

# The Impact of Learning Kurdish ‘Mother-Tongue’ in London on Mainstream Education

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## Abstract

This study investigates the impact of a group of Kurdish children learning their mother-tongue, in two Kurdish Saturday schools in North London, and particularly the impact on the children's integration into mainstream schooling. There are some historical issues surrounding ethnic minority children's education that have been labelled as problematic towards their educational achievements in the United Kingdom. The responsibility of teaching the mother-tongue to those children takes place formally in supplementary or Saturday schools in their community rather than in mainstream schools. Many researches have revealed that learning their mother tongue is beneficial for children in general. In particular, this research focuses on the impacts on Kurdish children in mainstream education, since the number of children from diverse backgrounds is increasing, including the number of children from the Kurdish community. Mixed method research has been undertaken to examine this issue, including a semi-structured questionnaire and group interview used to collect data, as this research depended on students' as well as parents' views in integrating their child in some state schools. The findings revealed that learning the mother-tongue is beneficial for children from diverse backgrounds and that supplementary schools play a vital role in learning the mother-tongue on children's attitude in mainstream education.

**Keywords:** Mother-Tongue, Supplementary, Mainstream Education, Community, Cultural Studies.

## 1. Introduction

This study begins by defining what the mother-tongue is and presents an outline of different types of supplementary schools in Britain, as children from ethnic minorities have been studying their mother-tongue in these schools. It will discuss a brief history of the Kurdish people, its community in this country and some background issues surrounding this area to explain the current situation of learning the mother-tongue. This paper will also highlight the methods that have been used for this research and the rationale for choosing the subject interest, as well as pointing out the aims and objectives of the study.

Tulasiewicz and Adams (1998) defined mother-tongue as one's first language or native language that one was born with, and the language that was used by one's mother community and culture. According to Swann's report in Education in England (2020) learning the mother-tongue is the child's community's responsibility rather than their mainstream school. Therefore, in Britain, teaching mother-tongue for ethnic minority children takes place outside state schools, which are called supplementary, complementary, community or Saturday schools (Matras & Karatsareas, 2020). These schools facilitate a variety of different activities for children and their families, especially helping immigrant children to learn, for example, the mother-tongue, cultural studies and religious studies as well as their sports, music and dance (Minty et. al, 2008).

The history of the first supplementary school establishment in Britain occurred in London by the mid-1800s, when the Italian community set up their own community school in Clerkenwell. Then different community schools followed

for example a Chinese community school in Docklands in East London (Minty et al, 2008). However, the major increase in these schools occurred fairly soon after the Second World War, especially, after the mass arrival of immigrant families from the Commonwealth and Asian countries (ContinYou, 2013). It was prior to the British government's announcement for the need of new workers to reconstruct the country after the war, as well as political refugees from rich oil countries during the 1970s and 1980s (Cole, 2017).

In addition, supplementary schools provided services during evenings, after school hours and weekends in community centres, youth clubs and some mainstream schools (Matras & Karatsareas, 2020). The range and the size of these schools may vary from large groups to small groups depending on the density of these communities in the area (Ealing Supplementary Schools Directory ESSD, 2009). Moreover, Kurdish children, like any other child from an ethnic minority have a reasonable number of Saturday schools to learn their mother-tongue and national identity in order to prepare them with the right tools for their future as a Kurd in Britain. In 1988, the first Kurdish supplementary school became established in London for Kurdish children, from the South and Eastern Kurdistan, every Saturday using the Sorani dialect (Kurdish Culture Centre KCC, 2013). These people were experiencing many problems within their own community and wanted the children to access their rights to their own language, for example; enabling them to fully integrate within their own community and society in general (Kurdish Human Rights Project KHRP, 2011; Matras & Karatsareas, 2020).

Kurdistan was once divided into four different parts during the British occupation of First World War. Therefore, greater Kurdistan was bordering Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, the current Kurdistan is divided into four main pieces under the British rule in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne (O'Leary et. al, 2006). As a result, Kurdistan became four parts of the above mentioned countries. Communities of Kurdish people exist in parts of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia and also around one million Kurds live in European countries including a tiny fraction of them living in the United States. They speak the Kurdish language with two main regional dialects (Kurmanji and Sorani) and practice different religions according to the region in which they settled, but mainly Sunni Muslim (Gunter, 2010). Kurdistan was divided and each area has developed its own problems and its cultures have been influenced accordingly. Moreover, since 1991, the Kurdish people in the north of Iraq, where the researcher comes from, have ruled their own region then in the following year Kurdistan Regional Government gained its semi-independence with its own parliament (O'Leary et. al, 2006). This research investigates the impact of learning the mother-tongue of children mainly from this region.

