

Research Article



Reframing Childhood: How Language, Kinship, and Multilingual Multigenerational Socialization Shape the Emirati Child

إعادة تصور الطفولة: كيف تُشكّل اللغة وروابط القرابة والتنشئة الاجتماعية متعددة اللغات وعبر الأجيال هوية الطفل الإماراتي

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Abstract

This paper challenges the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) monoculture in developmental science by investigating language socialization in a vastly understudied context: young Emirati children in the United Arab Emirates. Employing a linguistic ethnographic approach with 20 families, the study reveals a collective, multigenerational model of caregiving that starkly contrasts with nuclear-family-centric norms. Findings demonstrate that extended kin, including grandparents and older siblings, are central agents of socialization. Children are apprenticed into their linguistic and cultural heritage through culturally significant spaces like the *majlis* or other gatherings, and navigate a complex ecology of Modern Standard Arabic, local Emirati dialects, tribal dialects, and English. The study argues that this "multi-voiced" process effectively prepares children for local and global participation. It concludes that developmental science must abandon WEIRD-based assumptions as a universal standard and calls for policies and practices that are grounded in the Emirati child's lived reality, validating extended family structures and multilingualism as strengths.

الملخص

تتحدى هذه الدراسة النزعة الأحادية في علم النمو المرتبطة بنموذج WEIRD، من خلال استكشاف التنشئة اللغوية في سياق لا يزال يعاني من نقص شديد في البحث، وهو سياق الأطفال الإماراتيين في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وبالاعتماد على منهجية إثنوغرافية لغوية شملت ٢٠ أسرة، تكشف الدراسة عن نموذج جماعي ومتعدد الأجيال للرعاية، يتناقض بشكل واضح مع النماذج التي تركز على الأسرة النووية. تُظهر النتائج أن أفراد الأسرة الممتدة، بما في ذلك الأجداد والإخوة الأكبر سنًا، يشكلون عوامل أساسية في عملية التنشئة الاجتماعية. ويتم إدماج الأطفال في تراثهم اللغوي والثقافي من خلال فضاءات ذات دلالة ثقافية، مثل المجلس والتجمعات الاجتماعية الأخرى، حيث ينتقلون ضمن بيئة لغوية معقدة تشمل العربية الفصحى، واللهجات الإماراتية المحلية، واللهجات القبلية، اللغة الإنجليزية. وتبين الدراسة أن هذه العملية "متعددة الأصوات" تُسهم بفعالية في إعداد الأطفال للمشاركة على المستويين المحلي والعالمي. وتخلص إلى أن علم النمو بحاجة إلى تجاوز افتراضات نموذج WEIRD بوصفها معيارًا علميًا.

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وتدعو إلى تبني سياسات وممارسات تنطلق من الواقع المعيشي للطفل الإماراتي، مع الاعتراف بدور الأسرة الممتدة والتعدد اللغوي بوصفهما عنصرين من عناصر القوة.

Keywords: *Early childhood, Bilingual development, Caregiver-child interaction, Emirati families, Language socialization, Extended families*

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطفولة المبكرة، التطور الثنائي اللغة، التفاعل بين مقدم الرعاية والطفل، الأسر الإماراتية، التنشئة اللغوية، الأسر الممتدة

1. Introduction: Beyond the WEIRD Monoculture in Developmental Science

Research in early childhood development has long been shaped by an overly narrow empirical base, dominated by studies conducted in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. The term WEIRD, introduced by Henrich *et al.* (2010), captures the structural bias in developmental science, where the developmental trajectories of children in Western nuclear-family contexts have been elevated to the status of universal norms. As a result, developmental theories of language acquisition, cognition, and socialization remain disproportionately grounded in dyadic or small-group interactions between parents and children in Western households. This overrepresentation narrows theory and evidence, sidelining extended kinship systems, multilingual ecologies, and collective caregiving that characterize most children's worlds (Laing *et al.*, 2000; Punch, 2003).

This epistemic imbalance has serious scientific and ethical consequences. Global developmental theories, therefore, remain insufficiently tested in ecological contexts that differ markedly from WEIRD assumptions, while scholars based in the majority world face systemic challenges in publishing their work in high-impact journals, further entrenching the absence of diverse perspectives (Draper *et al.*, 2022; Hantrais *et al.*, 2020). Together, these factors reproduce an epistemic monoculture in which the realities of most of the world's children remain invisible to the scientific record. This article adopts Alam's (2008) "majority world¹" label to reflect the demographic reality that populations in Asia, Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Indigenous communities worldwide constitute the majority of humankind. As Henrich *et al.* (2010) argue, minority WEIRD contexts cannot be assumed to represent the behavior or development of the majority world; consequently, data derived from such contexts should not serve as the sole basis for theory-building, intervention design, or policy development in non-WEIRD populations. Systematically generated evidence from the majority world is therefore essential to advance a more inclusive and ecologically valid developmental science. This is not to deny the merit of such data, nor is it to say we do not need important, often crucial, information carefully and professionally sourced. Rather, this article responds to that call by contributing to the majority world dataset, documenting how Emirati children are socialized into their language, culture, and unique society from an early age.

