progress (Kandiyoti 1991: 49), and since the discourses of state and nation building after the Islamic Revolution intended Iranian women to conform with the Islamic role models of modesty, the Iranian women’s freedom seemed to face constraints both in sartorial codes and in presence in social mixed spheres in general. However, such
constraining actions as segregation of all schooling and the Cultural Revolution, made education that has long been celebrated in Iranian culture, available for women of religious families. In other words, a large population of women, who were traditionally perceived as wives and mothers, and perceived gender segregation as customary, even when not legally required\(^1\), were now permitted by their patriarchal religious families to attend the now segregated schools, which were perceived as a social sphere (Mirhosseini 2000: 8). Their presence in educational spaces, I argue, provided them with an opportunity to negotiated further freedom in the years following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. More education was equal to more legitimate opportunity to leave home among the lower class religious families (Rezai Rashti and Moghadam 2011: 421), which brought about freedom for both men and women. This article takes the more liberal choices in sartorial codes and in interactions as instances of freedom negotiated through extra-curricular language classes.

**Language Classes and Higher Education**

In Iran, besides the regular state sponsored schooling, language schools provide specialised services of teaching and learning foreign languages, including English. In the pre-Revolutionary period, language schools were affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, ran a coeducational system and recruited native speakers. After the 1980 Islamic Cultural Revolution, i.e. ‘refining the educational systems from cultural imperialism’ (Sreberny and Mohammadi, 1994: 11), removing foreign instructors, and re-opening the universities, such language schools resumed their operations under the affiliation of Higher Education Ministry. However, since the language learners attending these schools also included students under the age of 20, the Ministry of Education took charge, and segregated them in the late 1980s. Later on in the 1990s, the country started to experience the post-war relative relaxation with the passport system as well as the capitalism and economic stability during the ‘Reconstruction’ period of President Hashemi Rafsanjani (Adelkhah 1999: 27). Meanwhile, the advent of Islamic Azad universities as higher education institutions parallel to the existing ‘state’ universities, brought a tuition paying population to the sphere of higher education, which had previously been free at all levels. Accommodating the tuition paying students, Islamic Azad University negotiated a more liberal atmosphere in comparison to the state universities (Rohani 2015). Language schools started to grow, with those students who were applying as students or immigrants to the English speaking countries as well as owners of the businesses and industries. The high ranking engineers and businessmen also needed English

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\(^1\) Initially, the discourse about the need to educate women was tied up with new conceptualisations of the family, childrearing, and household management in a modern society (Najmabadi 1998).
language education, because that was the time of business trips all over the country.

Private Language Schools

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought an atmosphere of economic flourishing for business, privatisation of some sectors, and relative freedom in the public spheres. The presidency of Mohammad Khatami in the 2000s brought freedom of speech and relaxation, especially in the academic atmosphere (Adelkhah 1999:21). Women enjoyed certain freedoms in sartorial codes, i.e. looser ties on the headscarves, shorter uniforms and tighter pants, and lighter colours. In this relaxed atmosphere, cultural activities flourished with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Some language classes\(^2\) started as branches of cultural activities. It seems that this variation in the affiliation of language classes provided the grounds for the language classes to be held on a coeducational basis. Establishment of these classes coincided with a demand for English education as an economic stimulus and the rather liberal atmosphere of President Khatami’s time. The resulting success of these classes later caused more language schools to apply for affiliation with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and permission to hold coeducational classes, which the Ministry of Education would not permit. In this process, the dominant discourse of the ideal of Imam regarding segregation and Islamisation of schooling underwent a shift to converge with the needs of the people. This study further considers the voices of the language learners who negotiate freedom in the space of language classes.

Language Learners

The study on identity has a social constructionist position (Spellman et al. 2014: 4). Hence, to study how the participants construct identities and negotiate freedoms in sartorial code and interactions with language learners of opposite sex vis-à-vis the limiting dominant discourses in language colleges is to take a social process into account. To detect the demotic (alternative) discourses, the ethnographic approach allowed this study to describe the complex context (Bauman 1996: 196) in which language learners orient themselves on the one hand to the normative dominant discourses which limit the educational spaces and segregate them, resulting in such corporal and social constraints and on the other hand identifies the learners’ own strategies that inform their choices of social practices.

I taught English in a language college in Mashhad for nine months. Other than leading the free discussion classes, where my students would speak

\(^2\) An example would be the Iranian Academic Centre for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR)
about issues topical to their lives and I was the participant observer, I decided to ask some of the students and my colleagues to participate in semi-structured interviews. A list of topics was used as an aid-memoire, to address concepts of self and identity as well as negotiation for freedom and empowerment based on the paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, with an emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such, the research gained insights into people's motivations and actions. This enriched the study both with the answers I was intending, and the information that I consider as their lived experience.

The Divergence

With the fundamentalists’ return and the presidency of Ahmadinejad in the late 2000s and early 2010s, a different atmosphere emerged in which the Ministry of Education designed different textbooks for girls’ and boys’ schools that would ‘prepare them for future men and women roles in Islamic society.’ At this time, the increasing number of language schools indicates a divergence between the ideals of the people for themselves and state plans for them as citizens. The policies for English language education in the post-Revolutionary years were aimed at refraining from any type of ‘Western’ ideas and values as a strategy of cultural defense (Amir Arjmand 2009: 177), hence trying to replace English language as the language of ‘Western Cultural Invasion’ with Arabic as the ‘language of the world of Islam’ (ibid.). However, the new discourse of the state indicates a shift in the policy and a tolerance in the methods of language instruction. Last year, an Islamic Fundamentalist newspaper (Serat 2014) commented on the growing ‘fashion of language learning’:

It is mentionable that learning a language other than the mother tongue is not a flaw, but a plus. Because it helps build an easier connection with the people of other countries and use their experiences. But in case learning a new language leads to changes in social norms and imposing deviations from morality, then it is better not to learn a language at all.

At a meeting with the Supreme Board of the Cultural Revolution on Dec. 2013, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated:

As you know, nowadays learning the English language is very prevalent in the country, and there are many language schools recently established. Well, there are language schools and all the books that are taught over there suggest the Western life-style. The language learners, our teenager and the adult learners study the language and learns the culture. They might even forget the language and remember the culture and the life-style. This is what should not happen in this country (Serat 2014).
As mentioned, until recently, the language schools had to be affiliated with the Ministry of Education, which only allowed segregated buildings with certain distance between boys’ and girls’ departments. In line with the ideas of Moghaddam (2003) and Moghissi (2005), the growth of capitalist tendencies and free market competitions for coeducational classes in Iran has made the policies of language education in the country to submit licences for coed classes affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in this decade. Regarding the process in which some language schools boost in a short time, I draw upon my observation as a language teacher besides interviewing other teachers in Mashhad, and language learners who attend one of the recently boosting language schools in the city. Farid, 32, architect and attends ‘preparation for IELTS’. He says:

I think the people who establish such a language school in a rather posh area of the city always target certain people, of the girls who come to these classes to find richer boys and some boys who think of better girls here. I do not even call these places schools. These are just for entertainment, and learning could be seen as just a by-product of such schools. The people who establish such schools think business: they create the place in a good area of the city, gather the boys and girls, get the money. If they had any other vision, the condition of education in our country would not be so tragic. I think the Achilles Heel of the education in Iran is here: you come to a place for education, it does not look like an educational complex, it looks like a place you would imagine for virtual sex chatrooms. Boys and girls are all together and chatting, right at entrance. I do not want to say that boys and girls should not get together at a school. But I’m saying just because the society imposes so much pressure in other places, in such a school people are just going to extremes…because these are the places where they can see each other without being policed. Maybe the education is just out of their minds when they are in such a school. I think it is a complicated story…people are not completely aware of what they are really doing…there are not places where people got for education really.

Nasim believes the business considers the demand for coed classes:

Even the 70 year old man gets excited when girls are around in the language class. This is one key motivation for the language learners…even they like the teachers to be opposite sex, they get more motivated…regarding the fact that in Iran we do not have many opportunities to be with each other, especially younger learners look at the classes as a chance to mingle. Here they have the opposite sex sitting right beside them and they can speak to him/her freely.

Many of the interviewees gave precedence to the socialising aspects of the coed language classes when discussing the dynamics of language schools, leaving little space for education quality. To me it seemed as if they consider learning only as a by-product of the whole process of attending a mixed space. Nima sees the language classes as a socialising spot:

It might be a bit of pastime and entertainment, there are certain subjects discussed in those classes just to start speaking…personal experiences…especially because we do not have free discussions or tribunes easily around us. Such classes could be seen as a way to make ones mood better, not just to improve one’s language skills…speaking
English is just an alibi, you just say things that do matter but you cannot normally say it in Farsi.

Identity and the Imagined Worlds of ‘Target Culture’

The lived experience (Ellis and Bochner 1992: 3; Miles and Huberman 1994: 9) of Nasim, a 26 year old TEFL graduate in Mashhad who has taught classes in some private language schools, allows us to understand the process and structures of language education in the years after the Revolution:

If you consider the method they apply for teaching at state schools, they are grammar translation or in best cases direct method…the classes are dull and the teachers have no academic training for teaching English. For example, my teacher at high school was my chemistry teacher who also taught English. I never learned a word from my school teacher…no culture is conveyed in those books, all the pictures show Muslim women in hijab…. I remember just one reading comprehension about Mother Teresa and one on global warming that was not particularly about Iran… the practices were all controlled practice, no free activities. The semi-governmental school I experienced was audio lingual…they had some lessons about culture, for example about English breakfast or how the British people love fish and chips...

