Second Language Maintenance Amongst Sojourner Saudi Families After Returning to Their Home Country

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Abstract

This study explores the language planning efforts for English language maintenance employed by sojourning Saudi families after returning to their home country. The study concludes that the importance of English in the development of different sectors in Saudi Arabia and the advantages of bilingualism in economic, health, and cognitive aspects for children played a significant role in the families' language planning decisions. The study showed that the mothers maintained and developed their children's English through following planned language strategies. A focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews illustrated that the mothers used four main strategies, which are speaking English exclusively at home, watching English television shows, maintaining relationships with English native speakers, and playing online educational games in English. The findings of this research study contribute to achieving understanding of sojourner families' L2 maintenance efforts after returning to their home countries when those are monolingual countries such as Saudi Arabia. The study close with recommendations for future research to further develop this field of research.

Keywords: second language maintenance, bilingualism, family language policy, sojourners, language planning strategies

1. Introduction

'I was so happy because I had given my children a precious gift. However, I feel sorrow these days when I see this

gift being gradually lost.'

These words were spoken by a mother, Noura, while complaining at a dinner party that her happiness at raising bilingual children had been dimmed since they returned to their home country, Saudi Arabia, as she had watched her children gradually lose their language skills. Previously, Noura and her children lived as sojourners in Australia for eight years, where she travelled to study when her eldest child was two years old. During their stay, her children learned to speak English alongside their first language, Arabic. According to Noura, she was careful that her children spoke English fluently while also keeping their first language, as she saw that bilingualism would benefit them in their future by giving them an advantage over their monolingual peers. However, after nine months back in Saudi Arabia, she had begun to observe her children lose their second language of English, which is rarely spoken in the monolingual Arabic-speaking Saudi society.

It is commonplace for parents to wish to raise a bilingual child, which many perceive as good parenting and offering the child an advantage (King & Fogle, 2006), an idea supported by studies that have related bilingualism to social and economic advantages (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Sims & Ellis, 2014). Furthermore, bilingualism has been found to raise children's self-confidence, self-esteem, and intercultural communicative competence (King & Mackey, 2007; Mehisto & Marsch, 2011), along with their metalinguistic awareness and cognitive abilities (Mehisto & Marsch, 2011).

When they are socially shared, attitudes and beliefs towards a certain language and its use are referred to as 'language ideologies' (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193), and those affect parents' beliefs and attitudes regarding bilingual child-rearing. This can be clearly observed in Noura's wish for her children to speak English as a second language. English holds an important status as the language of globalisation, and it is considered an important factor in the success of international economic relations (Al-Zahrani & Rajab, 2017). Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, there is a socially shared belief that learning English is a positive given its importance for career entry into various development sectors in the country (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Furthermore, the importance of learning English increased with the announcement of Vision 2030 by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2016, which aims to improve and reform different sectors in the country (Yusuf & Atassi, 2016). Thus, Noura's positive beliefs and attitudes towards bilingual child-rearing reflect beliefs prevalent in Saudi society regarding bilingualism with valorisation of English as the second language.

Parents' decisions regarding raising their children bilingually are impacted by social contexts and mediated through language practices that stem from their ideologies regarding language (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). These language practices, and the planning and efforts that go into maintaining a language, are known as family language policy (FLP; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008). In the literature, compared to other minority groups, little research has so far considered sojourning groups, and few studies have examined FLPs for first-language maintenance among sojourning families living in English-speaking countries. Examples of the studies to date include those by Bahhari (2020) and Yousef (2022) in the Saudi context, Langager (2010) and Yoshimitsu (1999) in the Japanese context, and Moon

(2011) in the Korean context. No studies yet explore FLPs for host language (L2 maintenance) among sojourning families after returning to their home country, whether in the Saudi context or another. Against that literature background, this study aims to explore the English maintenance experiences, ideologies, and planning efforts of sojourning Saudi families after returning to Saudi Arabia, inspired by Noura's experience of her childern's L2 loss after returning to their home country.

