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MOVING TOWARD EQUITY: BRINGING BILINGUAL EDUCATION TO TURKEY'S KURDISH CHILDREN

ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of Kurdish language repression in Turkey and argues that bilingual education for Kurdish children will ultimately benefit both Turks and Kurds. Research shows that bilingual education tends to create empathy between the children of conflicting groups. This is particularly intriguing in the situation of Hebrew-Arabic bilingual schools in Israel, since the situation of Arab Israelis is in many ways comparable to that of Turkish Kurds.

Key words

Kurdish language, bilingual school, education, Turkey

1. Introduction

“I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people.”¹ These are the words (in English translation) spoken by Leyla Zana,² Turkey's first Kurdish female parliamentarian, as she took her parliamentary oath in 1991. This utterance caused pandemonium in the Turkish parliament, not so much for its content, but for the language in which it was spoken. Leyla Zana spoke these words in Kurmanji and this action was key element in the

¹ *Kurdish Political Prisoner Leyla Zana Released after a Decade in Jail*, “Democracy Now”, http://www.democracynow.org/2004/6/10/kurdish_political_prisoner_leyla_zana_released [Access date: 10.06.2011].

² While Marcus states in *Blood and Belief* that the exact words of this statement are contested, they are not. Leyla Zana apparently misremembered her exact words and misquoted herself in *Writings from Prison*. Her oath was recorded and Kurdish sources have told that the translation I have used is closest to what she actually said.

chain of events that led to a prison sentence of fifteen years in 1994, of which she served ten. Kurmanji is the form of Kurdish most used by Turkish Kurds and its use (or the use of any Kurdish language) could be considered a separatist act in Turkey. In Jiyar Gol's short film *The Struggle for Justice: Leyla Zana a Symbol of Courage* we can watch Leyla Zana take her oath and make her statement in Kurmanji. As she speaks the Turkish parliament is shaken with cries of "traitor!" and "separatist!"³ Yet the actual words Leyla Zana speaks are drowned out behind an English translation voiceover. I cannot hear the original words, the words that seem to have come close to instigating a riot, well enough to distinguish them. On the Democracy Now! Website there is an audio only recording of Leyla Zana's historic words, but the transcript is in English.⁴ Leyla Zana has given her life to the cause of the Kurdish people in Turkey, spent years in prison, faced torture and the possibility of death. Yet her original words, spoken in a language critical to the survival of Kurdish culture, have been obscured. When I started this paper I thought, surely, someone, knowing that this single sentence of Leyla Zana's was a historic act for the Kurdish people, would have transcribed the original Kurmanji into an article and followed it with an English translation. Yet this is not the case. It seems even when we are writing in defense of minority language rights, English dominates.

When the issue of language dominance is raised English is typically the aggressor language, the language that represents Western dominance over the rest of the world. Yet this view, intended to defend languages that are threatened by English, serves to further marginalize languages that are threatened by non-English languages. One of the forms this othering takes is the grouping of all Kurdish languages under the epithet "Kurdish," as if there were only one Kurdish language mutually intelligible to all native-speaking Kurds. This is not the case. The two main Kurdish languages, Sorani and Kurmanji, though often labeled dialects of Kurdish, are not mutually intelligible and are, in fact, separate languages.⁵ Furthermore, they are written with different alphabets. Sorani uses a modified Arabic script, while Kurmanji now uses a variation of the Latin

³ J. Gol, *The Struggle for Justice: Leyla Zana a Symbol of Courage*, Film, 12 minutes, September 6, 2006, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ELe0MqNWGk (Part 1), http://www.youtube.com/user/jiyargol#p/u/35/ZrH91tTt_as (Part 2).

⁴ *Kurdish Political Prisoner...*, op.cit.

⁵ W.M. Thackston, *Kurmanji Kurdish: A Reference Grammar with Selected Readings*, Cambridge-Harvard 2006, p. 7, http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Kurmanji/kurmanji_1_grammar.pdf.

alphabet, which has been in effect since the 1930s.⁶ In addition to Sorani and Kurmanji, there are multiple dialects within these languages. The othering of Kurdish languages means they are not given proper identification. This is probably due in part to the struggle to standardize Kurdish dialects, especially in terms of writing.⁷ In this paper I will primarily use the term “Kurdish” because Turkey’s language bans apply to all Kurdish languages and dialects and I do not wish to exclude Zaza and non-standard Kurmanji dialects from the discussion. However, for the purposes of education a standardized language becomes necessary, so it is important to note that in contexts that refer to Kurdish-Turkish bilingual education within Turkey I am talking about using a standardized form of Kurdish.