Having always studied with the textbooks designed and published in the Ministry of Education, the attendees in language schools would gain the chance to see the books designed for the global reader. The main difference between the Iranian and the global language learning books come in the graphics: according to studies by Lenzner et al. (2013) more than 70 percent of the pictures in a typical language book are decorative, and yet they have a positive effect on learning. A similar study on the books taught in the schools of Iran, however, shows that only 7 out of 260 pictures are decorative\(^3\). The rest of the pictures are instructional\(^4\). For the language learners who face them in the language schools, the global books become source of inspiration about the target culture as well as the target language with a ‘multimedia effect’\(^5\). In other words, the world that is constructed through the language textbooks, is informed by the data they randomly collect from other cultural products, including movies, blogs, posters, etc. Unlike the textbooks of the state schools, the books that are designed for the extra-curricular language schools are printed in colour, with plenty of decorative and educational images that help pick up the English language speakers’ culture (Rohani and Saeedfar 2013: 87), but rarely contribute to learning the language.

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\(^3\) Pictures were considered as instructional, when they were primarily informative, and as decorative, when they were primarily aesthetically appealing. (Ibid.)

\(^4\) A note on instructional pictures indicated that they were mostly used for teaching vocabulary.
Arezoo, a 30-year-old assistant professor of Architecture compares the image she had constructed about the European countries before she had the chance to visit Germany, and her disillusionment:

...what I imagined was constructed according to what I had seen on the internet, the books, what the people who come and go talk about, the movies... Many had such deep impacts on me: for example, one reading was about a country where the university professors would attempt other jobs every 5 years, for a month, to understand the problems of the systems of working in their country. I remember the picture vividly, of a university professor who is carrying a trash bin...while the reality is much simpler and easier to understand...the atmosphere of the countries overseas is presented like a place where they have no problems. But then you go and see they have their own problems, but they are more orderly...some of them!

Nima, a 31 year-old PhD student who plans to transfer to a European country, says:

Now they are censoring the pictures...the pictures draw my attention...for example in the third lesson of the intermediate book, which compares a classroom in the past and in the present, yes. I looked at this photo for a long time. It showed two pictures of the blackboard and old fashioned benches and desks, and the modern classroom with the changes in walls and chairs and technology...the people, the interactions....I compared our own classrooms as a third picture. Looking at the pictures, I also think of the personalities, the relationships, their society...I always compare the pictures with the very details of them, whenever I find foreign books. I am really curious to see them, to compare myself with them, to see their lifestyle and my own lifestyle...sometimes I think of jobs or entertainments and wonder when I would ever have a chance to have such experiences. For example in a lesson about the entertainments... I think why can’t I ride on a kite or a paraglider, or jump on a parachute...and why should we always do only a few of the sports and only watch others doing the exciting stuff.

As an English language teacher who has experienced books and websites as the material, Nasim evaluates her feelings towards the target culture:

The activities I find from the British Council website and bring to my students might make them and myself think of ‘the better world’ that the English language....but nothing in the books makes me think like, “wow, this is America”.....it shows Americans as perfect people, completely disciplined, honest, etc. But we all know that Americans are not that classy, some of them are extremely messy....compared to the British...and this understanding of mine does not just come from the textbooks we teach, but from the other sources I usually read. From the internet, and from the movies I have seen. The books exaggerate the perfection of their culture...for example, the characters that are made in the books comparing an Americana and an Italian, a Spanish, or an Arab, you always see that the American is better....for example, there are two characters in Result Elementary lesson three, one girl has a French accent and says that she speaks many languages, but the American girl says she speaks only some words of Spanish...comes out that the American girl is honest

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at the end and the French girl is just telling lies…it is always that they are the superior….

As a liminal world between the imaginary utopia of the target language and the existing everyday life of the language learners, the language class itself, as evaluated by the learners, is more than a chance to learn a language or culture. Nima thinks that the language class brings the imaginary to the real world, saying, “…this is an experience especially in a society where we feel the pressure, it is a great opportunity to have classes where people can interact and start some relationships…it is a good way to experience what one would otherwise imagine only…”

Arezoo also sees the liminality lived in the language schools, saying, “Language schools can prepare people for their future lives which might be in a foreign country.” Right opposite to what the Supreme Leader warns the society, the language classes introduce a whole new world which could be seen as a utopia by the learners. They usually see all the barriers as created by the government and imagine that society is a utopia without the intervention of the Islamic republic regime.

As mentioned before, higher education in the post-Revolutionary Iran meant access to co-educational system, and as observed in the interviews by Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam a higher level of self confidence in the female population vis-à-vis society. Similarly, coeducational language schools are among the legitimate places females could attend as educational sectors. Attending a coeducational language school provides women with empowerment, both as a legitimate reason to be far from home, and at the face of their patriarchal families, when they find the opportunity to speak in the class discussions. Similar to Leila Ahmad’s view to all the educational spheres, as a ‘legitimate reason for women to be out of domestic sphere’ language schools are now used as a ‘legitimate reason for women to be in non-segregated spaces’. Hence, now that women have negotiated their presence in the educational and work places (Mirhosseini 2000: 17) they continue the legitimacy of their presence in these educational places even though they are no longer segregated. Interestingly, women attending language schools also get the chance to follow more relaxed sartorial codes, including the newly fashionable manteau without buttons, tights instead of pants, and no ties on the headscarves. An observation of mine on one of my female students …she would come to college wearing black chador on top of her manteau, pants and black headscarf and go to restroom first. There she would fold her chador and change into tights and coloured headscarf and hide her chador and pants in her book bag, before attending the class. Because she took all the precautions not to let her classmates see her in both types of clothes, I never asked her about this action. I could see, however, how she
travelled through time- from black chador and ‘proper Islamic hijab’ to more relaxed coloured loose headscarf and fashionable tights.

Discussion

The historical view on the dominant discourses of the state regarding language learning in Iran indicates a shift from extreme elimination of any manifestation of Western culture to avoiding submission. This shift occurs to cope with the inclinations towards capitalism and free market in the post-war period in Iran, which advocate more liberal educational spaces, including coed classes. Even so, there is a divergence between the ideal Muslim man and woman role of the state, and the one known in the alternative discourses, i.e. the voices in the language college.

In the language colleges as educational centres, the overtone of sexuality and the purpose of socialisation rather than education is so strong that almost all the participants mention it as a secret for the success of the business of such language colleges. Though frowned upon by the dominant discourses of segregation and some participants who find it distracting, others believe they can use this space to develop towards the ideal identity that they believe they need for life in the target language society. In terms of Turner (2008) they see the language school as a liminal space between their present identity and their ideal one. Language classes provide the edge of transition from what they are, the ambiguous identity that is often subject to contestation between the dominant and alternative discourse, and what they negotiate to become, after they have experienced transition to the target language society.

The learners’ imagination of the target language society is created according to the narratives of the English language textbooks and their pictures. Participants believe this is through class discussions in the atmosphere of freedom to socialise and it is only in the English language that they can approach the identity they imagine for themselves in the target society. The interactions among the participants is also modelled after the imagined interactions in the target society. In this liminal world that moves towards the learners’ imagined utopia, women find a platform to dress more liberally and men assert themselves more freely, what the government has warned against as manifestations of Imperial culture. The coed language colleges demonstrate the ongoing process of negotiating freedom of sartorial code and interaction: from strictly Islamic and segregated to more liberal coeducational.

References


The Gender Role in the Educational Empowerment of Migrant Families from Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Countries

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Abstract

This paper analyses the influence of gender roles in educational empowerment, and the motivation placed on children from migrant families of ethnic Russian-speaking minority school communities and their everyday practices. Interviews with parents and teachers were conducted, and observations of participants were made in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee schools.

The findings show how gender roles that are functioning in migrant families are linked with building educational attitudes, and explore the mother’s influence on children’s educational motivation. Perspectives of these influences on educational empowerment are drawn, and this paper discusses how they are strongly connected with falling levels of poverty and positive integration into the local society of migrant children. These issues are especially important for migrant families. In addition, heritage language preservation is examined as one very important tool for the educational empowerment of migrant children.

Keywords
gender role, migrant families, educational empowerment

Introduction

Members of the post-Soviet population abroad have very different ethnic and national backgrounds, but employing the Russian language seems to be one of the significant markers of their group’s belonging (Laitin 1998: 15). Their attitudes towards Russian language practices in different environments and the preservation of the Russian language for the next generation appear to be an essential component for understanding the strategies’ of educational empowerment in families. According to previous research (Kay 2007), the disposition of gender roles in post-Soviet migrant families tends to be one of the key factors in this process. In addition, exploration of gender-related educational empowerment can be informative and important when investigating social mechanisms which can help people integrate more effectively into local society through educational and social lifts (Sen 1985).

Consequently, our paper will address the following questions: What kind of gender roles have been created in migrant families? What kind of attitudes
towards education can be found in migrant families? How do mothers influence the educational motivation of children in school? How do fathers’ attitudes towards attending ethnic minority complementary schools support the mother tongue preservation? Could this gender balance provide migrant children with new opportunities for development?

Studies of Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries’ migration show a wide range of differences between migrant groups from these countries, but significant similarities and general trends have also been found. One of the most common and important features of this migrant flow seems to be the attitude towards educational empowerment in families and gender role disposition (Heath, McGhee and Trevena 2011).

The research design is usually determined by the research questions and resources (Saunders et al., 2009: 600). The investigation of the impact on gender role disposition on families’ educational empowerment among Russian-speaking migrants has broad research perspectives which influence research methodology. We chose a composition of four Russian-speaking school communities attended by parents from Eastern European and post-Soviet countries as the main focus of our research. These weekend schools were chosen as the main field works, due to their specific influence on educational empowerment. According to Hornberger (2007), attendance of these schools could be employed as an indicator or criterion of selection of migrant families who are interested in the educational empowerment of their children.