In this research, the following questions will be answered:

1. What is the role of Community Saturday Schools in learning language?
2. How successful this Kurdish School is in terms of its programs and children's integration into mainstream schools?
3. How community schools effect learning the mother-tongue of a small minority in western society.

To investigate the above issues, data was gathered from children and their parents who attend two Kurdish Saturday schools in North London.

Findings from the research have been helpful in bringing about changes in schools. Although it is small in scope, the findings and recommendations of this study can be used in a similar way. This study, therefore, suggests the need for more research to examine the impact of learning the mother-tongue on Kurdish children in mainstream education. Teachers, parents, community organisations, the Kurdish community, and persons who have an interest in children's education can benefit from this study. At present, there is not any research study to illustrate the effect of learning the mother-tongue on Kurdish children. However, the researcher uses some research studies that have been done on Turkish, Cyprus and Bengali children to review the literature and to show the restrictions that those children have faced when studying their mother-tongue in supplementary schools. In particular, exploring how beneficial it is, or not, to learn the Kurdish mother-tongue on their mainstream education.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review considers a number of academic books and research that have been conducted to show the impact of learning the mother-tongue on children from ethnic minorities, especially investigating how successfully children from Kurdish Saturday schools are integrating into mainstream schools. These sources have been investigated to show different effects on various educational areas and by different ethnic minorities for example, research has been done on British Bangladeshi, Turkish and Cyprus children, as there is sparse evidence to demonstrate Kurdish children. Therefore, this literature reviews how children from ethnic minorities have been educated in British schools since their mass arrival after the Second World War in the UK. It will demonstrate some ethnic minority children's performance in comprehensive schools, as there are no statistics or studies to show Kurdish children in particular.

Prior to the Second World War, the education of children from diverse backgrounds was seen as implicit and 'problematic' while the British government was still living in an imperial ideology, therefore they were promoting

superiority over the nations. They were assuming that lessons were only for native English speakers (Tulasiewicz & Adams, 2005). The education system had been devaluing languages and cultures of ethnic minorities. There was an unfairness and racial discrimination seen practiced in schools and reinforced by the government institutions through statements and policies to serve the majority of children (Cole, 2017). According to Gaine and George (1999) there are three types of approaches that the British schools used for children from various backgrounds from the 1950s up to date, they are assimilation, multiculturalism or anti-racism education and inclusion.

The assimilation approach was used by the British schools between 1950s and 1970s, to reduce the differences between children from diverse families, who needed to be educated, and the vast majority of children. Therefore, all the educational institutions including schools were allowed to disperse between children for example, they were stopping them from speaking in their mother-tongue and schools were allowed to take around 30% of children from ethnic minorities in order to keep the school standard (Cole & Demaine, 1999). It was a similar approach of French assimilation against Algerians after the invasion during 1800s. The French did not allow Algerians to use their language, culture or any kind of national identity; they had to be assimilated to become French. Moreover, the government used language as a key instrument to change children from different societies as quick as possible.

In 1988 the government reformed the education system in England and Wales; with the introduction of the Education Reform Act (1988), the British government modified its interpretation towards ethnicity within the school curriculum. Therefore, schools had to integrate some lessons through non-core subjects to recognise cultural differences like cooking, clothing, dance, RE, art and literature. However, these subjects were not valued towards GCSE and it was only applied in schools with a high number of students from that ethnicity. This can be seen as a radical change in trying to get rid of racism by introducing the National Curriculum and its broad goals, like providing equality in schools for all pupils including pupils from diverse backgrounds. However, the goals were too broad and therefore, it did not achieve all its aims. It created more racism which lead to segregation (Reynolds, 2008).

The last approach mentioned above is inclusion. It was introduced in 2000 Race Relation (Amendment) Act (RRAA) in Parsons et al. (2004). The idea was to expand multiculturalism education by including all children from ethnic minorities as valuable members of society. The act aimed to make sure that all public bodies practice the duty to promote this approach, including the duty to avoid discrimination and most importantly equality of opportunity. This can be achieved through increasing interaction between children from diverse backgrounds to include the whole class (Matheson, 2008).