The struggle for Kurdish language rights is part of the larger struggle for Kurdish cultural rights and recognition. Much of the scholarship in the area of Kurdish rights focuses on the PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* or Kurdistan Workers’ Party). The PKK is considered a terrorist group by the U.S., Turkey, and the EU and has been responding violently to Turkey’s oppression of the Kurds since the 1980s. The estimated death toll in the conflict is 40,000 casualties, so it is unsurprising that when it comes to Turkey’s “Kurdish problem” the issue of the PKK is takes a position of prominence in academic articles relating to Kurdish studies. In his review of *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* David Romano writes, “The most significant and enduring Kurdish challenge to the Turkish state comes from the PKK.”⁸ However, while many Kurds feel that PKK has forced Ankara to consider Kurdish identity and to begin making changes to policies that deny the existence of Kurds, the negative attention garnered by the PKK has also deeply hurt the cause of Kurdish identity in Turkey because many Turks now associate Kurds with terrorism.⁹ The Turkish government has made cautious advancements in the direction of Kurdish rights, yet one of the most essential demands of Turkey’s Kurdish population, the right to mother-tongue education, is something the Turkish government refuses to discuss. Neophytos G. Loizides writes, “...although the

⁶ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁷ N.G. Loizides, *State Ideology and the Kurds in Turkey*, “Middle Eastern Studies” 2010, No. 4, p. 514.

⁸ D. Romano, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, “Middle East Journal” 2008, No. 2, p. 346.

⁹ J.C. Dixon, M. Ergin, *Explaining Anti-Kurdish Beliefs in Turkey: Group Competition, Identity, and Globalization*, “Social Science Quarterly” 2010, No. 5, p. 1336.

systematic effort to enforce Turkish among the Kurds was largely successful, it did not lead to the Turkification of the Kurdish segment of the population in national terms.”¹⁰ Turkey’s brutal language policies have not produced the hoped-for result of assimilating the country’s Kurdish population. However, bilingual education would be a major step in the process of reconciliation between Turks and Kurds.

While I desire to be cautious in light of the fact that advancements for Kurdish rights and recognition often seem small in contrast to Turkish acts of repression and aggression against the Kurds, I do believe recent developments in Turkey give us cause for optimism. Michael Gunter writes of Turkey that, “This great state can make democracy work for all its citizens and the entire world will be better for it.”¹¹ Turkey has the opportunity to use bilingual education as a tool for uniting its citizens. Research shows that bilingual education is an effective means of creating empathy between disparate populations and if steps could be taken in this direction in Turkey, much could be accomplished. There is a vast body of research in the area of bilingual education which Turkey could draw upon to create cutting-edge bilingual schools, schools that could become examples for the rest of the world to follow. It is time to seriously consider how Kurdish children can receive mother-tongue education while attaining the level of Turkish they need to function successfully within their society. This article argues that not only does Turkey’s Kurdish population deserve mother-tongue education, but bilingual education as well and that bilingual Turkish-Kurdish education will be beneficial to both Turks and Kurds.-Turkey needs to consider integration rather than assimilation, and one of the best ways to foster such integration is by creating public schools that offer Kurdish-Turkish bilingual education from the earliest stages.

2. Brief History of the Kurdish Language Struggle

It is important to understand the history of the Kurds in Turkey to be able to contextualize the struggle for Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights. The Kurds are the indigenous people of the lands they inhabit, which they have occupied for thousands of years. When Atatürk came to power, his constitution stipulated that all people living within the borders of Turkey would be viewed as Turks,

¹⁰ N.G. Loizides, op.cit., p. 515.

¹¹ M. Gunter, *Kurds Ascending*, p. 106.

effectively eliminating the ethnic identities of minority populations.¹² While not the only minority group within Turkey, the Kurds are the largest, comprising an estimated 20–25 percent of the population.¹³ The status of Kurdish language has been in dispute ever since Atatürk's time, restricted in the Turkish constitution in spite of guaranteed language rights for minorities within the Turkish state as stipulated in the Treaty of Lausanne, of which Turkey is a signatory.¹⁴ From 1980 to 2000 Kurdish language was not only forbidden in public, it was forbidden in the home. Kurdish television and radio broadcasts were banned and police demolished satellite dishes on the rooftops of Kurdish homes. Kurdish education was not allowed. Turkey was actively working to destroy the language of its Kurdish minority and with it their distinct culture and identity.

Kurdish languages have faced the same challenges in relation to Arabic, Persian, and Turkish that other languages have faced in relation to English. One of these is the assertion that the language in question is not equipped to deal with scientific or other academic discourse. In his article *The Pen and the Sword: Literacy, Education and the Revolution in Kurdistan* Amir Hassanpour points out that at one time English was in the same position in relation to Latin. Languages develop the terminology to deal with new concepts if they are allowed to do so.¹⁵ Hassanpour quotes the Kurdish poet and mullah Haji Qadiri Koya (1817–97) who laments:

It is only the Kurds, among all nations,
Deprived of reading and writing.
By translating into their own languages, the foreigners
Became familiar with the secrets of other peoples' books
None of our scholars/clergymen, great or small,
Has ever read two letters in Kurdish¹⁶

¹² D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 192.

¹³ M. Fotios, R. Chaudhuri, *Turkish-Kurdish Relations and the European Union: An Unprecedented Shift in the Kemalist Paradigm?*, "Mediterranean Quarterly" 2005, No. 4, pp. 77–89.

¹⁴ T. Skutnabb-Kangas, S. Bucak, *Killing a Mother Tongue: How the Kurds are Deprived of Linguistic Human Rights* [in:] *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson (eds.), Berlin 1995, p. 354.

