



PLURIDENTITIES

WORKING PAPER 5

Working package 4



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Problem statement

Across European education systems, multilingualism and identity have become central policy priorities, driven by the idea that learners develop rich linguistic repertoires that shape their identity, sense of belonging and participation in society (Council Recommendation, 2018, in The Pluridentities Framework). The Pluridentities multidimensional framework states that formal education plays a pivotal role in fostering, negotiating, or constraining multilingual identities. It identifies four components shaping (linguistic) identity development through schooling: linguistic capital, learning environments, language policy, and technology, emphasising their interdependence and the need for coherence across these components. To date, in the substantial literature on multilingual education models and the role of schooling in identity development, the interplay of these four dimensions in authentic educational settings remains insufficiently explored.

Flanders presents a compelling context for this research question. With 20,2% of pupils in Flemish secondary education having a different home language than Dutch¹, a growing number of schools have become multilingual spaces where home and heritage languages interact with Dutch-dominant instructional norms. The available research shows that pupils' linguistic repertoire is often undervalued, leading to stigmatisation of home languages, lower teacher expectations, and restricted identity expression (Agirdag, 2010; Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014; Van Der Wildt et al., 2015, 2017). While CLIL and other multilingual learning initiatives do exist in Flanders, the coherence between classroom practice, school policy and wider governance remains fragmented.

Teachers frequently bear responsibility for linguistic inclusion, yet policy alignment and pedagogical support are not well aligned, potentially limiting their ability to embed multilingual identities into everyday learning spaces (Jaspers, 2024). Little is yet known about how pupils make sense of their linguistic identities. Scholarly gaps exist at the intersection of multilingual policy and lived reality: policy discourse often emphasises the

¹ <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/onderwijsstatistieken/statistisch-jaarboek/statistisch-jaarboek-van-het-vlaams-onderwijs-2023-2024>. Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, school year 2023-2024.

value of multilingualism, yet everyday classroom interactions may reproduce monolingual norms, linguistic hierarchies, and assimilationist expectations.

By exploring how Flemish teachers and pupils perceive multilingualism, how pupils experience identity development, and where tensions or possibilities emerge across policy and practice, our qualitative study documents how the Pluridentities framework operates in lived educational reality. The aim of this study is not merely to describe teachers' and pupils' multilingual attitudes, but to investigate the conditions under which they can develop.

Therefore, the guiding research question is: How do Flemish secondary teachers and pupils perceive, negotiate, and experience multilingualism, linguistic identity, and language use in school? Is there any difference between schools offering CLIL and those not offering CLIL in this regard? What tensions or opportunities emerge with regard to the three components of the Pluridentities framework in this work package (linguistic capital, learning environment, and language policy)?

In the Belgian dataset, however, only two of the sixteen interviewed teachers were involved in CLIL programmes, and only one focus group included CLIL pupils. This number was too small to allow for a meaningful or reliable comparison between CLIL and non-CLIL teacher perspectives in the qualitative analysis. Because of this limited representation, we decided not to focus on programme-level effects (i.e., CLIL or not) or differences between multilingual and Dutch tracks at this stage. Instead, the analysis treats the teacher group as a whole, identifying shared patterns, tensions and experiences across school contexts rather than attributing differences to programme type. However, when integrating the qualitative findings with the large-scale survey data, the distribution and attitudes of CLIL teachers can be examined more systematically. At that stage, a mixed methods analysis may reveal whether CLIL participation corresponds with distinct beliefs or practices regarding multilingualism.

Methodology

Data collection for the first qualitative study was carried out in seventeen secondary schools across Flanders. The schools were randomly recruited and all voluntarily participated.

Qualitative data collection targeted authentic school-embedded perspectives relating to multilingualism, language use, identity and school policy, using two sets of guidelines for pupils focus groups and teacher interviews.

Pupil focus groups

In the **pupil focus groups**, discussions began with pupils' own experiences of multilingualism, including which languages they speak, in which contexts, and how they personally define being multilingual.