Within this global landscape, the Arab region occupies a particularly underexplored position. Despite its rich sociolinguistic diversity, cultural heritage, and distinctive caregiving practices, research on early childhood development in Arab societies remains sparse. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) exemplifies this neglect; having undergone rapid economic transformation while maintaining deep cultural traditions, the UAE offers a unique developmental ecology in which children navigate the tensions between globalizing influences and strong local identities. Arabic remains central to cultural and religious life, yet English increasingly dominates in education, commerce, and public communication. The predominance of expatriates, who constitute over 88.53% of the population, with Emirati nationals representing only 11.47% (MOFA, 2026), further intensifies the multilingual and multicultural character of children's everyday experiences. As a result, children born into this context encounter linguistic and cultural conditions unlike those found elsewhere. While Arabic and English dominate language policies and linguistic landscapes, other languages circulate widely, exposing children not only to multiple linguistic systems but also to different ways of being. Yet scholarship has paid little attention to one crucial area of development: How Emirati children acquire language, whether Arabic alone or in conjunction with English, and how they negotiate identity within these complex conditions. This sustained absence produces a double erasure: Arab (specifically Emirati) children are missing from dominant theory, and kinship-based caregiving—central in Gulf societies—remains analytically peripheral.

Understanding Emirati children's early experiences has direct implications for practice and policy. For teachers and speech therapists, locally grounded data provides culturally appropriate benchmarks, reducing the risk of misinterpreting multilingual development as delay and supporting accurate assessment and intervention.

For language policymakers, such evidence can inform balanced policies that strengthen Arabic while supporting English proficiency within a multilingual ecology. For education consultants, early childhood policymakers, and families, recognizing kinship-based caregiving structures ensures that recommendations align with local traditions rather than imposing external nuclear-family models.

In Abu Dhabi, praiseworthy efforts have already been undertaken by the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority (ECA) to combat this gap by funding research in Abu Dhabi pertaining to early childhood. Established in 2019, it has already made important changes to children's lives in health and nutrition, digital worlds, and child protection, among other areas. The ECA is working toward the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Development Strategy 2035, which aims to create a holistic and integrated system for early childhood development across the emirate. Data from projects supported by the ECA are instrumental in creating locally relevant data that has a direct impact in a non-WEIRD setting.

Taken together, this knowledge empowers all stakeholders to design fairer assessments, more responsive interventions, and more inclusive policies. It allows professionals to move beyond applying external benchmarks and instead engage with Emirati children, who are multilingual, culturally grounded, and navigating complex developmental ecologies. By doing so, teachers, therapists, consultants,

policymakers, and families can better support children's growth while also contributing to a global body of knowledge that has long overlooked Arab societies.

A distinctive feature of Emirati family life is the multigenerational and collective caregiving structure that challenges the nuclear-family model implicit in most developmental research. Emirati children grow up in households where caregiving responsibilities are distributed among parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and, importantly, live-in domestic workers. These caregivers collectively create a rich and dynamic linguistic environment. Grandparents transmit oral traditions, religious narratives, and Emirati Arabic idioms; parents often navigate between Arabic and English depending on context; siblings introduce hybrid registers influenced by global youth culture; and domestic workers often use English as a lingua franca, and some children are additionally exposed to South and Southeast Asian languages in daily interaction. In such settings, multilingualism emerges organically through daily interaction rather than as a product of formal instruction.

This ecology of caregiving situates children within a broad spectrum of cultural and linguistic practices from birth. By the time they enter preschool, many Emirati children are already negotiating Emirati Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and English, while also being passively exposed to additional languages spoken by domestic workers. This study underscores the importance of recognizing extended caregiving networks as central to children's bilingual and bicultural development in the UAE and in comparable contexts. By highlighting UAE children's experiences, the article calls for early childhood models that reflect these unique characteristics when considering Emirati development. The following sections review the literature on language socialization (LS) and its role in understanding early childhood experiences, provide a critical assessment of current scholarship, and then outline the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. Ultimately, this article addresses the double erasure of Emirati children in developmental scholarship by documenting how language, kinship, and culture intersect to shape early development within this unique social ecology.

This study asks: What is the process of language socialization for the Emirati child today? Drawing on ethnographic data from 20 Emirati families, this article contributes (i) a theoretically informed challenge to WEIRD assumptions using a majority-world lens; (ii) original ethnographic evidence from 20 Emirati families in the UAE; and (iii) practice-relevant implications for assessment and policy in multilingual, kin-based caregiving ecologies.

2. Language Socialization (LS)

Understanding how Emirati children acquire language within extended kinship systems requires drawing on the concept of LS. The notion of LS is one that aptly captures how a child is apprenticed into the ways of behaving and being in their society. It is the idea that the child learns language and culture simultaneously, as opposed to language first and then culture, as was previously envisaged. In the early

80s, two pioneering researchers, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin, changed the way we understood how children learned language (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). They introduced LS as a fundamental process through which children develop not only linguistic skills but also the sociocultural competencies required to become functioning members of their community. The authors argue that early development is not a passive reception of knowledge, but an active, culturally mediated process deeply embedded in everyday interactions with family and caregivers.

Early development is deeply shaped by local ideologies and practices, making locally produced knowledge essential for understanding children's growth. The authors challenged the universality of "child-directed speech" (baby talk), demonstrating that in communities like the Samoan and Kaluli, caregivers socialize children by positioning them as observers and overhearers in multiparty interactions, rather than simplifying language for them. This "situation-centered" approach scaffolds children's attention and prompts them to participate, fostering an alternative pathway to communicative competence that relies on inference and repetition rather than explicit simplification.

The role of the family and caregivers is therefore not merely to provide linguistic input but to orchestrate the child's participation in social life, immersing them in culturally specific practices and values. This process is bidirectional; while caregivers structure the environment, children are active agents who interpret, appropriate, and sometimes transform the social order (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002; Kramsch, 2003; Luykx, 2003). This bidirectionality is crucial for the formation of local cultures within individual families, which then make up the societal culture.

