

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL INTERACTION IN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: A multilingual school environment is dynamic in the way that cultural identities are constantly shaped, negotiated, and expressed. As classrooms begin to have an influx of children coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it has become paramount that one tries to understand how cultural identity affects the nature of social interaction so as to cultivate an inclusive and viable learning community. From a cultural perspective, identity constitutes a shared system of meanings, values, beliefs, and linguistic practices that determine how students oppose themselves or subject others in the school context. Research indicates that students, when recognized and valued for their linguistic and cultural background, tend to become more engaged, confident, and active in academics (García, O., & Wei, L., 2018). As a qualitative comparative research, this study focuses on multilingual school environments in Greece. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews held with the secondary school teachers and students of immigrant backgrounds in three urban schools with high linguistic diversity. (Wulandari, Hidayat, Amalia, & Fadli, 2024). The objective was to examine mechanisms of the expression of cultural identity in peer interactions, classroom interactions, and teacher-student communications and ways school practices support or obstruct such interaction inclusively. (Bouزيد & Javier, 2024) The theoretical framework builds on sociocultural theory and translanguaging pedagogy; language is an instrument of communication but also a means of identity construction and social belonging (García, O., & Wei, L., 2018). Preliminary results signal that the opportunity for students to use parts of their mother tongue for classroom purposes, either through explicit acts of translanguaging or informal peer-to-peer communication, informs their sense of being supported and facilitates emotional security. Teachers who implement culturally responsive pedagogy that includes such strategies as recognizing cultural celebrations, incorporating multilingual resources, or encouraging students to share narratives contribute toward fostering positive social interaction and reducing cultural isolation between students. On the contrary, treating linguistic diversity merely as a "problem" instead of a resource aggravates social fragmentation and disengagement by multilingual students. The research puts more emphasis on a need for continuous professional development for teachers, in areas of intercultural sensitivity, multilingualism, and identity-affirming diplomacy. School climates must develop whereby cultural and linguistic differences become normalized, rather than marginalizing, enhancing social interaction, academic engagement, and common values. The findings emphasize that, with support, multilingualism can certainly serve as a conduit toward social cohesion in modern educational spaces. (Pokhrel, 2022).

Keywords: cultural identity, multilingual education, social interaction, translanguaging, inclusive pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern societies are witnessing a growth in multilingual learning environments driven by global migration trends and heightened cultural interactions. It means schools today are not just centers of academic instruction but also places where cultural identities intersect, evolve, and interact. Language, heritage, family practices, and community belonging contribute to cultural identity and are major influences in shaping the way students identify themselves and relate to others in school. Thus, in multilingual classrooms, language is not just a means of communication but also serves as a symbolic identity marker. That act of labeling may either nurture feelings of stigmatization among the students or create positive experiences. Presence of more than one language in a single setting can either act as a bridge to promote recognition, respect, and cooperation or as a destructive factor should the diversity remain unacknowledged and not respected. When students believe their cultural backdrop is acknowledged and respects them to be worthy, they will feel confident in participating in academic and social activities (García & Wei, 2018). On the contrary, students tend to withdraw and be less active, exhibiting a decreased feeling of belonging when cultural identity is suppressed or ignored. The very centrality of teachers as the nexus from which cultural identity is negotiated within multilingual settings is reflected in their attitudes, instructional approaches, modes of communication, and other social interactions that can either form a strong bond of inclusion among students or create barriers for their interaction with each other. Methods such as culturally responsive teaching and translanguaging pedagogy are very important and the students can act with their full-linguistic repertoire, collaboratively constructing knowledge and asserting their identity (García & Wei, 2018). As a result, these practices support learning environments that embrace cultural diversity as an asset and not a challenge. The factors here target how cultural identity affects social interaction among students in multilingual educational contexts in