¹⁵ A. Hassanpour, *The Pen and the Sword: Literacy, Education and the Revolution in Kurdistan* [in:] *Knowledge, Culture, and Power: International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice*, P. Freebody, A.R. Welch (eds.), London 1993, p. 47.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

Haji knew that other people, such as the Japanese, were translating scientific terminology into their own languages and he wanted the same for Kurdish.¹⁷ The British argued that “Kurdish alone provides too narrow a basis for secondary and higher education.”¹⁸ However, this argument was not in favour of English education, but rather Arabic education, an example of how language endangerment occurs with other languages than English in the position of dominance.

A popular argument among Turkish nationalists is that Kurds didn’t know they were Kurds before the Turks came. It is true that the division of Kurdish people between the Ottoman and Persian empires fostered a sense of ethnic identity. However, this argument gives the idea that Kurdish nationalism and the desire of Kurdish language rights is something new, though it is not. Kurds have been advocating for their right to be educated in their own language for hundreds of years. Ahmadi Xani, a 17th Century Kurdish mullah and poet, advocated for the use of Kurdish in the education system, which at that time was almost entirely in Arabic or Persian. Kurdish faced a disadvantage because Arabic was viewed as the language of God, so in Xani’s arguments for Kurdish use he only refers to Persian as the opponent language.¹⁹ Xani also authored a written version of the traditional Kurdish ballad, *Mem û Zin*, which is typically described as a Kurdish *Romeo and Juliet*. However, within its pages Xani includes references to the struggle for Kurdish nationalism and the plight of the Kurdish language.²⁰

In the documentary *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds* one Kurdish man states, “Why are we fighting? It is because Turks have decided to assimilate all the Kurds into Turkish culture, Turkish language and for us to forget everything that we are about.”²¹ Kurdish suppression in Turkey has been described as “the most brutal linguistic oppression in the world enacted under force of law.”²² Kurdish languages have endured centuries of marginalization in relation to other languages. In modern day Turkey this means that many Kurds are not only unable to read and write in their own language, but they are unable to speak it as well. What does it mean for Kurdish people not to be able to speak their own language? The loss of the mother-tongue is not only a loss in linguistic terms, but also

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 50.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 41–44.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 44.

²¹ *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds*, directed by Kevin McKiernan (2001), DVD.

²² T. Skutnabb-Kangas, S. Bucak, op.cit., p. 353.

in terms of the way Kurds connect with their history, their culture, and their families. Michael Kimmelman interviews a Kurdish woman who describes what this means to her:

My grandmother, who turned 100 lately, doesn't speak a word of Turkish, and I don't know Kurdish. If you lose a language, you can lose your family, because you lose your link to the past. But when I ask my grandmother about her life 100 years ago she starts singing. It's how we communicate. I put my hand on her knee... She sings. I may not be able to understand the words. But I can understand the feelings.²³

The loss of language divides people from close relatives, sometimes not even a generation apart. This language based division affects not only people's relationships with loved ones, but the ability of elders to pass on culture, tradition, and heritage to the new generation. Moreover, because a large proportion of Kurds are illiterate, oral tradition becomes even more important.

The assimilation of Kurds into Turkish culture was not accidental. It has been carried out systematically and includes the destruction of Kurdish villages, the forced relocation of Kurdish people within Turkey, the deportation of Kurdish intellectuals, the suppression of Kurdish culture, the jailing and torture of some Kurdish politicians and the assassinations of others, and the immersion of Kurdish children in a Turkish education system that refuses to acknowledge that Kurdish languages even exist.²⁴ This is a slow and insidious process of cultural genocide. The formation of the PKK, which both Turkey and the U.S. label a terrorist organization, is the direct result of Turkey's attempt to wipe Kurdish culture from the face of the earth.²⁵ It is vital for Kurdish culture that Kurdish languages are freed from this oppression.

3. Challenges to Kurdish Language Education

When we consider the challenges Kurdish languages face it is important to understand that while they have been threatened by Persian, Arabic, and Turkish for many years, with the rise of globalization Kurdish languages are now threatened by the spread of English as well. There is much debate about how English

²³ M. Kimmelman, *For Kurds in Turkey, Autonomy in Music*, "New York Times" June 5, 2011.

²⁴ Yegen 602, Moustakis and Chaudhuri, p. 81.

²⁵ Moustakis and Chaudhuri, p. 80.

threatens other languages, but many times there is a hierarchy of languages within a country, such as in the case of many African, Indian, and, of course, Kurdish languages. The problem with considering only the case of English when we look at the language endangerment is that languages like Kurmanji, which are threatened by languages other than English, become marginalized even further. For instance, the prestigious Middle East Technical University uses English as the medium of instruction, not only marginalizing Turkish languages, but accentuating Kurmanji as a distant third. The following is a former student's experience of trying to learn English as a Kurdish speaker:

Our English teacher was a woman from Kazakhstan who was a Turkish nationalist. She made things difficult for us. In secondary school, science class brought my grade point average down. In high school, English class brought it down. That teacher always said: "There actually is no such thing as Kurdish; this is Turkish that has been Kurdified."²⁶

In this case it is clear that Turkish and English are privileged. Kurmanji is treated as if it is not even a real language, as if it is a form of modified Turkish. In fact, the opposite is true and Kurmanji has become "Turkified." Because of the geographical proximity of the languages and the privileged status of Turkish, Turkish borrowings and pronunciations have made their way into Kurmanji.²⁷ For Turks, struggling with their relationship with Europe and the West, the discourse seems to focus more on their fears of Turkish culture being westernized, rather than considering how Kurdish culture is being assimilated by Turkey's policies protecting "Turkishness." While English is probably the greatest threat to Kurmanji in Turkey after Turkish, it is clear that other Western languages also are privileged over Kurmanji. In the following statement a young man, Lezgin, remembers feeling ashamed of his mother for speaking to him in Kurdish in front of his friends.