Furthermore, Ochs and Schieffelin (2011) highlight that socialization practices must be responsive to children's individual needs and developmental profiles. They note that features such as exaggerated prosody and face-to-face alignment, often associated with Euro-American child-rearing practices, may not be equally effective for all children, including those with neurodevelopmental differences. This observation reinforces the broader principle that effective socialization is context-sensitive and attuned to the child within their specific cultural and developmental environment.

2.1. Bilingual and gender socialization

Building on the theoretical foundations of LS, this section considers how bilingualism and gender intersect to shape children's early development. Luykx's (2003) research in bilingual Aymara households in Bolivia powerfully demonstrates why it is essential to study diverse communities and value locally produced knowledge to truly support children's development. Her work extends beyond universal, often Western-centric, theories of child-rearing to show how development is deeply embedded in specific cultural, linguistic, and social contexts.

Luykx presents a nuanced study of how family language policy and gender roles intertwine in the early socialization of bilingual Aymara-Spanish children. The study argues that the family is the primary

site where children not only acquire language but are socialized into the social and gender norms of their community. She demonstrates that this process is not a simple, one-way transmission from parent to child but a dynamic network of mutual influence. Parents' language choices, often favoring Aymara for commands and scolding while incorporating Spanish through media and urban contact, are a conscious "family language policy" aimed at ensuring their children's economic survival. Simultaneously, children are active agents, influencing their parents' and siblings' language use as they bring Spanish home from school and play.

A central finding in her study is how deeply this linguistic socialization is gendered. From a young age, boys and girls are immersed in different communicative worlds. Boys, afforded more freedom, learn boisterous, competitive speech styles through outdoor play. Girls, tasked with domestic chores and childcare, learn and practice language through role-playing real-life social interactions and caregiving, often replicating their mothers' activities. Furthermore, Luykx observes that in public and even home settings, men dominate conversational space and authoritative speech genres, while women's influence is often exercised through collective, behind-the-scenes consensus-building rather than public oration. This layered view of gendered interaction is instructive for understanding how Emirati children may likewise encounter socially differentiated linguistic experiences within family and community life.

The study reveals that successful socialization hinges on practices that are intelligible and meaningful within a community's own framework. For instance, she finds that Aymara children develop competence not through simplified "baby talk" but by being positioned as observers and overhearers in multi-party conversations, a locally valued pathway to learning. This insight challenges imported, one-size-fits-all models of parenting or education and argues for developmental approaches that are culturally congruent.

Understanding these local rationales is critical, especially in the rapidly developing UAE, where well-intentioned external interventions often disregard situated knowledge, such as educational programs that marginalize or stigmatize home languages or ignore community-based communication styles. A study such as this highlights that such practices can inadvertently undermine children's sense of identity and familial learning pathways.

Ultimately, Luykx's work makes a compelling case that the most beneficial knowledge for children's development is often already present within communities. The role of research, therefore, is not to apply external models but to carefully document and learn from local practices. By centering community-produced knowledge, caregivers, educators, and policymakers can create support systems that genuinely resonate with children's lived experiences, fostering development that is both healthy and culturally sustainable. To date, there is a dearth of LS studies that present data on Arab children's early development within Arabic-speaking or Gulf nations. As mentioned earlier, such data is crucial for the aforementioned reasons, and this study aims to fill that gap.

To end, understanding and valuing diverse experiences of socialization affirms that effective development is context-sensitive, culturally resonant, and co-constructed between children and their

communities. Inclusive research not only advances knowledge but also promotes equitable practices that respect and nurture the richness of children's linguistic and social worlds. In light of these insights, the current study explores how such culturally embedded processes unfold in Emirati families.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive, linguistic ethnographic approach to examine how Emirati children's bilingual development is shaped by the unique caregiving ecologies within their extended families and household structures. Drawing on the idea that language practices are deeply embedded in cultural routines and familial ideologies (Shaw et al., 2015), the research situates children's multilingual LS not as a pedagogical artifact, but as a product of daily life.

The approach was informed by linguistic ethnography (LE; Creese & Copland, 2016), a framework that brings into focus the interplay between microlevel interactions and macrolevel ideologies. This was crucial in examining how families navigate the transmission of Arabic as a heritage language across multilingual and transnational contexts. LE is grounded in the epistemological view that knowledge is co-constructed, context-dependent, and mediated through language. By privileging insider perspectives, we can see how families themselves make sense of their linguistic worlds. This was essential for our study, which sought not only to document how Arabic is spoken or taught, but also to understand the meanings attached to it, meanings bound up with identity, belonging, ideology, and change.

3.1. Participants

Purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) was used to recruit 20 Emirati families who self-identified as bilingual and regularly used both Arabic and English in home and community settings in the UAE. Researchers specifically sought to recruit families that varied in terms of parental background, household composition, and caregiving arrangements, but all included preschool-aged children (2–4 years old) acquiring both Arabic and English (Emirati Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and English).