The object of the study is complicated, as gender roles in the schools among Russian-speaking communities require a varied practical approach with qualitative methodology at the core. Our research design merged the following elements together:

- 12 participant observations in the school corridors
- 4 participant observations in the community events organised by Russian schools
- 25 face-to-face ethnographic interviews with parents

Gender relationships inside migrant families are ‘socially constructed through the interaction between discursive practices and individual agency’ (Stella 2010: 47). In this case, observation and interviews are the most useful research methods as they allow a deeper understanding of behaviour and motivation of migrants. Utilising a mixed methodological approach, we can facilitate a deeper understanding of these gender roles in migrant school society thereby reducing the limitations you would encounter using a single method of data collection. This methodological approach provides us with
an understanding of the migrant communities and some very important insights which previously were hard to obtain, as usually they are social groups which are ‘hard to reach’ (Campbell 2010). Previous research shows that migrants tend to avoid direct answers to questions about relations and distribution of powers in their families (Remennick 2012). Quite a large proportion of informants prefer to give normative answers which they believe demonstrate their definition of a ‘good migrant.' Prior educational research also encountered some problems in publicly accepted answers to questions about learning, due to the high value of education among middle class families. People tend to speak in a positive way about education, and mixing participant observation with ethnographic interviews is helpful in clarifying this point and observing how gender roles act out in public places.

Participatory observation allows the gap between how people really bring up their children and what they say they do to be explored (DeWalt, K.M. and DeWalt, B.R. 2002). The main issue for observers is to understand the finer points, which can be helpful to draw a wider picture of social relations and emotions. Gender roles in educational empowerment tend to be sensitive to emotional aspects (Dewaele & van Oudenhoven 2009) observed during participation in community events. The ethnographic interviews are a method of data collection which can be effectively combined with participatory observation. According to previous research results, migrant families have numerous motivations for educational empowerment of their children (Dailey-O’Cain & Liebscher 2011). This process is very flexible and deeply immersed in everyday life, and may be based on low levels of reflexivity (Weber and Horner 2012). In this case, parents may face difficulties in answering direct questions, as the ethnographic interview is more flexible and sensitive for respondents, offering more opportunities to tell their own life story, and describe the roles and relationships within families as part of their everyday life (Forsey 2008).

In migrant communities, the question of educational empowerment tends to have strong links with people’s attitudes towards the whole educational system. This point was mentioned by groups of parents with diverse educational levels, while the topic of education was a main point in parents' discussions observed in school corridors. Parents try to organise the daily practice of children’s education using their own assumptions about effective child development. Decision making of how to prioritise children’s activities during the day is important for parents: is it more important for children to visit a sports club or to read a book, or to watch Russian or English cartoons? Making these decisions, migrant parents have to consider the children’s opinion but also have to implement their assumptions about what kind of activities are more beneficial for children. Understanding the value of
education could be considered as the first step in analysing the nature of gender roles in everyday life.

According to our observations and obtained interviews, the majority of migrant parents consider education to be an important and vital part of a child’s development which needs no discussion at all. Similar tendencies were found in Polish and Czech migrant communities in the UK (Berrington, Perelli-Harris and Trevena 2015). According to a parental opinion, obligations for their children's development are strongly linked to the time and money which families spend on education for their child. For parents whose children attend complementary schools in Scotland, it appears obvious that they must want to educate their children.

So she is a child, it develops her, however, education is very important for us (Parent, Glasgow).

When some parents decide that education is not valuable, there is no point to discuss this matter with them (Parent, Glasgow).

This attitude towards education as a whole could be classified as the main characteristic of parents whose children attend Russian schools in Scotland. This common point of view from migrant school communities was mentioned more often than others, such as love of Russian culture, or wishing to transfer their values on to children and so on.

R: What are the common features of parents from Russian schools?

P: Firstly, they are parents who are thinking about the future of their children, for whom education as a whole is a high-level priority in the family. Education is very important for them, they think that education cannot take care of itself, so any extra help is needed (Teacher, Edinburgh).

Probably because of that, I heard that the majority of parents send their children to Russian school not only to study Russian language but also to receive wider knowledge (Parent, Aberdeen).

A follow-up question could be why parents value education so highly. More than half of the parents from Russian schools in Scotland have received higher education. For them, higher education is a part of the family tradition, and they wish their children to have the same academic achievements. This level of well-educated parents is slightly higher in the Edinburgh school and lower in Dundee. However, those parents who do achieve a higher level of education also have some very strong attitudes towards education for their children. From the Russian teachers’ point of view, parents who have this attitude had their own learning experiences and can teach and support their child’s learning progress. Learning any language - including Russian - requires not only communication practice but also the participation of parents when doing writing and grammar homework.
Parents who spend their time organising educational activities believe that they are investing in the future of their children. From their point of view, professionals will always be in demand, and well-educated people will have better job opportunities in future life.

How are you seeing the future life of your child? I do not know. We only know, not know but wish that she will choose an occupation, and it does not matter what it is. For us, it is important that it is through higher education. As I already said it is our value, my husband and I consider that it gives more chances in life. (Parent, Glasgow)

Education is also assumed to be an asset which is more stable than finance or property, especially in times of crisis. Having experienced difficult periods, migrants are especially sensitive to the issue of stability. Some of them said that finding a more stable and conventional life was one of the primary reasons for moving to another country.

Now everything fails, everything is unstable. Money depreciates, real estate prices still haven’t returned to normal after the previous crisis, and already the new one is promised. It is probably worth to put your investment into yourself (Observation in Glasgow Russian School).

Migrant parents who struggle to find appropriate employment, imagine a brighter future for their children which is strongly linked to their occupation and opportunities for self-realisation. Direct evidence of that opinion could not be found in interviews where parents tended to avoid discussing such sensitive subjects. However, observations in school corridors show that people who previously spoke of their difficulties in finding an appropriate job in Scotland often talked about better jobs for their children in the future.

Parents believe that the classic Russian education system provides pupils with more knowledge than the current Scottish one. By sending their children to a Russian school in Scotland, they hope to realise the competitive advantage of their native education. The members of Russian school communities highlight the world status of the Russian education system and its ability to provide people with more knowledge and skills.

The status of Russian education is still great and parents remember that children were taught well. In Europe, people are now returning to that form of education. We all have begun to discuss more and more that a European liberal education leads to the situation that our children lag behind in comparison with Oriental countries, such as China and others (Teacher, Edinburgh).

Parents compare the current academic achievements of children in mainstream Scottish schools with their own past experiences, especially in relation to maths, reading and writing. Parents cannot understand why pupils in primary fourth class do not know what they knew at this age. Maybe, they do not want their children to be equal to them, but they think that
...if they knew something at age of eight, their children should know more not less at
the same age. (Parent, Aberdeen). Yes, I will say honestly that there was an additional
push, especially in Maths. In Scottish schools, children at her age do not study Maths
(Parent, Aberdeen).

Comparisons between schooling in Russia were a popular topic for
discussion among parents when they were waiting for the end of the working
day at the Russian school. Parents exchanged their knowledge and
experiences of how Scottish mainstream schools work and highlighted
differences in methods and educational approaches. The main advantages of
Scottish education, from their points of view, were independence and self-
motivation to study, which is encouraged in local children. Migrants wish to
integrate local school programmes with some methods of traditional Russian
schools. However, referring to Russian schools parents are very rarely told
about modern mainstream schools in Russia.

The images of mainstream schools in Russia displayed by parents seem to be
a reconstruction of their cultural and educational experience. The main
elements of this image are:

- appropriate behaviour in the classroom: paying considerable
  attention and respecting teachers
- a strong focus on natural scientific subjects
- very clear explanations of any teaching material by teachers to pupils
  and
- teaching children not only to achieve best results but also teaching
  how it would be achieved, showing some strategies for learning.

Migrant parents pay special attention to education, not only as a classical
social advantage for their children but also at the core of creating their child's
own personal identity. According to their beliefs, a thorough education can
provide more perspective and vision in life. Some of the migrants who could
not find an appropriate place for themselves in Scottish life, considered their
own education as a valuable asset for their identity. Achieving a high level of
education helped them to feel better socially and, despite their income being
lower than the average income of the Scottish middle class, to rank
themselves at that level also. A social unbalance was found in mixed families
where Russian-speaking wives possessed higher levels of education than
their husbands. By teaching children at home, they realise their levels and
describe their frustration about their own low demands on their educational
potential.
Russian school communities are not homogeneous in their social and financial resources. Russian speaking people belonging to the middle class are usually more confident in their ability to educate their children and in helping them to shape their future. Their children often attend private Scottish school or state schools in prestigious city districts. In contrast, migrants who do not have sufficient income or social capital said that they cannot give their children the appropriate financial support or include them in social networking which will be beneficial in the future. However, they can present their life experience to their children, offering them more knowledge than a private school.

We are migrants, I cannot provide my child with all of that which I could give him in Russia, but I can devote my life to his education. I can learn with him, take him on various extracurricular activities (Participant observation in Russian school of Glasgow).

To understand gender roles, migrant families can be classified into two groups:

(1) whole migrant families; (2) mixed migrant families. The first type unites family members who are all migrants in host countries. The second type contains partners from whom one is local and marriage with him/her gave the right to the second partners’ migration to this country. Those above equal or unequal positions can influence the distribution of power and gender-based stereotypes in families.

In the first group, relationships between partners are more strongly dependant on gender stereotypes which emanate from their countries of origin. According to gender studies in post-Soviet families (Kay 2007), the relationship between genders is not balanced, with the husband assumed to be the more dominant family member with stronger rights to make family-related decisions. In this traditional model, the mothers more often play the role of housewives who are responsible for household tasks with the education of children also assumed to come under this heading. Describing their role in families, migrant women highlighted the efforts of the husband as an excuse for their absence in family life. ‘Our father is working all day, but I am at home and looking after my small child’ (Parent, Glasgow).