2. Family Language Policy, Sojourners, and Bilingual Parenting

Sojourning families are ones that move to live in a new society for purposes such as work or study. Unlike migrants, who move with the intention of permanent residency, sojourners often stay in the new society for a few years but with the intention of returning to their home country (Bahhari, 2020). When compared with other minority groups, a literature search reveals that lesser attention has been paid to researching sojourning groups in terms of FLPs, including family ideologies, family beliefs about language use, and families' daily actions and efforts to learn/maintain language (King et al., 2008). In a study that examined the role of FLPs among Japanese families sojourning in an English-speaking country, Langager (2010) found three degrees of language effort made by parents: parents work hard to raise their children bilingually by maintaining their children's home language (L1) and also encouraging them to learn the dominant language spoken by others (English); parents encourage their children to learn the dominant language, with little effort put into L1 maintenance; or parents encourage their children to acquire basic knowledge of the two languages for the purpose of passing exams. Similarly, Moon (2011) examined language maintenance experiences among Korean families sojourning in an English-speaking country. They found parents held positive beliefs towards bilingual parenting and parental practices to maintain Korean as the heritage language while acquiring English as the host-country language. Another finding was that a long stay as sojourners in the host country reinforced children's proficiency in the host language, as well as family practices to improve the children's L1 proficiency. Meanwhile, the language practices of short-term sojourning families differed. Yoshimitsu (1999) examined Japanese people's L1 maintenance efforts while living in Australia, finding that sojourners worked hard to maintain their children's Japanese, whereas few migrants made sufficient effort to ensure their children retained Japanese. In the Saudi context, Bahhari (2020) examined the FLPs of Saudi families sojourning in Australia, finding that families worked hard to maintain Arabic as the children's first language. They did so because Arabic maintenance is important for religious practice as well as for reintegration into school when returning to their home country. In sum, the studies to date illustrate that sojourner families engage in extensive actions and efforts to maintain the children's L1 oral skills.

In the four studies mentioned above, sojourner parents living in English-speaking countries played an important role in their children's heritage language maintenance, which is an important part of bilingual parenting (King & Fogle, 2013; Kopeliovich, 2013). Parents in these studies were keen to follow the 'minority language at home' method (Caldas, 2006; Grosjean, 2010), while their children acquired English as a second language outside of the home. The sojourner parents reported feeling a great pressure to maintain their children's L1 as it would be the language of their future social interactions and education once they returned to their home country, as well as the language they would likely need in their adult life and work.

However, the literature search did not show up any studies conducted on sojourner families' L2 maintenance efforts after returning to their home countries when those were monolingual countries such as Saudi Arabia. This represents a pressing research gap given that many today believe bilingualism affords people an advantage and given that research has shown bilingual individuals outperform monolingual individuals (Piller & Gerber, 2021). The notion of the 'bilingual advantage', which has been widely disseminated, is that it affords a person economic, cognitive, and health and personal benefits (King & Mackey, 2007). Accordingly, the bilingual advantage has become a powerful language ideology affecting FLPs. However, living as a bilingual individual but then moving to a monolingual country, as occurs for many sojourner families, threatens the maintenance of that bilingual advantage. When returning to the monolingual home country, sojourner parents may face challenges in maintaining their children's L2 and thus sustaining the bilingual advantage for their children. Thus, there is a need to explore the FLPs of sojourner families seeking to maintain children's bilingualism in this situation.

3. The Status of English in Saudi Arabia

English enjoys an important status in Saudi Arabia. In development sectors including the economic, religious, and social sectors, it acts as the lingua franca and thus plays an important role (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Furthermore, due to its relevance for globalisation, English is taught as a compulsory subject in Saudi education from the early years. In fact, it is the only foreign language taught in the country.

