



Literacy among Yazidi IDPs

An investigation into adult literacy rates and attitudes toward literacy among displaced Yazidis in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract

This exploratory study forms part of a pilot project in adult literacy education for Yazidi IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan. The aim of this study is to investigate literacy levels and attitudes to literacy among the population of Bajed Kandala 2 camp in order to assess the feasibility and desirability of such a pilot project and evaluate likely challenges. A total of 179 individuals from 86 households were interviewed. Results suggest high levels of illiteracy and low levels of formal education, particularly among women and over 30s. 44% of interviewees answered that they were not able to read or write at all and 48% had never been to school. Responses indicate a high degree of interest in literacy classes and positive attitude to education more generally. 57% of interviewees would 'probably' or 'definitely' want to join. Curiosity, empowerment and self-improvement are the most commonly cited reasons. Family and childcare responsibilities were the most common reasons cited obstacles to participation. The authors conclude that there are strong prospects for adult literacy classes at Bajed Kandala 2 camp and that this would be a suitable location for the pilot project. We believe that this study also suggests both a need and favourable conditions for adult literacy education among the Yazidi IDP population in Iraq more generally, although more thorough research is needed.

“If you cannot read and write it is like being deaf and mute”

- survey respondent, a 43 year old woman, mother of 9 children.

Key Words

Yazidi, illiteracy, IDP (internally Displaced Person), adult education

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1. Introduction

Education and literacy levels among the Yazidi population in Iraq are generally believed to be low, but there is a paucity of data.

In order to form an estimate of illiteracy levels and attitudes to literacy with respect to age, gender and general living conditions before and after the displacement, a survey was carried out at one IDP camp in the Kurdistan autonomous region. Bajed Kandala 2 camp in Dohuk province was selected since there is a local NGO, Joint Help for Kurdistan, that was able to help facilitate the survey and has expressed interest in hosting a pilot adult literacy programme.

The population of Bajed Kandala 2 camp are Yazidis displaced from the Sinjar region by the Islamic State in 2014. Bajed Kandala camp has a total population of 10,750 individuals in 2,025 households, roughly evenly split between camps 1 and 2. According to the most recently available official estimates 93% of children aged 6-11 and 80% of children aged 12-17 attend school; median household monthly income is \$260, or less than \$2 per person per day ; adult employment-population ratio is 29%. These estimates are based on small samples and should be treated with caution. (REACH 2018, pp 30-31).

The mother tongue of this population is the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish. Much of the population lived prior to displacement in areas under the control of the Iraqi central government where Arabic is the language of administration and principal language of instruction in schools. Arabic remains the language of instruction in the camp school for children from these areas.

Survey participants were asked about their family situation, educational background, language use and literacy levels, their willingness to participate in literacy classes and benefits they might hope to derive.

2. Background and Theory

How many illiterate persons the proportion and distribution among this population, gender and age distribution has not been reported so far at least not up to our knowledge.

The Yazidi minority in Iraq has not been identified as a group with special needs in relation to GDGs (Global Development Goal) by the UN (United Nation) nor by the Iraqi central government or Kurdish regional government. This makes it difficult to gather detailed information regarding this minority population and their needs.

Literacy has not traditionally been highly valued in Yazidi society. On the contrary, Schmidinger (2019, p. 168) describes “a religious tradition which is almost antiliterate”. According to Açıkyıldız (2014), reading and writing were until relatively recently prohibited except for Sheiks of certain lineages. Changing patterns of literacy may thus have implications for the operation of hierarchy and clan structures in Yazidi society.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Yazidi community has relatively low levels of education and literacy compared to other groups in Iraq, with causes including: lack of provision due to discrimination, isolation, persecution, suspicion of state institutions, poverty, cultural traditions, and (in the case of women and girls) traditional gender roles. It appears that displacement has created obstacles and disrupted education, but may also have created new opportunities and contributed to a shift in attitudes toward education among the Yazidi population.

Prior to the 2014 genocide the Yazidi population of Iraq was estimated at 500-600,000. As of 2016 180,000 Yazidis lived in IDP camps in the Dohuk province with a similar number housed outside camps mostly in temporary/ informal accomodation.

Because of the current circumstances having a large part of the population living in IDP camps makes it possible to collect data in a camp and hopefully make general conclusions in a plausible way.

The purpose of this survey is to collect baseline information as whether an illiteracy project is feasible or not based on the Yazidis' own perception of their situation.

This method is to correspond to UNESCO's (2005) definition: Inclusive education is “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education”.

In this survey the focus is on young adults (age 15-40) who are illiterate. Many of them are parents or will soon be. One main aim of literacy education is to strengthen the family by enabling them to

- support children at school;
- find opportunities for employment in order to increase living standards;
- access public services;
- interact with, and make demands of, authorities and public institutions;
- find ways to cooperate with neighbours and participate more fully in the local community;

- become active citizens by participating in civil society, demanding changes as well as being a part of them;
- gain greater independence by being empowered through knowledge to change their conditions of life for themselves.

In a modern world dependent on various forms of written communication adult illiteracy can be seen as social disability contributing to marginalization and disempowerment of affected individuals and communities. Literacy education is thus a vital engine of empowerment and social inclusion. In short: 'leave no one behind'.