However, in Scotland, some of these stereotypes have been experienced in reverse, with the intention of absorbing into the local culture but not the full range as can be expected. The mother’s role in the socialisation of children cannot be underestimated in all language and early childhood life. As a result of the mother’s education, native language tends to increase the emotional element of communications (Dailey-O’Cain and Liebscher 2011). The dominant language in society is usually implemented later in family life.
when children go to the nursery and school and is employed in official communication with a more formal style (Baker 2014).

If local fathers support the idea of bilingual education for their children and help mothers to preserve their traditional identity, families become more active in educational spaces and are more likely to attend ethnic minority supplementary schools. In these cases, mothers use their own learning experience, teach and support the learning process of their children.

He knows that if Dad comes to put him to bed, he will bring an English book. If mum puts him to bed, a Russian book would be brought. We have a lot of Russian books, and he brings a Russian one himself (Parent, Edinburgh).

These mothers told us that they felt it increases their position of authority in the household dynamics. These women wish to integrate local school programmes with some methods used in ethnic minority schools.

Another point is that education is a core which will be helpful to mould personal identity. According to their beliefs, complex education gives people a better vision. Some mothers, who did not find an appropriate place in British life, consider their education as a valuable asset for their identity. The high level of their education allows them to elevate themselves in society despite their income level. Reading books together with their children, allows parents to create family time where parents have an opportunity to realise their social capital and show their children that even without possessing perfect English, they, nevertheless, know lots of new and interesting things. As such, one of the parents in Dundee in conversation in a school corridor pointed out that she was very glad when her teenage son said: “Mum, I did not have a clue that you are so clever” after discussing with her the book they read together. Before that, her son persistently rejected all of her remarks on the subjects taught in the Scottish school. Having gone through periods of difficulty and crisis, mothers are especially sensitive to the issue of stability. Supporting their children through ethnic minority schools in the UK, they hope to realise the competitive advantage of transnational culture and educational knowledge.

In the modern world, the traditional functioning of gender roles has dramatically shifted. During analysis of educational preferences and choices of educational strategies, it was observed that gender balance affected the integration of migrant children and their families into host countries. Gender balance can be defined as the nature of gender roles in providing successful integration of migrant families into society. Educational empowerment can be recognised as one example of functioning gender balance. The growth of equal participation of both partners in decisions about a child’s education can build a more sustainable basis for their education and career perspectives.
One possible way to strike this balance is the addition of educational decisions within mother’s roles, allowing her to realise her educational potential and raise a bilingual child. However, the implementation of this mother’s role is only possible if the father’s role also accepts the value of bilingual education and supports this intention. In this case, gender balance in decision-making about a child's education can be the key to success in migrant children and their integration into local society. On the contrary, if gender balance cannot be achieved in a migrant family, the risk of difficulties in adaptation among children may increase. For example, the crisis of gender balance may occur when a mother is in favour of bilingual education for her children, but the father is of the opposite view and does not pay sufficient attention to the child's educational needs.

In today's society, children require the special support of their family to maintain a high level of educational motivation and intentions for qualitative education. It is especially important in migrant families where parents’ educational levels are quite high but are not demanded or not realised in some reasons. Having gender balance, migrant families receive more opportunities to avoid crossing the poverty line and becoming trapped within vulnerable groups.

**Conclusion**

Migrant parents from Eastern European and post-Soviet countries consider education a very important value. From their point of view, heritage language preservation is part of a broader mission. It helps their child's development, providing them with the opportunity to increase the effectiveness of migrant families’ integration into Scottish society, using the educational approach from their origin country as a transnational advantage for children. Merging two educational systems - host and country of origin - can create special competitive benefits for migrant children. Education can play a role as a social integrator and provider of local social behaviours. In contrast, education with international elements supports transnational activities. Instead of hiding their origin, migrants whose children received bilingual education chose the way to highlight their transnational advantages for local communities through the education process. However, the level of families’ activities highly depends on the disposition of gender roles in families.

Special gender balance is established between the roles in mixed families, where fathers are locals and mothers are migrants, in organising and learning motivation. The fathers’ roles are providing the integration of migrant families in local society and introducing educational systems for family members. In turn, mothers pay significant attention to children's education and believe that it is a family investment in their future. For the majority of
migrant families, higher education is part of a tradition, and they hope for the same academic achievements for their children. When teaching children at home, migrant mothers realise their own educational potential and feel less frustrated about their own integration process.

References


Mafia Children: From Future to Past. Knowing Other Realities to Learn Freedom

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Abstract

In mafia families, children are educated in violence, revenge, and gender stereotypes. What can be done to guarantee these children the right to education, the right to become citizens, the right to be men without killing and women without obeying, and the right to know the value of democracy and legality? One possible answer lies in the recent judgment of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, which has mandated the revocation of parental responsibility in all cases in which serious injury to the child is proven. These limitations to parental rights have the principal purpose of allowing institutions to stop a system of behaviour that is harmful to the proper development of the personality of the child and that transmits negative cultural values from father to son and from mother to daughter.

Keywords

mafia, education, gender, blood ties, law

Introduction

Assuming that the objective of education is the emancipation of the subject in formation, this research addresses the problem of compatibility between the educational models popular among families belonging to the mafia and educational models seeking to create free, emancipated, and autonomous persons. Bauman (1999) argues that centre of the current crisis of the political process is not so much the absence of values or the confusion generated by their plurality as it is the absence of an institution powerful enough to produce legitimate representatives, to promote and strengthen any set of values, or to implement any range of consistent and cohesive options.

Man acquires morality from the environment in which he grows, but the true evolution of morality can be accomplished only through the critical skills learned during the complex phenomenon of training. In other words, only if one learns to be critical can one participate in the common good. Spadafora (2010) illustrated this point as follows: ‘Democracy, before being political technique to modify and adapt to social and economic changes, it is basically a way of life that only a critical pedagogy can favour.’ However, if families educate their children using values opposite those of democracy, legality, solidarity and the common good, how do you guarantee children the right to education and the right to become informed citizens who are integrated into their social context?
During my research on this subject, I examined the recent judgments of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Southern Italy, where a judge is pioneering a programme to help children of mafia families escape from a life of crime by taking them away from their parents at the first sign of trouble. The objective of these judges is to allow children who are growing up in similar contexts to learn about other realities in order to undermine the educational models inherited from their families of origin.

By applying the educational theories of Piero Bertolini (1965) and Jack Mezirow (1991, 1995), I believe it is possible to deconstruct deviating training models through experience. Training models should be aimed at the rehabilitation of persons who, for whatever reason, have introjected internal dysfunctional models and are incapable of developing appropriate relationships with others or society in general; such models need to begin with the epistemological foundation of the rehabilitation pedagogy. This is the case of the work of two great academics of the phenomenon of experiential learning who have worked to implement this transformative movement: Bertolini (1965) in Italy and Mezirow (1991, 1995) in the United States. Both researchers have claimed that every experience that crosses a human being’s path causes more or less significant change.

For this reason, it is very important to begin with the epistemological foundation of the rehabilitation pedagogy to build the most appropriate educational interventions for children removed from the ‘Ndrangheta families by order of the juvenile courts. Such a foundation can only be traced through the intersection of the perspectives of Bertolini (1965) and Mezirow (1991, 1995). Experience underlies learning, and it is capable of inducing deconstructions and new constructions of the self and encouraging the processes of transformation that facilitate the departure of children belonging to mafia families from their contexts of origin.

**Context and Research Question**

In mafia families, children are educated in the violence, revenge, and gender stereotypes that underpin the real strength of the clans, which are organised by families to control entire territories through intimidation and oppression. Clans are based on blood ties and strongly hierarchical and patriarchal family models: Men have the power to make any decision concerning their wives and children, and women have the task of handing down this familiar pattern. The bond of blood is the real core of the mafia, since clans close themselves within their household, leaving out the outside world and its rules.

The strength of blood ties makes it particularly hard for security forces to penetrate clans. While the Sicilian mafia has been undermined by the so-
called ‘Pentiti’, who have collaborated with the police and informed on their fellow criminals, the ‘Ndrangheta has not. In the case of the ‘Ndrangheta, no one helps the police because the mafia is structured on the strength of ties among families, who transmit their codes from one generation to the next.

However, children who grow up in such contexts are entitled, like all children, to be educated about the principles of legality, solidarity, human dignity, and alternative standpoints. Italian regulations, including Civil Code Art. 315 bis and the international conventions to protect children (including the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed in New York on November 20, 1989) recognise children’s right to education.

Thus, the research question of this study is: How can we ensure the right to education of mafia children? One possible answer could be the path chosen by the judges of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, who mandated that, in cases that could be considered parental abuse of children among mafia families, the children can be taken away.

The methodological approach used to pursue this question is the case study and review of recent judgments of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Southern Italy, where Judge Roberto Di Bella is pioneering a programme to help children who belong to mafia families escape a life of crime by taking them away from their parents at the first sign of trouble. To develop a comprehensive answer, I examined these judgments and the relevant psychological (Bruner 1986), pedagogical (Bertolini 1965), and sociological (Bandura 2000) literature.

Judge Di Bella’s approach stems from the need to find a way to break the mafia cycle, which transmits negative cultural values from father to son. The region of focus, Reggio Calabria, is the heartland of one of the country’s most terrible mafia groups: a criminal network known as the ‘Ndrangheta, which is also the largest cocaine smuggling group in Europe. The sentences arise from an analysis of statistical data conducted by the judges of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, which, in the last twenty years, has treated over one hundred prosecutions of mafia-associated crimes and more than fifty cases of murders and attempted murders committed by children, many of whom were subjected to harsh prison terms, were killed during family feuds, or have assumed leadership of the ‘Ndrangheta.