Previously, English was seen as controversial when it was first introduced to the country. Saudi conservatives considered it a threat to Saudi society in terms of its negative effect on Islam and Islamic culture, which Saudi society values highly and devotes efforts to preserve (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). However, this view of English gradually fell away after the reforms to the education system carried out by the Saudi government. Those were implemented following 11 September 2001 since 15 of the 19 known 9/11 hijackers were Saudi nationals (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). The Saudi government sought to encourage a new tolerance and promote positive attitudes towards the English language and Western cultures, which would be achieved through English teaching and learning (Elyas, 2011). The reforms included the introduction of English as a compulsory subject in primary school (previously, it was only taught to Saudi students in middle and high school; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). In addition, English classes in middle and high school were boosted from four sessions per week to ten (Elyas & Picard, 2019). Moreover, a large scholarship programme was launched by the Saudi government for its citizens to study in English-speaking countries to improve their English language skills and learn about other cultures. According to statistics provided by the Saudi Ministry of Education, around 87,000 Saudi students secured scholarships in this way to pursue their

studies in English-speaking countries, and while doing so, learn to speak English effectively (Bahhari, 2020). The scholarships were offered to both single and married students, and for the latter, their families were included in the relocation arrangements.

Today, the Saudi government gives great importance to English. Vision 2030, a strategic plan for economic and social development, was announced in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (Yusuf, 2017). This has boosted Saudi citizens' motivation to learn English since proficiency in the language is linked to certain benefits and economic opportunities available for Saudi people (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Habbash, 2011).

Nonetheless, many Saudi students still graduate from high schools with low English competence (Rajab, 2013), and a number of studies have been conducted to identify the reasons. Some found that English teachers do not provide students with adequate encouragement to learn English and that some allow them to use their L1 in English classes (e.g. Alhawsawi, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009). Others, meanwhile, noted a lack of English practice outside the classroom in the largely monolingual Arabic-speaking Saudi society (e.g. Alharbi, 2015; Alqahtani, 2019; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Accordingly, most Saudi people with high English proficiency are those who live as sojourners in English-speaking countries, as they study in the institutions of these countries and practice English with others, including native speakers, in social environments (Bahhari, 2020; Yousef, 2022). In that context, this study examines the efforts Saudi sojourners make to maintain their children's English proficiency after studying abroad and then returning to Saudi Arabia, where learning English is considered important but there is no affective environment to support its learning. The emphasis is on examining their FLPs employed in this situation. Thus, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature by making a first contribution on this specific topic, answering the following research question:

1. To what extent and through what practices do Saudi sojourners maintain their children's English after returning to their home country?

4. Methods

4.1 Participants

Four Saudi families with elementary-school-aged children who had previously lived as sojourners in English-speaking countries, namely Australia, the USA, and the UK, participated in this study. They had each sojourned for eight to nine years, and they had children studying at different grades of elementary school, some of whom were born during the overseas sojourn. These families are part of my social circle, and through seeing them socially, I had noted how sojourning families can struggle after returning to their monolingual home country, and how parents often make efforts to keep up their children's bilingualism with English given its economic and academic value. The parents in these families often expressed concerns that English was difficult to maintain in Saudi Arabia, and they confided in me that this caused them great worry as parents. The participants in this study were the mothers of the four families: Nouf, Sara, Renad, and Reem (pseudonyms). They were chosen to participate in order to accommodate Saudi cultural norms as it is difficult for a female researcher to directly contact unrelated men. In addition, mothers in Saudi culture spend the most time with their children and largely look after them at home, with fathers taking a supporting role. As such, mothers make the most effort to develop their children's bilingualism.

4.2 Data Collection

The data were collected using mixed methods: a questionnaire, a focus group discussion, and semi-structured interviews. In the first phase, the mothers completed a questionnaire through which I obtained general information about their children, as illustrated in Table 1. All the mothers had moved to a host country between 2013 and 2014 and returned to Saudi Arabia in 2022. They had moved overseas for the purpose of studying, having all secured scholarships to pursue postgraduate studies abroad. All the mothers returned to Saudi Arabia with a PhD degree. They are proficient in English having all attained a bachelor's degree with an English major and having all enrolled on English courses in the host country before starting their postgraduate studies. In the second phase of the study, a one-hour focus group discussion was arranged where the mothers answered questions regarding language beliefs and language planning strategies for English maintenance and raising bilingual (Arabic and English) children. Then, in the third phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the mothers to gain specific information about the strategies they each used. This study concentrates on the language strategies used by mothers that contribute to the development of their children's bilingualism.