The challenges involved in overcoming this disability are different for adults than for children. Adults have a wide range of responsibilities to their families and communities, including paid and unpaid labour, that place heavy demands on their time. The Iraqi and Kurdish governments, like those of most countries, aim to provide universal education for children but make little provision for adults. Even where opportunities exist, through projects such as this one, social norms may deter participation: classroom study might not be perceived an appropriate, worthwhile or dignified use of an adult's time even in contexts where the importance of education *for children* is widely accepted. There may also be shame associated with publicly acknowledging one's illiteracy.

These pedagogical challenges have to be carefully taken into account in developing adult learning projects, together with the empowerment goals described above. We intend to draw particularly on ALEF's (Adult Literacy and Empowerment Facilitators) experience of organizing community-based literacy education through "empowerment groups". The guiding principle of ALEF's method is that instructional content is determined by the needs and concerns of learners themselves, and that learning to read and write proceeds hand in hand with collective discussion of issues of immediate relevance to learners and their community (Boëthius 2017).

Many studies on the benefits, and challenges of, adult literacy education exist. (See for example, in connection with ALEF's method specifically, Efraimsson 2017.) One of the authors has extensive experience working with adult literacy programmes in Africa. However we are extremely hesitant to make inferences from these source given the distinct history, culture and current living situation of the Yazidi population.

A full cost-benefit analysis and discussion of the set-up for the adult literacy project itself is beyond the scope of this report. Questions such as how to organize groups, schedule training, find teachers and premises, production of course material etc. are still to be considered.

3. Methods

A questionnaire was prepared before the visit in the camp. It is divided into two forms: one (Appendix A) relating to the household as a whole, to gather basic demographic information and access to literacy and education on the family level, as measured by (1) number of children attending school and (2) presence of at least one literate adult. The second form (Appendix B) is for each individual between the ages of 15 and 40, and is intended to assess competence in written language (production and reception) as well as attitudes to literacy.

In constructing the questionnaire the authors drew on literacy surveys conducted by governments and international organizations, with two differences. Firstly, due to organizational constraints and desire to keep interviews relatively short, the questions were not as comprehensive. A detailed survey of reading and writing abilities is beyond the scope of this exploratory study. Secondly, we wanted to focus on IDPs' own perspectives and priorities rather than being overly guided by our own preconceptions. For this reason we included a number of open questions, encouraged interviewers to pose follow-up questions and invite comments and queries from interviewees. Answers to open questions are recorded in Appendix C.

A number of local volunteers were given a short introduction to the purpose of the survey and how to conduct the interviews and fill in the two kinds of forms.

All interviews took place at home in the tent of each family and the identity of each tent is documented as well to be able to track answers all the way down to a family and an individual.

All completed forms were entered into a database using Google Forms and then exported to spreadsheets for the collation of statistics and graphs. There are thus two discrete digital records of each interview in addition to the paper record. All data presented in this report emanate from the spreadsheet tables and graphs and are traceable back to tent identification to specific families and individuals. For reasons of anonymity no identifying information is included in this report.

An observational study of the standard of living in tents in this particular camp was conducted at the same time as the interviews took place. This adds an extra source of information and may help to provide context to interviewee responses. These observations are summarized in appendix D.

A total of 179 individuals in 86 households were interviewed. This represents about 6 % of the total population of Bajed Kandala camp 2 for the relevant age range. As many different parts of the camp as possible were visited in order to gain a representative sample, as it was hypothesized that families with similar geographic origin, occupation, socioeconomic status, or kinship ties would tend to live close to one another. Time constraints did not allow a fully random sample method to be used. One consequence of conducting interviews through home visits during the daytime was that men were underrepresented. We expected that employed people were underrepresented, although in fact the proportion reporting some employment in our survey corresponds closely to government survey data (BHRA 2018).

Although the limitations mentioned above, we are convinced that this survey and the data collected is plausible as a baseline for further work on literacy program for the Yazidi IDPs.

4. Results

4.1 Demographics

- A total of 179 individuals in 86 households completed the survey. 65% of respondents were women.
- Average age of respondent to individual form is 30 for males and 28 for females.
- Average number of children for mothers is 2.8 and for fathers 2.6.
- The average household size is 7 persons.
- 72% gave no occupation for the head of family. The most common sources of employment for the head of family were agricultural (12%), manual labourer (7%) and military (3.5%).

4.2 Language

- All families speak Kurdish (Kurmanji dialect) at home.
- Arabic was the most common second language. 61% reported they could speak Arabic to some degree, with 34% reporting they could speak it well or very well. 83% can understand spoken Arabic to some degree. Of those with formal education, 73% had attended a school with Arabic as the main language of instruction. Only a small minority reported any proficiency in languages other than Kurmanji or Arabic. 13 individuals (8%) understand spoken Sorani Kurdish 'well' or 'very well'. Two individuals (1%) understand spoken English 'well' or 'very well'. Other languages named were Turkish and German.