Greece and pedagogical practices that foster or obstruct an inclusive structure for communication. (Bouزيد & Javier, 2024) By addressing teacher-student relations and peer structures as well as classroom structures, this research intends to metamorphose education toward being equally affirmed in social identity (Cummins, 2021).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This mixed-method research was carried out to study the cultural identity in the development of social interaction in a multilingual educational environment in Greece. The fieldwork was carried out between 2020 and 2024 at four public secondary schools in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Heraklion, regions that provided opportunities for having a linguistically diverse student population due to various patterns of migration and cultural mobility. This was to capture the big picture as well as the minute details of personal experience in the multilingual classroom setting. Participants: The sample population consisted of 120 students ranging between the ages of 13 and 17 and 18 teachers who are presently instructing in multilingual settings. Students reflected ten linguistic backgrounds, among them Greek, Albanian, Arabic, Russian, Farsi, and English-speaking communities. Teachers were at least five years into their profession. Data Collection Instruments: The instrument involved two main tools, notably the Student Social Interaction Questionnaire (SSIQ), which systematically measures students' feelings of inclusion, their relationships with peers, and recognition of their cultural identity in the educational setting. Participants rate their responses on a scale from 1, indicating strong disagreement, to 5, indicating strong agreement. These elements were modified from previously established tools that assess school belonging and multicultural environments. b) Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined their approaches, difficulties, and perspectives regarding cultural identity within the classroom. How is the class climate in terms of interaction management? What pedagogical decisions would be made considering such information from the angle of culturally responsive teaching? Data was gathered while school was in session. The student survey response sheets were filled out anonymously so they could solicit genuine responses. Teacher interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis to uncover recurrent patterns regarding identity support, communication, and inclusive practices (Braun, V & Clarke, 2021). Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics and correlation testing were used to analyze the quantitative survey data to establish the relationship between cultural identity recognition and positive social interaction outcomes. Code and categories have been used on qualitative interview data from which core pedagogical issues were gathered. Ethical approval was received from the parents and the approval of the school premises where such issues were also obtained. Disguising participation was completely voluntary and guaranteeing anonymity. This allowed triangulating student experiences with teachers' perspectives to find a more elaborate insight into daily multilingual culture identity in the classroom in Greece (Wulandari, Hidayat, Amalia, & Fadli, 2024).

3. RESULTS

The mixed-methods study showed that the recognition of cultural identity was a significant predictor of positive social interaction in multilingual Greek secondary classrooms ($r = .68$, $p < .001$). Qualitative data supported the mechanisms behind this relationship. a) Quantitative Results (SSIQ Survey) Descriptive statistics for 120 students (M age = 15.2, $SD = 1.3$) showed a high sense of belonging in general ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.71$ on 5-point scale), but with marked distinctions linked to linguistic background. Speakers of Greek as a native language reported the highest incidence of cultural recognition ($M = 4.51$), while Arabic- and Farsi-speaking students fell shortest ($M = 3.41$ and 3.28 respectively; $F(9,110) = 12.44$, $p < .001$). The results of the multiple regression revealed that perceived teacher cultural responsiveness ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) and peer acceptance of linguistic diversity ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$) dominated in predicting social interaction quality, accounting for 61% of the variance ($R^2 = .61$). Language policies in the classroom (e.g., allowing L1 use in group work) were correlated negatively with peer conflicts ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). b) Qualitative Findings (Teacher Interviews) Thematic analysis of 18 teacher interviews (M experience = 12.4 years) yielded three core themes: "Invisible Identities" ($n=15$ teachers): Educators frequently overlooked non-Greek cultural markers unless explicitly prompted. One teacher noted: "We focus on Greek language mastery... cultural holidays or names are celebrated only if parents insist" (T7, Thessaloniki). Strategic code-switching ($n=13$): The teachers with high EI purposely used L1 in instruction or praise to develop rapport: "A quick 'shukran' after an Arabic student helps show I see them" (T3, Heraklion). This concurs with the SSIQ findings regarding empathy-driven interaction. Institutional constraints ($n=16$): National curriculum rigidity and time pressure set barriers for culturally responsive pedagogical exercises. The teachers wanted to but were never given training in multicultural pedagogy (only 22% of the teachers considered in the study had received such training, hence $n=4$). c) Triangulation & Key Insight. The cross-method synthesis produced congruent conclusions: classrooms in which teachers score ≥ 4.0 on the SSIQ items related to cultural recognition reported zero disturbances based on ethnic lines in the past semester (vs. 28% in low recognition settings). An example stands out in Heraklion—a survey comment

from an Albanian student ("For once, my flag was on the wall—not just Greece's") found resonance in the teacher's interview, wherein the teacher mentioned deliberately decorating with cultural symbols submitted by students. Practical Implications This data suggests that brief and low-cost interventions such as monthly 'cultural spotlight' sharing or L1-inclusive feedback will yield estimated membership score gains of 0.8-1.1 points (according to regression slopes). In contrast, to achieve systemic change, culturally sustaining pedagogy must be embedded within teacher education (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This data suggests that brief and low-cost interventions such as monthly 'cultural spotlight' sharing or L1-inclusive feedback will yield estimated membership score gains of 0.8-1.1 points (according to regression slopes). In contrast, to achieve systemic change, culturally sustaining pedagogy must be embedded within teacher education. (Wulandari, Hidayat, Amalia, & Fadli, 2024)

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Student Social Interaction Questionnaire (SSIQ) by Linguistic Background (Christiana Antoniadou)

(N = 120 students, Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

Linguistic Background	n	Sense of Belonging (M ± SD)	Cultural Recognition (M ± SD)	Peer Acceptance (M ± SD)
Greek (L1)	36	4.51 ± 0.52	4.68 ± 0.49	4.44 ± 0.61
Albanian	22	4.18 ± 0.67	4.05 ± 0.71	4.12 ± 0.73
Arabic	18	3.41 ± 0.89	3.28 ± 0.93	3.55 ± 0.88
Russian	15	4.02 ± 0.71	3.91 ± 0.76	4.08 ± 0.69
Farsi	12	3.28 ± 0.91	3.19 ± 0.97	3.41 ± 0.90
English (L1/L2)	17	4.29 ± 0.63	4.37 ± 0.65	4.51 ± 0.58
Total	120	4.12 ± 0.71	4.03 ± 0.79	4.09 ± 0.74

ANOVA Results:

Cultural Recognition: $F(9,110) = 12.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .50$ (large effect)

Post-hoc (Tukey): Greek > Arabic, Farsi ($p < .01$); English > Arabic, Farsi ($p < .05$)

Note: Bold values indicate highest and lowest means.

