



**Multicultural School Festival as a Creative Space for Identity Construction – From a Minority Parent Perspective**

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<i>Semiotic sign</i>	<i>Descriptive note</i>	<i>Field note</i>	<i>Interview transcript</i>
	<p>Monolingual Norwegian, event-related, informing, partly hand-written, partly printed.</p>	<p>Ara is clearly unhappy about the poster. He notes that there are several factual mistakes and draws my attention to the collection of sheets he has put up himself.</p>	<p>Interviewer: Yes, this is the poster the students made. (pointing to the picture) Ara: It isn't perfect. No, no, no, I talked to the bilingual assistant about it.</p>
	<p>Traditional dish as the Kurdish flag. Red and green pepper, rice and a lemon shaped as the sun with 21 sun beams.</p>	<p>The flag is everywhere – also as food. The bilingual assistant points to a big bowl of food which – as she explains – symbolizes the Kurdish flag.</p>	<p>Nazdar: This one is done with the Kurdish flag. The blood is the Kurdish martyr. We want people to understand the meaning behind them [the colours].</p>

## **Multicultural School Festival as a Creative Space for Identity Construction – From a Minority Parent Perspective**

### **Abstract**

In this article, we explore how minority parents construct and promote cultural identities through a multicultural school event in Norway. Such events respond to the call for diverse and inclusive initiatives to facilitate learning, belonging, and cohesion in schools. Interestingly, while schools see these events as helping further inclusion, prior research on the subject has criticized such events for promoting essentialist understandings of cultural identities, hence regarding them as counterproductive to the aim of promoting inclusion. This research has directed scarce attention to the participant perspective, among them minority parents. Using the stall of the Kurdish parents as an example, we conducted fieldwork applying the method of Linguistic Landscaping. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the parents asking questions about the festival and the meaning of the displayed representations in their stall. The findings indicate that the Kurdish parents involved view the event as an important space for creative construction of transnational and diasporic identities, as well as an opportunity for a minority group to strive for acceptance for its cause. We end the article by reflecting on the pedagogical potential in multicultural school events as tools for creating inclusive school practices.

### **Keywords**

multicultural school festivals

minority parents

diasporic identity

transnationalism

## Introduction

As a direct response to the increasingly diversified communities, many schools in Norway have developed pedagogical practices to promote international awareness, social cohesion and inclusion by arranging an international day, week or festival in various forms. Interestingly, while dominant theory-based research has traditionally criticized pedagogical initiatives of this kind, referring to multicultural school events as counterproductive to the aim of inclusion, more recent empirical studies have presented a more nuanced picture. By telling the stories of the participants, this research describes the same events as treasured and valuable. Researchers have specifically asserted that these events promote participation, trustful relationships and sense of belonging, indicating that multicultural school events could be creative spaces for identity construction.

Recognizing the greater complexity in multicultural school events and the need for more in-depth studies on participant experiences, our research team set out to explore a multicultural school festival in a Norwegian primary school where minority groups, especially minority parents, appear as key stakeholders. More specifically, in this article, we report on a study of one of the prominent minority groups at the festival, the Kurds, who are typically characterized as a minority group with transnational and diasporic identity (cf. Wahlbeck 1999). Using the Kurdish parents as an example, we ask how transnational and diasporic identities are being constructed during a multicultural school festival. The present study contributes to nuancing the critical research in the field by telling the stories of a selection of parents, thereby also highlighting the pedagogical potential in these events.

## Prior Research on the Subject Matter

Critics primarily argue that multicultural school events are based on essentialist concepts of culture. According to these critics, rather than stimulating reflexivity, critical thinking, self-awareness, and transformative learning, such events do exactly the opposite. This is

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3 particularly true of multicultural school festivals, which Diane Hoffmann (1996, 565) called  
4 “hallway multiculturalism,” stating that these events reveal that “we really do not know how  
5 to do multiculturalism in schools” (p. 565). From the Norwegian context, Kamil Øzerk (2008,  
6 223) has used the term “festivalization” when speaking of the same events, criticizing them as  
7 promoting stereotypical images of us and them and as establishing rigid categories of what is  
8 normal and what is exotic. Obviously, from the perspective of critical theory within  
9 multicultural education research (e.g. Banks 1988, McLaren 1995, Sleeter 1991, Donald and  
10 Rattansi 1992, Troyna 1993), these events become easy targets.

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20 In a previous study on an “international week” in a primary school conducted by  
21 members of our research group, essentialist traits were found, thereby confirming the critics’  
22 arguments. However, the study delved more deeply into the perspectives of the school  
23 leadership, the teachers, the students, and the parents, and the authors concluded that the  
24 international week was experienced as “a powerful social space where constructions of new  
25 identities take place” (Author 1, Author 2, Colleague and Author 3, xxxx). Being well aware  
26 of the criticism from the research field, the school’s principal remained steadfast, claiming  
27 “the international week is a symptom of what the school is all about,” as it serves to establish  
28 “a common understanding of the school as a multicultural school. Students get to know each  
29 other across classes, groups, and language. Something positive is happening. It makes us  
30 uplifted and happy!” (p. 484). This empirical study aims to go further into what “is  
31 happening,” in this particular case, to better understand the multicultural school festival as a  
32 space for identity construction.