4.3 Education

- 49% of respondents (54% of women and 39% of men) had no formal schooling (fig 1).
- There is a weak negative relationship between age and years of schooling (fig 2). The trend is somewhat stronger for women than for men ($R^2 = 0.18$ vs 0.12).
- Among those who have attended school, the average is 6.2
- Women without children have average 5.1 years formal schooling, compared with 2.9 years for all women.
- By far the most commonly given reason for stopping school was simply poverty (54%) followed by work (12%), travel distance or lack of a nearby school (10%) dislike of school (10%) and family responsibilities (7%). 6% explicitly mentioned gender (eg. "my parents said school was not necessary for girls").

1. Years of schooling

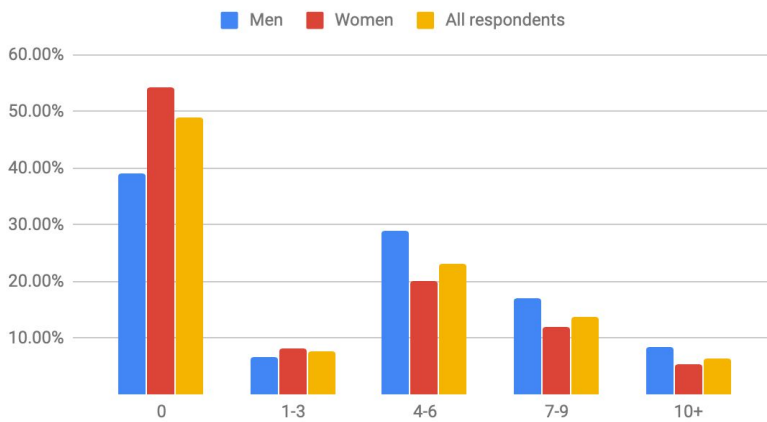


Figure 1.

Age vs years of schooling (all respondents)

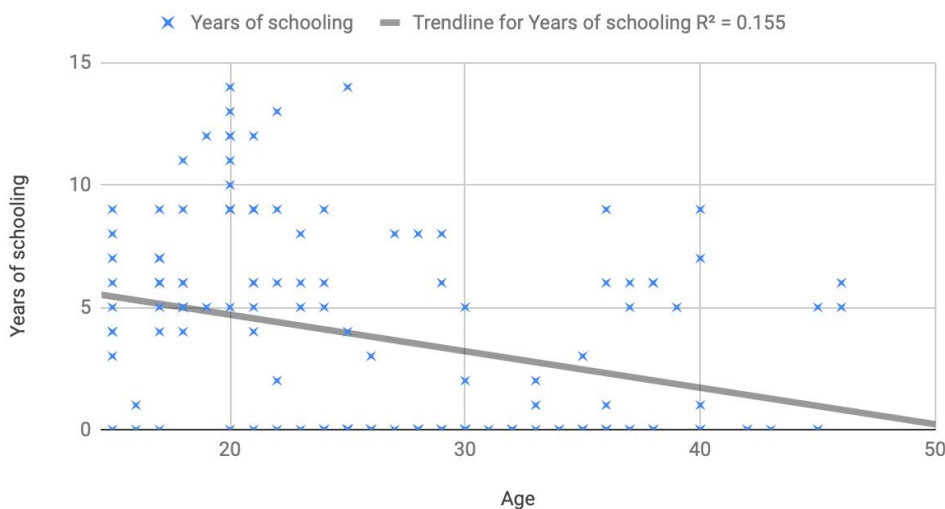


Figure 2.

4.4 Literacy - ability and attitudes

- 89% of households report that at least one person in the household is able to read Kurdish to some degree.
- 45% of respondents (34% of men and 50% of women) cannot read Kurmanji at all. 44% of respondents (29% of men and 52% of women) cannot read Arabic at all (fig 3). 45% of respondents (58% of men and 39% of women) can read Kurmanji “well” or “very well”. 39% (55% of men 30% of women and) can read Arabic “well” or “very well”.
- Younger respondents are somewhat more likely to be able to read. 40% of those under 30 compared to 50% aged 30 or over could not read Kurmanji at all.
- Participants were asked about their ability to perform a number of literacy-related tasks (figure 5). 76 respondents (42%) were able to perform at least one of these tasks. For each case, at least 30% of participants said they were not currently able to do it, but would like to learn.

- When self-reported ability to read is converted into a scale from 0-4 (figure 4), the correlation between reading ability in Arabic and Kurmanji is 0.9. The correlation is slightly stronger for men (0.93) than for women (0.87).

How well can you read the following languages?

