

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) WITH ASSYRIAN YOUTH



Prepared For

GEOG 404

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report documents the experience of a group of researchers who started a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with the Assyrian Youth community in Wellington. The objective of the project was to identify some important issues and challenges that Assyrian Youth face growing up in New Zealand.

The research team consists of six postgraduate students from Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), an Assyrian youth worker from Evolve, Wellington Youth Centre, and a youth representative of the Wellington Assyrian Association. The main objective for the university students was to gain experience in applying the principles of PAR. This is the first time that such a class has been run at VUW. The main objective for the Assyrian researchers was to use their personal experience to support the youth with the challenges that they face and help them to reach their potential in New Zealand. This project is in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development, supported by Sara Kindon, lecturer of the course GEOG 404 (Young People and Participatory Development), the Changemakers' Refugee Forum and is sponsored by the Somali Council.

While there are a number of Assyrians in Wellington, they have relatively low visibility within the wider community. Some Assyrians have been here nearly their whole lives, and others have arrived recently from a war-torn Iraq. As a whole, the arrival of the Assyrian community is relatively recent, and this increases the importance on researching their issues and needs. Research has never before been conducted specifically on Assyrian Youth. PAR was the method employed to carry out this research.

PAR is a collaborative process between researchers and a community on a project that is designed to benefit the community in some way (Kindon, 2005). Rather than the researcher extracting information for their own purposes, PAR challenges power relations, in order to build a partnership that will be mutually beneficial (Kindon, 2005; McGee, 2002; Slocum & Thomas-Slayter, 1995). Thus, PAR places just as much emphasis on the process as it does on the results, examining how those results came to be, and how representative they are.

On this note PAR is associated with a methodological revolution (McGee, 2002). It looks at using innovative methods to attain information in a way that is appropriate to the context, and engages a wide range of participants. A high degree of participant control over the research design and implementation is considered important because people generally know what is best for them. One of the key justifications for PAR is the fact that it brings out the voices of those usually marginalised. Everyone in the community is included, not just community leaders and elites, and this creates a sense of ownership leading to more sustainable change. It is hoped that the process will create an opportunity for participants to empower themselves and bring about long-term positive changes in their lives (Slocum & Thomas-Slayter, 1995).

The next section describes the specific process and methods that we used with our Assyrian community partners.

2.0 METHODOLOGY/PROCESS

The Project Team developed a methodology based on PAR to achieve the project objectives. This included the following tasks:

2.1 Participatory Planning Sessions

The research team planned the methodology over a series of meetings (11th of August to 21st of September), employing participatory diagramming and ranking techniques to develop and evaluate ideas (See Tables 1-2). Initially, the research team aimed to represent a cross-section of male and female young people and adults of the Assyrian community. However, due to the short timeframe and logistical constraints, only Assyrian boys and one adult Assyrian School Liaison Officer were eventually able to participate in the project. At this point, however, several members of the research team would like the opportunity to pursue further work in the community beyond the Summit for Refugee Health and Wellbeing.

During the planning process, the Assyrian partners shared valuable information on the Assyrian culture and their own experiences as Assyrian youth living in Wellington. The team watched videos on young refugees in New Zealand ("Stamping Grounds") and the history of the Assyrian people ("Assyrian Untold Holocaust"). The postgraduate researchers also conducted a literature review on youth participation which included some information on youth refugees in New Zealand. These efforts helped to provide a better understanding of the research participants, so that the workshops could be organised in a way that was relevant and appropriate to the Assyrian youth.

2.2 Workshops with Assyrian Boys

Two workshops were held with male Assyrian youth at the Kilbirnie Community Centre in August and September 2005. This venue was chosen because many of the boys go there twice a week to hang out together in the late afternoon and play games such as table tennis and play station. Our Assyrian research partners visited the Community Centre prior to the workshops to inform the boys and the staff about the research we

were planning to do. In addition, male youth were encouraged to attend the workshops in an announcement and subsequent interview on Assyrian Radio, which was broadcasted in Neo-Aramaic language on a local radio station.

Each session typically included introductions, warming exercises (e.g. games), a research activity, discussion of the findings, food sharing and evaluation. These activities were designed to create a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere in which the youth could feel comfortable participating.

2.2.1 Workshop One

The first workshop was attended by thirteen boys aged 11-17 and an Assyrian youth support worker. It was oriented around gaining an understanding of the youths' perspectives on issues facing them. For this purpose, the youth were divided into three small groups. Two of the groups were asked to draw a typical 'Assyrian youth' and a 'Kiwi youth' and compare how they were different. The remaining group was asked to do the same for an 'Assyrian family' and a 'Kiwi family', focusing on differences in the parent-child relationship.