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48 To our knowledge, there are no studies on multicultural school events highlighting the  
49 issue of participant identity construction. If we go outside the pedagogical sphere and broaden  
50 the scope to multicultural community festivals, which have grown in popularity during the  
51 last 20 years both domestically and abroad, the research remains surprisingly limited.

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3 However, being part of what is being characterized as a global phenomenon, referred to as the  
4 “festivalization of culture” (Woodward, Bennett, and Taylor 2014), some important studies  
5 have emerged. One important study is Michelle Duffy’s (2005) “Performing Identity within a  
6 Multicultural Framework,” which from an Australian context brings attention to the  
7 multicultural music festival as a place for “cultural practice ... in which fluid and complex  
8 meanings are generated” (p. 686). As one of the first to highlight the experiences of  
9 individuals’ identity construction, Duffy challenged the research field’s primary orientation  
10 towards the communal aspects of multicultural festivals (economic, social and political).  
11 Other relevant examples are Insun Lee’s (2015) visitor-benefit perspective from a South  
12 Korean context and McClinchey’s (2017) study on performers’ emotive and sensuous  
13 experiences during two Canadian multicultural festivals. Although being outside the  
14 pedagogical sphere, these studies draw attention to the importance of studying multicultural  
15 events from the participant perspective.

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31 Finally, on the specific issue of Kurdish transnationalism and diaspora, it is interesting to  
32 note the contribution of several empirical studies from the Nordic context during the last two  
33 decades, particularly associated with the works of Östen Wahlbeck (Alinia et al. 2014,  
34 Wahlbeck 2002, 1999). In this article, we draw theoretically from these studies. Underlining  
35 that our primary aim is to deepen our understanding of multicultural school events as potential  
36 spaces for identity construction, we assert that our study should also be relevant for the  
37 ongoing sociology- and anthropology-based discussion about Kurdish transnational and  
38 diasporic identity.

### 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 **Theoretical Perspectives on Diaspora, Transnationalism and Representation**