- A major theme concerned (the pupils' perception of) the school language policy, for which pupils described explicit and implicit rules regulating the use of Dutch and other languages both inside and outside the classroom. They reflected on when and why certain languages are permitted or prohibited, differences between subjects (e.g., language classes vs. content subjects, CLIL vs. non-CLIL), and the consequences of speaking other languages than the main language of instruction (i.e., Dutch).
- Another core topic was the role of home languages at school, especially how pupils perceive the value, visibility and social implications of using their home languages. This section included questions on peer relations, group formation, feelings of inclusion or exclusion, and whether pupils wished for more opportunities to use their home languages.
- Focus groups also explored identity development and attitudes toward multilingualism, including beliefs about language learning, fairness of Dutch-only expectations, links between language use and academic outcomes, and broader affiliations such as feeling Flemish, Belgian or European.

Eight focus groups were organized, including 39 pupils aged 14–18. Participants were selected based on their own voluntary candidacy in the quantitative part of the data

collection – an online survey – and included a range of linguistic biographies, including monolingual Dutch-speaking pupils and those who spoke heritage or migrant languages at home.

Teacher interviews

The semi-structured **teacher interviews** followed parallel thematic lines, but from a professional perspective. Teachers discussed their own multilingualism and experiences with linguistically diverse classrooms.

- A substantial part of the questions addressed school language policy development and implementation, including how language policies are created, communicated and implemented at school, and how well they reflect best practices.
- Teachers evaluated the role of home languages in learning, responding to statements about academic performance, inclusion, and the value of linguistic diversity.
- Additional topics included classroom practices, disciplinary approaches, professional development needs, and teachers' own identity positioning, including European identity and beliefs about the role of multilingualism in education.

Sixteen secondary school teachers were interviewed on a voluntary basis. Teachers represented various disciplines and varied in their experience with multilingual learners, language policies, and instructional approaches (e.g., mainstream Dutch-medium instruction, and CLIL).

For both pupils and teachers, participation was voluntary and ethically compliant: we obtained informed consent from all participants. For pupils under the age of 16, informed consent was also obtained from their parents. For pupils above the age of 16, the parents were informed about the schools' participation in the project. The researchers took care to facilitate respectful dialogic environments, particularly in the focus groups.

Each interview and focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes captured contextual cues and interactional dynamics.

Since the theoretical framework emphasises the under-researched coherence among these components, coding highlighted not only individual themes but also intersections between domains. Transcripts were first open-coded to identify recurring themes. Codes were then organised into thematic clusters.

Results

In our first analyses we compared teacher and pupil perspectives across school contexts and interpreted emerging tensions and opportunities related to the Pluridentities framework's three domains: linguistic capital, learning environment, and language policy.

1. Linguistic capital: perceptions of home languages and multilingual repertoires

Both teachers and pupils recognise that their schools are increasingly multilingual spaces, yet they attribute different meanings and value to home languages.

Teachers generally view multilingualism as an asset, but one that must be balanced with ensuring access to the official school language, Dutch. Several teachers stress that multilingualism is important because it enables communication: *"Language remains a means of communication... as soon as you can communicate in those languages, you are multilingual"*. Both teachers and pupils consider being able to have a basic conversation as the threshold for that language to be included in their multilingual identity; they often express the wish to possess that skill in more than one language. Languages they only have a basic notion of, or languages they used to know better but have not used for a long time, are also often not considered as part of their multilingual identity. It seems that being raised bi- or multilingually is often considered the only way to truly be multilingual, as put by one teacher: *"I speak some English obviously, I used to speak French well and I know some Spanish, but my only mother tongue is Dutch, so no, I am not a true multilingual."*

This functional view is mirrored by a lot of the teachers who were interviewed: multilingualism can be an enrichment, but also a practical challenge for comprehension, assessment, and inclusion. Some teachers emphasise the positive effect of a strong home

language, although with nuance. One teacher accepts that *“if you are already strong in language, you may have an easier time learning other languages”*. Yet, at the same time, she mentions that linguistic transfer is likely to be easier between languages that are related to each other (with regard to vocabulary and grammar rules). The greater the linguistic distance, the harder the linguistic transfer becomes. Other teachers explicitly reject the hierarchical status of home languages: for example, when exposed to the statement that *“English is more useful as a home language than Turkish,”* a teacher responds firmly, *“You do not choose where you are born... so no”*. Even though none of the teachers strongly agreed with the statement that some languages are more useful than others, when asked for examples on how this plays out in the classroom, they often mentioned more practical and future-oriented use for high-status languages such as English (cf. *infra*).