It can be seen that the British government attempted to change its educational policies and provisions towards educating children from ethnic minorities as it was seen as 'problematic'. However, they were not successful as they have an imbalanced education system in dealing with educating children from ethnic minorities within the mainstream schools. Therefore, children from ethnic minorities need to be educated in order to preserve their language, cultural and social identity (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018; Morales, 2015; Georgiadis & Zisimos, 2010). As stated in the United Nation report under the title of Human Development Report every single human being including 'children' are free to choose to speak their language, practice their culture and religion (UN, 2013). Thus, the Kurdish community like any other ethnic minority in Britain needed to maintain their language and national identity for their young generation to equip them for their future.

As mentioned above the Kurdish community has been facing difficulties with language barriers that stop them accessing their rights, for example to welfare, education, housing, training and the labour market (KHRP, 2011). Therefore, according to the Kurdish Culture Centre (KCC) website (2012), teaching the mother-tongue language to Kurdish children started with only one Kurdish Saturday school in London, after that they expanded it into four schools by 1993 in different areas to become more accessible. It was very successful and in demand therefore, the number of children going to Kurdish Saturday school continued to increase. In addition, in 2003 the Kurdish Children and Youth Centre KCYC was established in the London borough of Islington to guarantee better quality of education for Kurdish children and youth (ContinYou, 2008). The KCYC improved the quality of teaching in all areas of learning, for example, speaking, reading and writing in the Kurdish language in a more academic way. Since the development of KCYC, they ensured a variety of services in a more official way such as; creating a better teaching environment for children in a fun way, teaching Kurdish music and arranging trips by raising more funds to expand the schools and open another new school. In addition, the KCYC also promotes its students cultural identity including traditions, folks and cultural celebrations for example; the celebration of the Kurdish New Year's day, which is called 'Nawroz' in the Kurdish language (KCC, 2012). Therefore, these supplementary schools play a vital role in educating the Kurdish young generation in order to become skillful for their future well-being.

It cannot be denied that it is essential for children to learn the official language of the state where they live in order to enable them to communicate, socialise and take part in activities such as education, as they need it for their future life for example: to participate in a social life, and an economic and political life. However, the mother-tongue is essential

as well for example: psychologically, cognitively, and culturally (Philipson, 2010). In addition, Gillborn (2012) argues that children who have been in mother-tongue classes or learnt their linguistic bases show a better understanding than those who have never been to tuition or supplementary schools, as well as have a better understanding of the Standard English language than other peers in the same community or other ethnic minorities.

Children from a very young age suffer from being unable to speak or communicate in the English language, however, once they achieve that they will be more advanced than their peer native English speakers (Ganuza & Hedman, 2019; Dukhan, et al., 2016; Parker-Rees et al, 2010). Recent research has shown that bilingual children who are supported in developing of their home language go on to achieve higher standards in English (Evan & Ferris, 2019). In addition, children growing up with more than one language and who receive support in developing language skills also achieve higher in other areas of the National Curriculum. Minty et al. (2008) have suggested that children who speak other than English as a first language have more academic advantages than their peer monolingual children while they develop cognitively. Most importantly, learning in their first language raises their self-esteem, self-respect and strengthens their identities in western culture. Learning an additional language is empowering to children, giving more opportunity to grow and feel included in the society and have a better chance in the labour market (Clucas, 2020).

There are some studies that have been done that show the importance of supplementary schools on children's education in Western society, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. The Department for Children, Schools and Families in a Maylor (2010) research report has shown that learning the mother-tongue has a number of positive effects on children's perception towards education. For example: increased awareness of the mother-tongue, greater self-esteem, better understanding of cultural identity, positive reinforcement, and self-worth (Kirsch & Duarte, 2020). In addition, according to a Guardian Newspaper article on how effective supplementary school is on children, they found that there were eight out of ten students in one particular study that said that they benefited from the supplementary schools in one Turkish supplementary school in north London (Gould, 2007).

However, in Kenner et al.'s (2008) research on British Bangladeshi children learning their mother-tongue in mainstream schools, they believe that children, who are born in this country including second and third generation, are mastering English instead of their mother-tongue, as they are exposed to the English language more often. Moreover, according to Khan (2006) in a journal article on The 'Mother-Tongue' of Linguistic Minority in Multicultural England, he believes that the rapid growth of the number of supplementary schools associated with the awareness of the benefit of offering mother-tongue tuition within the mainstream education (García, & Lin, 2017).