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51 In recent years, the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism have become increasingly  
52 utilized among academics and others to understand contemporary societal changes due to  
53 growth in migration and processes of globalization (Dufoix 2017, Vertovec 2009). As  
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3 Vertovec (2009, p. 2) has noted, it is no coincidence that the increased interest in diaspora and  
4 transnationalism parallels the growth of interest in migration and globalization. While  
5 migration implies that many people have been forced to move from their home and cannot  
6 return for fear of persecution, globalization has entailed an increased interdependence and  
7 interconnectedness of people and countries. The concept of diaspora understood as groups  
8 who are dispersed from their homelands, often traumatically, therefore fits well with the  
9 transnational commitments and connections that immigrant communities attempt to maintain  
10 to their homeland and to similar immigrant communities in other countries of settlement.  
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20         However, although the concepts are related and may overlap, current understandings of  
21 diaspora and transnationalism often suffer from conflation, even with terms like *minority* and  
22 *migration* (Bhatia and Ram 2009, 145, Vertovec 2009, 128, Tölölyan 1996, 3). All of these  
23 terms are interlinked, but each encompasses specific processes of cultural transformation.  
24 Moreover, scholars have tended to over-use the term *diaspora* in order to explain a variety of  
25 research interests. As early as the mid-1990s, the editor of the academic journal *Diaspora*,  
26 Khachig Tölölyan (1996, 3), noted that the “discursive change in the three past decades has  
27 increased both the number of global diasporas and the range and diversity of the new semantic  
28 domains that the term ‘diaspora’ inhabits”. The overuse as well as the insufficient study of the  
29 concept has lead Vertovec (2009, 132) to state that the descriptive usefulness of the term has  
30 been threatened. Thus, in the following we turn to a focused discussion on how diaspora and  
31 transnationalism can be better understood, and how we will apply these terms in our study.  
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46         *Diaspora* derives from the two Greek words *δια* (*dia*: across) and *σπείρω* (*speiro*: to  
47 sow), namely “to spread across,” “to scatter” or “to disperse.” Historically, the term may refer  
48 to different historical displacements and national catastrophes, like Babylonian captivity for  
49 the Jews, slavery for the Africans, massacres and deportation for the Armenians, and the  
50 Palestinian displacement during the formation of the state of Israel (Cohen 2008, 4).  
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3 However, the Jewish experiences of living both voluntarily and involuntarily outside of  
4 Palestine has had significant impact on the understanding of the concept. As Vertovec (2009,  
5 130) noted, “the overall Jewish history of displacement has embodied the long-standing,  
6 conventional meaning of diaspora”. Hence, the contemporary use of *diaspora* carries a sense  
7 of dispersion of people from their homeland and is closely associated with suffering, loss and  
8 unwilling separation. Moreover, scholars have emphasized at least three rather different ways  
9 of using the concept, which all have their root in the Jewish diasporic experience (cf. Dufoix  
10 2017; Vertovec 2009). First, the concept may refer to the scattering of people away from a  
11 geographical territory. Second, it relates to the community of people that lives outside of the  
12 home country. Third, it applies to the actual places where the dispersed communities are  
13 settled.  
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17 While these distinctions contribute to strengthen the term’s descriptive usefulness, Robin  
18 Cohen (2008, 17) has suggested a set of features that may be helpful to clarify the concept  
19 further. He acknowledged that the history of the Jews will always be the starting point for a  
20 reflection on diaspora. However, it is also necessary to transcend the Jewish experiences.  
21 Expansion of the meaning of the term *diaspora* thus highlights what may be said to be  
22 common traits of identity for those communities sharing an experience of diaspora (cf. also  
23 Vertovec 2009, 133). Cohen (2008, 17) established that a diaspora first involves the dispersal  
24 from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign places. For the  
25 dispersed groups, this means that they often develop collective memories and myths about the  
26 place of origin. This includes the idealization of location, national figures, history and  
27 achievements. Furthermore, the groups will often strive for legitimacy of their cause within  
28 the countries of settlement, based on a strong consciousness of common fate, history and  
29 beliefs for the group. Finally, the sharing of a diasporic existence will often trigger a  
30 creativeness, particularly in tolerant host countries, giving the groups an opportunity to  
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3 construct and define their historical experiences and to reinvent traditions like cultural and  
4 religious narratives, folktales, dances, songs and food (Cohen 2008, 17). Experiences of  
5 diaspora will thus be constitutive for the way the group and the individuals understand  
6 themselves and the relation to others as well as to the homeland.  
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11 Cohen (2008, 103) explained that “it is not invariably true that diasporas require  
12 homelands in a strict territorial sense, though they normally include a notion of ‘homeland’ or  
13 a looser idea of ‘home’ in their collective myths or aspirations”. The diasporic notion of  
14 homeland may thus be understood as an idea, referring to a real or imagined place. Thus, it is  
15 the actual dislocation and relocation in relation to an idea of a homeland that characterizes the  
16 diaspora (Wahlbeck 2002).  
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24 These clarifications on diasporic identities lead us to the concept of *transnationalism*.  
25 According to Vertovec (2009, 2), transnationalism refers to the increasing changes in “cross-  
26 border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations” that characterize  
27 multicultural communities throughout Norway as well as in the rest of Europe. In this way,  
28 the concept clearly differs from diaspora the way we have elaborated it above. However, the  
29 actual ongoing communication and exchange of ideas and resources make the concept highly  
30 relevant for understanding the processes where diasporic identities are developed and formed.  
31 The concept of diaspora is therefore closely related to processes of transnational relations,  
32 social organization, and formations of communities connected to the experiences of  
33 displacement (Wahlbeck 2002). Moreover, as we will show, the concept of transnationalism  
34 also highlights that a territorial place, such as Kurdistan, is not an internationally recognized  
35 sovereign country, but exists as an idea of a homeland comprising Kurdish people from four  
36 different states.  
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52 Vertovec (2009, 3) stated that “new technologies, especially involving  
53 telecommunications, serve to connect [...] networks with increasing speed and efficiency”.  
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3 Thus, according to Vertovec, transnationalism portrays the evolvement of interconnections  
4 and relationships between people, beyond the boundaries of nation-states. For individuals  
5 sharing experiences of diaspora, new technologies make it possible to maintain closer and  
6 more frequent contact, connecting oneself with others and reshaping the memory of the place  
7 of origin. With reference to Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, Vertovec (2009, 6)  
8 noted that diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory, yet these memories are often  
9 fractured and must be reconstructed. Transnationalism understood as the ongoing exchanges  
10 of information, knowledge and resources thus represents a possibility for rebuilding a  
11 common diasporic identity.  
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22 Thus, as transnationalism refers to the significance of information and communication  
23 technologies for interaction across national borders, it also includes the actual identity  
24 formation of people living their lives across international borders (Shaker 2018). An example  
25 is the Kurdish population with backgrounds from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey who share a  
26 collective fragmented memory of a territory that they have a vision of reclaiming in the  
27 future. For the Kurdish diaspora, this means that transnational ties are shaped and reshaped,  
28 not only between the home and the host countries, but also between individuals from different  
29 nation states. Transnationalism thus captures the space in which cross-border social formation  
30 and identity construction operates.  
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41 Below, we present and analyse how such transnational diasporic identities are constructed  
42 in a particular educational context like a multicultural school festival. More specifically, we  
43 direct our empirical gaze towards the values and meanings that are negotiated and performed  
44 by a selection of the Kurdish participants through representations of heritage. Drawing on  
45 Blackledge, Creese, and Hu (2016, 8), we understand heritage “as the performance and  
46 negotiation of identity, values and sense of place”. Heritage is thus a process “in which social  
47 and cultural values, meanings, understandings about both the past and present are worked out,  
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2 inspected, considered, rejected, embraced, or transformed” (Blackledge, Creese, and Hu 2016,  
3 9). Accordingly, representations like food, costumes, craft, music and dance, are imbued with  
4 history, identity and continuity (Blackledge, Creese, and Hu 2016, Hall 1997). Rather than  
5 being static representations of the past, they are resources from the past, bringing past into  
6 present and future (Deumert 2018). In our research, the study of representations allows us to  
7 explore the values and meanings expressed by the Kurdish parents. The representations are  
8 symbols or semiotic signs of values and meanings, linking the participants’ past, present and  
9 future.  
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12 The selection of representations made by the participants is not neutral, however. Rather,  
13 the process of taking up certain resources must be understood in light of the specific diasporic  
14 situation of the Kurdish community (cf. Blackledge, Creese, and Hu 2016). Moreover, the  
15 interconnections and relationships between people in a transnational era provide a possibility  
16 for choosing, preserving and transmitting representations as symbols of identity. We would  
17 therefore argue for a close interrelation between the concepts of diaspora, transnationalism,  
18 and representations.  
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### 20 21 22 **The Study’s Design and Methods**