The research team used this activity to establish how the youth saw themselves (and their families) as distinct from Kiwis. The exercise generated a lively debate about what it was like to be an Assyrian youth living in Wellington and what were the most critical issues they faced at school and with their parents. Each group was invited to share their posters with the larger group towards the end of the workshop (See Photos 8-10).

2.2.2 Workshop Two

The second workshop was attended by twenty-four boys aged 11-18 and the Assyrian youth support worker. It was orientated around seeking the youths' opinion on:

- a) Services available to them in the community
- b) Strategies to resolve issues discussed in the previous workshop.

A role play exercise was conducted to attain this information. In this activity, the youth were divided into three groups and told that half the members of each group were

community leaders and half were new Assyrian youth arrivals. They were asked to act out the scenario that it was twenty years into the future and the new arrivals had come to request the community leaders' advice on how to resolve issues facing them. The community leaders were specifically asked to inform the arrivals of what services they could access to help them settle into school and family life in Wellington.

As the role-play exercise developed, it became clear that the youth could identify their issues with ease but had more difficulty identifying specific services that could help them. Therefore, the exercise evolved into a group discussion that explored the issues that Assyrian youth have and what community services they can access (See Photo 12).

2.3 Additional Information from Adults Involved with the Assyrian Youth

In order to substantiate the findings from the workshops, additional information was sought from adults who regularly interact with the Assyrian youth. This included an interview with an Assyrian man who works as a liaison between Assyrian parents and the schools their children attend. A letter was also sent to the principals of four schools with Assyrian pupils (St Patrick's College, Rongatai College, Evans Bay Intermediate and South Wellington Intermediate) to request a brief report on how Assyrian students were faring at those schools.

3.0 FINDINGS

Our research produced some substantial information about some of the important issues that affect Assyrian youth. Before we present our findings, it is important to clarify several factors that limited the scope of our research and affect how representative the findings are. The time constraints of our project meant that we were only able to involve male youth in our research. It must also be made clear that the youth we consulted are not a homogenous group, but rather had differing opinions on some of the issues presented below. Although most of the youth spoke English fluently, both Aramaic and English were spoken at times during the workshops. With Assyrian members of our research team that could translate for us, this did not present as a huge barrier to our research, but must be acknowledged as a limitation nonetheless. A further limitation concerning time was that we only received one report from a school principal, and their observations would have given us a wider insight into the academic and social experiences of the youth.

Results presented here come from the two workshops with Assyrian boys at Kilbirnie Community Centre, and discussions with Andreas (Assyrian Youth Liason Officer for St. Patrick, St. Catherine and Evans Intermediate schools), Sarjon (Assyrian youth worker at the Kilbirnie Community Centre), Phil and Edwar (Assyrian young adults and research team members).

In this section the findings are presented under four main topic headings, the first three are related to main issues that Assyrian youth face here in New Zealand, and the fourth issue is related to youth access to services and support. Our own research is reinforced by the research on refugee youth in New Zealand, recently conducted for the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Immigration Service (NZIS) (Hamilton et al, 2000; NZIS, 2000).

The four main issue topics are:

- Barriers to Education
- Transition to independence and transition between cultures
- Issues associated with parent/child relationships

- Lack of services and support

(Please see Table 3. for more detailed examples and quotes).

3.1 Barriers to Education

There are a number of barriers to education for Assyrian young people. These barriers are seen as important issues by the young Assyrians themselves and by the Adults (Phil, Edwar, Sarjon and Andreas) that provided some insight to these issues. The key barriers were:

- **Economic barriers.** Families experience difficulty paying the costs associated with their children's education e.g. school fees, cost of uniforms, and fees for extracurricular activities such as sports.
- **Language barriers.** Some boys experience difficulty with English language and feel discouraged to participate in class as they fear being teased. Language difficulties are sometimes masked by the fact that many of the boys speak fluent English, but it is common for them to experience difficulty with written English and grammar (Assyrian School Liaison).
- **Lack of parent involvement in children's schooling.** The school liaison identified that parents are not getting involved in their children's schooling, and that there is not enough communication between parents and schools. Parents may lack understanding of the New Zealand school system which can make them feel left out of this part of their children's lives (Hamilton et al, 2000; NZIS, 2004, p281). The boys expressed that parents "*don't know what we learn at school*", and that due to parents' limited English language skills they "*cannot help us with homework*".
- **Schools and teachers lack resources and skills.** Schools lack the resources and skilled teachers to provide for the specific needs of Assyrian students. Teachers may not have understanding of the vastly different learning environment that Assyrian youth are used to from their life in Iraq. Furthermore,

they do not give students the necessary support for their adjustment to the New Zealand school system. The literature review found that *“the current education system does not have a comprehensive refugee support system in place to assist refugee families and children to adapt to their new schools.”* (Hamilton et al, 2000, p6). As a result, the students that need extra help and encouragement often fall further behind.