The varieties of Arabic spoken within the homes included Emirati Arabic as well as other Gulf, Arab, and tribal dialects (e.g., Yemeni, Saudi, Egyptian, Al-Mesa'bi [tribal], Al-Badawi [Bedouin]), reflecting the diverse familial and heritage backgrounds of the participating families and a window into the diversity of the Emirati population. Some families lived in multigenerational households, while others resided in nuclear family units with extended relatives living nearby, often across the street or within the same residential area.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected over a 12-month period as part of a broader research project exploring bilingual development in 20 Emirati families residing in Abu Dhabi. However, the scope of this research is limited to three primary sources: (1) demographic data, (2) semi-structured interviews with mothers (coded as INT-F#), and (3) observational field notes from home visits (coded as FN-F#), all of which center the child's linguistic and cultural socialization within the home environment. Demographic data provides essential contextual background to interpret other data sources meaningfully (Burton, 2019).

In Emirati culture, as in much of the Gulf and other Arab-majority societies, when non-family females enter the home, they are received by the women of the household, while the men do not participate in such visits. For this project, which examined children's language development, working only with mothers was therefore both respectful of cultural norms and practically appropriate. Mothers are often the primary caregivers and the closest to their children's daily routines, which positions them as central figures in understanding children's communicative practices, and they can better describe socialization practices. This approach provided access to nuanced linguistic practices that could not have been captured through other methods.

Importantly, this focus on mothers did not detract from the quality or scope of the data. On the contrary, it generated detailed insights into children's socialization: who they interact with, how those interactions unfold, and the subtle patterns that shape their linguistic environment. This provided a textured account of children's everyday lives that might otherwise have been inaccessible. Mothers' active engagement also made it possible to build trust, enabling us to ask questions, hold conversations, and conduct observations in ways that did not violate cultural expectations. In this sense, the methodological choice not only respected family boundaries but also enriched the ethnographic design of the project.

3.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to inductive thematic analysis. This included immersion in the data, generating initial codes across all interview and field sources, and iteratively refining themes that best captured caregivers' narratives about language, identity, and culture. Themes were constructed based on both explicit content and latent meanings. Interpretation was anchored in the sociolinguistic framework of LS (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011), where linguistic input is not seen as passive exposure but as socially situated practice, intertwined with belief systems, rituals, and role relations in the Emirati household. Themes were collaboratively reviewed by the research team to ensure consistency and reduce interpretive bias.

3.4. Ethics

All research protocols adhered to the Helsinki Declaration on ethical research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all participating families, and researchers maintained confidentiality through pseudonymization and contextual masking. Families were briefed on the scope, goals, and flexibility of their participation, with emphasis placed on voluntary disclosure, trust, and cultural sensitivity. No audio or video material is reported here to preserve participants' privacy.

These methodological considerations were critical in the context of Emirati society, where families are often cautious about granting outsiders access to domestic spaces. Ensuring entry into the intimate settings of children's everyday lives required researchers to prioritize reassurance, respect, and robust ethical safeguards. While Emirati families maintain a strong commitment to privacy and cultural values, many were also motivated to participate once the significance of the research was made clear. They recognized its potential to generate knowledge that could inform understandings of children's linguistic and cultural development in the UAE.

Throughout the study, researchers adopted a reflexive stance (Lichterhan, 2017), continuously interrogating their positionalities as Arabic-speaking, female ethnographers working within a culturally specific setting. Gaining entry into homes entailed an ongoing negotiation of trust, cultural sensitivity, and mutual respect. Although the researchers' presence inevitably shaped the field, its impact was minimized through long-term rapport-building, repeated visits, and member-checking practices during and after data collection. These strategies enhanced the reliability of interpretations and ensured that emic meanings, particularly concerning caregiving roles, linguistic practices, and cultural expectations, were faithfully represented.

At the same time, participants retained agency in determining the timing, structure, and focus of interviews and observations. This participatory orientation reflected an ethical commitment to co-construction and respect, aligning with majority-world perspectives on research relationships. Together, reflexivity, negotiated trust, and participant autonomy allowed the researchers to access authentic accounts of family life while upholding cultural appropriateness and ethical integrity.

4. Results

This section presents the findings that address the guiding research question set out above, "*What is the process of language socialization for the Emirati child today?*" Data are presented first demographically to offer context to the findings and then thematically to present a snapshot of how children are socialized from birth onward in the UAE.

4.1. Demographic survey

The demographic survey reveals that most Emirati preschool children in the study grow up in non-nuclear households, reflecting the strong role of extended family and collective caregiving in Emirati society. Further demographic details are provided in Appendix I (Table A1).

A large proportion of families (e.g., F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F8, F12, F13, F14, F19, F20) live either within the same household as paternal or maternal relatives or in shared residential complexes where extended kin reside nearby. These arrangements often involve daily interaction with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and domestic workers to different degrees. In some cases, families live in the same apartment unit as siblings-in-law or other relatives, forming a highly interactive caregiving environment. A smaller number of families (e.g., F6, F9, F10, F11, F15, F17) live in separate households but typically remain in close proximity to extended family, such as houses located behind or near grandparents' homes. Even in these cases, contact with extended kin remains part of daily life.

By contrast, only a minority of children (F7, F16, F18) live in nuclear family arrangements without extended kin co-residence. Even in these cases, contact with extended kin remained part of daily life, underscoring that multigenerational caregiving remains the prevailing model of early socialization in Emirati households.

4.2. Language socialization (LS) during early childhood in the UAE

The analysis of all the data above, and especially the interview and field notes, revealed several key themes regarding the socialization of Emirati children. It highlighted the central role of family, family-related socialization practices, cultural institutions, and multigenerational caregiving in shaping linguistic and cultural identity. The findings are presented thematically below.