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24 The research project is a qualitative study of a single case (Stake 2010), bounded in time and  
25 place, and designed to optimize the understanding of that case. We explored an international  
26 week at a primary school in Norway in a municipality with 12.5% immigrants and  
27 Norwegian-born to immigrants, which is just below the national average of 13.8% (Statistics  
28 Norway 2017). The school aims at developing pedagogies for culturally and linguistically  
29 diverse classrooms, through efforts such as their annual international week. In another  
30 publication, we reported on the international week more in general (Author 1 et al. xxxx).  
31 Here, we concentrate on the two-hour-long multicultural festival organized in a sports hall  
32 connected to the school at the end of the international week (see also Colleague and Author 2  
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3 xxxx), and more specifically on the Kurdish stall. The multicultural festival is the climax of  
4 that week and attracts children and parents belonging to the school, representatives from the  
5 municipality's school department, government officials such as the mayor, relatives and  
6 acquaintances from minority families, and even ethnic minority associations such as the  
7 county's Kurdish association. Parents are encouraged to bring traditional dishes, national  
8 costumes and other artefacts from their countries of origin and engage in a dance performance  
9 with their children. Before the festival starts, the parent board sets up a stall for each nation,  
10 40 in total, hangs up posters created by the students, and fixes up tables for food and artefacts.  
11 During the festival, participants walk from stall to stall, taste food and mingle. The festival  
12 ends with a performance, where parents and children show their national costumes on the  
13 catwalk, play traditional music and engage in traditional dance.

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27 The Kurdish stall is interesting for two reasons. First, the Kurdish parents had put  
28 considerable effort in their stall compared to the participants in other stalls. In addition to  
29 serving typical dishes and dressing in traditional costumes, one of the parents, who is also the  
30 local leader of the Kurdish Cultural Society, contributed postcards, books and self-made  
31 information sheets on Kurdish culture. In addition, other Kurds had travelled several hours to  
32 participate in the festival. Thus, the multicultural festival appeared particularly important for  
33 the Kurds. Second, as the Kurds are dispersed from their homeland and thus live in diaspora,  
34 the Kurdish parents are particularly interesting with regard to the issue of identity  
35 construction. In the event, they showed transnational commitment as they attempted to  
36 maintain their connection to their homeland in their new host country.