One day my mother called out to me in Kurdish. My playmates asked me "what did your mother say?" And I told them – I was in secondary school – "My mother speaks French with me." My friends told their mothers, "Mom, do you know that our friend's mother is French? She has come from France; they live here." Then their mothers told my mother what I had said. When my mother asked me

²⁶ V. Çoşkun, Ş. Derince, N. Uçarlar, *Scar of Tongue: Consequences of the Ban on the Use of Mother Tongue in Education and Experiences of Kurdish Students in Turkey*, Diyarbakir Institute for Social and Political Research, March 2011, p. 49, <http://www.disa.org.tr/files/documents/scaroftongue.pdf>.

²⁷ W.M. Thackston, op.cit., p. 8.

why I had lied, I told that I was embarrassed. Most of the people living in our building were Turkish; they spoke Turkish. I had lied because I didn't want to be excluded.²⁸

This case illustrates the sense of shame many young Kurds feel about their language, but it also shows that European languages, like French, are endowed with an aura of prestige in Turkey.

An example of Kurdish being further marginalized in relation to a non-English European language occurs in Shelley Taylor's study of a bilingual education program in Denmark, which was created for Turkish immigrant children. In this program the children were all classified as Turkish speakers because they were Turkish nationals: The Kurdish children entered what was supposed to be a bilingual education program at kindergarten, but since the mediums of instruction were Turkish and Danish they received no mother-tongue education. Taylor writes, "Because Kurdish was invisibilized in the program they were not able to fully develop their multilingualism."²⁹ Kurds have been "invisibilized"³⁰ for centuries now and the threat of dominant English (or even other European languages) pushes Kurdish languages even further towards the margins. In the case of English the threat is far greater because, unlike Danish, English is becoming more and more important in the Turkish education system and bilingual education is more likely to take place in Turkish and English than in Turkish and Kurmanji, thus further alienating Turkey's Kurds and hurting the cause of Kurdish ethnic rights. English dominance is closely connected to the process of globalization. Dixon and Ergin's study *Explaining Anti-Kurdish Beliefs in Turkey: Group Competition, Identity, and Globalization* revealed that Turks who are in favour of globalization are more likely to hold the view that Kurds have a negative effect on society.³¹ Views like these coupled with the spread of English, which comes part and parcel with globalization, further other the cause of Kurdish culture and languages.

Turkey's policies of nationalism and the country's attitude toward globalization mean that a different population views the Kurds in a negative light than what one might expect (at least from an American perspective). For Americans, more education and less religion usually equate to greater tolerance toward

²⁸ V. Çoşkun, Ş. Derince, N. Uçarlar, op.cit., p. 53.

²⁹ S. Taylor, *Right Pedagogy/Wrong Language*, "International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism" 2009, No. 3, pp. 292–293.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 292.

³¹ J.C. Dixon, M. Ergin, op.cit., p. 1341.

others, but in Turkey findings show just the opposite. There is a tendency to conflate Kurdish ethnicity with religious fundamentalism, lack of education, and terrorism.³² The Kurds are seen as an impediment to globalization.³³ Kimmelman writes, “Nationalists regard even the most basic Kurdish demand – that their language also be allowed in grade schools and at official settings where Kurds are involved – as treason. Turkish Kurds respond that increased cultural freedom only encourages their loyalty to the Turkish state.”³⁴ The truth is that many Kurds in Turkey are undereducated, but the reasons for this are complex and many of them are the fault of the Turkish state, rather than a lack of interest in or desire for education (which is what many Turks seem to think). Like many minority language speakers, Kurds have a high rate of illiteracy. In 2007 Al Jazeera gave these figures, “Forty-five per cent of women and 19 per cent of men in the mainly Kurdish southeast are illiterate – well above the national average of 20 and four per cent, respectively.”³⁵ Kurdish people are not illiterate and uneducated because they have chosen to be, which seems to be the attitude Turkish nationalists take. Rather, Kurdish people in Turkey are greatly impeded in the process of education because they are not able to receive education in their mother tongue.

Unfortunately, attitudes toward the idea of Kurdish-Turkish bilingual education in Turkey are far more negative than attitudes toward Turkish-English bilingual education, reflecting the desire of educated Turks to participate in the globalization process as well as the desire to preserve what they perceive as national unity. Prime Minister Erdoğan is vehemently against Kurdish language education in Turkey, in stark contrast to his support for Turkish schools in Germany. Erdoğan is quoted saying, “Germany has not yet caught up with the times. One must first have a firm command of one’s own language, that is to say, Turkish, and that is unfortunately rarely the case.”³⁶ Not surprisingly, Germans reacted to Erdoğan’s proposal in much the same way Erdoğan has reacted to the idea of Kurdish schools in Turkey: with expressions of fear and doubt relating to national integration. In contrast to his views on Turkish education in Germany, Erdoğan made the following statement regarding Kurdish education in Turkey:

³² Ibidem, p. 1334, 1336.