The judgments are novel for two reasons. First, they are the first to use pedagogical criteria in developing judicial decisions aimed at showing mafia children a world different from the one in which they grew up. Second, they draw parallels between classic assumptions of child abuse (e.g. beatings, psychological and physical violence) and cases in which children are exposed to violence, expected to follow the strict rules of the family, educated in
killing and revenge (if they are males), or taught to perform the duties of wives and mothers (if they are females).

Education is seen as the only possibility of deconstructing these children’s deviant educational models, and the law may be the only way to support this principle and the value of the educational function. This is particularly true if we reflect on the danger of the transmission of negative cultural values from one generation to another, following gender stereotypes useful to the consolidation of a criminal force.

The family’s critical role in consolidating the strength of the ‘Ndrangheta is demonstrated by the group’s practice of arranging marriages among individuals from different clans in order to strengthen relations among mafia families. Marriages, in fact, have a high symbolic value and are infused with the idea of the family as a nucleus impenetrable from the outside. For this reason, marriages have been repeatedly used to sanction the end of a feud. The ‘Ndrangheta began as a structured organisation of families, each of which had full power and control over the territory in which it operated. These families confidently managed both licit and illicit monopoly activities.

In my research, I highlighted the danger that exists for children who grow up in ‘Ndrangheta families, which stems from the unwritten codes through which these families transmit negative values to their children. Because of these codes and values, the sons of mafia bosses, particularly the first-born sons, are predestined to follow in their fathers’ footsteps. Similarly, daughters are sometimes compelled to marry the sons of other bosses, thus binding separate clans together through blood relations.

Because of this differentiation of tasks within the criminal organisation, women have always been engaged in traditional tasks and relegated to the private sphere. Tasks perceived to be vital and essential within the female universe can be distinguished as either active or passive. Active tasks involve transmitting the cultural mafia code to children and encouraging them to engage in vengeance. It is a mother’s duty to inculcate in her children silence, gender differences, and contempt for public authorities, while simultaneously playing the role of a custodian of honour, keeping the flame of vengeance for offended men alive. Within the ‘Ndrangheta, one can speak of a real ‘pedagogy of revenge,’ which involves continuously inciting children to avenge the honour of fathers and brothers killed by the mafia.

These passive features give women two fundamental tasks. First, they must, through their own respectability and integrity, protect the authority of the masculine reputation of the men formally affiliated with the mafia. Second, they must be considered objects within arranged marriages, through which they serve the strategic purpose of broadening or ending alliances, sometimes
after years of feuding between clans. In other words, women are slave to both male and family will.

This role of women within the ‘Ndrangheta is ambiguous and contradictory, and modern female members participate in both traditional and criminal tasks. For example, as the criminal organisation enters the drug trafficking market, a new generation of women, who are younger and more educated, is adapting to the mafia system and beginning to take active part in drug trafficking. Within this function, women are enlisted as couriers and drug dealers, since the transportation of drugs is a task that is particularly suitable to women, who can easily hide quantities of drugs by simulating pregnancy or rounded hips and breasts. Modern mafia women are also directly involved in managing mafia power and holding command positions in the organisational structure, especially when the male figure is absent (e.g. due to being in prison or being an absconder). In these situations, women deliver written or oral messages on behalf of clan members and are temporarily delegated to manage male power.

However, this does not mean that women have a real path of empowerment within the mafia, since these roles are always temporary and involve only pseudo-emancipation. Instead, due to the patriarchal system, women continue to suffer physical and psychological violence and to be economically dependent on men.

For these reasons, today’s mafia women are rejecting the role of the guardians of the pedagogy of revenge. They no longer want their sons to be killed in family feuds or their daughters forced to marry bosses’ sons, they are challenging the vengeful pursuits of their husbands and other family members, and they are turning to judges in juvenile courts to save their children.

Methodology

The methodology used in this research was a case or document analysis, conducted using the judgements of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria. From a scientific point of view, these judgments can be framed as documents. A document analysis is a valid method of investigation in empirical research, especially when it is integrated with other methods (Gibson and Brown 2009: 65). However, since there is no consensus on what can be considered a document (Flick 2014: 377), it is important to specify. Here, a document refers to:

Information material on a particular social phenomenon that exists independently of the researcher. It therefore is produced by individuals or institutions for purposes other than those of social research: this however you can use it to take possession of their knowledge purposes. (Corbetta 1999: 437)
One of the main benefits of document analysis is that it avoids potential problems related to the relational dimensions of other research methods (e.g., in cases of interviewers and interviewees: the interviewee looking for approval, the interviewer exerting influence, etc.). At the same time, however, in a document analysis, the researcher is unable to explore beyond what is written (Corbetta 1999). For this reason, it may be useful to combine document analysis with other types of investigation.

I chose to examine the Italian legislation on the right to education, as expressly expressed in Article 315 bis of the Civil Code, and the international law recognising the same right (i.e., the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed in New York on November 20, 1989). The studied judgments pertain to the principles of the right to education in both Italian and international law.

I also chose to cross-examine the given documents (i.e., the judgments), which show the dysfunction of family relationships in mafia families, with the historical foundations of so-called amoral familism. The origins of the familistic culture reside in the history of Southern Italy in general and, in particular, in the history of Calabria. The latter was a land of conquest dominated by foreign powers. In Calabria, this conquest by foreign powers produced different reactions; however, too often, conquered populations shared an atavistic resignation, which is an unconditional surrender to the ruler in power. As a result of this history of conquest by foreign powers, the Calabrian region lacks the prerequisites for the construction of a culture of the State, especially as expressed through an ethos of shared values and justice for all. One symptom of this situation is the fact that a significant proportion of Calabrian families pay ‘protection money’ to the ‘Ndrangheta, but do not pay taxes to the State.

Why does this happen? The history of domination and the consequential root of a mentality of mistrust towards the state, which is perceived as alien and oppressive, has encouraged the spread of a culture of custody and protection via the mafia in order to ensure the survival of individuals, their families, and their businesses. This school of thought, labeled ‘amoral familism’ by Banfield (1958), has produced a backward society in southern Italy. It has also led to an extremist conception of family ties that adversely affects individuals’ ability to associate beyond the boundaries of the family and, thus, the collective interest.

Individuals typically base their actions on maximising the short-term material advantages of their nuclear families, and they assume that all others will behave the same way. This explains why the codes that mark the life of the clan are not only symptoms of strength, but also expressions of the mafia culture and of the ways of thinking and acting in the context of the clan.
New course introduced by the judges of Reggio Calabria: Proposals for action on mafia children following removals. Re-education projects

The jointly gathered and stored data show that growing up in mafia families continually exposes children to the logics of domination and subjection, with implications for both emancipation and cognitive and emotional development. Here, pedagogy and rights merge into a single objective: the protection of children. This may extend to the decision to revoke parental responsibility in all cases in which the existence of a serious injury to the child, whose needs, desires, inclinations, and feelings are crushed by an adult world incapable caring for him or her, is established.

Italian law gives parents the opportunity and authority to fulfil their duties and fully carry out their responsibilities for their children. Parental power and authority are not to be used for their own personal interest or the interests of the family or clan; instead, they should be used to develop the family’s children. Parental authority is, therefore, power for the child, not power over the child. Indeed, such power does not create subjective rights for the parents, but gives them an officium or a munus—in which the power is not discretionary but instrumental—to be used for the purposes for which the power is given, which is to support an appropriate course of education for the child.

What happens, then, if the exercise of power results in injury to the child? What should the law do if the conduct of the parent denies the true meaning of the officium conferred by the law and natural law? Several pre-judgement measures have been designed to ensure the interests of the child in the event of danger; these involve the work of social services and the judiciary. The intervention of the Court in the education process is very marginal in terms of the physiology of the relationship between parents and their children. Furthermore, with regard to the particular assumptions of the differences among spouses regarding pedagogical choices, the law limits Court appeals to only the most serious cases.

The intervention of the Court, in fact, is an instrument of protection marked by the principle of minimal invasiveness in the sphere of autonomy which is the family, so much so that the Court is prevented from engaging, except in cases of ‘issues of particular importance.’ The law is not expected to provide the magistrate with power replacing that of a child’s parents; instead, it confers only the power to mediate the power of the parents. That said, it is natural that, in cases of intra-family pathologies, violence, abuse, and any kind of injury to a child’s mental or physical development, the intervention of the Court is not only relevant, but necessary. The State cannot fail to guard the rights of individuals, such as children, who do not have adequate means to protect themselves independently.
Thus, the limitation of parental rights has this principal purpose: to allow institutions to stop, even temporarily, a system of behaviour prejudicial to the proper development of the personality of the child or continuous aggression by adults who cause (even unintentionally) irreparable damage to the child’s development.

In this context, the judgments on the children of the mafia are very important because they make it possible to intervene at the beginning of a child’s acquisition of the ‘Mafiosi’ mentality. When these children are accused of bullying or vandalism, and their families do nothing, the Juvenile Court intervenes by taking the children away from their relatives and placing them in social services. Social services are indispensable to this decision because they provide necessary assistance, support, and supervision, integrating children into community structures outside of Calabria that are suitable to their needs. These community structures must include operators who are professionally qualified to treat the problems facing mafia children and provide real alternatives to the cultures from which these children come. In this context, social services manage the entire phase of the placement of a child outside his or her family of origin (i.e., away from Calabria) and coordinate rehabilitation projects with family home educators or foster families.

