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FOCUS TOPIC ARTICLE

British ethnic minority children's meaning-making of transnational belonging/s in the primary school

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This paper explores minority children's understandings of transnationalism through lived experience or family stories of migration. The paper is based on a study in a multicultural primary school, with children aged 6–7 and 10–11. The primary objective of the research was to explore children's identity work around reading at school, and the role of the everyday practice of reading. The research utilized participative methods in the form of visual research, and qualitative interviews in order to promote pupil voice. The children read multicultural picture books depicting different localities, and these acted as a springboard for eliciting conversations about sense of place. A main outcome of the research was to gain a clearer understanding of the significance of identifying as Muslim for many children. Children found a sense of togetherness in their Muslim identity through sharing prayer practices and learning Arabic. The conclusions concern the significance of such multi-placed senses of belonging for children's formations of their subjectivities, and the implications of this for both transnationalism, but also for social work. Future research on children's identity work and how their voices and opinions are produced in research, as well as their conceptions of the nation state would warrant further exploration.

Keywords: minority children; transnationalism; migration; Muslim; identity work

Introduction

This paper will explore data generated in a multicultural London primary school over 1 school year, with children aged 6–7 and 10–11. Though the primary objective of the research was to explore children's meaning-making of the processes and practices of learning to read, it also sought to consider the way in which minority children constructed their identities in mainstream primary schools. In order to start conversations about their own identities, a range of multicultural picture books were shown to the children, and used as a “trigger material” (Troyna & Carrington, 1987, p. 12) for discussion. The conversations about children's experiences of nationality, religious practices, and multiple, transnational notions of belonging are explored in this paper.

The paper first situates the data in relation to theory on transnationalism, and previous work on children and transnationalism. Drawing upon these points, the qualitative research design, where pairs of children were interviewed, is discussed. Data on themes of belonging to “my country” are then explored, along with children's identity work around attending the Madrasa or community language school, and prayer practices. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of this research for social work, and reflects upon the findings in relation to children's identities and social work practice.

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Theorizing transnationalism

Initially it is useful to define transnationalism. Glick Schiller, 1999, suggests it is:

the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. [...] Transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend upon multiple and constant interconnections. (p. 73)

This definition enables us to frame transnationalism as concerned with the creation and maintenance of crucial life support networks across international boundaries. Sakai (2010) argues that transnationalism “seeks to interrupt the practices of *separation*, but never allows itself to overlook the workings of *bordering*” (p. 273) for transnational subjects. King and Christou (2011) argue there is too much focus on transnational subjects being seen as liminal, or floating between nations, rather than occupying clear, multi-placed spaces in both. What is key in theorizing the transnational subject in relation to this paper is the *interconnectedness* of lived experiences outlined in Glick Schiller’s definition.

In order to both theorize and thoroughly explore transnationalism, Robinson (1998) argues for interdisciplinary transnational studies based on a paradigm shift “in the focus of social inquiry from the nation state at the basic unit of analysis to the global system as the appropriate unit” (1998, p. 561). Arguably, though such structures have been explored in some depth since Robinson’s article was published, there remains a gap in the literature where children’s experiences are explored in depth from a social work perspective. In terms of positioning social work within transnational studies, Schweppe (2012) argues that “methodological nationalism is constitutive to transnational research in social work” (p. 1). The point is that legal and policy frameworks in the traditional nation state with which social workers operate might not “be transnational” since national laws are fixed and nationally bounded. Transnational social work could have a reparative role through utilizing legislative frameworks across different nation states. Having considered definitions and theorisations of transnationalism, the next section seeks to critique transnational studies.

Faist (2010) critiques transnational studies, arguing it falls short in that:

most transnational analyses have focused on migrant practices, but they have neglected to look at transformation of institutions in transnational spaces, and how these interact with the life worlds of migrants. (p. 1666)

He goes on to suggest that it is important not to forget the national in (trans)nationalism. National formations of space have significance in people’s imaginaries, but also have real power to prohibit us and to enact restrictions on people’s lives, for example with immigration policies shifting to prevent migrants obtaining visas. Erasing the significance of “the nation,” Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) argue, is incorrect for understanding and using the concept of transnationalism. (Trans)nationalism continues to encapsulate notions of *nationalism*, that is to say belonging/s which do *not* cross national barriers and boundaries, but rather remain tightly connected with affiliations to the nation state in their conceptualizations. In this way theories of “transnationalism” dismantle and then rebuild the concept of the nation state. Transnationalism is not *post*-nationalism; it does not suggest that we can think in terms above and beyond the national, or that “the nation” is a past issue for children’s sense of who they are. Whilst it is outside the scope of this paper, minority children’s meaning-making of the nation state would warrant

further investigation, especially in the UK in light of recent debates on Scottish independence, and also in wider geopolitical contexts, such as the war in Syria.

