

# We are multilingual: identity education to promote engagement and achievement in schools

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- Education plays a fundamental role in the identity of young people. One key question is how it intersects with increasing linguistic diversity in schools
- Our position is all students should be empowered to identify (if they wish) as multilingual - whether this is through languages or dialects spoken at home, languages learned in school as part of the curriculum, or other languages or forms of communication they are exposed to elsewhere.
- Research evidence shows that developing such a multilingual identity may not only have positive implications for students' engagement with and motivation towards language learning but may also have wider implications for academic attainment across the curriculum more broadly.
- Our policy recommendation is that an identity-based pedagogy is necessary in schools in order to help all learners to fully understand their own and others' linguistic repertoires (whether learned in school, at home, or in the community) and so to recognise their agency in being able to claim a multilingual identity.

## Introduction

When we consider multilingualism in schools we tend to think initially about those students with a migration background who speak a language at home which is distinct from the language of schooling; in England, for example, almost 20% of school students are currently recorded as speaking English as an additional language (EAL). Yet, *all* students across the United Kingdom (UK) and, indeed, in many other countries globally, engage in statutory foreign language learning at some stage of their schooling and, as such, may also be considered as multilingual. Our argument in this paper, therefore, is that a new dimension of identity-focused pedagogy is necessary in order to help *all* learners fully understand their own and others' linguistic repertoires (whether learned

in school, at home, or in the community) and so to recognise their agency in being able to claim a multilingual identity. To this end, we begin by defining what we mean by multilingual identity and explore why this matters for schools. We then introduce a research-informed package of identity-based pedagogical resources which has been shown to help students develop their multilingual identity by building knowledge about languages, raising awareness and promoting reflexivity across the school. We argue that this has important implications for changing attitudes towards languages and multilingualism, enhancing attainment across the curriculum and creating an inclusive, multilingual school community. The research presented below is drawn from a four-year study as part of the Education strand of the [Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies](#) project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

## What is multilingual identity?

Identity has been explored across a wide range of disciplines and from a variety of theoretical perspectives (for an overview see Fisher et al., 2020) yet, for the purpose of our work, we crucially consider identity as both an individual and social phenomenon. As such, identity should be seen not only as a psychological construct, but also as relational and contextually situated. In addition, rather than viewing identity as a fixed condition, we see it as a *process* which, in turn, raises the possibility that at least some aspects of identity are subject to change.

Within this, we are particularly interested in the role of language(s) in the (re)negotiation of identity; after all, it is through language that we think, define ourselves and represent ourselves to others. We therefore use the term multilingual identity to refer to an 'umbrella' identity, where one identifies as multilingual precisely because of an awareness of the linguistic repertoire one has. We consider multilingual identity to be shaped by what we refer to as the three Es (see Fisher et al., 2022):

- Learners' experiences with languages and language learning (i.e. their exposure to and use of the various languages in their repertoire across a range of social contexts);
- Learners' evaluations of languages and language learning. This includes both self-evaluations (e.g. self-efficacy, beliefs about languages) and other-evaluations (e.g. the beliefs of parents, teachers and friends);

- Learners' emotions in relation to languages and language learning (e.g. feelings of pride, enjoyment, motivation etc.).

It is also important to note that we adopt a broad, multimodal view of multilingualism which encompasses all of the languages in a learner's repertoire, regardless of their level of exposure to the language or proficiency in the language. This is not restricted to named spoken languages (such as Japanese, French, Hindi), but also includes regional dialects and sign languages. We similarly consider other non-verbal forms of communication such as computer coding and the use of emoji. Our position, therefore, is that each language or variety of language that is part of an individual's repertoire may influence the nature of their identity negotiation in important ways and that this, in turn, may have important implications for educational contexts.

## Why does multilingual identity matter in schools?

Our first step was to explore the link between multilingualism, identifying as multilingual and attainment in school. While multilingualism is highly prevalent in schools, as noted in the Introduction, the relationship between multilingualism and academic attainment is less well understood. Research to date has focused almost exclusively on the role of students' home language background (as recorded by the school) without taking into consideration a broader view of multilingualism or the perspectives of individual students. To investigate this, we collected the following data which involved 818 Year 11 (age 15-16) students across five state-funded secondary schools in the East of England and London. The schools represent a range of geographical locations (i.e. urban/rural) and high/average/low levels of linguistic diversity (for full details see Rutgers et al., 2021):

- Attainment data: all of the students took national standardised GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11 and we collected their final results across a range of curriculum subjects (English Language, English Literature, Maths, Science, Geography, History, French, German, Spanish).
- Demographic data held by the schools on whether the students were recorded as speaking or being exposed to a language at home which is known or believed to be other than English (i.e. school-ascribed EAL status).
- Self-report data from students via a questionnaire: the key responses of interest here were whether students themselves reported home languages other than English (i.e. self-ascribed EAL status) and where students

positioned themselves on a visual analogue scale from monolingual to multilingual (i.e. self-ascribed multilingual identity).

Through analysis of these three different (yet sometimes overlapping) indicators of multilingualism, we found that it was the third (students' self-ascribed multilingual identity) which emerged as the strongest predictor of students' academic attainment across almost all subjects in school. This held true regardless of whether or not students were 'officially' recorded as EAL by the school and therefore reflects the importance not only of students' exposure to home languages, but also of their broader experiences of languages and language learning (e.g. in school). These findings first of all foreground the importance of adopting a more holistic notion of multilingualism in schools and moving beyond a focus on language competence to understand the full impact of 'being multilingual'. Secondly, given that meaningful connections emerged between multilingual identity and academic attainment across the curriculum, it opens the door to developing new pedagogical approaches that seek to empower students to develop and claim a multilingual identity for themselves.