### 3. Methodology

This section explains how the data was collected and analysed for this research including the process and planning, as well as the rationale for choosing quantitative and qualitative data gathering within these methods. For example; questionnaires and focus group interviews were employed to find answers to the issues raised at the beginning of the research. Bill (2010) suggested that the primary research is best conducted when using qualitative and quantitative methods.

The rationale for choosing quantitative and qualitative data gathering is to demonstrate to what extent the impact of learning the mother-tongue on Kurdish children has and to answer the research questions mentioned previously. The focus will be on the general impact of learning Kurdish and how it affects schooling. There has been no research carried out for these particular children. This research, therefore, is going to be a primary resource for future studies, it examines the views of children and parents. The benefits of using a mixed method is to create a full picture and a reliable representation of each sample and to show the impact of learning the mother-tongue on children's education. Moreover, it is important to get sufficient knowledge to fulfil the aims and objectives of this research. Consequently, the researcher sought to use both quantitative and qualitative research methods to increase its validity and reliability (Bell, 2010; Denscombe, 2010).

The first method used to conduct data for this research was a questionnaire. According to Bill (2010) a questionnaire is a research method used to collect data. It consisted of twenty open-ended questions and one closed question, to give more opportunity for the participant to answer the questions and get as much information as possible. The researcher needed to be fully aware of who to select as participants, and whether it is truly representative of the population for example, ensuring an equal or at least a reasonable number of female and male representatives (Bell, 2010).

The second method used for this research was a focus group interview. A focus group interview is one type of qualitative data collection that the researcher used to get in-depth information by interviewing a group of people who have knowledge of a specific topic (Merriam, 2009). It also involves recording their feelings, emotions and experiences to obtain certain information from the interviewee (Denscombe, 2010). Using this approach allows the researcher to gain an inside view of the participants. Interviews can be adapted in different formats for example, unstructured, semi-structured and structured questions (Bell, 2010). Moreover, for this study the researcher used eighteen semi-structured questions for the focus group interview, which was prepared beforehand.

This research took place in two Kurdish Saturday schools in North London. A random selection of twenty Kurdish children in each school were interviewed in four different focus groups, whose ages ranged from 9 to 14 years. All interviewees were of Iraqi Kurdish parentage. All participants were born and raised in Britain and receiving their education in British schools. There were 26 participants in secondary schools and 14 in primary schools. In addition, 40 questionnaires were conducted with parents who attend Kurdish Saturday schools along with their children.

### 3.1. Analysing and coding the data

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data by coding, categorising, and analysing it (Saldana & Omasta, 2016). This is one of the most widely used approaches to utilising questions relating to different professions (such as health, education, and psychology) (Smith, 2015). This method gathers the participants' answers and passages of text that are linked by a common theme or idea, allowing the researcher to index the text into categories and thus establish a framework to present the data (Smith, 2016). This method can simplify a broad range of complex data, but this can be difficult because there are not necessarily clear guidelines for how to use the technique (Saldana & Omasta, 2016). In addition, the researcher decided to record and transcribe the focus group interviews to obtain in-depth information.

## 4. Findings and discussion

The findings discuss several questions from the parents' questionnaire and the focus group interview. The findings reveal that there are several factors that contribute to the positive impact of Kurdish children learning their mother-tongue, for example, better outcomes in terms of language acquisition, children's awareness, home environment and the teacher's commitment.

The literature showed that learning the mother-tongue has a number of positive effects on children's perception towards education. According to Gillborn (2012) when children learn their mother-tongue and specifically native linguistic bases formally at an early age, they show a better understanding than those who have never been to supplementary schools. Therefore, those children will have a better understanding of Standard English than other peers in the same community. In addition, Philipson (2010) believed that learning their mother-tongue has a positive impact on children's psychological and cognitive development. The study found that when children learn their mother-tongue fluently, it influences their additional language acquisition. This was also underpinned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families DCSF (2010) research as it was argued in the literature review.

Children from diverse backgrounds need to be aware of the importance of learning their mother-tongue for their future well-being, as it will empower them and give them more opportunity when they grow up. They will feel included within the society and also have a better chance in the labour market (Minty et al, 2008; Kirsch & Duarte, 2020). This was confirmed by the research findings from both parent's questionnaire and children's focus group interviews, especially when the all participants strongly agreed that attending Kurdish Saturday School on a regular basis was vital for them. When children were asked "why" the researcher observed different answers such as; to enable me to communicate with my parents and I can speak to my friends and family when I go back home. In addition, one child stated: 'I always wanted to know a language and use it all the time in school, at home, with my friends' and everywhere. This illustrated that these children and their parents were aware of the importance of learning their mother-tongue on their children's future.