Such rehabilitation projects are essential for demonstrating the power of education. The objective of the Court, indeed, is to show these young children a world different from that in which they grew up. Thus, time must reverse its course: from future to past. Only cultural contamination and an awareness of other worlds and different ways of life can give mafia children a different future, away from crime. If the centre of a child’s culture is his or her family of origin and its rules, then children may never learn other ways of thinking or acting that oppose the rules and roles of their families of origin. Here, the complex relationship between law and education becomes evident: The law educates children who would otherwise simply join the law of blood, offering them new possibilities for the future.

**Conclusions**

In this interpretation, key rights to education, information, and the possession of a minimum income become pre-requisites of the democratic process and, thus, of citizenship. The international legal recognition of children’s rights makes these rights fundamental and, as such, guaranteed.

One very significant example of this international legal recognition is Art. 28 of the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of Children (which essentially incorporates Art. 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This rule mandates state parties to recognise the rights of children to
education and, in particular, to recognise the duty of the State to ensure the progressive exercise of this right on the basis of equal opportunity. Among other things, these rules require all states to take all measures necessary to guarantee these rights, including by offering financial assistance in cases of need. Because citizenship education is an integral part of human rights education and the core of any goals related to education and training aimed at building a universal and democratic culture, it must be guaranteed to those who are deprived.

This is the only way to give mafia children a different future and a chance in society: education in the culture of democracy and information and the dissemination of the principles according to which every person has the power and duty to achieve self-realisation and contribute to the functioning of the system-state. This objective can be achieved by applying the transformative learning theory during the process of rehabilitating children who have been removed from mafia families.

From this perspective, educators must assume responsibility for setting objectives that explicitly include autonomous thinking and must recognise that accomplishing these objectives requires designing experiences to foster critical reflectivity and experience in discourse. Education that fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse is learner-centred, participatory, and interactive, and it involves group deliberation and group problem solving. Instructional materials should reflect the real-life experiences of the learners and be designed to foster participation in small-group discussions to assess reasons, examine evidence, and arrive at reflective judgments. Learning takes place through the discovery and imaginative use of metaphors to solve and redefine problems.

To promote learning discovery, an educator often reframes learners’ questions in terms of the learners’ current levels of understanding. Learning contracts, group projects, role plays, case studies, and simulations are classroom methods associated with transformative education. The key idea of such education is to help learners actively engage in concepts presented in the contexts of their own lives and to collectively and critically assess the justification of new knowledge.

Together, learners undertake action research projects. They are frequently challenged to identify and examine assumptions, including their own. Methods that have been found useful in accomplishing these objectives include critical incidents, metaphor analyses, concept mapping, consciousness raising, life histories, repertory grids, and participation in social action (Mezirow and Associates 1990).
This route can facilitate the achievement of a new culture of legality. However, it is necessary to educate and re-educate children through experiences and comparisons with worlds that are different from those learned during early ages, when they have no alternatives. This is why the removal of mafia children from their families results in pedagogical activity; more than anything else, this approach facilitates the teachings of Platonic Socrates: that the law teaches and improves the youth generation.

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Gender Disparity and Cultural Impacts on Girls’ Education in Laos

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the problem of school dropouts in Houa Kham village, a rural district of Savannakhet Province, Laos. The main objective is to understand the reason why some school-age children dropout of school before finishing the primary level. Qualitative research techniques were applied; participant observation and interviews were conducted with village authorities, school principals, teachers, and the community as well as the parents of four families. The investigation used four main research dimensions, family financial situation, cultural and traditional beliefs, gender roles, and the current situation of education. The results of the study revealed that cultural beliefs and gender disparity within the community seem to be the major factors associated with dropping out of school. Some policy intervention for future development and strategic plans to improve the quality of education in rural areas of Laos were addressed to the Government of Laos (GOL) to respond to this crucial problem.

Keywords

gender disparity, cultural belief, school dropout, primary education, Laos

Introduction

Gender equality does not necessarily mean equality of outcomes for males and females. In the Development Report of the World Bank in 2006, gender equality is defined as “equal access to opportunities that allow people to pursue a life of their own choosing and to avoid extreme deprivation in outcomes” – that is, gender equality in rights, resources, and voice (World Bank 2007).

According to the World Bank, equality of rights refers to equality under the law, whether customary or statutory, while equality of resources refers to equality of opportunity, including equality of access to human capital investments and other productive resources and access to the markets. Equality of voice captures the ability to influence and contribute to the political discourse and the development process (World Bank 2007: 106).

Gender equality in rights, resources and voice surfaces in three different domains: in the household, in the economy, and in society. The evidence of the household suggests that if equality between men and women within the household increases, the allocation of household expenditures changes; for example, there will be a large share of resources devoted to children’s education and health. Distribution of household tasks has normally been influenced by inequality of gender within the household; women are always expected to work inside the home, and are usually limited regarding
decision-making. In the market, the gender inequality is reflected in the unequal access to land, credits, and labour market, and in significantly less access to new production technologies. And in society, the inequality is reflected by fewer women in political positions (2007: 106).

Women in Laos, especially those who reside in more remote locations, experience a certain amount of inequality in terms of gender and social opportunity. This paper argues that cultural and traditional beliefs result in gender inequality in formal education among women in the sampled community, whereas the family’s financial condition and inadequate educational system were not considered to be major factors influencing gender inequality in schooling. Religiously, women are believed to be weak and should not take the role of leader. In addition, ritual tasks require more participation from women than from men. When women are being prepared for these religious performances and ceremonies, they ultimately do not have equal opportunity in formal education throughout the courses of their lives. This paper includes five main sections: after the introduction, the literature review is presented. Section three explains the methodology and indicates the research participants. The fourth section presents the empirical data and discussion. The paper concludes in section five with some suggestions for future policy intervention.

**Literature Review**

Some parents have seen the importance of education for their children; they have a prior right to choose the education that their children will receive. In developed countries, the attitude of parents toward the educational attainment of their children is deeply profound. Jager and Holm (2007) suggest that parents have a great desire for the educational success of their children; they notice the importance of academic achievement of their children as a means to acquire personal achievement, higher social status and wealth. Webbink, Smits and de Jong (2012) have examined the role of parental involvement on children’s academic performance. Clearly the result shows that children’s educational performance was better when parents were involved with school activities. Mahamood et al., (2012) found that the involvement of parents in children’s education has many positive effects on their learning outcomes. Miedel and Reynolds (2000) claimed that the early involvement of parents in their children’s education has had a long-term effect on children’s education, reducing grade retention and increasing child’s reading proficiency and other academic achievements. Oketch, Mutisya and Sagwe (2012) have also mentioned the benefits of parental involvement in education of children. So, the earlier the involvement of parents the better the education of the children will be. Other studies made clear that lower motivation to support their children’s education is the result
of low income of the household (Nguon 2012; Kazianga 2012; Løken 2010; Shapiro and Tambashe 2001; Acemoglu and Pischke 2001). Most parents in remote areas of Laos are illiterate; they do not have this skill themselves, and thus they do not support and encourage their children to go to school because they think that education is not necessary for them.

Meanwhile, when the family income is low, it leads to the problem of child labour within the household. This is one of the most serious problems among developing countries. ‘Trade influences child time allocation in developing countries through its effects on the returns to education, labour demand, and poverty’ (Nguon 2012). It seems obvious that one of the glaring issues that has a major impact on children’s education is the problem of children’s involvement in household responsibilities. The children have to engage in work and help their families to supplement income and survive. In the republic of Yemen, a significant proportion of children are involved in labour. Yemen is one of the developing countries that has a high number of working children and the country with the lowest rate of female participation in primary education in the world (Edmonds, Topalova, and Pavcnik 2009). The studies of Dyer (2007); Admassie, (2003); Duryea and Arends-Kuenning (2003); Dessy and Knowles (2008) have also concluded significant results regarding child labour and their education. Undoubtedly, poverty has been objectively the major problem of children's schooling in poor nations. Kim (2009) argued that child labour remains an enormous challenge to the achievement of the universal primary education in developing countries, including Kenya. Some children combine work and education. For example Holgado et al. (2014); Kruger (2007); Emerson and Souza (2008) examine the effect of birth order on the potential of children to be included in the labour market. They examine the factors that influence families’ decision in sending children either to school or to work. Poverty is again considered to be a major problem for children’s education in Laos.

In addition, cultural influences also affect children’s education, especially girls’ education. Colclough, Rose and Tembon (2000) have studied the relationship between poverty, schooling and gender inequality in Guinea and Ethiopia. In China, Sheng (2012) reveals the condition of children’s education in a patriarchal society, where the fathers take the role of leaders, and the mothers take a secondary role. The transmission of this cultural capital has a great effect on children’s educational attainment in China. There is other evidence that shows the impact of cultural influences on the education of girls. Stephens (2000) conducted research on girls and basic education in Ghana. This study portrays some interesting points about culture relation and child’s education. Cultural influence issue is another concern regarding Lao children’s schooling as well.
Based on the literature review, the following research framework has been created to understand the problem of girls’ education in the case of Laos.

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<th>School drop out</th>
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<td>Education System</td>
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<td>Family Financial Situation</td>
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<td>Culture and Tradition</td>
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<td>Gender Disparity</td>
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**Figure 1: Study Framework**

The above framework has been created in order to illustrate the causes of school dropout. As can be seen above, four main factors have been assumed to be the major ones affecting women and girls in rural areas of Laos to leave primary school early. Most families are poor and the parents tend to withdraw their daughters from school after some grades. Also, women in Laos’s society are perceived to be weak and should only be followers and this perception also has been one of the major influential factors that cause inequality between sexes. Lastly, the quality of education in rural schools is inadequate. Therefore, these four major causes have been selected to be the main focus of this research study.