In terms of critiquing transnationalism in other quarters, feminist psychologists such as (Upegui-Hernández, 2011) argue the role of women in the transnational social field has been neglected by researchers within her own field of psychology, but also more generally. By exploring transnationalism through the lens of gender, she argues that we can “uncover the capacity for resistance, solidarity, and collective action of women across borders” (p. 8). She also suggests that some of the tools psychology as a discipline has to offer are useful to enframe how women are vulnerable and shaped by gender inequality in what she calls the “migration circuit” (p. 1). There is also a call for intersectional transnational studies from within feminist and gender studies, which would emphasize the relationality of transnational subjects such as child/adult and man/-woman to one another, rather than seeing each as separate units of study (Erel, 2012).

Having considered the theory on transnationalism and its critique, this section explores the literature on transnationalism and children, in order to position the research in this paper in relation to such debates. Work on children’s migrant experiences such as that by King, Christou, and Teerling (2009) and Morrice (2011) is on the increase. Both explore children’s transnational experiences. Gardner (2012) argues for the need to bring to the fore:

issues concerning familiar practices [...] and the importance of the life course and of generation, and the role of feelings in creating changing transgenerational relationships and imaginaries. (p. 1159)

in studying children and transnationalism. The way in which Gardner suggests *feelings* underpin part of children’s transnational belongings is key. Little or none of the work on transnationalism and affect, which engages directly in the study of emotion, however, looks at children’s experiences (Anderson, 2014; Chouliaraki, 2014; Donnell, 2014; Puar, 2014); still fewer consult children on their conceptualizations of transnationalism and their relationship to it as part of their identities.

The issue of transnationalism and children was explored in a 2011 special issue of *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* on the topic. There, authors such as Crawley (2011), and Eastmond and Ascher (2011) explore the issue of transnational childhoods from the point of view of asylum seekers. The emphasis is on both the transitory and the transitioning status of the children involved, but also the traumatic qualities of this experience. Similarly, Doná and Veale (Doná & Veale, 2011) and Mai (2011) explore the vulnerable child, positioned through trajectories of forced migration. Mai’s work (2011) focuses upon the body of the child, as it concerns children working in the sex industry, where children gain money with their bodies through sex work.

What is distinctive about the data presented in this article is that they explore the everyday experiences of children settled in transnational spaces: transnationalism as part of childhood/s then becomes ordinary. The data consider the interplay of transnationalism; migration, movement, disruption and perhaps a disrupted education, with “schooling as usual” (Davies, 1993, p. 167); schooling which is fixed by national boundaries and policies. The children in this research are engaged in the everyday schooling process of reading and learning to read. For some, learning to read English picture books means learning to read in a foreign language. This paper seeks to contribute new knowledge to work such as White, Ní Laoire, Tyrrell, and Carpena-Méndez’s (2011) which argues understandings of transnational childhoods are “rooted in

hegemonic western assumptions about constructions of childhood, family and migration in general” (p. 1159). They go on to argue that “migrant children are positioned as needy and different. Accounts of their selves are silenced through adultist discourses about migration and decision making” (p. 1159). This paper seeks to reposition children as agentic through listening to what they have to say.

White et al. (2011) cite Bushin (2009) to argue:

family migration research in general tends to overlook children’s experiences [...] however, other research suggests that, when migrant children do return to their country of origin, this is often constructed by the parents as being for the benefit of the children. (White et al., 2011, p. 1255)

We gain a sense then that children are silent forces in making decisions about migration. Without consulting them on their opinions, it is impossible to say what they make of such issues. This is not to see children as a “bounded tribe” (Zeitlyn & Mand, 2012, p. 987) or to exoticize them (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998) but rather to allow that they may perceive issues involved in their own transnationalism in different ways to adults. Having looked at the theory and some critiques of transnationalism, the following section is on methodology and the approach taken in this research.