Table 1. Participants' information

	Nouf	Sara	Renad	Reem
Country of sojourn	USA	UK	Australia	Australia
Years of residency in host country	9	8	8	8
Number of children	3	2	2	3
Ages of children at time of study	10, 9, 6	9,7	10, 7	10, 8, 6
Education level	PhD	PhD	PhD	PhD
Language used with children	Mix of Arabic and			
	English	English	English	English

5. Results

5.1 Minority Language at Home

Speaking the minority language to their children at home is a popular strategy used by parents to raise bilingual children. Data from this study showed that three mothers adopted this strategy to maintain the bilingualism of their children. Sara was an enthusiastic user of this strategy and noted that her main reason for adopting this method was that her children (aged 9 and 7) spoke Arabic socially and at school

after returning to Saudi Arabia and had no cause to speak English. She believed that using this strategy helped their children to keep up their bilingualism: 'Really. I totally believe that my speaking English at home with my kids is really a good way... English will not be lost.' Reem and Renad agreed, describing how speaking English with their children at home, given that the children had sufficient exposure to Arabic outside their home, was an effective way to support their bilingual children to maintain English. As Renad expressed: 'They hear Arabic mostly outside the home and little or maybe no English'. Thus, English practice at home is important for English maintenance.' Interestingly, this strategy has previously mostly been reported as used by migrant and sojourner families in the host country – in a reverse setup where children hear English (majority language in the host country) spoken outside the home and then only Arabic (minority language in the host country) is spoken when they are home with family – to raise their children bilingually (Bahhari, 2020; Gomaa, 2011; Yousf, 2022).

The mothers commented on the importance of being consistent, despite their belief in the effectiveness and success of this strategy. For example, Reem stressed, 'I only speak English all the time', and Sara and Renad agreed. This agreement indicates that the mothers were strongly aware of the significance of having a language plan to keep up and promote their children's bilingualism (King et al., 2008), which has been described by scholars as an effective approach (King & Mackey, 2007; Piller, 2001). However, the mothers faced challenges in consistently following the 'minority language at home' strategy, especially when in the presence of Arabic-speaking friends. Plus, for this strategy to be effective, it requires that both parents have good English proficiency so that when the mother speaks English in front of their children, the father can understand them without translation or switching to Arabic.

During the focus group meeting, the mothers described a need to be attentive to language choice when talking to their children in front of Arabic-speaking friends. Nonetheless, Renad, Sara, and Reem asserted that they spoke English with their children all the time, even in the presence of Arabic-speaking friends. Sara proposed that this was the best approach to take since her children got sufficient exposure to Arabic at other times: 'I do not pay attention to Arabic as I'm sure that my kids will be able to speak their first language effectively.' She referred to her use of this approach with her children when in the company of Arabic-speaking friends as being positive on balance: 'It might be thought that it is impolite to speak to your kids in English when there are people who do not know English, but using this approach, in fact, helps those people to learn about English and motivates them to practice speaking English with my kids.' Ultimately, the value of using the 'minority language at home' strategy for English maintenance among Saudi sojourning children after returning to their home country was asserted by most of the mothers who participated in this study, with it seen as an effective way to sustain their bilingualism (Hirmer, 2014).

5.2 Television Shows

Watching satellite English television shows was another strategy the mothers described as helping their children to maintain English. Nouf spoke of leaving the TV running with English shows on, even when the family was not especially watching, for background exposure to English: 'I always open the TV on English programs all day. I do not turn it off. I have found this method is very effective as it makes the child listen to English even though they otherwise have no intention to do so.' Renad, meanwhile, described carefully choosing English cartoons that her children would enjoy watching: 'I encourage my kids to watch English cartoons to improve their English. My kids love watching cartoons such as Word Girl, Martha Speaks, and Peppa Pig. I just turn the TV on to these cartoons, and I find my kids come in quickly, sit in front of the TV, and watch. I am sure that this method is effective for improving and maintaining my kids' English.' Moreover, Reem expressed a strong belief in this strategy. She referred to the importance of her children watching culturally appropriate English films, to keep them from losing their English: 'I find Netflix a great source of English films. I am careful to choose the films that are suitable for my kids' ages. I try to watch with them as a way to encourage them to watch. I find my kids are excited to see me watching with him. As a result, watching movies helps my kids to expand their English vocabulary and pick up useful expressions for everyday conversations.' Sare also described the advantage of TV shows for teaching her children about English cultures and accents, regardless of shows' age appropriateness: 'Sometimes, they watch American films for adults with me. Although my kids speak British English due to our sojourning stay in the UK, they now learn about American English and culture... so this really helps.'