³³ Ibidem, p. 1341.

³⁴ M. Kimmelman, *op.cit.*

³⁵ *Turkey’s Kurds Try to Be Heard*, “Al Jazeera English” July 22, 2007.

³⁶ *German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Istanbul*, “Istanbul Times”, http://www.newistanbultimes.com/news_detail.php?id=59.

“Do not expect us to agree to education in the mother tongue. Turkey’s official language is Turkish.”³⁷

Kurds in Turkey have long advocated for Kurdish language schools, while Turkey’s bans on Kurdish language have made such a thing impossible. Primary Kurdish language education is still inhibited by Article 49 (9) of Turkey’s Constitution, which prohibits the teaching of any language other than Turkish as a mother tongue.³⁸ However, there is hope that with the new Constitution soon to be drafted this situation will change, though opposition to such schooling remains because many Turks see Kurdish language schools as something that encourages to Kurdish demands for separatism. Additionally, researchers working on the prospect of bilingual education in Turkey must struggle for government approval to present their findings to the public.³⁹ Another issue, one common to marginalized languages, is that Kurdish has lost its value in the eyes of many young learners. Kimmelman elaborates on the situation:

Nurcan Baysal and Dilan Bozgan, researchers in their 30s, said that like many Kurds of their generation they never learned their own mother tongue because it was stigmatized in schools. But they grew up hearing it in Kurdish music. Ms. Bozgan said her own young children don’t want to learn Kurdish because their Turkish classmates and teachers tell them Turkish is the only language that really matters, and after that, English. “If you don’t give prestige to a culture,” she lamented, “people won’t value it, and it will die.”⁴⁰

Kurdish languages in Turkey need to be protected instead of persecuted so that the culture the language carries is not lost. For this to happen Kurdish children need to be able to receive their education in their mother tongue. Turks fear that this will divide the country, yet the treatment of Kurdish people and Kurdish language has already divided Turkey. However, bilingual education is a means able to bridge the divide.

If Kurdish children were able to receive bilingual education and their culture were treated with respect they would be far more likely to integrate into Turkish society than if their language and culture are violently suppressed. Amir Hassanpour writes, “...it needs a handful of experts to develop the *corpus* of a language. It requires, however, a revolution, a centuries-long struggle to enhance the *status*

³⁷ S. Pelek, *No Education in Mother Tongue with PM Erdoğan*, Bianet, <http://www.bianet.org/english/minorities/125051-no-education-in-mother-tongue-with-pm-erdogan>.

³⁸ M. Gunter, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

³⁹ M. Kimmelman, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

of a language”⁴¹ Through bilingual education Turkey has the power to raise the status of Kurmanji and perhaps after centuries of struggle, Kurdish languages might finally be given the environment they need to flourish.

4. Positive Steps

While the previous section shows just how daunting the task of bringing Kurdish language education to Turkey is, the situation is far from hopeless. In recent years positive steps have been taken toward recognizing Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights that would have been impossible in the past. In this section I will highlight these advancements. A set of changes to the law made in 2002 allowed for private Kurdish language schools for adults.⁴² In Istanbul the first Kurdology institute was opened in 2008 at Nazim Hikmet Marxist Sciences Academy, which made Kurdish study possible at the graduate level. However, in October 2011 the first undergraduate program in Kurdish studies opened at Artuklu University in southeast Turkey. Such programs give Kurds the opportunity to study their own culture and language, something that was previously denied them in the public sphere. However, these programs are problematic because they teach Kurdish as a foreign language rather than allowing Kurdish children to receive their education in Kurdish, which would serve to strengthen the language.

In 2010 the film *Min Dit: Children of Diyarbakir*, a Kurmanji language film, was released in Turkey, after being previously banned. Not only was it released, but it won several awards from Turkish film festivals.⁴³ *Min Dit* tells the story of three children who are orphaned after their parents are killed by a secret service arm of the Turkish government. The film is based on the life of filmmaker Miraz Bezar’s aunt, Kurdish journalist Evrim Alatas. Bezar, who refers to himself as a “diaspora Kurd,”⁴⁴ does not speak Kurdish (which is a problem for many Turkish Kurds), but he wanted his film to be in the language of the people of Diyarbakir, so he wrote his script in Turkish and had it translated. Speaking about the continued clashes between the PKK and the Turkish military, Bezar

⁴¹ A. Hassanpour, op.cit., p. 52.

⁴² Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, p. 294.

⁴³ N. Sobecki, *From Banned to Box Office*, “Global Post”, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/turkey/100527/kurdish-film>.

⁴⁴ Bezar was born in Ankara in 1971 and moved to Germany with his family after the coup of 1980. See <http://www.filmmovement.com/downloads/press/BEFORE%20YOUR%20EYES%20PRESS%20KIT.pdf>.

states, “Hundreds of millions of dollars that have been spent on this war represent the sums that were not spent on schools, science or the country’s development.”⁴⁵ If filmmakers like Bezar are allowed to make films like *Min Dit* and these films gain prominence through film festivals and awards, then it is to be hoped that the cause of Kurdish rights and the desire of many Kurds for a peaceful solution to what is known as the “Kurdish problem” will also gain exposure.