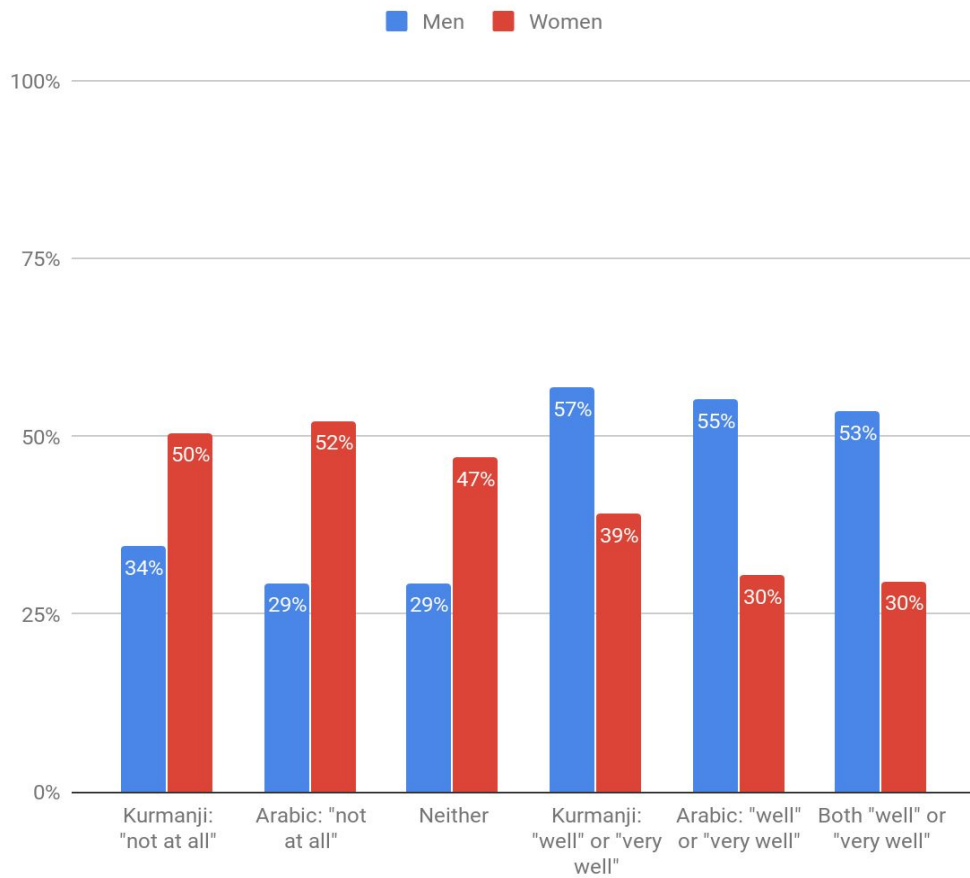


Figure 3.

How well can you read the following languages?

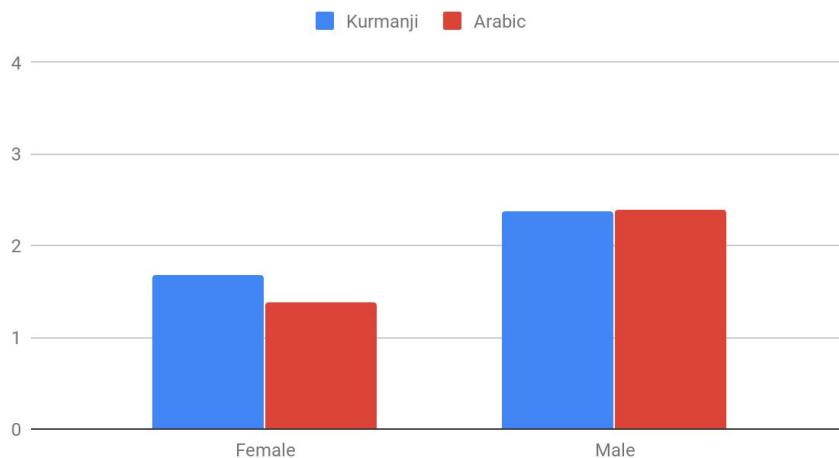


Figure 4

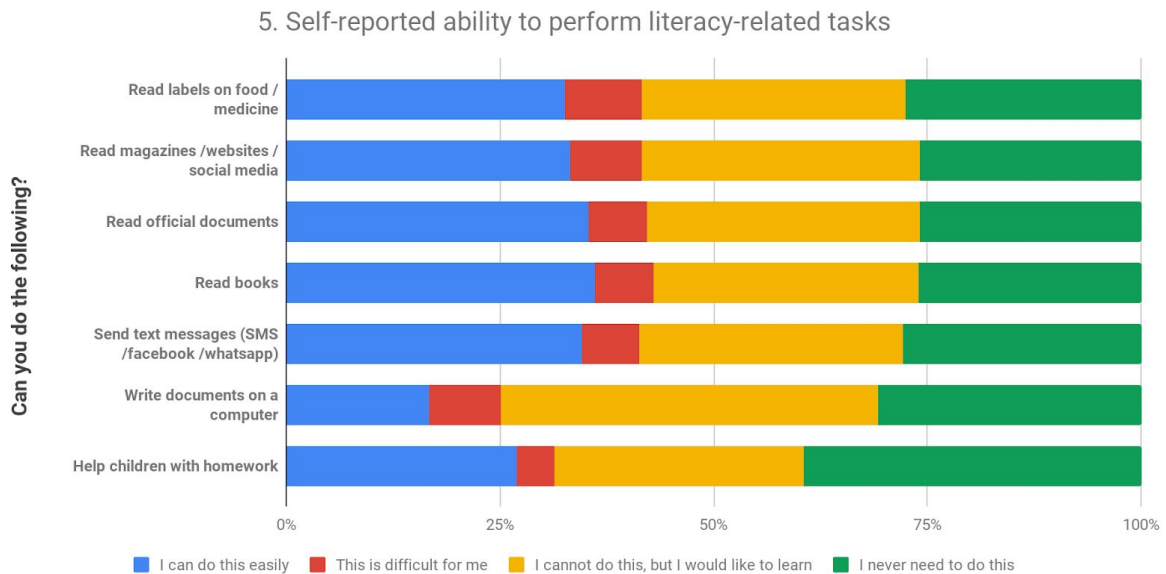
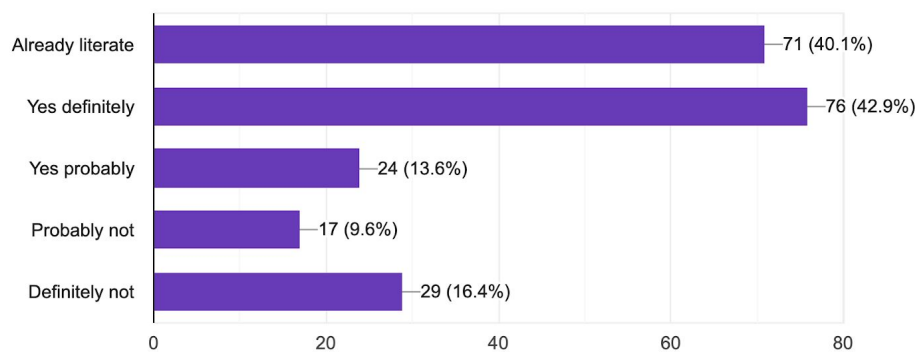