In sum, all the mothers who participated in this study were assured of the role TV shows can play in supporting English maintenance by boosting their children's English exposure. It is interesting that there are widespread reports of the use of this strategy by parents to support their children's language maintenance (Shin, 2018; Yousef, 2022). Its popularity may be attributed to the ease of using this method as it does not require a lot of effort on the part of parents. Plus, this method also serves as a source of entertainment. According to Mallett (2010), this strategy is helpful if parents carefully choose shows that are suitable for the children's ages, which is an important consideration in order to see results. In that regard, some of the mothers who participated in this study were aware that they needed to assume the role of TV monitor, choosing shows with content that was appropriate for their children's ages.

5.3 Maintaining Relationships

A highly effective strategy to promote English proficiency that the mothers discussed was maintaining the relationships between their children and their native-speaker friends. They observed that helping their children stay in contact with friends they made in their host country was an effective method of encouraging English practice. Sara talked about this strategy early in the focus group discussion. She described how her children 'speak in English... because they contact their friends they made in the UK'. Reem and Renad agreed with Sara and noted that their children did the same, and Nouf described how her children got to practice English this way on the weekends: 'I encourage my kids to get into a video call with their American friends at least once every weekend. They talk about the good times they

spent together, catch up on each other's lives... This is a great method for improving speaking and listening skills.' The mothers noted that keeping up friendships with the parents of their children's friends and being in contact with them even after returning home helped them to adopt this strategy successfully. Reem, for example, described how this worked: 'When I was in Australia, I made friends with a number of families there who had children the same age as my kids. We used to go out together on weekends and have fun together. After I returned home, I was keen to maintain these friendships. I always communicate with my Australian friends and ask them to allow their children to contact my kids.' According to the mothers, this strategy has advantages as it does not require cost or effort on their part to get their children practicing English, and it is also a pleasant way of learning as their children have a lot of fun when they talk with their old friends.

Keeping in contact with native L2 speakers is an established strategy for language development in the literature. Chen et al. (2014), for example, showed that Chinese parents helped their children establish friendships with native English speakers in the USA to provide their children with opportunities to improve their L2 skills. A significant relationship was shown between the improvement of children's L2 skills and their number of L2 friends, and parental contact with the parents of the native L2 speakers helped mediate the contact between Chinese children and their host-country friends. The findings of the present study are in agreement, as the mothers described their efforts to maintain their relationships with L2 speakers after returning to their home country, which they did partly to mediate and ease the contact between their children and their L2 friends, and accordingly, help improve their children's L2 skills. Similarly, Troesch, Segerer, Claus-Pröstler, Grob (2021) indicated that keeping in contact with L2-speaking children, assisted by parents, has a significant benefit for promoting L2 skills in bilingual children. Perhaps one of the main values of keeping up relationships with L2 speakers and being in contact with them is reinstating the relevance of English as a dominant language outside their home country and an important means of international communication. As Grosjean (2010) emphasised, parents should help their children to be aware of the value and reasons for them learning a minority language, to prevent resistance from their children. In the case of the mothers in the present study, it can be surmised that their efforts to maintain relationships with L2 speakers were part of a language planning strategy to sustain their bilingual children's L2 skills.

5.4 Online Games

There was a consensus among the mothers on the effectiveness of online games for practicing English. They encouraged their children to play online educational games in English at home as a strategy to maintain their English since it offered an added source of English language input. Renad was enthusiastic about this approach:

I have found that using online games is useful in the development of English literacy... After coming back from Australia, I noticed that my children spoke Arabic almost all the time. When I asked them to speak English with me, I noticed that they did not speak English as well as when we were in Australia because of their low practice of English... I was sad at that moment... I had heard about online games and their role in the development of English learning. I asked them to play an online game called *Fun English*... I find this game is useful as my children have a lot of fun and their English skills are developed.