In the spring of 2011 the Diyarbakir Institute of Political and Social (DISA) published an extensive report entitled *Scar of Tongue: Consequences of the Ban on the Use of Mother Tongue in Education and Experiences of Kurdish Students in Turkey* concerning the state of education for Turkish Kurds and calling for change. The fact that this report was able to be published in Turkey coupled with the recent creation of university Kurdology programs (which include Kurdish language components) offers new hope for the plight of Kurdish education in Turkey. Among the promising developments for the future of Kurmanji in Turkey are the formation of DISA and the publication of the *Scar* report, which indicate a significant shift in the Turkish attitude toward the Kurdish question. Not long ago publishing such a report would have resulted in prison sentences for the authors and the publisher. In June of 2011 Leyla Zana was reelected to the Turkish parliament, along with 35 other Kurdish parliamentarians, the highest percentage ever elected to Turkey’s parliament. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan has vowed to rewrite the constitution (the current constitution was developed after a military coup in 1980). More significantly, Erdoğan has promised to include input from all parties in the process of rewriting it.⁴⁶ However, it is virtually impossible to predict developments in the political situation of the Kurds in Turkey, since apparent progress is often immediately countered with drastic setbacks. Progress is more strongly indicated in the spheres of culture and academia, with the success of films like *Min Dit* and the publication of the DISA report.

5. Models of Bilingual Education

There are a number of different theoretical models for bilingual education that might work in the context of Turkish-Kurdish bilingualism and which fit the

⁴⁵ E.N. Özbudak, M. Gökçe, ‘*Min Dit*’ Director Miraz Bezar Wants to Restrain Violence with His Film, “Today’s Zaman”, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-207048-min-dit-director-miraz-bezar-wants-to-restrain-violence-with-his-film.html>.

⁴⁶ Erdoğan Pledges ‘Constitution by Consensus’, “Al Jazeera (Qatar)” June 13, 2011.

description of Skutnabb-Kangas refers to as “strong form”⁴⁷ bilingual education. There are numerous, well-established, and successful models of bilingual education and these could be applied to the situation of the Kurds in Turkey. The model used may depend on a number of factors, especially financing and location of the program. It would be ideal for Turkish children to study Kurmanji too (and if it is not mandatory they should at least be given the opportunity.) However, it would be more practical for both groups of children to study both languages if they lived in Eastern Turkey, since Kurmanji is more widely spoken there. Additionally, when considering bilingual or multilingual education in Turkey it is important to remember that Kurmanji is not the only minority language in the country, and if the ultimate goal is to provide mother tongue education for all children in Turkey, then a model of education that can be adapted for various linguistic scenarios is necessary.

This section includes examples of bilingual education programs from Sweden, New Zealand, and Israel, as well as another look at Taylor’s study in Denmark all of which could be applied in some way to the situation of Turkish Kurds. The Swedish scenario comes from the case of Finnish students in Sweden. The students in this example were attending a Finnish immersion school and also learning Swedish. What is particularly striking about this study is the fact that these students showed stronger Swedish language ability than Swedish native speaking students.⁴⁸ Studies like this one would be useful for Kurdish advocates of linguistic human rights because they serve as evidence of how successful a bilingual education can be and also show that such education does not lead to segregation, which is ostensibly the Turkish government’s reason for wanting to assimilate the Kurds.

Another situation which would be useful for those interested in implementing Kurdish-Turkish bilingual education is that of the Maori in New Zealand. During the early 1980s, when it was discovered that Maori children were losing their language, *Kohanga Reo* (“language nests”), were created for preschool children to immerse them in their language and culture.⁴⁹ Parents quickly realized that once school began, everything gained in the *Kohanga Reo* would be lost and gradually three Maori language options were developed within the school system: one taught Maori language as a separate subject, with basic phrases,

⁴⁷ T. Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic Human Rights in Education?*, p. 580.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 608.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 603.

songs, and some cultural information; the second provided bilingual Maori and English education; the third was a Maori immersion program.⁵⁰ A model like this one might be very effective for Turkey because it would not only allow Kurdish students to be educated in their own language and retain their cultural heritage, but it would give Turkish students the opportunity to learn a little Kurmanji and develop an appreciation for Kurdish culture without necessarily being part of a full bilingual Kurdish-Turkish program.