- **Discrimination and racism in schools.** Some of the boys we talked to feel that they are treated differently and sometimes unfairly by teachers and other students because they are Assyrian. Discrimination can be damaging to students confidence and has in the case of some boys, contributed to their dislike of school. It seems that teachers experience difficulty managing discrimination and bullying at school. When asked if the teachers try to stop bullying and fix the problems between kids, one boy said *“No! We have to fix them with our fists”*.

There were also some boys that said that discrimination was not such a problem for them.

- **Behaviour at school.** Some Assyrian boys do not know how to manage anger at school. The boys told us that they *“have too much temper”*, which inevitably gets them into trouble at school. The Assyrian School Liaison explained that different methods of discipline between Iraq and New Zealand cause them confusion: *“Kids are given more freedom in New Zealand and do not know how to use it”*. Literature on refugee children and young people explains that *“differences in discipline, school culture and processes of learning...place additional pressure on a child who has already faced multiple changes, trauma and loss”* (Hamilton et al, 2000, p43).
- **Peer group attitudes.** There is lack of peer support for Assyrian youth that work hard at school, and these students are sometimes marginalised from the other Assyrian young people. This has been identified as a social disincentive against working hard at school (School Liaison).

- **Attitudes towards school and the Assyrian youth identity.** There tends to be a non-competitive attitude towards school work, and lack of self motivation. The Assyrian boys that talked to us expressed lack of confidence in their ability to do well at school. This lack of confidence seemed to be connected to the Assyrian youth identity. They identified themselves as “*lazy*”: “*it is easy to give up and be quitters*”. This mindset has been identified in the literature review which revealed that some refugee youth “*were likely to exhibit acting out behaviours, low self esteem and self criticism.*” (Hamilton et al, 2000, p27)

The Assyrian School Liaison (who was a teacher in Iraq for several years) explained that students who worked hard in Iraq often do not do as well under the different style of teaching and discipline in the New Zealand school context. “*They are used to a very structured learning environment, they are used to people pushing them (encouraging them) and they do not know how to push themselves*”.

The lack of motivation to work hard at school may also be connected to a mindset in which youth focus on the short-term. The youth and the adults communicated that Assyrian youth do not tend to set long-term goals, “*they do not look to the future*” (Assyrian Youth Worker). Phil (Assyrian young adult) explained to us that the experiences of religious persecution, and forced migration that Assyrians have endured throughout history have contributed to this mindset.

- **Lack of career aspirations and future vision.** We found that the lack of future vision (described above) impacts on their career aspirations. The Assyrian boys expressed to us that they choose to have a job now, rather than a higher paying one later (after education and training). For example, one youth already referenced: “*I don’t want to study more, I want to work to make money*”. The School Liaison explained that they don’t prioritise education because “*young kids know that being here, they can get a job easily without having education*”.
- **Lack of role models.** Lack of role models was identified as an important issue by both the youth and the adults. Youth identified that an ideal role model would

be: *"Like someone who's got a good job, high education, flash clothes. We need someone like that"*.

3.2 Transition to independence and transition between cultures

The transition from child to young adult is never easy, but it can be especially difficult when having to transition between cultures as well.

- **Cultural difference and sense of belonging.** A sense of cultural difference between the Assyrian boys and other New Zealand youth affects their sense of belonging: One youth lamented that *"people don't respect us"*. They also experience identity conflict as they are part of, and between, two cultures. It is well argued in literature that that *"a tremendous gap often exists between the culture of the home and the culture of the school...these children are often left to struggle and mediate the dichotomy between the two"* (Hamilton et al, 2000, p43).
- **Conflict with family.** From Assyrian parents' perspective, the family is of highest importance and the needs of the individual are secondary. Conflict in the family arises when young people take on a more "Kiwi" (or Western) idea of independence, which tends to shift focus from the family, to the needs of individual Assyrian youth.

3.3 Issues associated with parent-child relationships

It is argued in literature that *"family themes in relation to post migration issues are often overlooked...they are essential to our understanding of the refugee experience"* (Hamilton et al, 2000, p32). In the workshops the boys discussed some of the issues that challenged the relationship they have with their parents.

- **Lack of trust and understanding.** Some boys feel that they cannot go to their parents with the difficulties they may be facing because there is a lack of trust and understanding between them and their parents. *"They don't understand my problems"* (Youth). It is particularly difficult for them to talk with parents about the difficulties associated with living between two cultures, as they feel that their

parents often do not want them to have non-Assyrian friends or to take on aspects of non-Assyrian culture.