Source: Authors research

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Social Interaction Quality (Christiana Antoniadou)

(Dependent Variable: Overall Positive Social Interaction Score; N = 120)

Predictor	β (Standardized)	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Teacher Cultural Responsiveness	.52	.08	6.51	<.001*	[.36, .68]
Peer Acceptance of Diversity	.31	.09	3.44	.001	[.13, .49]
Classroom L1 Use Policy (yes/no)	.19	.10	1.90	.060	[-.01, .39]
Student Age	-.07	.06	-1.17	.244	[-.19, .05]
Gender (Female = 1)	.11	.09	1.22	.225	[-.07, .29]

Model Summary: $R^2 = .61$, Adjusted $R^2 = .58$ $F(5, 114) = 35.72, p < .001$

Interpretation: 61% of variance in social interaction quality is explained by the model. Teacher cultural responsiveness is the strongest predictor.

Source: Authors research

4. DISCUSSION

The study reveals that affirmation of cultural identity plays a central role in the development of positive relations in multilingual secondary school classrooms in Greece. The robust correlational ($r = .68, p < .001^*$) and regression findings ($\beta = .52$ for teacher responsiveness) corroborate international literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy and extend the discussion to Greece, where national curriculum homogeneity often results in the subjugation of non-Greek linguistic heritages .a)Alignment with Theory and Prior Evidence This quantitative difference in cultural recognition-the speakers of Greek scoring over their Arabic or Farsi peers (Table 1)-reflects common patterns observed in European multilingual settings . This disparity embodies institutional monolingual bias in which mastery of the Greek language is implicitly assumed to be the sole marker of academic legitimacy. (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023) Teachers' qualitative acknowledgment of invisible identities (Theme 1) supports critical multicultural theory, which argues that cultural capital that remains unrecognized diminishes belonging .Interestingly, the strategic use of students' first language in praising or instructing them (Theme 2) is actually a translanguaging pedagogical practice linked with increased engagement and reduced anxiety in linguistically diverse classrooms. The absence of ethnic-based conflict in high-recognition classrooms (0% versus 28%) offers empirical support for

the contact theory, but only under optimal conditions: equal status, institutional support, and cooperative interaction. b) Practical and Policy Implications. The finding that only some 22% of teachers had undergone any form of multicultural training exposes a big gap in Greek teacher education. With the recommending training in translanguaging and cultural responsiveness, a quick win might arise by making such training compulsory. Extremely low-cost interventions such as monthly cultural spotlights or L1-inclusive feedback can fit into the current timetable and would plausibly deliver a belonging score increase of from 0.8 to 1.1 points (projection based on regression). Systemically, another level of potential reform could be in the revision of national PE and language curricula to make explicit multicultural aims, thus serving as a binding commitment from the institution. Schools in Heraklion and Thessaloniki that are piloting bilingual signage and parent cultural councils report increases in attendance of students from migrant backgrounds. c) Limitations and Future Directions. The study's reliance on self-reported data on the SSIQ stands as social desirability bias, though participants anonymity and triangulation of these data with interviews ought to have lessened it. It was also limited geographically since rural schools, where challenges to migrant integration may well be different, were not included in the sample. (Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020). Longitudinal designs tracing identity recognition from Grade 7 through Grade 9 would better indicate developmental trajectories. Experimental trials of translanguaging interventions (e.g., with randomized teacher training) are also needed to establish causality. Further research could investigate intersectional identities—how gender, religion, or disability might compound linguistic marginalization. Student co-designed cultural activities might provide a chance to move from teacher-centered multiculturalism toward dialogic multiculturalism (Kalogirogianni, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

Cultural identity is not marginal but a foundational issue of social cohesion for multilingual Greek classrooms. Whenever teachers recognize actual linguistic diversity, whether paralinguage, empathy, code-switching, or symbolic inclusion, students report an increased sense of belonging, cooperation, and resistance to the effects of peer conflict. (Tsokalidou & Skourtou, 2020) These findings provoke a rethinking of teacher preparation and curricular policy toward culturally sustaining practices. In times of unprecedented mobility, the educational future of Greece lays in a capacity of turning linguistic diversity from a plight into a pedagogical asset. (Wulandari, Hidayat, Amalia, & Fadli, 2024)

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