Similarly, Sara referred to the positive role that online educational games play in improving her children's L2 skills: 'My children love playing online games in English... It has made practicing reading and writing English fun for them, which I consider a big achievement.' Reem also asserted the important role of online games in developing her children's English skills, referring to them as bringing about 'positive changes for my children's writing.' Similarly, Nouf agreed with the other mothers on the usefulness of her children playing English educational games: 'My daughter absolutely hates any form of reading; however, online games make her love reading and increase her will to learn'. Nonetheless, the mothers referred to the importance of parents' support and guidance to help children with these games, as well as choosing suitable games for their ages. They also commented that parents should control children's usage of these games. Reem, for example, remarked that she put a weekly cap on gaming time: 'I allow my kids to play 15–20 minutes per day to ensure a total playing time of no more than two hours in a week.'

In sum, the mothers agreed on the effective role that online games played in maintaining and developing English literacy skills among their children, while noting the importance of parental monitoring of the usage of these games. Such games' effectiveness has been confirmed by several studies in the literature, some in terms of literacy learning in the mainstream language (e.g. Eisenchlas, Schalley, & Moyes, 2016; Lyytinen, Ronimus, Alanko, Poikkeus, & Taanila, 2007; van Daal & Reitsma, 2000) and others for foreign language acquisition (e.g. Cruaud, 2018; Kachenga, 2008). However, most previous studies examined the role of online educational games for children in the school environment to supplement classroom activities, or their role for maintaining the first language through self-directed use at home while living abroad (e.g. Eisenchlas et al., 2016). To my knowledge, no study has previously explored the role of online educational games in maintaining and developing English literacy skills through self-directed use by bilingual children when at home in their monolingual (non-English) home country. Thus, the findings of this study provide initial insights into the role played by online games in this situation.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the planning efforts for English language maintenance made by Saudi families who previously lived as sojourners in English-speaking countries and then returned to their home country. As Pillar and Gerber (2021, p. 623) noted, bilingualism is seen as an advantage among many parents and constitutes 'a powerful language ideology in family language policy (FLP) decisions' due to its potential economic, health, and cognitive benefits for their children. Furthermore, English enjoys an important status in Saudi Arabia due

to its important role in the development of different sectors in the country (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Thus, English maintenance among Arabic–English bilingual Saudi children after returning to their monolingual home country is linked to benefits such as improved job opportunities in the future (Chiswick & Miller, 2010; Grosjean, 2010; Pillar & Gerber, 2021). However, while exposure to Arabic is readily available to children in Saudi Arabia, there is a low level of English teaching in Saudi schools (Alhawsawi, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009) and a lack of social opportunities to practice English since Arabic is the language of communication (Alharbi, 2015; Alqahtani, 2019; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Accordingly, the mothers in this study worried about their children losing their English after moving back to Saudi Arabia.

To prevent that, they adopted a number of strategies to help their children maintain and develop their bilingual skills, such as speaking English exclusively at home, watching English television shows, maintaining relationships with native English speakers, and playing online educational games in English. These strategies differed in their effectiveness according to their implementation, but most of the mothers agreed that the 'minority language at home' strategy was the most effective for supporting their children's English maintenance. This adds support to the same finding in previous research among migrant families who used this strategy for home language maintenance after having permanently moved away (e.g. Bahhari, 2020; Baker&Wright 2017; Moustaoui Srhir, 2020; Yousef, 2022). The novel findings reported here show that the same effectiveness can be achieved for L2 maintenance after a sojourner family returns to their home country, and the findings add support for the effectiveness of this strategy for language maintenance in general.

To further develop this field of research, based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that future research efforts should explore the role of online educational games in maintaining and developing English literacy skills through self-directed use by bilingual children at home, which is not yet greatly understood. Furthermore, while the mothers in this study referred to four strategies to maintain and develop bilingual skills among their children, none had enrolled their children in schools where an international curriculum was taught and English was the language of instruction. Thus, further studies should be conducted to gain insight into the popularity of this choice among returning sojourner families and the impact it has on language use and language skills development at home. Moreover, a final suggestion is that future studies should examine the attitudes in Saudi society towards sojourner families after they return to their home country, as well as academic attitudes and how these impact returnee children's education.

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