Perhaps the most profound example of a bilingual education program is that of Hebrew-Arabic education for Israeli and Arab students in Israel. While there is obviously a power differential between the groups mentioned in the other two studies, the situation of the Arab and Israeli students is most comparable to that of Turkish and Kurdish students. However, one major difference between the situation of Turkey and that of Israel is that unlike Kurmanji, Arabic is recognized as an official language in Israel. Nevertheless, the status of Arabic in Israel, while protected, is still far from being on par with Hebrew, and Israeli Arabs need Hebrew to participate in Israeli society in much the same way Turkish Kurds need Turkish. Amara describes the Arab-Jewish conflict in Israel as an “identity conflict” and states that this sets up a victim-victimizer dynamic for both groups.⁵¹ This “identity-conflict” in Israel mirrors the issues of Kurds and Turks, embroiled in a power struggle for identity. While issues of ethnic conflict and domination are in many ways similar between Turkey and its Kurdish population and Israel and its Arab population, language policy in Israel is different than language policy in Turkey. While Arabic is not privileged in the way Hebrew is, it is taught and Arab children are able to receive mother-tongue education, unlike Kurdish children in Turkey. Both Jews and Arabs also have opportunities to learn each other’s languages as well as study English, starting as early as the third grade for the second language.⁵² This method of education leads to greater segregation of Arabs and Jews within the state of Israel. In an attempt to counter this segregation the Hand-in-Hand program was developed to create a bilingual and bicultural curriculum for combined classes of Arab and Jewish students.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, pp. 603, 604.

⁵¹ M. Amara, F. Azaiza, R. Hertz-Lazarowitz, A. Mor-Sommerfeld, *A New Bilingual Education in the Conflict-ridden Israeli Reality: Language Practices*, “Language & Education: An International Journal” 2009, No. 1, p. 16.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 18.

The program has not met with unmitigated success, especially in terms of its linguistic outcomes. Arab students became far more proficient in using Hebrew than Jewish students became at learning Arabic. However, it is noteworthy that the program made great strides in promoting empathy between the two groups of children, something which would certainly be beneficial for Turkish and Kurdish children. Bekerman and Horenczyk write, "There have been some situations of profound empathy. Such was the case when Jewish children expressed the fear that their Arab friends would be expelled from their homes and offered them shelter after the commemoration of the Day of the Land."⁵³ However, even in the area of promoting empathy between the Jewish and Arab students area, there was room for improvement. One of the problems the bilingual Hebrew-Arabic schools faced was that the children did not truly become integrated. Bekerman and Horenczyk suggest that this is because the schools focused too much on the uniqueness of the students' cultures and promoted difference rather than encouraging students to develop a common identity. Bekerman and Horenczyk write:

In the bilingual schools described in our study, neither decategorization nor crossed-categorization approaches seem to be allowed for in school practices, thus preventing the implementation, at least partial, of strategies which allow for an increase of complexity in intergroup perceptions.⁵⁴

For Turkey this means that bilingual schools need not give up on the idea of a common Turkishness in terms of being one nation, but that the concept of Turkishness needs to be reformed to allow a plurality of ethnicities.

Some aspects of the model employed in the Danish mother tongue maintenance program dealt with in the Taylor study might also be successful for helping Kurdish children retain their linguistic heritage, but such a model may not do enough to integrate Turks and Kurds. One positive result of the bilingual program was that even though the Danish children did not learn Turkish they did learn to not only tolerate the differences of their Turkish peers but to defend their rights. Both the Danish and Turkish teachers reported that the Danish students in the cohort stood up for the Turkish students when they were harassed or discriminated against by either teachers or other students.⁵⁵

⁵³ Z. Bekerman, G. Horenczyk, *Arab-Jewish Bilingual Coeducation in Israel: A Long-Term Approach to Intergroup Conflict Resolution*, "Journal of Social Issues" 2004, No. 2, p. 399.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 400.

⁵⁵ S. Taylor, *op.cit.*, p. 302.

Under the current education system in Turkey, Kurdish students receive unfair treatment from both teachers and other students. However, it is important to note that the Turkish-Danish bilingual education program met with limited success. While it did produce a more positive relationship between the Turkish and Danish children, they ultimately remained segregated. Referencing a novel by Hugh MacLennan, Taylor describes the Turkish and Danish children as “two solitudes.”⁵⁶ This is a scenario to be avoided in Turkish-Kurmanji bilingual education because the ultimate goals should not only include the preservation and development of Kurdish language and culture, but the integration of Turkish and Kurdish peoples.

These four cases of bilingual education show commonalities in their outcomes indicating that similar outcomes could be expected for Kurmanji-Turkish bilingual education programs. One of the most important conclusions shared by studies of bilingual education is that such education fosters greater empathy between children of different linguistic and ethnic groups and that this empathy is not tied to strong bilingualism within the majority language group, as shown by the Taylor study and the Jewish-Arab bilingual schools. The studies also show that bilingual education does not produce greater segregation, which is in direct contrast to the assertions of the Turkish government. There are also common problems between the bilingual education programs, which researches are continuing to look into. If bilingual education programs in Turkey are created, they would stand to benefit from this research, especially the research relating to using bilingual education as a solution to intergroup conflict. Realistically, Kurmanji-Turkish bilingual education should focus on creating empathy between students of different ethnic backgrounds, preserving Kurdish language, and giving Kurdish children the Turkish they need to be able to function well and have opportunities for achievement in their society. Turkish children should be taught about Kurdish culture and language with the goal of fostering empathy and respect for their Kurdish peers.

According to the DISA report, many of the Kurdish students had feelings of accomplishment derived from learning Turkish. One of the interviewees, Sabahat, said, “I am happy to have learned Turkish. Having learned such a language gives you a different feeling. I like being able to express myself in Turkish. But I have left behind a language that belonged to me. You feel the pain of that. You feel as if you are choosing between two children.”⁵⁷ In a good system of bilingual

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 303.