Methodology and approach

One of the core aims of this research was to promote pupil voice. Before exploring the methodology used in the research, it is useful to frame it against the debate on children’s voices. Whilst the notion of including children’s voice/s in research which is concerned with aspects of their lives has become taken for granted in some disciplines such as the Sociology of Childhood, (Christensen, 2004; Danby & Baker, 1998; James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2004), this is not the case in all academic areas. Further, the notion of children’s voice itself is not unproblematic. Komulainen, from within debates in the Sociology of Childhood, critiques the notion of “children’s voice,” cautioning us to see it “as socially constructed and therefore it is important we deconstruct it” (Komulainen, 2007, p. 18). She argues that children’s voice itself ought to be an object of inquiry, and that ultimately, the concept of “voices” in the plural is more useful. Otherwise a so-called “child centered” discourse often results in an “individualistic status of the voice of the individual child,” (Komulainen, 2007, p. 19) which in fact results in “their” voices remaining unheard. Spyrou (2011) points out that even if there are difficulties with recording and consulting children’s voice/s, it is still a worthwhile object of research as a way to include children’s perspectives.

The research design used in this project aimed to be participative. The research took place in a central London school with the pseudonym “Three Chimneys.” All children were interviewed twice, along with participant observation throughout the research and the completion of picture diaries. The sample contained 58 children with a roughly equal gender mix, half from the older age group (10–11 years old) and half from the younger age group (aged 6–7). The children had a mix of academic abilities, and came from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. There was no one majority group, though the largest was of children from south Asian heritage families. There were also children from Kosovo, Angola, and Afghanistan. Given this, it is not surprising that there was a much higher than average number of children with English as an additional language (98%). Whilst the children identified with a wide range of

nationalities, something which unified many was their Muslim identity. Around three-quarters described themselves as Muslim. The children's ethnicities are self-described.

The data generated in the picture diaries is outside the scope of this article; it draws instead on interview data. In terms of ethics and the procedures that were part of the interview process, as all the children were under 16 years old, the ultimate decision over whether the children could participate in interviews was made by parents or carers. It was, however, down to the individual child to decide if they would assent to taking part in the research. Children were given an information sheet which explained what the project involved, and that they were able to withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason. In reality, in the highly rule bound space of the school, with strong sanctions for disobeying adult requests, children did not withdraw from interviews. Interviews took place in the school library. The children chose a friend to be interviewed with, and then, sitting round a coffee table, selected one of several books on the table to read. The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder. The interviews took place with two children who were peers. As Renold (2005) argues, this creates a relaxed and convivial environment for children to speak in. I found similarly that by allowing children to choose their interview partners, an atmosphere where it was possible to speak openly was forged. Other work on transnational childhoods such as Zeitlyn and Mand's (2012) argues for a careful consideration of the methodologies used in researching transnational childhoods; whilst there is a need to *adapt* methods for use with children, my paper argues for the use of well-established qualitative methods of interviewing children as a way of engaging them around the topic of their transnational identities.

The rationale for the books selected was that they had won awards such as the Sunday Times Children's books award; they had, therefore been voted "best" examples of picture books. The books depicted characters from a range of ethnicities in respectful, everyday contexts, such as doing the washing up, sharing a meal, or going for a walk. All the data in this paper relate to a wordless picture book, *Mirror* (Baker, 2010) by Jeanie Baker. It represents two parallel "days in the life" of families in Morocco and Australia respectively. I understand that it was the evocation of an/other Arabic place, through Arabic text in the book, which led to talk about transnational understandings of belonging, since such conversations did not emerge in talk about other books, in class, or in the playground. The first theme which is explored in relation to this book is evocations of "my country" by the children. The children referred directly to their own lived experiences, and articulated a range of preoccupations which I argue hold important implications for identity and selfhood, for the play of agency, and for our understandings of such children in terms of their transnational belongings.

Data analysis

"My country": Definitions

The sheer frequency with which the phrase "my country" was uttered in interviews warranted further exploration. It suggests that for the children this was an important concept. It is useful to gain a sense of what the children understood "my country" to mean. Place and belonging were run together initially:

Sabeen (Bangladeshi, 6): Bangladesh is my country because my mum was born there. That's what makes it your country.