Pupils also frame multilingualism as part of their personal capital, identifying themselves as speakers of a wide variety of languages, including Dutch, French, English, Berber, Polish, Albanian, and many more. They readily list multiple languages and define multilingualism as *“being able to have a normal conversation in two languages”*. Pupils experience their linguistic capital as only partially recognised in school. They report that teachers show little interest in their home languages and are inconsistent in allowing them to be used.

Both pupils and teachers attribute a strong intrinsic value to multilingualism, describing languages as part of one’s identity, family history, and social world. At the same time, they emphasise the instrumental role of languages in achieving academic and professional success, with Dutch positioned as the key language. This perspective creates a tension: while multiple languages are celebrated in principle, their use is often restricted or discouraged because they are perceived as potentially hindering Dutch-language development. As a result, pupils’ full linguistic repertoires are recognised symbolically, but remain only partially legitimised within day-to-day school practices.

2. Learning environment: lived experiences and classroom interactions

A strong divergence appears in how both groups experience the multilingual learning environment in their school. Teachers often articulate a pragmatic approach aimed at

maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere. For example, one teacher stresses avoiding a “witch hunt” regarding language rules, preferring encouragement over sanctions. Some teachers also allow the strategic use of home languages for comprehension, noting that using a home language “*can help to understand something better... it can be a tool*” and emphasising that this does not impede the acquisition of Dutch. Still, when asked for examples of valorizing home languages in the classroom, teachers mention that they specifically find it hard to make use of the home languages they don’t know themselves. Some teachers also supported the Dutch-only approach, because it is clear and straightforward, and offers pupils who do not speak Dutch at home more opportunities to practice.

Pupils, however, describe the environment as quite restrictive and sometimes policing. School rules typically require that *only Dutch* be spoken in class and often also on the playground, despite widespread multilingualism at school. Pupils describe sanctions for speaking other languages, including reprimands, warnings, or even monitoring cards (“volgkaart”). This, however, seems to vary between schools depending on school context and culture, as all pupils participating in the focus group for one specific school explicitly mentioned that the use of all languages was allowed at any time.

Students also report that linguistic identity influences social dynamics. Pupils perceive clear linguistic boundaries: some feel that teachers treat them differently because of their language background, and they notice that speakers of Dutch tend to cluster together socially. Teachers, too, observe this dynamic.

Thus, while teachers state that they aspire to a supportive environment, pupils experience uneven enforcement and subtle hierarchies, revealing emotional tensions that are not always visible to teachers.

3. Language policy: formal rules and flexibility

School context strongly shapes the perceived role of policy. In schools with high proportions of multilingual learners, particularly in urban settings or vocational tracks,

teachers describe navigating complex linguistic realities. Some schools maintain strict Dutch-only rules, while others adopt more flexible or dynamically evolving policies.

Teachers report ongoing efforts to develop or revise language policies, which are still “in transition.” One school’s coordinator explains that although much is happening in practice, *“we have nothing on paper... we do a lot, but we haven’t written it down”* – which aligns with the phantom school language policy identified by Marieke Vanbuel (Vanbuel, 2020), where no formal document exists, but actions are still being undertaken by the teacher team. Another type distinguished by Vanbuel (2020), the paper school language policy, could also be found: teachers express concerns that written policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative: “a paper tiger” unless connected to real practices and shared reflection. A lack of time is also often mentioned as the reason for not investing more effort in the development of a clear view on multilingualism in the school’s language policy, even though the need to move toward a strategic language policy (one that connects written guidelines with concrete practices, collective reflection, and sustained commitment across the school) is mentioned in every school.

By contrast, pupils experience policies primarily through enforcement. Their accounts focus almost exclusively on rules and sanctions, not on policy debates or pedagogical intentions. Pupils also perceive inconsistency between teachers: some allow translations or occasional home-language use, while others prohibit them entirely.