4.2.1. The Majlis as a cultural and language socialization (LS) space

A predominant finding concerns the significance of the *majlis* (or *maylis*), the traditional sitting area found in every Emirati home and across the Gulf. It serves as a sitting room where guests are welcomed, is gender-segregated, and where people meet weekly. Primarily used by men more than women, the data here suggests that it is a primary physical area for cultural and linguistic transmission and where children are socialized. Beyond a physical setting, the *majlis* functions as a cultural classroom where children learn through observation and participation, internalizing Emirati ways of being.

Parents explicitly described the *majlis* as a crucial environment, especially for their sons, to learn gendered social practices, hospitality rituals, and codes of respect that define Emirati male gatherings and Emirati Arabic. As one mother noted, it is important for her son to attend with his father to "know the traditions and how men salute themselves, how to pour coffee, who drinks the coffee first, differences of

drinking coffee between men and women... etc.” (Hind, INT: F8). This observation highlights the *majlis* as a training ground for embodied cultural practices, where children internalize socially valued behaviors. This act of reproducing nonverbal cues reflects how children absorb the pragmatic and symbolic practices that define Emirati interaction.

The *majlis* also serves as a rich linguistic environment where children are exposed to and actively engage with traditional Emirati Arabic through interaction with multiple speakers. Almost all mothers reported that their sons attend the *majlis* on a weekly basis to learn how to behave correctly in society, that they would meet guests from other cities, even neighboring countries, and be exposed to their practices as well. Within this space, children begin to develop pragmatic awareness, storytelling skills, and communicative competence across different registers and audiences. Children come home to their mothers and describe who they saw and what they understood, and parents engage in metalinguistic conversations to ascertain children’s understandings of words or how they were used during conversation.

The value the parents place on the *majlis* is deeply tied to a broader desire to raise children within their cultural and religious environment. One mother articulated this by stating, “I care that my child be raised within his environment and around him to be among people of his same identity, which is Muslim, Arab, then an Emirati *majlis*” (Shamma, INT: F11). This layering of identity, Muslim, Arab, then Emirati, is experienced and reinforced within the communal space of the *majlis*, making it a unique institution for cultural continuity that diverges from Western, nuclear-family-based socialization models in which children spend most of their time only with their immediate family.

To end, the *majlis* exemplifies the UAE’s multigenerational and collective caregiving and LS ecology, serving as a living institution where cultural continuity is enacted. Unlike WEIRD nuclear-family models, Emirati children are socialized in communal settings where elders, parents, and extended kin transmit heritage practices through lived rituals rather than formal teaching. In this sense, the *majlis* exemplifies how Emirati social life operates as an educational system, one that collectively transmits language, values, and identity rather than through institutional instruction.

4.2.2. Socialization into gendered roles and spaces

The data revealed that gender plays a significant role in organizing children’s social experiences in early childhood and, consequently, their exposure to cultural and linguistic practices. A clear division was observed: boys often accompanied their fathers to the men’s *majlis*, while girls typically stayed with their mothers (Salama, INT: F10). While boys are socialized more visibly through male gatherings, girls’ socialization unfolds through daily interactions with female relatives and within family life. These spaces offer equally rich sites for cultural and linguistic learning, and this division socializes children into society-specific gendered expectations from an early age. Boys, in particular, are often explicitly reminded to “act like men,” participate in male gatherings so that they are more effectively socialized into socially

acceptable ways of being (Hind INT: F14). These interactions often involve gender-specific speech genres, such as formulaic greetings, deferential tones, or storytelling styles, which children observe, imitate, and gradually internalize.

The data here aligns with Luykx's (2003) work on the gender socialization of Aymara children (see section 2), in showing that LS is deeply gendered, not in a hierarchical or value-laden sense, but as a process through which boys and girls are oriented toward the culturally specific roles they are expected to assume as adults. Importantly, this gendered socialization does not translate into inequality in later stages of education or professional life. Upon entering school, progressing through higher education, or applying for employment, Emirati children are treated equally and assessed on merit, irrespective of gender. The UAE is recognized as a leading country in gender equality by the Economic Forum in 2024 (PCHR, 2025) and, according to the World Economic Forum in 2014, has already achieved equality between men and women in educational attainment (MOFA, 2026). Thus, gendered socialization functions less as a constraint and more as a culturally embedded rite of passage. Children are socialized through cultural and religious practices that shape their dispositions and ways of being, equipping them to participate fully in society and to interact confidently across regional and international contexts, without limitation arising from gender or the gendered aspects of their upbringing.

4.3. Socialization into multilingualism and multiple dialects

Emirati households represent complex, multilayered linguistic ecologies where children are immersed in a blend of languages and dialects shaped by family heritage, religion, and parental choices. A common pattern involved exposure to Modern Standard Arabic (*Fusha*) for religious purposes or through cartoons or children's shows, the local Emirati dialect, and often other regional Arabic dialects from the parents' or grandparents' heritage. For example, in one household, the child was exposed to *Fusha*, Emirati, and a Yemeni (*Adeni*) dialect, with the grandmother introducing French, drawing on her years in Djibouti (Hind, INT: F8). This illustrates how dialects and languages are layered in the Emirati child's environment, which is different from monolingual children around the world. The mother positions Arabic (*Fusha* and Emirati) as central, while also acknowledging the Yemeni dialect as part of daily life.

Parents often act as deliberate custodians of their heritage dialects. One mother expressed a strong desire for her son to learn her specific *Al-Mesa'abi* dialect to maintain that familial identity, even as she recognized the social necessity of him acquiring the Emirati dialect to interact: "I want him to learn my own dialect, the *Al-Mesa'abi* dialect. I don't want him to be bullied in my family, so I focus on that. But he is also acquiring some Emirati vocabulary from his aunts and their families." (Salama, INT: F10).