Sabeen clearly indicates that it is your mother's birthplace that makes a location your "country"; it is through the maternal line that you inherit the belonging, and also possession of "my" country. Akoji then spoke of different places that she hailed from, and belonged to, which encompassed both "here" and "away":

- Akoji
(Saudi Arabian/
Sudanese, 7): I come from three countries.
Interviewer: What's your three countries that you come from?
Akoji: Saudi Arabia, Sudan and England. My dad is from Saudi Arabia, my mum from Sudan, I was born in England.

Akoji's sense of belonging was multiple, but she had within that multiplicity a distinct sense of belonging to England. The children's oral histories such as this one conveyed a transgenerational sense of belonging; what was their parents' was also theirs to story. This multilocational sense of familiar space was stable and clear for Sabeen and Akoji.

As Sabeen only talked about Bangladesh being her mother's birthplace, I was unclear about whether she was born outside the UK and sometime later migrated, or was born in the UK. In subsequent conversations with Sabeen, she told me she too was born in England. Sabeen had a sense of connection to multiple places. In the case of Bangladesh, she had personal experiences of visiting there which gave her her own connection to the country, as well as one through her mother. Having considered the children's definitions of "my country," in the next section children's meaning-making of faith and prayer practices are explored.

Faith and place

In the following data we gain a sense of two aspects of the children's Muslim identity and belonging to the wider Muslim community: learning Arabic through Qur'anic classes in a Madrasa (a school for Islamic instruction), and knowledge of religious practices in transnational contexts, where children in particular talk about attending the mosque in London and in their home countries. To begin with, an excerpt from Sanaa's interview illustrates the children's excitement about engaging with a book containing Arabic text:

- Sanaa
(Lebanese, 7): Arabic! I learn Arabic [*pointing to the text on the spine of the book Mirror*].
Interviewer: How come you know that, do you read Arabic books at home?
Sanaa: I go to the Madrasa, Saturdays.
Interviewer: What do you do there?
Sanaa: Learn Arabic, learn to read and write the letters. I go and Roxanne, and Shada, Zoe and Leyla, Akoji, and Aaliyah comes too. Ben and Amir go another class [*naming other children in her class*].
Interviewer: What sorts of thing do you do?
Sanaa: We learn the Qur'an. If you talk you go out of the room, outside, and you have to put up your hand for a question, start reading again if you make a mistake.

We learn from this excerpt that Sanaa attended Madrasa, as did a significant number of children in her class, something which they confirmed. Other Muslim children talked about attending different Madrasas in London, where they also learnt Arabic and

eventually began to read the Qur'an. Sanaa's reference to "starting again" is concerned with the requirement to recite passages of the Qur'an "correctly": without error. It is seen as necessary, for jointly pedagogical and spiritual reasons, that if a mistake is made, the reader must begin reading the page again from the beginning, not midway where they left off (Gregory et al., 2012). This is different from mainstream school literacy practices, where teachers see going back to the start of the page as a waste of time, so the children had to navigate between different pedagogical expectations and language competencies in different educational settings.

As a facet of their transnational identities, Arabic was often only one of the languages other than English the children spoke. For example, Sabeen spoke Sylheti, a language spoken in a region of Bangladesh with no written form with her family, English at school, and Arabic at the Madrasa, making her trilingual. Learning Arabic gave the children both an affective and a practical connection with their sense of "my country," and created invisible transnational threads around the world with other Muslims who all studied the same holy text and spoke the religious language of instruction: Arabic. Speaking Arabic, and other home languages such as Sylheti, also enabled children to communicate with relatives whom they visited or who visited them, or whom they spoke to on the phone or through Skype.

In Tamvia and Jessica's interview, another faith practice, prayer, connected the transnational "Umma," or wider Muslim community, as the girls found that wherever the practice occurred, it took the same form. Tamvia identified a woman in an illustration as engaged in prayer. Jessica began to talk about her experience of visiting a mosque with her grandfather in the diasporic space of Kosovo, but Tamvia was so keen to show her faith knowledge that she interrupted, and a description of prayer emerged:

Interviewer: How about you Jessica have you seen people pray?