⁵⁷ V. Çoşkun, Ş. Derince, N. Uçarlar, op.cit., p. 55.

education, Kurdish students would not need to leave their own language behind, but they would also be able to develop skills in Turkish. Kurdish students who are able to succeed in school and develop the necessary ability in Turkish to do so are obviously more likely to have positive feelings about the Turkish language. Achievement in language study can boost a student's self-worth. Unfortunately, if language is not considered to be valuable by the general populace, the sense of self-worth for gaining capability in a language may be diminished. Turkish students are unlikely to see much benefit in learning Kurmanji. Bilingual education in Turkey would need to provide some bridge between the two groups of students and for this to happen Kurdish language and culture need to be treated as valuable by Turkey as a whole. This means that even if ethnic Turkish students are not learning Kurmanji they should be taught about Kurdish culture in a positive fashion.

The best solution to Kurdish language endangerment would be bilingual education, not only for Kurdish children, but ideally for Turkish children as well. Unfortunately, this is a situation in which English dominance becomes a problem. Most Turks would probably prefer bilingual education for their children in Turkish and English rather than Turkish and Kurdish. Yet bilingual Turkish/Kurdish education would serve to decrease many of the problems related to Kurdish rights issues in Turkey. The case studies of bilingual education for Finnish students in Sweden, Maori students in New Zealand, and (perhaps most notably) Arab and Israeli students in Israel give evidence of the success of bilingual education and offer hope for bridging the divide between Turks and Kurds.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, Kurdish language education is not going to happen in Turkey until Turks decide they want it to. Thus, it becomes crucial not only to raise the status of the mother tongue among Kurds but among Turks as well. Film is an excellent medium for generating interest in Kurdish culture and language and it has the advantage of being an expedient means of doing so. However, literature is also another path to raising interest in Kurdish culture. The Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism distributed copies of *Mem u Zin* (translated into Turkish) to the Turkish parliament, which seems a decidedly positive step for the promotion of Kurdish culture in Turkey. Unfortunately when a city council attempted to name a park after Ahmed Xani they were sentenced to 1 month and 20 days in prison because the "x" in "Xani" is forbidden for not being part of the Turkish

alphabet.⁵⁸ Thus while there are indications that acknowledgement and interest in Kurdish culture are on the rise in Turkey, there continue to be numerous setbacks ranging from issues like the naming of the municipal park to violent acts carried out by the PKK and Turkish military retaliation.

The task of bringing bilingual Kurmanji-Turkish education to Turkey is a momentous one and something that will not be achieved without struggle. Implementing such educational programs will require support from Turks and Kurds together and for these programs to be successful a fundamental shift in Turkish attitudes toward Kurds is vital, especially among the educated class who possess the most influence in creating such reforms. According to Turkish professor Burhan Senatalar, of Bilgi University in Istanbul:

If you asked Turks today whether, in the abstract, people should be able to speak their mother tongue, most of them would say, of course, no problem... But with Kurdish, fear clouds the picture. Language is the biggest Kurdish demand because language equals identity. It's the root of any culture, and many Kurds, having had their language repressed, no longer even know the basics of Kurdish grammar. So the debate has inevitably turned to language. To have cultural demands beyond language you need qualified people to write plays and make art, and during the 1980s you had so many Kurdish people tortured that they didn't have time to think about cultural questions, which means there's still a long way to go.⁵⁹

Yet this attitude shift does not need to occur en masse all at once. It can begin with a few people who have the power to instigate change: teachers, school officials, government officials, and conscientious Turkish citizens regardless of their ethnicity. However, for this to work support needs to come from the top down. Bilingual teachers who are supportive of both their Turkish and Kurdish students and understand the challenges both groups face in terms of integration could gradually bridge the rift between Turks and Kurds. It is vital that the world work to protect linguistic human rights of all languages because, in the words of Leyla Zana, "The disappearance of any language or culture, which is the fruit of the labor of generations of men and women over centuries, is an impoverishment, an irreparable mutilation of the world's heritage."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Council Members Sentenced to Prison over Park Named for Kurdish Poet*, "Today's Zaman", <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-246118-council-members-sentenced-to-prison-over-park-named-after-kurdish-poet.html>.

⁵⁹ M. Kimmelman, *op.cit.*

⁶⁰ L. Zana, *Writings from Prison*, Cambridge 1999, p. 10.

In the wake of the 2011 earthquake in Van, Turkish journalist Mehmet Ali Birand stated, “If we wish to win over the heart of our Kurdish brothers, now is the time. We should beat the PKK with this [new] approach that is more efficient than guns.”⁶¹ Birand was referring to relief efforts for the people of Van, a city with a largely Kurdish population. However, a similar statement might be made with regard to bilingual education. Fostering “strong-form” bilingual education programs for its Kurdish population, while working to raise the status of Kurdish language and culture in the eyes of both young Kurdish and Turkish students, may prove far more productive for Turkey than continuing the cycle of violence.

⁶¹ M.S. Akgönül, *Major Earthquake and Political Contention in Van*, “Kurdish Globe”, <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=94484FD25B5B4BC2F1D560A185807C96>.