## How can we help students to develop their multilingual identity in the classroom?

As noted above, we consider identity as subject to change and, as such, we see the classroom as providing an ideal space for the (re)construction and (re)negotiation of multilingual identity. Drawing on the concept of 'identity education', defined by Schachter and Rich (2011) as 'the purposeful involvement of educators with students' identity-related processes or contents' (p.222), we developed a pedagogical framework for participative construction of multilingual identity. We hoped that this, in turn, would have a positive impact on students' engagement with language learning and attainment across the curriculum.

The framework is underpinned by the following key dimensions (for full details see Fisher et al., 2020):

- Knowledge and awareness raising: The first premise is that, before any work on multilingual identity can be done in the classroom, learners need to understand their own linguistic repertoires and those of people around them. This requires acquisition of sufficient and appropriate sociolinguistic knowledge. For example, information about what a language is, how this differs from a dialect, what it means to be multilingual etc.

- Reflection: As is clear from most educational research on how we learn, input alone is not enough; we learn by taking new knowledge and building it into our conceptual frameworks, which requires cognitive engagement through the process of reflection. This is done through interaction and a range of participative activities.
- Reflexivity: Reflection alone, however, may or may not lead to change, so we propose that a further stage is needed which requires learners to consider how their experience relates to them individually and emotionally which involves a process of reflexivity.

Based on this framework we developed a series of resources for the classroom entitled 'We Are Multilingual' (free to download at [www.wamcam.org](http://www.wamcam.org)). The resources were initially developed for use in the secondary school Modern Languages classroom with versions in French, German and Spanish to represent the main languages taught within the curriculum in England. Subsequent versions were then created in English for use across secondary schools more broadly (e.g. in school assemblies and form/tutor time) and for use in primary schools. Aware that teachers have a heavy curriculum to deliver, the complete programme of resources was designed to take approximately 6-10 hours of classroom time over the course of an academic year.

The resources encourage critical thinking and personal reflection on a range of sociolinguistic issues, demonstrating to students the amount of implicit knowledge about language that they already bring into the classroom as users of multiple languages, dialects and other forms of communication. They support learners to think explicitly about what it means to be multilingual, to explore language in its widest sense and reflect on how it influences them both as individuals and as members of the wider community. While many of the dialogic activities are based within the classroom and facilitated by the teacher, there are also tasks which extend into broader sociocultural contexts and encourage learners to explore languages in their school (e.g. by collecting information about the languages represented among staff and students), their family (e.g. by encouraging conversations about languages in the home) and in their wider community (e.g. through linguistic landscaping activities). Throughout the programme, the resources explicitly invite learners to reflect on what any new information means for them personally and seek to empower them – if they wish – to identify as multilingual.

## How does an identity-focused pedagogy influence students' multilingual identity?

The research team conducted a quasi-experimental study to explore the influence of the above pedagogical resources on the development of students' multilingual identity (for full details see Forbes et al., 2021). The study was conducted in four secondary schools in England and involved 268 Year 9 (age 13-14) students and their Modern Languages (French, German or Spanish) teachers. The students were in their third year of secondary school which is the final year of statutory foreign language study and, as such, they represented a broad range of attainment levels and attitudes towards languages.

Three parallel classes were selected in each of the four schools; one acted as the control group and so continued with their normal lessons, while the two other intervention groups engaged with different versions of the above resources over the course of an academic year. These two groups are referred to as the 'partial' intervention group, which received the knowledge and reflection dimensions of the activities, and the 'full' intervention group, which also engaged with the reflexivity (i.e. more identity-focused) elements. Data were collected through questionnaires administered before and after the intervention which explored various aspects of students' multilingual identity. This centred on their evaluations of languages and language learning (including self-beliefs and others' beliefs) and their emotions towards languages and language learning.

Evidence from the study suggests that while more traditional interventions focusing on raising awareness about the benefits of languages can be beneficial, effects can be enhanced by an additional 'identity' element, i.e. actively promoting reflexivity. We found that this particularly influenced students' *emotions* towards languages, for example, students in the 'full' intervention group reported more enthusiasm for learning languages and a greater sense of pride towards the languages in their repertoire. This, in turn, was associated with a stronger overall sense of multilingual identity. Our findings overall suggest the potential for such an identity-based pedagogy to enhance students' multilingual identity in the languages classroom which, in turn, may have positive implications for students' engagement with and motivation towards language learning. Evidence presented above from the Rutgers et al. (2021) study suggests that this may, consequently, also have wider implications for academic attainment across the curriculum more broadly.

## Recommendations and policy implications

As noted above, evidence from the various studies in this research project highlights the importance and relevance for language learning of explicit engagement with identity-based pedagogy in schools. Several key recommendations emerged of relevance to a range of stakeholders:

- Policy-makers and school leaders: evidence suggests a need to promote a more inclusive societal and educational vision of multilingualism to better tap into the inner resources of learners in schools. Given the differences between how students are identified by schools in relation to their languages and how they identify themselves, more consideration is needed on how the EAL label is ascribed and used.
- Curriculum designers: evidence suggests that incorporating an identity-based pedagogy into the existing curriculum and schemes of work can be effective in empowering students to develop and claim a multilingual identity. This, in turn, is linked to wider implications for enhancing overall engagement with language learning and attainment across the school curriculum.
- Classroom teachers: evidence highlights the importance not only of raising awareness about the benefits of languages but, crucially, of actively promoting reflexivity and encouraging learners to reflect on implications for them personally. While this may be of primary interest to languages teachers, it also has applications for broader school contexts such as assemblies, form time and PSHCE (personal, social, health, citizenship, economic) lessons.

## References

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