Jessica

(Kosovan, 11): Yes, in Kosovo my grandpa took me to the mosque-

Tamvia

(Bangladeshi, 7): *[Interrupts]* I know how you start.

Interviewer: *[To Tamvia]* How do you start?

Tamvia: You need to do, umm, you need to wash yourself. Then you get the Namaz put it out in front you, *[stands up]* and then you stand up, and then you do this *[crosses her hands in front of her chest]* and then you do that *[puts her fingertips together, palms facing her chest]*. Men do that *[does a different configuration where her hands are crossed over her chest]* and ladies do that *[with her hands in front of her chest, fingertips touching as she showed me initially]*.

Interviewer: And why do ladies do that?

Tamvia: Because *[pause]* men do it a different way, and ladies do it a different way, and when they, because when they stand up the men do that *[shows me the crossed over hands]* and the ladies do that *[puts her fingertips together]*.

Jessica: Yeah, it's the same here, and in Kosovo.

Tamvia gives a detailed verbal description of the process of prayer. She also makes a physical performance, where creating visual symbols with hands and fingertips is crucial, and is differentiated by gender. Tamvia suggests that to "know" what to do creates a sense of belonging to the Muslim faith that transcends space – whether in Bangladesh or London. Jessica affirms it is the same in her transnational family, both in London and in Kosovo. Embodiment, which I argue is a key aspect of data generated here, was

crucial in the excerpt above. Words alone do not explain the practices Tamvia was articulating, her understanding of them, or her performance of prayer in the interview.

Other children talked about prayer too, and what emerged was further commonality of experience across different geographical locations. Looking at the same illustration, Akoji reflected:

- Akoji
(Saudi Arabian/
Sudanese, 7): In my country, Saudi Arabia, everyone prays, everyone does this [*pointing at the woman praying on a prayer mat*] you have to make sure you pray every single day, five times-
- Sabeen
(Bangladeshi, 7): [*Interrupting*] Five times each day.
- Akoji: And you read the Qur'an.
- Sabeen: Yes, in my country Bangladesh people go to the mosque.

Location, whether it is Saudi Arabia or Bangladesh, is important in these narratives of prayer and faith practices, in terms of the familial connections the children have with them, but it is also significant that there are connections between these practices which cross languages, cultures, and time zones. Both girls talk here about a daily ritual which binds the Umma across transnational space. There is, as part of the girls' connection with the Umma, a potential tension between identifying with, and having loyalty to national identity as opposed to their emerging sense of a supra-national identity as part of the wider Muslim community. I believe that in the same way as the children simultaneously occupy the category of British and Bangladeshi, for example, so too they occupy the category of "Muslim." The children see themselves as "Muslim" as their religious identity, at the same time as owning, or inhabiting one or more national identities. For example, the royal wedding between Prince William and Kate Middleton took place during the research. The children, who were given the day off school for the wedding, and who celebrated the wedding in school with a "royal" themed tea party identified "our" queen and "our" prince and princess as part of their British identities. This neither competed with nor contradicted the other aspects of their sense of who they were: British Muslims with transnational family. The adoption of multiple identities is evidence of the children's ability to negotiate more than one identity fluidly. Unlike the Somali heritage of young people in Valentine and Sporton's (2009) study, whose Muslim identity trumped "being" either British or Somali, I believe the children in this study do not seek to occupy only one category of religious and/or national identity as a way of forming their identities.

Significantly, the issue of religion did not arise in the conversations I had with children from non-Muslim backgrounds, who formed around one quarter of the sample. These children came from Christian, non-religious, or Hindu backgrounds. This would suggest it was particularly the book *Mirror*, with its depictions of Muslim faith, that evoked conversations about religion: a woman in hijab praying in one illustration, prayer mats, a mosque and minarets on the skyline in another, which summoned the children's talk about Muslim faith. Had a book including images of churches or temples been included in the research, perhaps children from other faith backgrounds would have discussed their own religious practices and beliefs. Many of the children in the sample who were non-Muslim also had family living abroad and experienced transnational childhoods. The two white British children did not speak of holidays that they had been on in the context of looking at the picture of an aeroplane in *Mirror*. Children

who were from non-British families but were also non-Muslim, however, looked at pictures of different localities and began to speak of “my country,” which ranged from Malaysia to Eritrea. Having considered the children’s talk about language, faith, and nation, and their role in transnational belonging, we now consider the children’s narratives of migration from what they referred to as “my country.”