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48 The collection of the material for this article was inspired by linguistic landscaping (LL)  
49 in an ethnographic tradition. Traditionally, LL studies have focused on linguistic signs such as  
50 posters, sales texts in shop windows and signposts. Over the last three decades, a broader  
51 perspective with roots in interdisciplinary work in semiotics (e.g. Barthes 1985) has emerged,  
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3 now also including other semiotic modes such as images, artefacts, poems, maps, and signage  
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5 (Shohamy and Waksman 2009). Jan Blommaert (2013) has emphasized that LL holds both a  
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7 descriptive and an analytical potential. In descriptive terms, LL goes beyond people's social  
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9 behaviour as it considers the physical spaces in which these people dwell and leave their  
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11 mark. Analytically, these physical spaces are perceived as social, cultural and political spaces.  
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13 As Blommaert (2013, 3, italics in original) stated, "a space [...] is never no-man's land, but  
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15 always *somebody's* space; a *historical* space, therefore full of codes, expectations, norms and  
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17 traditions; a space of *power* controlled by, as well as controlling, people." LL thus becomes a  
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19 diagnostic tool of social, cultural and political structures inscribed in the semiotic space under  
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21 scrutiny. In this article, we consider the investigation of the semiotic landscape in a  
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23 multicultural festival to be fruitful to exploring transnational diasporic representations of  
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25 identity. That is, we view participation in a multicultural festival as a social action in which  
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27 Kurdish participants exercise identity construction and agency in engaging in representing  
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29 their homeland.  
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33 In terms of data, as part of a larger fieldwork, the team observed approximately three  
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35 hours, that is, the multicultural festival as well as a half an hour before and after. We wrote  
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37 field notes, took pictures of semiotic signs, and video recorded the performance. In addition,  
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39 we had many field conversations with participants during the event and conducted semi-  
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41 structured interviews with two representatives of the Kurdish stall about the event and the  
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43 signs six weeks later. One of them was a Kurdish mother, whom we call Nazdar, who had a  
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45 special responsibility for the Kurdish stall this year. The other was the leader of the Kurdish  
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47 Cultural Society for the county, whom we call Ara. The school's bilingual Kurdish assistant  
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49 helped us establish contact with both representatives prior to the fieldwork and acted as a  
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51 translator between Nazdar and us when necessary. During the interviews, we asked general  
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53 questions about their role in the multicultural festival, before asking them to comment on a  
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3 selection of pictures and video recordings taken during the festival. Both interviews were  
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5 transcribed, and when necessary translated into English. For this article, we draw on the  
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7 pictures related to the Kurdish stall (25 in total), mainly capturing signs of culture, language,  
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9 religion, and nations as well as of the stall as a whole, and on the video recording from the  
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11 performance. Equally important are our field notes and transcripts from the interviews with  
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13 the Kurdish representatives.  
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16 Data analysis took place in two stages. In the first phase, we made an overview of the  
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18 representations (semiotic signs) specifically connected to the Kurdish stall based on our visual  
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20 data (Blommaert 2013, 50–62). In the second phase, we added layers of complexity to the  
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22 signs by drawing on field notes and interview transcripts. We created a Word document with  
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24 four columns. In the first column, we pasted a picture of a cultural, linguistic, religious and/or  
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26 national sign. We used the second column for our own notes, the third for field notes, and the  
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28 fourth for conversations and transcripts from the interview with the Kurdish parents. Here are  
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30 two examples:  
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36 *Figure 1.* Example of analysis.  
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39 Our analyses were guided by abduction (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2017), which meant that we  
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41 continuously oscillated between our data and theoretical concepts. Each member of the team  
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43 did a first analysis which was then presented and jointly discussed by the team. Guided by our  
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45 theoretical framework, two core themes with regard to the Kurds' identity construction stood  
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47 out, namely, inward identity construction consolidating the Kurdish diasporic community and  
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49 outward identity construction when striving for acceptance for their cause. These core themes  
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51 will be further elaborated and discussed below (see section 5).  
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3 Fieldwork designs are open and responsive to the contingency of the context, which  
4 makes research ethics a continual concern (Copland and Creese 2015, Fangen 2010). The  
5 project has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Ethnic, political and  
6 religious affiliations are generally regarded as sensitive information, and thus also in this  
7 study. Both key participants were informed about the aims of the study prior to the data  
8 collection and signed forms of consent, including permission to interview and observe them,  
9 as well as take pictures of cultural artefacts during the festival. This consent was orally  
10 renewed during data collection. The Kurds participating in the dance performance gave their  
11 oral consent through the bilingual assistant to be video recorded. In order to secure  
12 confidentiality, we asked both key participants to choose pseudonyms for publication, and we  
13 have chosen not to describe the locality of the school in detail.

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Doing research that involves the production of knowledge about Kurds and Kurdistan, the  
question of independent critical research became particularly important to the study. As the  
Kurdish conflict is highly politicized and conditioned by practices of nation-building, we were  
aware of the fact that Kurdish nationalists may underplay the ethnic heterogeneity of  
Kurdistan and that researchers run the risk of being spokesmen of Kurdish nationalism. In our  
study, however, we believe to have accounted for this risk by continuously discussing issues  
of independence and critical distance when collecting and interpreting the data. Moreover, the  
primary focus of the study has been descriptive, that is to describe the construction of  
transnational diasporic identities at a school festival, using the Kurdish participants as an  
example. This implies that questions of whether Kurdistan should be recognized as an  
independent entity lies beyond the scope of this article.