In another case, a father actively chose not to use English with his son, insisting on Arabic and specifically teaching him the *Badawi* dialect (Hayat, INT: F15). This active correction and teaching highlight the family's role in preserving linguistic heritage against the dominance of English in wider society. It is

beyond the scope of this article to venture into parental beliefs, but this example serves to offer a snapshot into the socialization experiences of children. Please see Said and Jaafarawi (2025) and Zhang *et al.* (2024) for more details about Emirati parents and their language beliefs.

However, children also exercise agency, often engaging in using more than one language at once or not using the dialect. One child was noted to mix languages, preferring to say, “*aba eggs*” (I want eggs) instead of the Arabic “*bayd*,” a practice that extended family members disapproved of (FN: F11). Such creative mixing underscores children’s active negotiation of meaning, a hallmark of multilingual socialization. This illustrates the dynamic negotiation between the natural bilingualism of children and the family’s efforts to maintain linguistic purity as a form of cultural preservation during the early LS years. Most parents in the project preferred to use Arabic at home and English outside of the home, a parental belief shared by many other multilingual parents. This is referred to as domain separation, where parents make a decision to use language *x* in domain *a* and language *y* in domain *b* (Anthony-Newman, 2024; Hwang *et al.*, 2022). However, given the fluidity of language and the non-compartmental nature of communication, this is never possible, and as children develop and explore their languages, they mix or move freely between them (Zhang *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond the family, dialect acquisition was strongly linked to a child’s need for social belonging among peers. Children demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of the social value of language and would adapt their speech to fit in. A key example is: “At the age of two, there was a turning point in Nabil’s ability to speak only in English. After that, realizing that everyone around him speaks in Arabic, forced Naser to speak in Arabic so he won’t feel an outsider or weird or odd.” (Zahra, INT: F1). This indicates that peer groups powerfully reinforce the use of Emirati Arabic, normalizing it as the expected medium of interaction (FN: F11). Taken together, these findings illustrate how multilingualism in Emirati households operates as a social process—fluid, negotiated, and anchored in kinship networks that value both heritage preservation and adaptability in a globalized society.

4.4. The central role of multigenerational caregivers

The transmission of language and culture in Emirati families is sustained by a multigenerational caregiving ecology in which grandmothers often play a pivotal role. In many households, grandmothers are the primary caregivers, spending the most time with the children. They act as active linguistic models and correctors, using the Emirati dialect to tell stories, teach religious supplications (*duaa*), and ensure proper language use (Rowdha, INT: F5; Hayat, INT: F15). Their speech is often rich in varied vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, embedding children in culturally resonant ways of speaking that may not be transmitted by younger caregivers. Such language use helps children not only acquire the language but also understand its social meanings and appropriate language.

Grandmothers also often act as linguistic gatekeepers for the entire household. Their authority as the elders within the family gives them unique power to influence language norms and intergenerational continuity, shaping how children internalize language hierarchies and cultural expectations. In one case, a grandmother explicitly requested that the family speak Arabic so she could understand, actively discouraging the use of English and thereby reinforcing Arabic as the household's shared language (FN: F3). Through these practices, grandmothers ensure consistent exposure to heritage dialects and cultural values, providing a rich environment primed for apprenticeship and socialization of children into Emirati culture and languages. These practices reinforce LS theory by demonstrating how grandparents, not just parents, actively shape children's linguistic trajectories through culturally embedded routines and expectations (Kenner et al., 2007; Said, 2024).

Similarly, siblings constitute an important category of caregivers with a profound influence on younger children's early socialization. In this study, Matar (F14), Hilal (F15), and Khawlah (F9) were cared for not only by their parents but also by their older siblings. In many majority-world contexts, older siblings occupy a dual position: they remain children within the household while simultaneously assuming "pseudo-parental" roles that complement and support parental care (Krejčová et al., 2023; Su-Russell & Russell, 2023). In the cases observed here, age gaps of more than 10 years facilitated the development of quasi-parental relationships, with older siblings often exercising authority in caregiving and decision-making.

These sibling roles were enacted through a variety of socialization practices, including shared book reading, facilitating Arabic language learning via digital platforms such as YouTube, and reinforcing the use of Arabic at home. Such dynamics highlight the complex, multilayered nature of Emirati children's socialization, in which multiple caregivers contribute to both linguistic and sociocultural development.

This form of sibling involvement is relatively uncommon in WEIRD contexts, where caregiving roles are more narrowly defined. By contrast, Emirati children experience a more complex and multivoiced process of LS shaped by multiple caregivers, which enriches both their linguistic repertoires and their broader developmental trajectories.

Ultimately, the Emirati child's LS is a multivoiced process, orchestrated by the extended family and enacted through daily rituals and culturally significant spaces like the *majlis*. Through observation, participation, and interaction with multiple caregivers, children learn language, gendered practices, and codes of respect that structure Emirati social life. The process is inherently gendered, orienting children toward different social spaces and speech genres from an early age, yet within a national framework that champions educational and professional equality. It stands in stark contrast to WEIRD, nuclear-family-based models, highlighting a distinctive pathway to acquiring language, identity, and cultural competence that is both traditional and dynamically engaged with a modern, multilingual society. This collective ecology ensures the robust intergenerational transmission of Emirati heritage, preparing children to confidently navigate both local and global contexts.