Two CLIL teachers also mentioned that an abundance of formal rules and requirements for teaching CLIL hinders its effective implementation. They advocate for more flexible approaches to multilingual learning, such as translanguaging. They mention that Belgium as an inherently multilingual context offers a lot of interesting opportunities for multilingual learning, but strict rules mostly result in missed opportunities.

4. Negotiating local, national and European identities

Teachers and pupils also diverge in how they relate multilingualism to identity. Teachers often reflect on multilingualism as part of a broader European or national identity. For example, one teacher argues that multilingualism fosters a sense of European belonging,

especially through mobility and Erasmus projects. Other teachers express hybrid identities linked to geographical mobility: one teacher raised in Brussels with family roots across Flanders, identifies with being “Belgian” and adapts language use to each region.

Pupils, however, discuss identity mainly in relation to home culture, ethnicity, and regional attachment. They mention Belgium, Congo, Morocco, Albania, or specific Flemish regions as reference points, and note that multilingualism shapes openness and social identity. Few pupils spontaneously link multilingualism to Europe unless prompted, and some consider local identities more important than European ones.

Conclusions

This initial analysis shows that, while teachers and pupils share the same multilingual school spaces on a daily basis, they walk through them with very different experiences, expectations, and emotional investments. What feels practical and manageable to teachers can feel restrictive or limiting to pupils. Conversely, what pupils experience as natural and everyday forms of multilingual expression can feel pedagogically challenging to teachers.

For pupils, multilingualism is simply part of life. They switch fluidly between languages, and they consider these languages as elements of who they are. In their accounts, multilingualism is not an issue to be solved, but a lived reality: a way of relating to friends, sharing culture, or navigating identity. Yet, many pupils feel that this linguistic richness is rarely seen or valued at school. They describe rules that limit the use of home languages, teachers who discourage translation or switching, and a general lack of interest in the languages that matter to them. Their multilingual repertoires often become sources of tension at school.

Teachers, on the other hand, tend to understand multilingualism through the lens of educational responsibility. They often describe themselves as open-minded and appreciative of linguistic diversity, but with an important condition: multilingualism must not obstruct Dutch language acquisition and proficiency. Dutch remains the key to curriculum access, assessment, and social cohesion, and teachers feel responsible for safeguarding

that. Many teachers express a desire to avoid rigid policing and instead encourage Dutch “with understanding”. Still, the pressure they feel, to keep order, ensure comprehension, and prepare pupils for exams, sometimes results in classroom practices that pupils interpret as restrictive.

This contrast becomes especially visible in discussions of language policy. Teachers often describe policy as flexible and intuitive work in progress. Some schools experiment with multilingual activities or more inclusive frameworks. However, pupils mainly encounter policy through rules and sanctions. While teachers discuss policy as a concept, pupils experience policy as lived practice. This difference in perspective explains why teachers see their approach as nuanced, while pupils report a sense of uniform strictness.

Many teachers explicitly call for a more coherent and clearly articulated school-wide vision on multilingualism, preferably embedded in the school’s language policy. While teachers acknowledge ongoing initiatives and individual efforts, they consistently express the need for a shared framework that clarifies expectations, aligns practices across classrooms, and provides guidance on how multilingualism should be supported during both instructional and informal moments. The absence of such a framework not only leads to inconsistent practices, but also places the burden on individual teachers to tackle linguistic diversity on their own. Teachers emphasise that a clear, collectively developed policy, one that is both practical and reflective of the school’s values, would offer stability and reduce arbitrariness.

If schools want to bridge these tensions, a shift is needed. Multilingualism must move from being something to monitor toward something to *use* as a learning tool, a support for comprehension, and a resource for inclusion. Secondly, language policy should be co-constructed with school leaders, teachers and pupils so that rules feel meaningful rather than imposed. And thirdly, professional development should focus on practical strategies rather than theory alone, because teachers want concrete, peer-based examples that help them navigate multilingual classrooms with confidence.

Taken together, these steps can help schools create environments where pupils' linguistic identities are not only acknowledged but actively welcomed, and where teachers feel supported rather than pressured.

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