**Methodology**

Ethnographic research techniques served as an important tool for the data collection in this study. Participant observation and interviews with the village authorities, school principals and teachers and the community have provided valuable insights for the understanding of people’s life and historical context of the sampled village.

According to Hammond:

> Cultural and social anthropology as a discipline is based on the collection and theoretical analysis of information on nearly every aspect of the various ways life the world’s people. Most of this information is collected by the anthropologists working in the field. Anthropological or ethnographic, fieldwork usually involves the careful study at the first hand of the patterned behaviour of the particular human group, the
family band, a local community, and one or more segment of some larger societal unit, a tribe or a nation. The descriptive account written on the basis of such fieldwork is called ethnography (Hammond 1978: 24).

Ethnography has always been the predominant method in social and cultural anthropology (Hammersley 1992: 11). ‘Ethnography in the anthropology was thus designed to be only description or description as a form of argumentation within the well-regulated discourse regimes of culture areas’ (Marcus 1997: 54-64). In addition, Spradley considers that ethnography is the work of describing a culture (1979: 3).

Besides, Taylor (2002) claimed that ethnography is more appropriate to the study of social world than quantitative methods because ethnographers obtain insiders’ view of society to understand other people’s own worldviews. Jorgensen (1989) indicated that the most appropriate method to the studies of human assistance is the participant observational approach. Targeted research populations were parents, school principal and teachers, village authorities and elderly people from the community.

Empirical Data and Discussion

The family’s future relies on men; they are strong and are able to cope with many obstacles in the course of their lives in where many of the women are unable to. As young girls, we listen to our parents and do as we are told to do. After marriage, women have to listen to their husbands, be quiet and then are not allowed to take part in some of the important decisions for the household.

The above quote is the elaboration of a woman’s perception about gender roles within the community. I had discussed this with some elderly women, having casual conversations with them about women's status and roles in their village. It is clearly shown that most of the women are still trapped in this traditional social norm. This is one of the main issues that impede many young girls in this community from having better opportunities in their lives. The opportunity of being educated; the opportunity to receive equal rights and fulfil their life potential.

Most of the households are poor, and parents are not able to afford their children’s school education. People do not have a regular income; there are no paid jobs available in this village. Some grow vegetables as a family business. High proportions of the teenage populations migrate to Thailand where there are more employment opportunities. They drop out of school because of the family financial situation, which reflects a similar situation as that of Brazil; when domestic employment is available to school-age children of the poor households, many of them tend to dropout and enter the labour force in order to produce income for their family (Admassie 2003).
In Houa Kham village ‘going to Thailand has become a traditional way of life among teenagers in this village’, said one of the school teachers. It has become the new social trend among teenagers that when they grow up, they have to leave their village in order to search for more opportunities to earn a living as well as help their family’s financial stability. Their intentions of going to Thailand are much stronger than their motivations to go to school. The social and cultural environment drives these children to take this decision. Their families, parents and relatives also support them because it is the only way that their lives can be relied on.

When more people move out from their village, they explore other cultures from different societies, so their attitudes sometimes change as they become influenced by these experiences. When they come back to the village, they only have the images of living in a big city, ‘the city of light’ as it is commonly known amongst the rural population, the images of living in a more modern society. Most people who experienced life in Thailand when they come back to the village they say to those who have never been there, ‘get out of the dark and go to see the colourful lights in big cities’. And, as a result of the family’s financial situation, parents have to go out to search for food in the forest and keep almost all of the household chores for their children. Income generating activities are another of the major obstacles that hamper children’s educational attainment. There is a need for children’s labour in all seasons, for example, children’s contribution to family tasks is needed when the family grows vegetables. Parents need their children to help water the garden and take care of their vegetables. During rice growing season, parents also need their children to plant their rice, take care of the rice paddy field, and take care of their cows and buffalos to make sure that they do not ruin other people’s paddy fields. Children have to work again during the harvesting season. Every task requires children’s help, so the question is when can these children go to school?

Despite the fact that people in the community acknowledge the importance of school education, the economic situation of the family forces them to use their children for labour. It is more necessary for the children to work at home to supplement the family income and survival than it is for them to spend their time in school, according to this viewpoint. This attitude is consistent with Jensen and Neilsen (1997), who state that ‘poverty forces households to keep their children away from school’. The study conducted by Edmonds, Topalova and Pavcnik (2009), in Yemen, has also revealed that children from poor families are employed in a variety of occupations ranging from street vending to guards in the farms.

The time that children spend in contributing to the household responsibilities, either through work outside or inside the home, will
negatively affect their ability to stay in school. Previous studies have clearly shown the impact of child labour on children’s education. For example in Ethiopia, children combine their work and school attendance because of the financial burden of the family. They also need financial support to pay for the school expenses (Dyer 2007). Duryea and Arends-Kuenning (2003) claim that the time children spend working is associated with school failure in the medium term.

When poverty places high pressure on the family, parents have to take action. They have to go out to either look for food or earn money for their daily survival. In Houa Kham, people search for food in the forest; men go fishing in the lake or in a small river, and women look for mushrooms and bamboo shoots, among other edible items. These activities require a lot of time, they sometimes go in the morning and come back in the afternoon and some people pack some food in case they have to stay a longer time to search for food. As a consequence, there is a need for the child’s help or contribution to the family when parents spend time outside of the house. Children from this family will not have enough time to study effectively and sufficiently, which leads to problems at school: they cannot follow what is daily taught in the class and are unable to perform well in their studies. When this happens to students, they lose motivation and confidence in their capacities. Eventually, these children feel bored with homework and other school tasks. They will not have the courage to study and finally drop out of school.

Certain aspects of the school system in Laos present another troubling issue contributing to the problem of school dropouts. First, the current primary school has low quality in terms of its infrastructure and the availability of school facilities, such as chairs, tables, latrine etc. Second, the quality of teaching and learning processes is not sufficient because teachers have low ability in teaching. In addition, the lack of teaching and learning materials also challenges teachers’ activity. There are no visual aids to help teachers deliver their knowledge to students effectively. Third, the students’ lack of motivation and enthusiasm, which is actually the consequence of the first, second and third factors. Fourth, when students have less motivation to study it results in low performance and frequently in grade repetition. Fifth, students have no hope to continue studying further because there is no secondary school in this village. They tend to foresee what is going to happen to them after they finish the primary level. The parents also do not get involved in children’s formal education because they do not see any connection between education and their children’s future.

Finally, the gender stereotype where women are weaker than men and not supposed to take the lead also has a damaging effect. This social stereotype has been brought from the old time up to the present and has become part of
the cultural identity, which makes most women perceive that having a higher level of formal education is not going to be necessary for their future. The opportunities to pursue education that are taken away from them or even by themselves make these women unable to realise how important education is. Therefore, gender stereotypes have a tremendous impact on women’s formal education. As most Buddhist women justify themselves based on their religious beliefs, they conform their social behaviour based on what they learnt from the past generations, when supposedly women had to be obedient and follow the husband. There are some Lao proverbs that actually reflect the gender disparity, and teach women to think in the way they are¹, ‘Husbands are elephant’s front feet, wives are the elephant’s back feet’, and another proverb is: ‘Wives should wake up early and go to bed after’. These proverbs come from ancient times, and they give the idea that women should conform to these living standards. However, nowadays people are still practicing the teaching of these two proverbs, as it has been found in this village. This can also constitute an explanation for the inadequate level of education of women and girls from this village.

Conclusion

Previous literature has revealed a number of factors that influence children’s educational attainment. Those factors are poverty, child labour, educational level of parents, educational system and management, and other factors like difficult transportation, school location, etc. In this study, even if these factors were found to be significantly related to issues regarding educational attainment among children in the sampled village, some components and contexts remain distinctive. The findings of my research have directed me to a similar conclusion in the case of Laos.

The economic situation of the families was not found to be the major impact on children’s schooling, the household economy and the inability to afford school materials or other indirect costs were not the main factor for school dropout. However, the financial effect on children’s schooling could be explained by the fact that in this society (village), money is perceived as the most important possession, which everyone has to work hard for. Because of poverty and together with the low level of education, people think that what money can buy is the most important. People place a high value on money and they also tend to respect those who are richer. In return, they also want to be rich because they want to be respected as well. This situation often results in migration to Thailand, usually among teenagers.

¹ The proverb is not considered as a law which all people have to strictly obey, but it has some impact on the life of people culturally and socially to some extent.
There are great disparities among those who have access to primary schools in Lao PDR, for example, in the type of school and the quality of the classroom environment, due to the national budget, which limits the ability to provide education to all remote areas. There is a serious shortage of schools and facilities in the undeveloped remote mountainous areas such as the sampled village. This and the fact that most of the schools in rural areas are in temporary construction made with dirt floors, woven bamboo walls, and thatched grass roofs, which place youth at a distinct disadvantage. Other basic facilities such as clean water supply, toilets, furniture, learning materials, including the officially prescribed textbooks and playground are also lacking or in a poor condition. These cumulatively are unattractive to students and teachers who go to school. It is one of the reasons that teachers do not want to teach there and for students to drop out of school before finishing, as the data from the interviews suggested. This study identifies some possible solutions and interventions for future educational development plans and strategies. Education of children in rural areas has to be taken into consideration; girls’ education should be prioritised, and immediate actionsshould be taken.

Compared to other factors, I would like to emphasise that the cultural aspect has the most significant impact on school dropout rates among children in this village. People in this village strongly believe in tradition, practice religious ceremonies, and believe that things occur because of ghost power and spirits. Women get involved in the religious ceremony more than the men; it is the responsibility of women to prepare and organise everything for the religious performance.