- **The pressure of parental expectations.** Conflict is common when “*parents attempt to control their children for fear of losing them to the influences of the new society*” (Hamilton et al, 2000, p45; NZIS, 2004, p274). Young Assyrians feel pressure from parental expectations for them to maintain their culture and practices. Family tension arises when young people want to do things that their parents see as not part of the Assyrian culture e.g. go flatting.

Some of the boys explained that they have responsibilities to communicate and translate for their parents who may not speak English well. This responsibility can put extra pressure on young people, and force a change in the parent/child balance of power (NZIS, 2004, p291).

3.4 Lack of Services and Support

In the second workshop, focus group discussions about what services and support are available for Assyrian youth and what services and support need to be established, resulted in the findings that:

- The boys know that there are career advisors at school, but those who had left school had never used the service, and those who were at school thought it “*might be helpful*” (youth).
- Boys recognised that it would be good to have help with homework but that they “*probably wouldn’t go to a homework club. It’s just like more school!*” (youth).
- The most useful services for youth were the church youth groups
- Work experience and apprenticeships would be really helpful
- The boys are aware that youth centres such as Evolve exist, but

they do not go there. We did not explore the reasons for this in any depth. Understanding possible factors that make Evolve Youth Centre inappropriate for the Assyrian youth, would be a subject for further investigation. The fact that the boys go to the Kilbirnie Community Centre suggests that they do need a place to hang out together – out side of their homes. In this way, the Community Centre provides a valuable service for the Assyrian community. However, it does not provide the kind of specialist youth services and support that would be of great benefit to them such as confidential counselling services, health services, and information, education, and advice services.

The boys identified that for their family:

- Access to ESOL and ETC (for learning English), WINZ and doctors are very important. Within the community relatives are the most useful source of information about living in New Zealand; what services are available for new Assyrian migrants; and how to access these services.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

In this project, we sought to gain an understanding of some of the key issues Assyrian youth face in New Zealand utilising PAR techniques. Prior to this project, not much was known about Assyrian youth and their particular needs. This project has helped to establish a base of information about what some of these needs are.

The young Assyrians who participated in this research were eager to be part of any programme of social change affecting their lives. It is worth mentioning that their response to the issues discussed in this project is enough to suggest that Assyrian youth have the desire to achieve and to be more involved in deciding their future.

4.2 Recommendations

The literature has identified that *“a refugee child’s ability to adapt is influenced positively by an external support system that supports and encourages a child’s coping mechanism”* (Hamilton et al, 2000, p45). Research also identifies that out of the ten countries that regularly resettle refugees *“New Zealand rates lowest in post-arrival support”* (Hamilton et al, 2000, p6). We recognise that recently there have been some positive steps forward in terms of Government support for the settlement of refugees and new migrants, including the *NZ Settlement Strategy*; however, we strongly suggest that there be greater recognition of the issues and needs of children and young people in the settlement process, and that meaningful steps be taken to address issues and meet needs.

Based on our research findings, we have several recommendations which are aimed at improving the support available to refugee youth. We recommend that there is:

4.2.1 Further research

We recommend that the government provide funding for further research into the issues that Assyrian youth face. There should be research with Assyrian female youth, in order to determine what issues are important to them. Further action should be conducted with on-going consultation with the young people so that any services provided will be relevant.

In addition, research must be conducted with parents in order to find out what issues affect their ability to support their children, and to investigate relevant support services need to be provided. For example, there could be series of workshops and focus groups with Assyrian parents to discuss the challenges of bringing up children in a very different place to where they themselves were raised. A dialogue could be started between these parents and parents of other migrant or refugee groups to create a multicultural network of support and advice.

4.2.2 The establishment of “Mentors”

We recommend that the government provide support for the establishment of Assyrian Youth Mentors, who will have the role of helping Assyrian youth with the issues they face both at school and at home. We recommend that there be both male and female mentors because the issues that boys and girls face differ considerably. We think that the most appropriate and effective people for these roles will be members of the Assyrian community who possess experience and knowledge of settlement into New Zealand society.

4.2.3 The development of a Youth Centre

We feel that Assyrian youth would greatly benefit from the services of a youth centre in Wellington. We recommend that government provide funding for the development of a

youth centre that provides support services that are culturally appropriate for Assyrian youth. This may involve developing and improving an existing youth centre, or the establishment of a new one.

Youth should be involved with the development of the centre to ensure that it is responsive to their needs. It is intended that the centre will help kids with any obstacles that they face in their daily lives. Youth centres are an ideal place for youth to engage with their mentors.

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