### **Restructuring a Collective Memory**

In this part of the study, we focus on the constructions of parents' identity at the multicultural  
school festival. More specifically, we identify how the Kurds at the festival contributed to the

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3 creation of a collective memory which took form as an inward and outward construction of  
4 identity among the participants. As emphasized in the elaboration on diasporic identities,  
5 experiences of exile, dispersion and loss are often a resource for mobilization. According to  
6  
7 Cohen (2008, 17), the tension between national, transnational and ethnic identities often  
8  
9 makes the diasporic identity a creative one. To recognize the “positive virtues of retaining a  
10 diasporic identity” (Cohen 2008, 7) will thus be to draw attention to how the Kurdish diaspora  
11 mobilizes a collective identity by restoring fragmented memories.  
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18 In the further analysis, we explore how this collection and displaying of fragments relates  
19 to the reconstruction of a collective memory. As we will show, this mobilization of Kurdish  
20 identity is not restricted to the consolidation of the Kurdish community in the host country or  
21 to co-ethnic Kurds in other countries. The restoration of a collective memory is also important  
22 for the participants striving for acceptance for their cause in the wider society. In this way, the  
23 construction of identity at the multicultural school festival is both an inward and an outward  
24 process.  
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### 33 ***Inward Identity Construction – Consolidating the Kurdish Diasporic Community***

34 From the outset, the festival’s many stalls where minority parents were present appeared  
35 retrospective in its approach. The primary aim seemed to be to confirm long established  
36 national and ethnic customs through traditional dishes, handicrafts and folk costumes. To  
37 illustrate, when Nazdar spoke of *dolma*, a stuffed vegetable dish highly appreciated among  
38 Kurds, she said: “We inherited it from our forefathers.” Shortly afterwards, however, she  
39 linked *dolma* to the present, continuing: “If you don’t have this food, you are not counted as  
40 Kurds, totally! You know we hear this very often.” Obviously, *dolma* is not just any food, nor  
41 does it represent just an exotic, historic curiosity with fixed meanings of content, as suggested  
42 by critics of multicultural school festivals (Hoffman 1996; Øzerk 2008). Rather, it serves as a  
43 dynamic and unifying representation for Kurds in diaspora. Furthermore, *dolma* marks a clear  
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3 demarcation between Kurds and those “not counted as Kurds.” One should note, however,  
4 that *dolma* is not perceived as an exclusive Kurdish dish but a well-known part of the Middle  
5 Eastern cuisine. More precisely, as it unifies Kurds with origin from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and  
6 Syria, *dolma* reflects Kurdish transnational origin. For the Kurdish parents at the festival,  
7 therefore, *dolma* seems to perfectly serve a consolidating role for Kurds in the diaspora, as a  
8 manifestation of the link between the historic home, whether that is in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, or  
9 Syria, and the homeland idea of transnational Kurdistan.  
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18 The folk costumes with matching accessories (jewelry in particular) played a similar role  
19 at the festival. Even more so than with *dolma*, the folk costumes appeared as visible  
20 representations of the Kurds’ transnational origin. Nazdar explained: “Well, there are  
21 differences, different styles. Like, for instance, this one is mine [pointing at a picture]. It is  
22 from Kurdistan [i.e., Northern Iraq]. That one is from Iran. Kurdish people in Iran use that  
23 style. The other style is from Kurdistan Turkey.” Again, a clear demarcation was made, as  
24 Nazdar continued: “People who are with me never ask [about my origin], in any Kurdish  
25 occasions. They are clever, and they know where others come from.” More precisely, a  
26 demarcation is made between those who “know” and those who do not “know”, the latter later  
27 spoken of as “strangers” or more specifically as “Arabic,” as “someone [i.e., a non-Kurd]  
28 from Iran or Turkey.” As objects evoking national and ethnic consciousness (Cohen 2008,  
29 17), the folk costumes appeared as particular powerful means for consolidating the Kurdish  
30 diasporic community.  
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46 Throughout the festival, the most visible and prominent representation was the Kurdish  
47 flag. The flag was everywhere, used to decorate food and handicrafts (see Figure 1), to cover  
48 one of the main walls of the stall, to illustrate information posters made by students and, not  
49 least, to serve as the centrepiece artefact for the Kurds performing on stage. Thus, appearing  
50 in various creative forms, the flag functioned as a representation that consolidated a collective  
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3 memory (cf. Cohen 2008; Vertovec 2009), a memory which in particular emphasized the  
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5 Kurds' many historic and present sacrifices, "the blood of the martyrs," as Nazdar put it when  
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7 pointing at the red color of the flag.  
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9 Giving the nature of the flag as a symbol, it has an obvious outward side. Being aware of  
10  
11 the formal status of Kurdistan, the flag appears as the foremost symbol of their cause: the  
12  
13 struggle for a homeland and an independent state. According to Cohen, an important feature  
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15 of diasporic identity is the effort made to gain acceptance for their cause (Cohen 2008, 17).  
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17 As we will see in the following, this is certainly true for the Kurds at the multicultural festival.  
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### 22 ***Outward Identity Construction – Striving for Acceptance for Their Cause***