In conclusion, the data reveal that Emirati LS is a deeply cultural, situation-centered process. Grandparents, parents, and siblings collectively scaffold children's communicative development through participation and observation, echoing patterns identified by Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) in *Samoa* and *Kaluli* communities. Through daily routines and multi-party interactions, Emirati children develop communicative competence grounded in inference, repetition, and cultural understanding rather than simplified input.

5. Discussion

This study set out to illuminate the process of LS for the young Emirati child, a question whose answer reveals a complex, multivoiced, novel, and culturally situated developmental pathway. The findings compellingly demonstrate that early socialization in the UAE is fundamentally structured by a collective, kin-based ecology that stands in marked contrast to the nuclear-family models dominant in WEIRD societies, which have historically framed developmental science. This discussion interprets these findings, articulating their significance for challenging hegemonic theories, informing local policy, and validating the methodological approach.

5.1. The collective socialization model: Challenging WEIRD norms

The most salient finding of this research is the centrality of the extended family as the primary engine of socialization. The demographic reality that multigenerational households are the norm, not the exception, establishes a foundational context where caregiving is distributed across a wide network of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings. This structure creates a "dense web of relationships" that immerses the child in a rich and diverse linguistic environment from birth. Children are socialized less through direct instruction from a single caregiver and more through observation, participation, and guidance from a chorus of voices, each contributing different dialects, registers, and cultural knowledge.

This collective model manifests in distinct socialization spaces like the *majlis*, which functions as a cultural classroom for embodied learning, and through the pivotal role of grandmothers as linguistic gatekeepers and older siblings as quasi-parental figures. These practices underscore that socialization is a communal responsibility aimed at cultural continuity. This contrasts sharply with WEIRD models, which often conceptualize development as an individual trajectory nurtured within a nuclear family, with caregiving responsibilities highly concentrated. The Emirati case, therefore, provides a powerful counter-narrative that challenges the presumed universality of WEIRD-based developmental theories. It affirms that childhood is not a universal biological stage but a culturally constructed experience, and that concepts like "family" and "caregiver" must be pluralized to accurately reflect global realities. In doing so, the Emirati

model broadens the very definition of socialization, illustrating that development unfolds not in isolation but within interdependent, multigenerational networks of meaning.

5.2. Implications for developmental science and policy

The significance of this research extends beyond description; it represents a critical step toward a more pluralistic developmental science. By centering the Emirati experience, this study contributes to the growing body of work that de-centers WEIRD epistemologies and recognizes the diverse pathways through which children acquire language and culture. The sophisticated multilingual and multi-dialectal repertoires developed by Emirati children before formal schooling are a direct product of their unique social ecology. This evidence demands a reconceptualization of multilingualism not as a special case but as a global norm, and of multiple language use and dialectal variation not as deficits but as advanced communicative competencies.

This reconceptualization has direct practical implications. For educators, it necessitates pedagogies that are responsive to this reality. Classrooms should be designed to engage with extended family members, recognize and leverage children's existing multilingual abilities, and incorporate oral storytelling traditions as strengths rather than prioritizing monolingual or mono-dialectal norms. For policymakers, it underscores the urgent need to formulate early childhood policies that are grounded in the Emirati child's lived experience, supporting rather than undermining the kin-based structures that are so effective at fostering cultural and linguistic identity. Neglecting this ecological context fosters a home–school divide. This divide risks pathologizing children's natural linguistic development by measuring them against inappropriate benchmarks.

5.3. Methodological suitability: The strength of linguistic ethnography (LE)

The complexity of the socialization processes uncovered in this study strongly supports the use of LE as the methodological framework. A quantitative or survey-based approach might have captured the demographic prevalence of extended households, but would have failed to capture the *meaning* of the interactions within them. The core strength of LE lies in its ability to connect to microlevel interactions, for example, a father's dialect correction or a grandmother's storytelling, to the macrolevel social structures and ideologies that give them meaning.

This approach enabled us to see the *majlis* not simply as a room but as a site of cultural identity; to understand a parent's insistence on a heritage dialect not as personal preference but as ideological preservation; and to interpret sibling caregiving not as an exception but as a valued cultural practice. LE provided the tools to ask not just *what* was happening, but *why* it mattered to the participants. It

illuminated how LS is inseparable from the transmission of culture, values, and social roles, making it an indispensable methodology for research in culturally rich, rapidly evolving contexts such as the UAE.

5.4. Limitations and directions for future research

While this study offers important insights into the LS of Emirati children, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study draws on ethnographic data from 20 families in the UAE and therefore does not aim to represent the full diversity of Emirati households or Gulf societies more broadly. In addition, although the present analysis focuses primarily on caregivers' perspectives and ethnographic observations within the home environment, the broader project also generated recordings of children's interactions that are currently being analyzed and will be reported in future publications. Future research could therefore extend this work by examining children's language use longitudinally as they enter educational settings and by exploring interactional data across a wider range of households. Comparative studies across Gulf societies may also provide further insight into how multilingual and kinship-based caregiving ecologies shape early language development in the majority world.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the Emirati child is socialized within a robust, collective, and multilingual ecology that effectively prepares them for participation in both local and global contexts. The findings challenge the field of developmental science to embrace epistemic plurality and move beyond WEIRD-centric assumptions as the default standard. Ultimately, to understand the Emirati child's path through life, one must recognize that growth is not a lone ascent but a shared effort, rooted deeply in the ties of kinship and culture.

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Competing Interests

None.