Narratives of migration from “my country”

For many children, the story of family migration took meaning for them specifically

through that; it was *story* rather than lived experience. This is not to suggest such stories lacked potency or impact. Angelica, however, had experienced migration first hand, as part of her own transnational movement. She left Kabul with her family when she was younger. Volatility and danger are almost, but not quite, absent in her remembrances as she talks of people’s daily practices. We were looking at an illustration of a desert plain with some small shacks dotted around its edges in the book *Mirror*, which provoked a memory for her:

- Angelica
(Afghani, 11): Mmm, that reminds me of Afghanistan.
Interviewer: What is it about it that reminds you of Afghanistan?
Angelica: Um, because you know most people, they dig a hole in the ground, they make a fire and then they cook their bread on it.
Interviewer: Ah wow!
Angelica: Mostly it’s in those little cliffs, and there are houses like that [*points at the houses*].
Interviewer: Yes.
Angelica: For some poor people, but there are some real houses in, um the capital. Yeah, that’s what reminds me.
Interviewer: And do the buildings look a bit like that?
Angelica: Um, no actually, there are some buildings that are normal, like our buildings, in the capital, Kabul, but in some parts of Afghanistan where there are lots of war they actually live- they have to move to other places, to like keep safe.

Angelica paints a picture of life in Afghanistan through a locally specific way of cooking bread by digging a hole. She also articulates a poverty of a sort which is more absolute than that found in London: people live in caves. She differentiates this rural poverty from people who live in the city in “real houses”; she later talked about how the people who lived in the caves were the poorest, too poor to seek or afford alternative dwellings. Her notion of poverty is relational, and is co-produced against her knowledge of London dwellings.

Angelica refers to buildings in London as “normal” and “ours,” posed against the caves and desert terrain depicted in the book. It is also useful to point out the way in which both the book and also the questions I asked summoned the topic of place, and brought into the room notions of other places, of identity and belonging. Whether Angelica had adopted a western aesthetic, or assumed that the white female adult researcher she was talking to would find such buildings “normal” and would have this frame of reference is equally plausible. Angelica articulates stories of internal migration due to war: “they have to move to other places, to like keep safe.”

Immediately after this, Shada discussed why she lived in England, not “my country,” which was part of her own transnational belonging. She evoked Lebanon through imagery of dangerous threats there:

- Shada
(Lebanese, 7): Few people went there [*pointing at the houses in the picture*] in Lebanon, they're bad.
Interviewer: They're- what sorry?
Shada: They're bad.
Interviewer: Why are they bad?
Shada: They um, few times they kill the people, in Lebanon.
Interviewer: Really?
Shada: So that is why I live in that [this] country [pause] because they want to take Lebanon's place, because it is a really nice place, and they just [...] a few times they, there's fire in Lebanon.

Shada had a sense of different rival groups vying for soil and territory; she combined pride about her country with recognition that there are people in it who are “bad,” who wanted her country as “it is a really nice place” but which is nonetheless in a bad predicament at present. She holds these contradictions as part of her knowledge about her “place.” Later in the conversation she told me:

- Shada: In Lebanon there's no buildings, as if there's big buildings where people work, few of the baddies will knock them down.

Shada's perception and vocalization of the armed conflict in Lebanon is clear. The threat is to people's lives, buildings, and daily life – people cannot go to work for fear of the building being burned down. This dramatic picture encircles her family's departure from Lebanon and her story. Having explored the data the children constructed about their transnational identities, the implications of this for social work are now considered.

