



PLURIDENTITIES

WORKING PAPER 7

Working package 4



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement n° **101178914**. The document represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Research Executive Agency (REA) and the European Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Document Control Sheet

Project Title	Protecting and stimulating plurilingual identities in learners in Europe via inclusive policies and classroom practices
Deliverable	D4.4
Work Package	WP4
WP leader	KU Leuven
Number of pages	13
Delivery date	15/12/2025
Dissemination level	Public Use
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Acknowledgements

Pluridentities is an interdisciplinary research project that received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement n° 101178914. Please see <https://www.pluridentities.com/> for more information.

The project partners are a multidisciplinary group of research teams consisting of linguists, teacher trainers and political scientists. The members of the consortium are based in Belgium (Vrije Universiteit Brussel and KU Leuven), The Netherlands (University of Amsterdam), Sweden (University of Gothenburg), Spain (University of Cordoba) and Aruba (University of Aruba). The content of this document is the result of the work developed by the partners in the context of the project.

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Problem statement

Across Europe, multilingualism is both a lived reality and a central educational challenge. The Pluridentities framework conceptualises identity formation in multilingual environments as shaped through four interdependent dimensions (linguistic capital, learning environments, language policies, and technology) and emphasises that the development of inclusive multilingual identities depends on the coherence between these domains. Although multilingual education research is extensive, comparative evidence on how these dimensions interact in day-to-day school life across different national settings remains limited.

The Belgian and Swedish contexts offer complementary viewpoints for exploring these dynamics. Belgium combines a strongly monolingual Dutch-medium system with highly multilingual pupil populations, while Sweden combines strong English proficiency, expanding CLIL provision, and diverse linguistic backgrounds. Both systems therefore illustrate how multilingualism is simultaneously valued, instrumentalised, regulated, and negotiated in practice.

In Flanders (Belgium), where Dutch is the official language of instruction, schools increasingly enrol pupils with diverse linguistic repertoires, yet monolingual Dutch norms continue to dominate institutional and instructional expectations. Prior research has described the marginalisation of home languages in Flemish schools, and tensions between curriculum demands and multilingual realities (Van Raemdonck, 2024). The Flemish government has been relatively late in permitting secondary schools to offer CLIL instruction, and the regulatory framework that eventually emerged imposes rather strict and demanding conditions on schools wishing to implement it. These requirements, ranging from staff qualifications to programme design, create high entry barriers that many schools find difficult to meet (Caira et al., 2024; Van Oss et al. 2025). Nevertheless, over the past decade, CLIL has been steadily growing in Flanders, with now around 20% of Flemish schools now offering CLIL (Van Oss et al. 2025).

In Sweden, by contrast, multilingualism is shaped by a different historical and policy trajectory. All Swedish schools are guided by national steering documents, and laws which name Sweden's official language(s), yet there are no laws which guide the use of languages other than Swedish for subject content tuition in secondary school contexts. The presence of English in Sweden is longstanding and ubiquitous (Mežek, 2024), while large-scale migration has diversified linguistic repertoires in recent decades. Among Swedish schools are an increasing number of CLIL programmes where English is used partially or fully as a medium of instruction (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2025). This creates dual linguistic hierarchies: English holds a privileged position as a global language, while Swedish remains the official and socially dominant language of schooling. Multilingual students participate in CLIL and non-CLIL instruction, yet many choose to study in English through CLIL (Apelgren, 2019; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). Comparing Belgium and Sweden provides an opportunity to study how multilingualism is perceived and negotiated in two contrasting educational environments, either through rather restrictive Dutch-only norms (Belgium) or through diverse language practices shaped by English and Swedish usage (Sweden).

Therefore, the guiding comparative research question is: How do Flemish and Swedish secondary teachers and pupils perceive, negotiate, and experience multilingualism, linguistic identity, and language use in school, and what tensions or opportunities emerge within the learning environments (i.e. CLIL and non-CLIL) across both contexts?

Methodology

The comparative analysis draws on qualitative data collected in Flanders (Belgium) and Sweden. Despite differences in scale, both datasets were produced using comparable semi-structured protocols for teacher interviews and pupil focus groups, allowing for cross-context analysis.

The interview guides addressed topics including definitions of multilingualism, perceived linguistic hierarchies, classroom practices, language policy, identity, and the role of home

languages. Pupils discussed their linguistic biographies, experiences with Dutch/Swedish/English-only rules, translanguaging practices, peer dynamics, and identity building. The Swedish interviews also specifically focused on experiences with CLIL approaches to learning, whereas there were only two CLIL teachers and five CLIL pupils in the Belgian dataset.

In Belgium, data were collected in 17 randomly recruited secondary schools across Flanders, including general, technical, and vocational tracks. The aim was to involve diverse linguistic school environments. The Belgian dataset comprises 16 teacher interviews, representing various subjects and different experiences with multilingual learners, and 8 pupil focus groups, totalling 39 pupils aged 14–18.