In addition, in the parents' questionnaire, the study observed the following responses when they were asked: How would you describe your child/rens' learning mother-tongue in Kurdish Saturday schools? A third of the participants (28.9%) believed that their children's speaking and listening improved while attending Kurdish Saturday school (see Figure 1). 26.3% of them deemed that their children's writing improved, and the same percentage was presented for their reading. Additionally, 18% of them believed their children's understanding improved while attending this school.

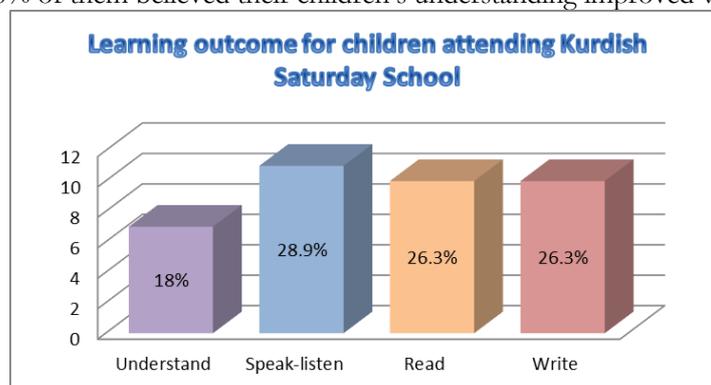


Figure 1. Learning outcomes for children attending Kurdish Saturday school.

Moreover, in the completion of responses to the open-ended question show that all participants were asked to rate between (1) least beneficial to (5) most beneficial on the previous two questions ‘Do you think that Kurdish Saturday school positively impacted on your child/ren since they started?’ The questions were whether their children appreciate other cultures, self-esteem, confidence, sense of belonging to society and learning the English language. The highest score recorded confidence as 65% of the participants believed that Kurdish Saturday Schools is beneficial to children’s confidence, 62% found it to be beneficial on self-esteem, 50% of the parents believed that it to be beneficial on a sense of belonging to the society and 25% on learning the English language or an additional language. Figure 2 shows that learning the mother-tongue has more advantages than limitations.