Figure 5 (above), Figure 6 (below)

6. Would you be interested in joining literacy classes

177 responses



- Participants were told that we were planning to introduce mother-tongue adult literacy classes at the camp and asked whether they would be interested in taking part (fig 6). 57% replied that they would definitely or probably be interested.
- Note that 20% of respondents chose “yes definitely” AND “already literate”. This was not originally anticipated, as these had been intended as mutually exclusive options, but interviewers were instructed to record responses as given: the large number of respondents who can read and write to some degree but want to learn more has important implications for the development of our project (see analysis and discussion below).
- By far the most common reason for wanting to take part in classes was curiosity, enthusiasm for learning or a desire for self-improvement (58%). The second most common reason was to help children with their schoolwork (19%). Only 6% of participants named opportunities for employment or further study.
- Among those responding negatively, the most common obstacle named was family or childcare responsibilities (43% of all negative respondents, 60% of women), followed by lack of time(29%) and dislike of school (21%).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

1. Illiteracy rates are high. Almost half of adult (over 15 years) women and a third of adult men cannot read or write. Illiteracy in that range will probably not only have a severe impact on opportunities for the individual to actively participate in contemporary society, but will affect the development of the local society as a whole, and the next generation.
2. There is a significant gender disparity in both literacy and formal education. Many women received no education because it was considered inappropriate, unimportant or at least a lower priority than familial and childcare responsibilities. However, most illiterate women we spoke to no longer share this view, if they ever did: *they want to learn*.

(If anything the real gender literacy gap is likely to be higher than our figures suggest, as our sample of the male population was not fully representative. We interviewed those who were at home at the time of the visit. The male population spend more time outside the home - at work, study, or socialising in cafes.)

3. There are signs that literacy rates are improving. Younger respondents were more likely to be literate, and slightly more likely to have attended school. Most families report that their children attend school. This is cause for optimism for the future.
4. Education levels are low but there is significant variation. Almost half of respondents have no formal schooling while a significant minority have nine years or more - that is to say, at least some secondary education. Our survey does not enable us to draw conclusions about the social or economic causes of these disparities.
5. By far the most common reason not to have attended school is said to be poverty. In many cases there is not a single reason but a combination of the current situation of flight and displacement and problems finding a job.

There is a gender disparity in reasons given for not attending or not completing school and how this choice is experienced. Women are more likely to describe being constrained by family or surroundings. Men are more likely to feel empowered to express their own opinion (not a good school, prefer to work instead, or dislike studies in general etc).

6. There is a significant unmet demand for literacy education. A majority of those surveyed wanted to take part in adult literacy classes, including (to our surprise) a large proportion of those who can already read and write to some degree.
7. There is a widespread belief in the importance of literacy and education. This is expressed primarily in terms of empowerment, self-development, autonomy and social inclusion, rather than as a key to specific economic opportunities.

Attitudes to the importance of education varies between individuals and families. We are not able to draw conclusions about the causes of this variation.

8. A large proportion of the population is unemployed and thus without income to support the family, dependent instead on handouts and kinship networks. Many were already unemployed or underemployed prior to the displacement. Reasons for unemployment were not addressed in this survey, and there are obviously significant causes that have nothing to do with literacy and education. (Discrimination, the wider Kurdish and Iraqi economic situation, etc.) Nonetheless, improving literacy rates would help remove a significant barrier.
9. The empowerment of the Yazidis, especially women, is an important part of the collective response to the military and political situation. “Sinjar is [...] a no-man's land trapped in a regional power struggle”. There is a desire for “self-defence and self-rule” and preservation of a distinct Yazidi identity and culture. (Yilmaz and Sevdeen 2019, pp. 175-180). The positive attitudes to literacy and education expressed by IDPs in this survey reflect a willingness to challenge and reevaluate existing traditions, such as negative attitudes to literacy, in pursuit of individual and collective empowerment.