Also, it has been found that gender inequality is the result of cultural practices; it is the consequence of the social beliefs that women are supposed to be followers of their husbands. These social notions have led to gender stereotypes about roles in the community, which are clearly divided between women and men. Women not only take care of the household chores at home but they also have to prepare religious ceremonies in the community; while men play the role of leader both at home and in the community. The distinction in gender roles made in this village are the justification for women’s lack of education and opportunity, and determine the gap in gender education and school dropout among many girls. Therefore, it can be concluded that the dominance over women in a patriarchal society contributes markedly to the gap found in the educational path.

References


BOOK REVIEWS


In Human Rights under State-Enforced Religious Family Laws, Sezgin compares and contrasts (i) the enactments in Israel, Egypt and India of personal status laws “which includes only the matters of marriage, divorce, spousal maintenance and, to some extent, succession or inheritance,” (p.15); (ii) their impact on rights, particularly, “the freedom of religion, equality before the law, marital and familial rights; and procedural rights” (p.45); and (iii) the societal responses to the rights-weakening effect of personal status law.

Sezgin explains the variation in institutional and normative unification (and fragmentation) of personal status law with “regime choices, state-society interactions [mainly, the balance of power between the state and religious groups] and ideological orientation.” (p.17) Accordingly, a theoretically inclined and exclusionary ideological orientation of state elites coupled with a lack of interest in unifying the field of personal status led to the implementation of a fragmented confessional personal status law in Israel. While at the same time, Egypt implemented a unified confessional personal status law due to (i) the state elites’ mechanical considerations to institutionalise a technocratic-authoritarian regime, overriding any clear ideological orientation, and (ii) the limited resistance they faced from religious groups and authorities. State elites in India, on the other hand, implemented a unified semi-confessional personal status law due to their secular and inclusionary ideological orientation, yet failed to institutionalise a thorough normative unification mainly because of the resistance of some religious groups and authorities.

Regardless of the type of personal status of law, Sezgin further argues, personal status law is detrimental for the rights of marginalised populations that include women, children, marginalised dissident voices, like the secularists in the case of Egypt. Nevertheless, individuals and activist groups find venues and ways to resist these detrimental effects through two main strategies that Sezgin identifies as forum-shopping and the formation of hermeneutic and rule-making communities. Among examples of the former are the cases of conversions to Islam or migrations between different Christian denominations in Egypt, and shopping between different shariat courts as well as between informal tribunals and state courts in India. In addition, Sezgin demonstrates in the empirical chapters (chapters 4-6) that particularly women’s groups, in all of the three countries, respond to the detrimental effects of personal status law through hermeneutic and rule-
making communities that challenge the official interpretations of religious precepts.

The book has four merits. The first is the comparative and historical focus on Egypt, India and Israel, the three countries with different majority religions. Such focus enables Sezgin to go beyond arguments that explain violation of human rights with the intrinsic qualities of religious traditions (p.10). In fact, Sezgin convincingly argues that “state-enforced religious personal status law is a socio-political construction [that is] not different than secular enactments of the state.” (p.10, 44) These secular enactments of the state have to do with codification and legislation of “the so-called religious laws,” incorporation of “institutions of certain ethno-religious communities into its legal system,” and taking “it upon itself to interpret and enforce these laws through its agencies.” (p.10) The wise move that Sezgin takes here to analyse personal status law as a socio-political construction allows the book, and this is its second merit, to analyse religious personal status law as an institutional and/or normative mechanism for forming subjectivities during nation- and state-building processes. He contends in chapter 2 that “questioning the universality of the so-called Western European trajectory of state-building and judicial consolidation, offers an alternative view on state-building in the post-colonial world.” (p.17) Thirdly, Sezgin’s methodological intervention to treat “human rights as a testing ground” (p.12, 45, 74) is valuable to simultaneously probe into the ways in which personal status law affects individual and group rights. Last, but not least, Sezgin’s focus on individual responses to the limiting and detrimental effects of personal status law allows him to demonstrate that religious legal systems or traditions have flexibility that opens up space for a diverse array of political strategies to negotiate the personal status law.

Despite these significant merits, the book would analytically benefit from a few clarifications. Although Sezgin’s emphasis on personal status law as a “socio-political construction that is similar to the secular enactments of the state” is very valuable, as mentioned earlier, the book still requires a clearer discussion of secular(ism) as an ideology and secular enactment(s) of the state as institutional tool(s). One byproduct of lacking such discussion, and subsequently, matching secular-religious (or “theologically inclined,” using Sezgin’s terminology) orientations onto inclusionary-exclusionary regimes structures, for instance, in the cases India and Israel, respectively, is to overlook at the ways in which inclusion and exclusion might happen simultaneously. Second, the ways in which state- and nation-building processes might be intertwined with each other remain ambiguous. Whether the book focusses on “the strategies adopted by post-colonial/post-imperial nations in the process of state-building” (p.10) or whether it does so on the choices that state elites made in institutionalising certain understandings of
the nation is unclear. As a result, for instance, it remains vague why ideological motivations assume a larger explanatory power in the case of Israel compared to Egypt where mechanical considerations towards building a centralised state mechanism do the explaining. If family is the central node around which personal status law is implemented in ways to shape subjectivities, one might as well make the claim that certain ideas about the nation – despite the degree of the firmness of these ideas – shape the ways in which religious family laws took particular forms in different contexts.

Overall, *Human Rights under State-Enforced Religious Family Laws* is an important intervention to the literature on state-enforced family law and its effects on human rights. The book is of particular analytical and empirical importance to the discussions on secular(ism) and religion, nationalism and nation-building, and human rights. Moreover, it offers practical information to human rights practitioners.

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"Work Rules!" by Laszlo Bock, Senior Vice President of the People’s Operations sector at Google, has gained remarkable recognition worldwide, especially from aspiring and established professionals. Incorporating operational aspects of work with values and ethics, the book paves way for positive change at both individual and organisational levels.

Fourteen chapters, each with a very attention-grabbing caption, discuss different aspects of the corporate world. Each chapter concludes with a few interesting points that highlight the essence of the chapter. These could also be easily reviewed at the end of the book.

The book provides readers with a comprehensive account of various companies, with a particular focus on their work culture and HR strategies. These descriptions map organisations’ successes and failures with their management strategies, organisational layout and employee relationships. The author sheds light on some important psychological concepts like work culture, need hierarchy, employee expectations and health, which are very different from the conventional HR management approach. In these changing times, organisational autonomy needs to be balanced with employees’ autonomy, diversity and experiences to drive success.

Many organisations like Costco, McKinsey, and Bloomberg etc. have been discussed under these themes. Interesting insights into Google based on the author’s individual interpretation are also shared, such as how the company processes and administers the Googlers.

The sixteen-year-old successful company, Google, wants “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” (p. 33). He identifies that Google has exceptional products with great market value, but that it is its culture that makes it different. This culture hinges on three key aspects: being transparent, giving a voice to its people, and affirming with the mission.

After years of progression, Google provides its services in accordance to the laws while paying equal respect to its users and mission. Many such examples within the book indicate the loyalty of Googlers to their company and clients. The book offers the example of Google’s transparency in China. The laws and policies withheld the company from displaying results for a range of services, thereby in accordance to its mission, Google notified users about the reasoning.

The last chapter submits ten rules (that summarise the major aspects of the book) that could be a start for any professional to transform themselves, their
team and the workplace. Two of these points that I personally found very useful were: ‘give meaning to your work’ and ‘pay unfairly’. The first combines an important psychological relationship between employees and their work. This is foremost in fostering value and performance at an individual level that contributes not only to personal success and fulfilment, but also to the organisational culture and success. Additionally, ‘paying unfairly’ suggests that monetary benefit should be tied to performance; so people who perform better should be paid or rewarded more than others. This reward mechanism can retain outstanding performers while motivating low performers towards better results. However, the author states that the organisation should be transparent with its measurement of performance, and ensure healthy competition amongst the employees.

Two things that stimulated me several times in the course of reading this book were in relation to confidentiality and the confidence to take risks. Very detailed case studies of several companies were mentioned with their names. I fear whether the details of certain operational problems could tarnish the image of these companies in the minds of the readers and negatively affect the market value of the company. I was also amazed at the confidence through which individuals and companies have the abilities to take risks. The case study of Mr Kelly, who later became the president of Bell Labs, is one such story. This was a big lesson to take back home.

To conclude, this book exemplifies why Google has been consistently rated as one of the best companies to work. Google exemplifies that a culture of innovation, diversity, and employee autonomy could grow and develop the employees and the organisation alike.

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**Legal Pluralism in Action: Dispute Resolution and the Kurdish Peace Committee.** By Latif Tas. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, 222 pp., £70.

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CONTENTS

ARTICLES

De-mythologising the Image of War Hero as Dominant Hegemonic Masculinity Constructed through ISAs, Covert Educational Institutions (With Special Reference to David Rabe’s Sticks and Bones)
Roya Yaghoubi

Barriers and Enablers of Education Equality for Transgender Students
Stephanie Burns, Ruth Leitch and Joanne Hughes

Identity Formation and Negotiation of Freedom in Coeducational Language Schools in Iran
Alyeh Mehin Jafarabadi

The Gender Role in the Educational Empowerment of Migrant Families from Eastern Europe and Post-Soviet Countries
Nina Ivashinenko and Valentina Shatalina

Mafia Children: From Future to Past. Knowing Other Realities to Learn Freedom
Rosella Marzullo

Gender Disparity and Cultural Impacts on Girls’ Education in Laos
Inleusa Basengkham

BOOK REVIEWS

The Human Rights under State-Enforced Religious Family Laws in Israel, Egypt and India (by Sezgin Yuksel)
Sinem Adar

Work Rules! (by Laszlo Bock)
Nimisha Bhatnagar