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24 In preparation for the multicultural school festival, a group of grade 5–7 students in the school  
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26 had made a large poster in Norwegian with facts and pictures for each stall. With regard to the  
27  
28 poster portraying Kurdistan, the students had glued a sheet of paper with six facts on  
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30 Kurdistan in the middle. In addition, they included a world map indicating Kurdistan, the  
31  
32 Kurdish flag, and four pictures symbolizing the capital Hawler, people in national costumes,  
33  
34 Kurdish New Year, and a landscape, respectively (see Figure 1). This poster may be found to  
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36 portray Kurdistan and Kurdish culture as bounded and stable entities, in line with the critique  
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38 of the research literature (Hoffman 1996; Øzerk 2008). However, the choices will never be  
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40 neutral, but rather embedded in larger societal discourses. Ara was unhappy with the poster,  
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42 something he voiced to one of the members of the research team.  
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46 In the follow-up interview, he repeated that "it [the poster] wasn't perfect," adding that he  
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48 had confronted the bilingual assistant who had explained that it was the students' work. The  
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50 poster stated that Kurdistan was situated in northern Iraq, "which isn't true," according to Ara.  
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52 He also disagreed with what was written about the Kurdish language, indicating that it was  
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54 more complicated than consisting of three dialects, and he argued that *kulicha* is not a cake  
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3 but a kind of bread. He concluded, “I’ve talked to them about it.” Nazdar first asserted that the  
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5 poster was “perfect” before nuancing:

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7 ...but if you focus on the picture, you’ll find this is the part of Kurdistan that we came  
8  
9 from, the mountain area, and I’m sure that they will make better and bigger things next  
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11 year. [...] but if they told me before I could at least show better things, [...] like  
12  
13 waterfalls in Kurdistan.  
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15 For people living in diaspora, collecting memories and myths from the homeland is important,  
16  
17 often idealizing locations, national figures, history and achievements (Cohen 2008; Vertovec  
18  
19 2009). It is clear that it was important to Nazdar and Ara which fragments of the collective  
20  
21 memory of Kurdistan were chosen for the multicultural school festival. Nazdar’s wish to have  
22  
23 a picture of waterfalls rather than the mountain area also illustrates that the landscape serves  
24  
25 as an important point of cultural reference, envisioning an ideal, romantic image of what  
26  
27 constitutes their identity. Ara had not been aware that the students would make a poster.  
28  
29 Instead, he had displayed nine sheets of paper in plastic sleeves on one of the stall’s walls.  
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31 Each paper had information on Kurdistan printed in Norwegian. During the interview, he  
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33 explained that he used the sheets in the annual *Newroz* (Kurdish New Years) celebration at a  
34  
35 local museum. Even though the sheets were event-related signs, the plastic sleeves and the  
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37 fact that they were printed gave them certain permanence. Their function was to recruit  
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39 participants to the stand and inform them about Kurdistan, that is, about the food, language,  
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41 religion, flag, map and core values. The use of the Norwegian language gave them a wide  
42  
43 semiotic scope, potentially targeting and including a broad audience, since Norwegian was the  
44  
45 lingua franca (common language) of the event. Blommaert (2013, 47) argued that signs in an  
46  
47 event raise questions about agency. We will claim that through Ara’s additional information  
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49 sheets, the Kurdish community was able to mobilize a strong collective, agentive identity (cf.  
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51 Cohen 2008).  
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3 The Kurdish community's striving for legitimacy was visible not only in the signs, but  
4 also in their practices during the event. Before the festival ended, Ara asked the parent in  
5 charge of the performance if he and the mayor could speak to the participants. In our field  
6 notes, we recorded:  
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12 Ara and the mayor are in deep conversation before entering the stage. Ara starts by  
13 saying that the municipality is diverse and colourful, and so is the school. The  
14 multicultural festival is organized every year, and multicultural parents contribute with  
15 food, dance songs, and cultural materials. Multiculturalism is an enrichment for the  
16 municipality and for the school. Ara ends by saying: "I wish to say something about  
17 the fight against IS. Kurdish military forces called Peshmerga fight hard against IS  
18 [Islamic State]. Thanks to Peshmerga who stopped the power expansion of IS.  
19 Peshmerga fight for the security of the world community, for safety, democracy and  
20 freedom." When Ara has finished talking, the mayor addresses the audience by saying  
21 that the school does great work with regard to multicultural education. People clap,  
22 and not much later participants start taking down their stuff and leave the hall.  
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36 As the field note illustrates, Ara used the opportunity to praise the municipality and the school  
37 for their work and multicultural profile, again connecting to the host country. However, he  
38 also praised Kurdish military forces for battling against IS and contributing to the security,  
39 safety, democracy and freedom of the world community. Linking the municipality and the  
40 school to the Kurdish forces was not only a powerful statement which equated the work of  
41 municipality, the school and Peshmerga, but also a political statement and an idealization of  
42 Peshmerga's achievements as a resistance movement (cf. Cohen 2008, 17). Contrary to this,  
43 during the interview, Ara emphasized that the multicultural festival was not a place for  
44 politics and conflict: "[It is] important to put it [politics and conflict] on the shelf and be  
45 together and show your culture, integration and inclusion. [...] And forget the past with  
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3 different nations at war. Solidarity.” When we asked about his relationship to people from  
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5 Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria in the event, he replied, “We shouldn’t talk about why with that  
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7 person from Iran. [...]. That’s forbidden at school that day. I don’t want to talk to about it  
8  
9 with him, and hurt him, because he’s a refugee just like me.” An important aspect of diaspora  
10  
11 to Cohen (Cohen 2008, 7) is mobilization of a collective identity in terms of a solidarity with  
12  
13 co-ethnic members in other countries. Here, however, we see how Ara built solidarity with  
14  
15 co-refugees in similar diaspora situations, what can be framed as a cosmopolitan  
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17 consciousness. The restoration of a collective memory also seemed to include a global  
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19 solidarity with other participants at the festival with experiences of displacement and  
20  
21 transnational existence.  
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24 In summary, the displayed and performed cultural artefacts were inward-oriented, as  
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26 means that in different creative ways linked the historic home of Kurds to the present  
27  
28 diasporic experience and the idea of homeland Kurdistan. In terms of outward identity  
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30 construction, an analysis of the representations shows that the representatives of the Kurdish  
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32 community appeared to be self-confident and able to mobilize a collective identity. The  
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34 festival was used to inform participants about Kurdish culture, but also about their battle for  
35  
36 an independent state and values such as solidarity and democracy. They sought further  
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38 legitimacy by connecting semiotic signs and values to multicultural work done in the  
39  
40 municipality and in school. Thus, it becomes more comprehensible why the Kurdish  
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42 participants spoke so warmly and enthusiastically about the festival, stating that it was “very  
43  
44 important” and “something big for everybody” as well as representing “a great day for all  
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46 Kurds.” Obviously, for these parents, the festival represented an important opportunity to  
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48 express Kurdish identity.  
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### Concluding Remarks