4.2. Recommendations

The baseline for starting literacy training in this particular camp is about 1200 adults with a need for such training.

Experience gained in many previous literacy projects teaches us that training the mother tongue is the most effective in several regards: such as empowering the individuals to involve previous experience; reaching higher rate of mental engagement (thoughts and feelings); reducing feelings of inferiority; and enriching capacity. In the fields of education and language acquisition research there is an extensive literature on the benefits of mother tongue literacy education, although this is mostly focussed on child rather than adult education. Initial mother tongue literacy has a positive impact on participation, empowerment, and subsequent second-language education. (Benson 2000, Benson 2005, Dutcher 2005, Hovens 2002).

100% of the population in the camp speak Kurmanji, a Kurdish dialect, the language to be taught.

The method of teaching adults is very different compared to teaching children. Adults have previous experiences and have a completely different role in the family, being responsible for feeding, fostering and care for others. All these aspects should be taken into account. Adults should be empowered to use knowledge gained from each and every given lesson immediately in collaboration with other adults. They also need to use the tool of being able to read and write and calculate to empower cooperation locally on many different tasks in their daily life. The goal is not to develop classroom skills to be applied in later life but to put into practice from lesson one and all the way through the course. (Boëthius 2017)

In planning the course it will be particularly necessary to take account of gender-based obstacles to participation. This extends to how the course is promoted and advertised, scheduling, support facilities, student group allocation, and teaching methods. Women must feel that the course is open to them, that it does not conflict with other responsibilities, and the teaching environment must be such that they feel empowered to actively and meaningfully participate.

Participation and completion rates will likely be much higher if the demands of seasonal agricultural activities such as harvesting are taken into account. This goes also for families herding in the mountains.

If a pilot project to improve literacy among IDPs at Bajed Kandala 2 camp proves successful there is a potential to scale up to get rid of all adult illiteracy among all Yazidis in IDP camps and then in the whole Yazidi society and even among all Kurmanji speaking population in Iraqi Kurdistan and elsewhere.

The population of the Yazidi minority is estimated to be about 600 000. If 3/5 of them are adults and 40% of them are illiterate there are about 150 000 adults who need to attend literacy classes.

We are convinced that this would be a fair goal considering the Yazidis' history and current situation as a marginalized and vulnerable population, kept isolated from outside society, locally and internationally, and exposed to repeated attempts at subjugation and genocide.

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Appendix A – Household form

Date:..... Interviewers name.....

Fill in one copy for each household

Household number:

- 1. Number of people in household
- 2. Number of males 15 or over
- 3. Number of females 15 or over
- 4. Number of males age under 15
- 5. Number females under 15
- 6. Number children at school

- 7. Place of origin

- 8. Head of family job before 2014

- 9. Head of family job now

- 10. Is there at least one adult in the household who can **read** these languages:

	Yes	No
Kurmanji	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arabic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sorani	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
English	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other language _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix B - Individual form

Household no:

Name: _____

- 1. Age
- 2. Sex (m/f)
- 3. Number of children
- 4. Job now

- 5. Past job(s)

- 6. Years of schooling
- 7. Age when left school
(leave blank if no school)

8. Why did you leave school?

9. What was the **main** language at school?

10. What language do you speak at home?

11. What language do you use at work?

12. What other language(s) do you use?

13. How well can you **speak** these languages:

	Not at all	Badly	OK	Well	Very well
Kurmanji					
Arabic					
Sorani					
English					
Other language _____					

14. How well can you **understand** these languages when **spoken** to you:

	Not at all	Badly	OK	Well	Very well
Kurmanji					
Arabic					
Sorani					
English					
Other language _____					

15. How well can you **read** these languages:

	Not at all	Badly	OK	Well	Very well
Kurmanji					
Arabic					
Sorani					
English					
Other language _____					

16. How well can you **write** these languages:

	Not at all	Badly	OK	Well	Very well
Kurmanji					
Arabic					
Sorani					
English					
Other language _____					

17. If you cannot read and write - what has stopped you learning?

18. **How often** do you **speak** these languages:

	Every day	At least once a week	Less than once a week	Rarely/N ever
Kurmanji				
Arabic				
Sorani				
English				
Other language _____				

19. **How often** do you **write** (including SMS, email, facebook, whatsapp):

	Every day	At least once a week	Less than once a week	Rarely/Ne ver
Kurmanji				
Arabic				
Sorani				
English				
Other language _____				

20. **How often** do you watch TV shows, movies or internet videos in these languages:

	Every day	At least once a week	Less than once a week	Rarely/Never
Kurmanji				
Arabic				
Sorani				
English				
Other language _____				

21. Can you do the following:

	I can do this well/ this is easy.	This is difficult for me	I cannot do this, but I would like to learn	I never need to do this.
Read labels on food / medicine				
Read magazines / websites / social media				
Read official documents				
Read books				
Send text messages (SMS/facebook /whatsapp)				
Write documents on a computer				
Help children with homework				

22. We are planning to start literacy classes for adults at Bajed Kandala. The aim of these classes would be to teach reading and writing skills that you can use for everyday life, for dealing with authorities, and for work and education.