Implications for social work

There is a diverse range of implications for social work from the data generated in this research. A key implication is to reposition the transnational child as worth listening to directly, since social work research such as Healy's (2008) positions transnational children as voiceless, traumatized, and unagentic. She suggests: “transnationalism may ameliorate the trauma of family separation and reunification as family members maintain closer contact with their relatives abroad” (p. 290), without consulting such children about their experiences. The focus in international social work literature is for example on supporting migrant children who have experienced forced migration. Doná and Veale (2011) point out that there is a “widespread tendency amongst researchers to make sense of children's experiences of displacement and involuntary migration through the apolitical prism of psychological concepts such as trauma and mental health and psycho-social needs” (p. 1282). This neatly sums up the general approach taken toward children in transnational social work, and also reflects the need for much a better understanding of the complex experiences of the children involved in this research. Being agentic as a child might not necessarily mean being able to take control of their own material circumstances, such as for example moving to a new place, in search of better work in a constantly shifting transnational economic climate, as an adult might. Agency for children might be displayed in arenas where they are able to act, such as storying

themselves, or “getting on” in a new country. Goldring (1998) argues that exploring “the agency of collectives” (p. 288) and children’s agency, as part of a family unit, or a group of children, might be a way to address this. Both through these data, and through theory from the Sociology of Childhood, a more child centred social work could be arrived at. Such social work practice could focus upon children’s social competence and their agency, alongside children’s rights which are already a core focus of such practice.

As Furman, Negi, and Salvador (2010) point out, transnational social work has been concerned with organizational systems which cross more than one state or modes of analyzing and framing practice with transnational populations (Negi & Furman, 2013). Furman, Kaufmann, and Ackerman (2012) have considered the ways in which, in a European context, the role of transnational support systems have clear repercussions for international, or global, social work. An implication of the current paper then is to look at what we can learn from *settled* transnational children, rather than those which King and Christou (2011) refer to as “floating,” in order to instead look at how transnationalism can be part of the everyday fabric of children’s lives.

One of the understandings of transnationalism – that people’s identities cross national boundaries – could enable cases to be shared across national borders, and for broader shared agendas to exist for a “refocusing on the core values of social work as concerned with human rights and social justice” (Lyons & Lyons, 1999, p. 163). Healy (2008) discusses the need for “professional action that will require new knowledge and new attitudes” (p. 163), knowledge which, I would argue, is the sort to come out of this research. Social workers could think about ways of consulting children as part of families in order to take account of their opinions, for example about housing, care, and education, rather than simply positioning them as in need of protection and considering their best interests without explicitly promoting their voice/s.

Whilst this research worked with many children for whom social services were a part of their lives, this was not something they discussed in interviews. Reports such as that by the NCB (2012) on children’s participation suggest children find the process of being interviewed therapeutic. We could see the children in this research working through and working out their subjectivities – transnational or otherwise – as a therapeutic process in dialog with one another; an implication for social work practice then is that creating support networks for transnational children, where they can talk with other families and children who share their experiences, could be a positive area to develop.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has considered minority children’s understandings of transnationalism through lived experience or family stories of migration. Having explored the methodology used in the research, the paper focused on data around aspects of transnational identity. We saw the way in which children’s own stories were mapped onto multicultural picture books which depicted different localities, and how these acted as a springboard for eliciting conversations about the children’s sense of places they had affinities with or had migrated from. Through a discussion of the data on learning Arabic, a clear understanding of the significance of identifying as Muslim for many of the children and its role for bringing them together in the “Umma” was explored. This togetherness was enacted through attending community language schools, and embodied through prayer. The significance of such multi-placed senses of home was considerable and important for children’s formations of their transnational subjectivities.

In terms of the implications of this research for social work, we saw the way in which it was necessary to problematize children's voice, and to start from where they are at in order to position them as knowers of their own worlds and experiences, so that notions of their social competence are put into practice rather than remain cloistered in theory. Starting where children are at means ascertaining what they know, understand, and what is significant to them. This can be accomplished through consulting them. In terms of reflections on transnational social work and children's identities, if transnational social work is about providing up-to-date knowledge of people across national boundaries, effective social work in transnational social spaces might mean sharing information about those children, especially if they are abused, unaccompanied, or at risk. Transnational social work practice should be about facilitating communication and learning which can inform both the "here" and the "there," irrespective of national borders. Though this potentially presents a deficient model of the vulnerable child, and might not be the sort of intervention required for the children in this research, nonetheless the need for such networks of support are key as a safety net for all children. We see the relevance of involving children in the processes of research or consultation, in which their lives and experiences are involved, for the data indicate they are able to be reflective if given the opportunity to be listened to seriously, and that it is through such conversations that they are negotiating their sense of who they are as gendered, ethnicized, and transnational subjects.

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