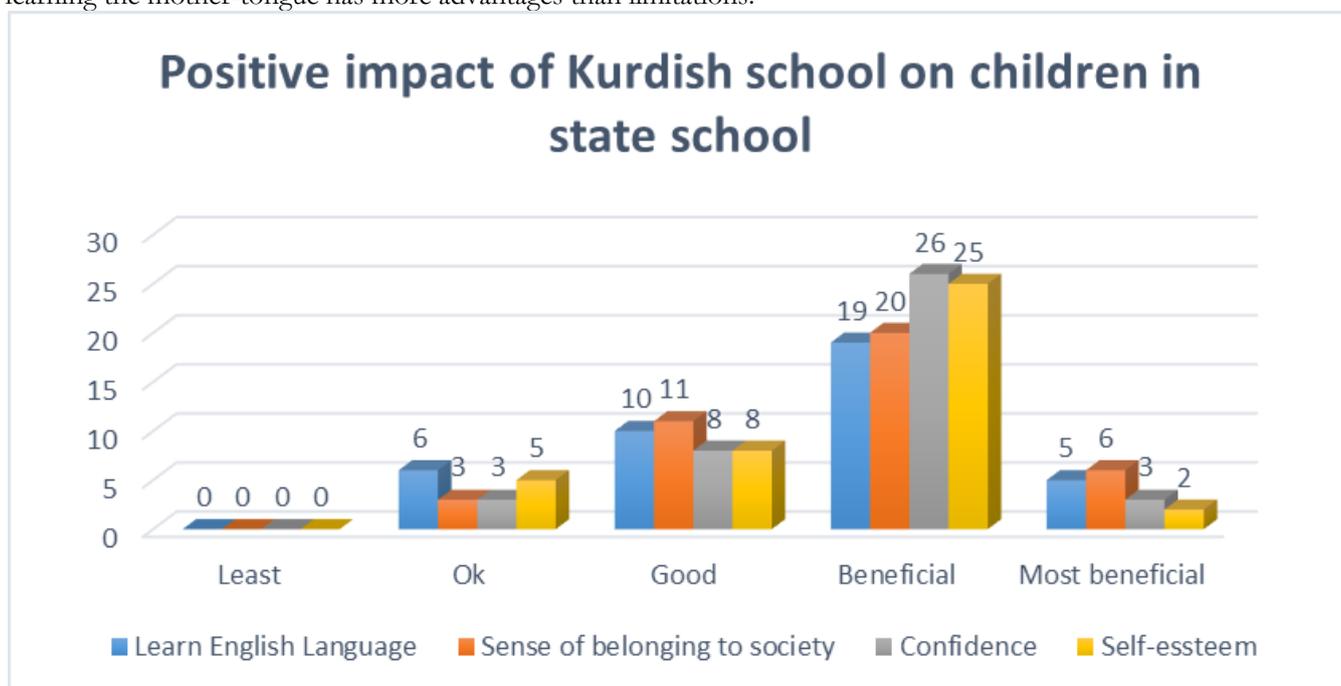


Figure 2. Positive impact of Saturday School on children in state schools.

Additionally, the findings of this research demonstrated the impact of learning their mother-tongue by Kurdish children on mainstream education. The results show that learning the mother-tongue has a profound impact on children’s integration into mainstream education. While children from ethnic minorities need to feel valued and included in schools in order to succeed with their educational achievements, as they suffer from inequalities in school. This conveys that schools are still dominated by one culture (Cole, 2017; Evan & Ferris, 2019). This study shows evidence from the parents’ questionnaires (see Figure 2) that children’s confidence, self-esteem, cultural identity and their sense of wellbeing (Morales, 2015; Clucas, 2020) included in society were all enhanced by attending supplementary schools. As these are essential factors for minority children’s integration in school and consequently their educational success (DCSF, 2010).

Moreover, the home environment, particularly parental involvement, was another strong factor that increases the benefit of learning the mother-tongue, for example, children’s attendance to school, and staying and looking after children in the community schools (DCSF, 2010). These are all factors that promote learning their mother-tongue. The findings of this study show that parental support and encouragement significantly improve the child’s learning outcomes in both supplementary school and as a result impact their mainstream education too.

Furthermore, this section discussed the findings in the light of the literature research. It has shown that learning the Kurdish ‘mother-tongue’ by children in Kurdish Saturday School has many positive impacts on their mainstream education. The impacts are on children’s attitudes in school such as confidence, self-esteem, valuing different cultures and a sense of belonging to the society they live in. These attitudes help children settle in schools better because it they can reduce the inequalities between children in schools and remove labelling those children’s education as ‘problematic’ as discussed in the literature review. It also revealed that learning the mother-tongue is beneficial for children from diverse backgrounds and that supplementary schools play a vital role in learning the mother-tongue on children’s attitude in mainstream education.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendation

This study investigated the impact of learning the mother-tongue by Kurdish children on their mainstream education. This research is evidence of its positive impact on their state school education. There is no doubt that learning the

mother-tongue for children from ethnic minorities has been recognized by the government's plans and policies, however, there is still great inequality in the education system. Learning the mother-tongue is the responsibility of the child's community and not that of the educational system in mainstream schools. This separation can lead to children's rights being violated and can undermine their language and cultural identity for many years. Therefore, children from ethnic minorities and their communities are facing big challenges in order to learn their mother-tongue in Britain. Findings from this study show that learning the Kurdish 'mother-tongue' has several positive impacts on their progress in mainstream schools, such as; increased confidence, self-esteem, additional language acquisition, cultural identity and their sense of belonging to the society in general. As a result, supplementary school plays a vital role in learning the mother-tongue on children's attitude in mainstream education.

As in all social research, this research has some limitations, for example, the sample size was small and it was time consuming. The researcher could have increased the number of participants, for example, the number of parents in order to increase its validity (Denscombe, 2007). At the time when the researcher decided to research this area, it was late to arrange the third data collection method with children's mainstream schools, which meant that the researcher had to depend totally on the honesty and knowledge of the parents to get information about children's integration in mainstream schools. For future research, sample size is one of the most important factors and can give accurate and precise information. When the number of sampling increases, this enhances and improves the findings and will also ensure a bigger picture of the research (Denscombe, 2014).

This study has only touched the surface in terms of the impacts of learning the mother-tongue by Kurdish children on their state schooling. The findings have revealed sufficient issues that allow the researcher to make some recommendations to identify areas for future research, for example:

- To further investigate the impact of learning the Kurdish 'mother-tongue' on children who have been attending Saturday Schools on their educational achievement in mainstream schools, in comparison to those children who have never attended Saturday schools.
- Provide Kurdish mother-tongue lessons in state schools in order to help children feel included in the society.

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