Would you be interested in joining literacy classes?

I can already read and write.	Yes definitely.	Yes, probably.	No, probably not.	No, definitely not.

23. If you said 'yes': what would you personally hope to gain from literacy classes?

24. If you said 'no', why not?

25. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

26. Interviewer notes

Appendix C – Examples of comments given by respondents

Would you be interested in joining literacy classes and the answer is NO.

Next question Why not? Answers grouped as follows:

1. **No time** (9 same answer)
Added comments to this: work (3),
Poverty / cost,
family /childcare (2),
Maybe I can't because of Peshmerga
2. **Family /childcare** (9 same answer)
Added comments to this:
Poverty / cost,
3 daughters suffering from epilepsy and she has to take care of them
3. **Dislike of school / learning** (5 same answer)
Added comments to this: Not in the mood
4. Actual situation,
No point - we are in tents. If we go to another country, there is a point in studying.
5. Too old
6. Arabic and English is more important than Kurmanji.

Would you be interested in joining literacy classes and the answer is YES.

What would you hope to gain from literacy classes? Answers grouped as follows:

1. **Self improvement / curiosity** (44 answers mention first)
 Added comments to this:
 I have a lot to say to the world (2),
 If there is a chance I will join classes,
 I want to learn anything,
 I think it is very good for me,
 I want to leave home because it is very boring,
 I want to talk to people in another language.

2. **Help children with homework** (15 answers mention this first)
 Added comments to this:
 Self improvement / curiosity (4 answers),
 "read and write is better you don't know",
 Needs someone to tell what to learn more so that one will be able to teach his children in the future,
 Wants to teach her children in the future.

3. **Employment opportunities** (3 answers mention this first)
 Added comments to this:
 Self improvement / curiosity (2 answers),
 Provide for family,
 Wants to work in a beauty salon,
 Wants to be a dressmaker/seamstress.

4. **Educational opportunities** (3 answers mention this first)
 Added comments to this:
 Wants to learn more and to go to university,
 Wants to continue the dream to learn English.

5. **Wants to learn** (42 answer corresponding to this)
 Added comments to this:
 Want to learn how to read and write (2),
 How to write and read different things,
 Learn more things by practicing in a course,
 To read signs / information,
 Has already started to go to the Arabic school and can write her name but would like to go to Kurmanji class if there is a chance,
 Will help if I travel abroad,
 Learning is very important,
 Want to be more social and to gain more knowledge

6. **Express own view difficulties to learn** (4 answers)
 She wants but she is sick

7. **No chance to go to school before** (5 answers)

Want literacy classes because she had left the chance before,
 Two sisters and a brother who work as farmers. If they have a chance they would like to join the class,
 Will join classes if during the winter,
 When we were forced to leave Shingal we lost all happiness and were not able to have the same joy in school that we used to. In Duhok it was difficult, at least here in the camp there is a school and we hope to go to school again.

Outstanding quote: *“If you cannot read and write it is like being deaf and mute”*

Additional comment on what to learn:

1. English (12 answers), Wants to learn how to speak
2. Other languages like Arabic, German (3 answers)
3. Maths classes
4. Computer classes (2 answers)
5. Music course
6. Likes all courses!
7. Wants to teach people sports.
8. Want you to help us more and try to change the system of education that Iraq uses.

Miscellaneous comments and interviewers notes:

1. The family is very poor and nobody gives them any money.
2. Plays online games in English
3. One daughter has a heart disease
4. They don't have tools and no material for repair of cars which is their family business
5. Needs a job.
6. Wants to be our teacher
7. No money to visit a doctor
8. Want to go back to Shingal (2)
9. Want to get out from here to Australia

Appendix D – Authors’ observations

Observations recorded while overseeing interviews and other experiences during a short stay in Bajed Kandala 2 camp in April 2019.

To live for years in a “tent home” is completely different to a normal life in the home you are used to, together with people you know well.

To live for years in a “tent home” is something almost no one chooses to do. It is something you do when you are forced to leave your real home, the place you feel is your homeland.

One cannot knock on a door when visiting families in Bajed Kandala camp and so you have to call for attention in other ways.

While interviewing you also listen to what is ongoing inside and outside the tent. Since the “walls” transmit all kinds of sound and noise you get to know what is going on outside to some extent. The crow of a rooster. The same goes for people living here 24 hours a day and for many years.

To be able to imagine how life is one has to think of the difference compared to having your home in a house. While commenting interviews, this also will be a mix it with some other impressions.