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Endnote

¹The term "majority world" is used in place of hierarchy-signaling labels such as "Global South" or "developing countries," which may obscure demographic realities and reproduce implicit deficit framings.

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Appendix I

Family Demographic Table

Table A1

Demographic profile of participating families and children (all names are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality. Dialect references are italicized to distinguish linguistic varieties mentioned by participants. Ages are reported at the time of data collection).

Family (F) mother's name	Child pseudonym	Demographics	Age (year: months)	Languages spoken at home	Child's living arrangements
F1 (Zahra)	Child A (Nabil)	Emirati mother (BA Business) Emirati father (BA Business)	5:00	Emirati Arabic	Lives with paternal extended family (in the same household). Mother has limited control over interactions outside her private room.
F2 (Hessa)	Child B (Shamsa)	Emirati mother (High school) and Emirati father (High school)	3:05	Emirati Arabic	Shared complex with paternal family. Lives with parents and older siblings in the same apartment with multiple relatives nearby.
F3 (Nashwa)	Child C (Sultan)	Emirati mother (Special Education Diploma) and Emirati father (High school)	3:09	Emirati Arabic	Shared complex with paternal family. Lives with parents and a younger sibling in the same apartment with multiple relatives nearby.
F4 (Amna)	Child D (Tameem)	Saudi mother (High school) and Emirati father (High school)	3:09	Emirati Arabic; Saudi Arabic	Shared complex with paternal family. Lives with parents and husband's sister in the same apartment.
F5 (Rowdha)	Child E (Anoud)	Qatari–Yemeni mother (high School) Emirati father (BSc Economics)	3:04	Emirati Arabic; Saudi Arabic	Shared complex with paternal family. Lives with parents and younger sibling in the same apartment.

Table A1*Continued.*

Family (F) mother's name	Child pseudonym	Demographics	Age (year: months)	Languages spoken at home	Child's living arrangements
F6 (Aisha)	Child F (Thabit)	Emirati mother (BA in Early Childhood Education), Emirati father (College)	3:05	Emirati Arabic, Some English	Lives in a separate household (behind paternal grandparents' house) with parents and younger sibling.
F7 (Sara)	Child G (Khalid)	Emirati mother (University Diploma) and Emirati father (college)	3:06	Emirati Arabic (Attempts to use <i>Fusha</i>)	Lives in a nuclear family; no nanny (mentioned in notes).
F8 (Hind)	Child H (Younis)	Emirati mother (BA Special Education) and non-Emirati father (British/College)	3:01	Emirati/Yemeni Arabic and English	Shared complex with maternal family. Lives with parents and younger sibling in the same apartment.
F9 (Arwa)	Child I (Khawla)	Emirati mother (BA Mass Communication) and Emirati father (Diploma from abroad)	3:00	Emirati Arabic, Some English	Lives with parents and older siblings in a separate household (limited interaction with neighbors).
F10 (Salama)	Child J (Hazza)	Emirati mother (college) and Emirati father (BA in Law)	3:07	Primarily Arabic (Yemeni dialect), Emirati dialect, and English	Lives in an extended family setting in a separate household unit, surrounded by adults, no peers his age at home.
F11 (Shamma)	Child K (Salem)	Emirati mother (BA Counselling) Yemeni father (BSc Engineering)	4:01	Emirati Arabic, Some English	Lives a street away from paternal grandparents' home. Lives with parents and siblings in the same apartment. Extended family household (Maid speaks Arabic).
F12 (Fatema)	Child L (Majid)	Emirati mother (College) and Emirati father (BA Business)	3:04	Emirati Arabic	Shared complex with maternal extended family. Lives with parents and siblings in the same apartment (maternal with uncle).
F13 (Haifa)	Child M (Ali)	Emirati mother (BA Arabic and Islamic Studies) and Emirati father (College)	4:08	Emirati Arabic	Lives with the paternal extended family.
F14 (Haifa/Hajer)	Child N (Matar)	Emirati mother (BA Arabic and Islamic Studies) and Emirati father (University level)	4:08	Emirati Arabic	Lives with the paternal extended family.
F15 (Hayat)	Child O (Hilal)	Emirati mother (College) and Emirati father (College)	4:05	Emirati Arabic, including the <i>Bedouin</i> dialect mostly and some English	Lives with parents and older siblings in a separate household (no interaction with neighbors).

Table A1*Continued.*

Family (F) mother's name	Child pseudonym	Demographics	Age (year: months)	Languages spoken at home	Child's living arrangements
F16 (Moza)	Child P (Lulwa)	Emirati mother (BA Psychology) and Emirati father (College)	3:07	Emirati Arabic, Some English	Lives with parents and siblings in a separate household (nuclear family).
F17 (Hayat/Hanin)	Child Q (Gaith)	Emirati mother (College) and Emirati father (College)	3:00	Emirati Arabic, including the <i>Bedouin</i> dialect and Some English	Lives with parents and older siblings in a separate household (no interaction with neighbors).
F18 (Ebtisam)	R (Khudair)	Emirati mother (College) and Emirati father (College)	3:06	Emirati Arabic and English (Siblings)	Lives with nuclear family in an independent household.
F19 (Nawal)	S (Meera)	Emirati mother (College) and Emirati father (BA-University)	3:02	Emirati Arabic	Lives with paternal extended family.
F20 (Rahma)	Child T (Bakheeta)	Emirati mother (final year of BA) and Emirati father (Master's in Finance)	3:05	Emirati Arabic, Some English	Lives with parents and siblings in paternal grandparents' home.