In this article, we set out to explore how a multicultural school festival becomes a space for transnational and diasporic identity construction, using Kurdish parents as an example. As noted earlier, previous research on multicultural school events has been theory-driven and sceptical. Our empirical study nuances this criticism. For the Kurdish parents involved, the festival appeared as a creative space that at times even challenged the perceived and unwritten code of not promoting political content, thus reflecting a strong sense of agency.

With regard to the construction of diasporic identities, the sense of loss created by the traumatic experiences of being forced from their homeland formed a strong connection between the participants. First, it created a commitment to reconstruct a collective memory of fragmented traditions and pass it along to future generations. For the parents, it was important to create a sense of belonging to the Kurdish group using representations of collected heritage. Second, experiences of loss led the participants to strive for a wider acceptance for the Kurdish cause, which in the study took form as an outward-oriented appearance. Although the participants were clear that the school event was a non-political arena, the festival provided a space for the participants to reach out to the Norwegian society and to relate the Kurdish political struggle for independence to a solidarity with other refugees living with similar experiences. While construction of inward identity accommodated the Kurdish participants to life in exile, outward identity mobilized global sympathy for the dream of ending it (Gabaccia 2003). Hence, we will claim that the present study displays a complexity of identity constructions at the multicultural school event, which prior research largely has overlooked.

In order to promote such events as arenas for international awareness, social cohesion and inclusion, schools need to be aware of and address the complex content and functions that multicultural events may hold. As a matter of encouraging the polyphony of participant voices controversial issues should not be silenced. As we have seen in this study, being Kurdish at

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2  
3 the multicultural school festival was for one of the parents also about presenting a political  
4 message, striving for acceptance for a cause. For schools to acknowledge this part of outward  
5 identity construction may contribute to evoking the invigorating, imaginative, and  
6  
7 empowering sides of a multicultural event, hence addressing the criticism of such events as  
8  
9 superficial, harmonizing and apolitical (Hoffman 1996, Øzerk 2008). As critics of such events  
10  
11 have argued, focusing on the presentation and acquisition of lexical information about  
12  
13 different cultures may easily lead to essentialist conceptions and strengthen stereotypes and  
14  
15 prejudices. For schools, the pedagogical potential thus lies in elaborating interactions and  
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17 encounters at the festival, allowing the participants to attend with different voices and  
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19 different ways of representing their nations of origin.  
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24 Finally, parents are central actors in these events. Future research should further examine  
25  
26 multicultural events from the perspectives of children and young people who are a core target  
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28 group and who may hold different views than their parents. Important issues to explore would  
29  
30 be how they construct identities and learn at the events, and how they reflect on culture,  
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32 language, religion and nation as matters of identity construction and learning.  
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### 37 **Declarations of interest:**

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39 Declarations of interest: none.  
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