Outside of tents

Outside a tent we met a small black rabbit skittering around between the tents. There are not many animals to be seen in the camp but a few families have poultry or a goat. Where possible some families also grow vegetables outside their tent. Marigolds shining here and there. Small trees and bushes. Since the camp area is very dense there is not much space left for creative ideas of activities such as prepared space for cultivation.. There is no common area to be used for rational cultivation or bringing up animals, fruit-trees etc. Children play in the roads. The roads are broad enough for car parking, traffic and pedestrians. Cars are quite common in the camp. Families owning a car are probably more fortunate. Related families are living together in larger clusters. When we meet them as a group many interviews can be done in the same place. Each family has the sanitation and water support outside of the tent, the living room. We saw females washing laundry outside the tent and the clothesline as well. One family might have more than one tent, depending on the size of the family. The use of an extra tent can be something else than being just a living room.

The ground is mainly sand, gravel, cement and pebbles for drainage. No grass or greenery, no space to raise any livestock inside the fence of the camp. The camp area is very dense and the land is rented from a landowner. There might be restrictions in a contract how on how to use the area of the camp in general.

Inside tents

Weather conditions and the changes in weather are obvious, sunshine and birds voices, also children playing, other animals, footsteps, falling rain, the wind, the heat and chill. Adapting to year-round living in a dense network of tents is a great challenge, whatever creative precautions are taken. There is a concrete foundation around all tents about half a meter high. This should prevent rain and flooding over the floor inside as well prevent chilly wind and heat from passing from side to side. The

electricity line in each tent is high up in the ridge of the tent. Cables are visible but children cannot reach them. Lamps are also placed high up just under the ceiling.

It is tidy and neat in all living rooms in the “tent homes”. Most of the families have a big carpet on the floor, but some a bare concrete floor. There is no furniture except mats to sit on and a pillow for the back. We are always politely received and invited to sit down. Fairly often we are offered water and/or tea.

There is a TV in most homes. Most of them the old fashioned ones, probably cheap to acquire. Only a few have flat screen TV. Mobile phones are at hand in most families. There is a refrigerator as well as freezer in some of the homes. Toys for children are rarely visible where guests and adults meet and there are no books or bookshelves visible. But there is not very much space to store other belongings, clothes are often hanging on tent lines just beneath the ceiling. The tent walls are very often covered by nicely colored fabric and most often the fabric also hides the lower concrete part of the wall.

In another home I saw a doll put up on the wall, in a handmade dress. It was an advanced piece of knitted handicraft and while asking who made the dress I got to know it was an aunt who made it. Generally there are no toys at all.

Living conditions brought up in conversations

- Having three daughters, all of them having epilepsy and their mother illiterate, the mother reasons it is not interesting in studying since care of the daughters comes first. There is no father in the family and no other male to support and provide an income.
- While entering one tent we meet a very well-dressed young woman. She is very kind and welcomes us profusely. She also wants to take a photo of herself, two of her children and me. I took the opportunity to take a photo from inside the tent, in her private home. In this home everything was arranged carefully. A flat screen TV. I think the economic situation is different from most of the families. During the interview we learned that her husband was living and working in Germany. She also made a comment about her desire private phone calls. She could not talk by phone to her husband and be sure that no one else listened. This is also a result of living in a tent community – no privacy. This woman has ten years of schooling. She was dressed to travel to Lalesh for Yazidi new year celebrations and was just waiting for the car to arrive outside the tent. The children would at home and the baby-sitter has just arrived.
- Some families lost their sheep flock completely but some still have the flock in the mountains to be herded and provide support for the family. The family members move back and forth between camp and mountain.
- Even though it was outside our target age-range we interviewed an old woman, 83 years old. She looked very curious and participated in the conversation while we visited the family. It was really interesting to catch her comments on our mission. She spoke out very clearly that no girls at all were allowed to attend school earlier. It was not even mentioned and talked about. Furthermore, she told us that you never ever talk about being illiterate, it is in fact shameful. The younger generation do not express it so clearly but other findings indicate that this is true. It was very interesting to get this formulated so straightforwardly.

- A Peshmerga family stay in the mountains out of their village far away from schools long term. This family is made up of 14 children, their father and mother.
- One family had their own business, a garage, before the escape in 2014. Several individuals, some boys already married and staying in adjacent tents, have the required skills and know-how but they lack tools and spare parts. Microfinance would help them to go on also in the camp because all the old cars. This is a big family with at least 4 sons over 15, who would be able to set up their family business again. But they showed us filled applications for resettlement in Australia. None of them showed interest in further schooling.
- One family composed only of children. The father had three wives, all illiterate. The mother of these two youths, a girl and a boy, died. The father left the camp with the other two wives and moved back to their home. The two youths stay in the tent at the camp together with a number of younger sisters and brothers. The girl has 12 years of schooling and she is now attending college and the boy a bit younger has taken on the same route. They are 26 in the family, all told.

Occasional comments

“There is nothing to do. Any training activity is just good for us.”

- Women tend to be more positive in their attitude towards education, attend courses and participate in training activities. This also goes for literacy courses.
- We have not met any woman talking about earning her own income. This makes families without males extremely vulnerable.
- Employment opportunities are highly seasonal, tied to the rhythms of growing and harvesting. Many families depend on agriculture for their household and income.
- During the interviews very few breadwinners providing income to the household were at home.
- Many breadwinners who are supposed to go to work have no job. Temporary work and day-labour is common.

Said by one participant in this study:

“If you cannot read and write it is like being deaf and mute”