In Sweden, data were collected in 7 secondary schools, some following CLIL (English-medium) approaches, with English used partially or fully for subject content instruction, and others following mainstream Swedish-medium instruction. The Swedish dataset comprises 7 teacher interviews, mostly language teachers, but including both CLIL and non-CLIL programmes, and 8 pupil focus groups, involving 29 students aged 15–18.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Although NVivo was used in Sweden and a manual coding workflow in Belgium, both analyses followed similar steps, consisting of open coding of transcripts to identify recurring concepts (e.g., multilingualism definitions, linguistic environment in schools, policy perceptions, language ideologies).

The comparison does not aim to draw general conclusions based on statistical analyses; instead, it aims to identify convergent and divergent patterns in teachers' and students' experiences and perceptions across the two systems. The Belgian dataset includes more participants; the Swedish dataset includes more CLIL teachers and pupils, shaping the comparative balance. CLIL participation in Belgium is too limited for analysis; but in Sweden, English use is a central feature of the educational system. Nevertheless, both datasets allow for robust examination of multilingual identity negotiation in classroom environments.

Results

Our first analyses of the Belgian qualitative dataset show that both teachers and pupils describe the constraints of everyday multilingualism: linguistic repertoires are often recognised symbolically but validated only when they can support Dutch-medium instruction. Teachers express ambivalence: they try to balance the appreciation of diversity with the responsibility to safeguard students' Dutch proficiency. Pupils, on the other hand, experience inconsistent or even restrictive rules on language use. This points to a gap between both teachers' and students' recognition of the value of multilingualism and educational practices.

Belgian teachers and pupils describe multilingual repertoires that include Dutch, English, French, and a wide range of home languages. Teachers value languages, particularly Dutch proficiency, and, to some extent, English and French as academic capital with instrumental value. Home languages are described as important parts of their identity, but rarely as learning resources. Pupils consider their home languages as part of who they are but report that these languages receive little recognition in school.

Swedish participants describe a linguistic capital dominated by English and Swedish, with English functioning as a lingua franca and English proficiency as a marker of academic distinction and social status. CLIL students describe English as a core part of their language identity, future aspirations, and social life. Other home languages (e.g. Arabic, Hindi, Norwegian, Danish) are also valued in both CLIL and non-CLIL environments but, like Belgium, are described by students as largely absent from the classroom environment. Students in CLIL environments, are however very positive to learning (diverse) languages, and emphasize the value of language learning, explicitly referring to metalinguistic strategies and awareness. CLIL students identified themselves as multilingual and their definition often included fluency in Swedish and English alongside other languages learned in and outside school, while students in non-CLIL programs tended to refer to multilinguals as those students who had another first language than Swedish. They did not seem to

identify their own language skills in modern languages or in English as a qualification of being multilingual.

The initial findings from the dataset seem to indicate that students in CLIL and non-CLIL environments perceive these hierarchies differently. CLIL approaches to learning can function as both an academic opportunity and a barrier to developing academic Swedish; meanwhile, heritage languages receive limited pedagogical space in subject matter tuition despite their importance for students' identity building. Teachers express varied beliefs about multilingual learning and receive limited training in multilingual pedagogy. These features raise questions about how Swedish learning environments support (or constrain) multilingual identity formation.

So, across both contexts, there appears to be a difference between the intrinsic value of multilingualism for identity building and belonging on the one hand, and the instrumental value of multilingualism for academic success on the other hand. English is a high-status language in both contexts, while home languages sometimes hold symbolic value, but little academic legitimacy.

Belgian pupils frequently describe strict Dutch-only rules in classrooms and playgrounds, enforced through warnings, monitoring cards, or teacher reprimands. Teachers state they try to avoid "witch hunts" but prioritise Dutch. Some teachers allow the strategic use of home languages; others prohibit it entirely. Teachers also point to a lack of a school-wide language policy that includes a clear view on how to approach multilingualism.

Swedish learning environments vary by program: full CLIL environments where English is used as the primary language of tuition and where Swedish is used both socially and less frequently for subject content teaching; partial CLIL environments that intermittently mix Swedish and English; and non-CLIL classrooms that maintain Swedish as the primary language of tuition. However, in non-CLIL classrooms, students also described exposure to English outside school as being a natural part of their lives. Students report flexibility in switching languages, depending on the teacher and task. Some interviewed teachers

allowed/encouraged home language use for note-taking or metalinguistic reflection, yet the struggle to support learning when they do not understand students was also mentioned. CLIL students describe challenges transferring English-learned concepts into Swedish (or other home languages), which creates disciplinary gaps. These gaps were also described as being socially isolating, as Swedish speaking family members or friends could not always offer academic support in English. This was also true of students who spoke another home language than Swedish. Students also discussed confusion over mixed messages from their parents related to language learning; on the one hand they were encouraged to become fluent and proficient speakers of English, but at the same time some pupils described being chastised for forgetting (Swedish) words and turning to English. Most students, however, describe the central role English played in their lives both inside and outside the classroom. At times, however, the use of English seemed to cause a clash of identities. During one focus group, CLIL students discussed being occasionally mistaken for being L1 speakers of English. This was confusing for them, as on the one hand they were proud of this achievement, yet, on the other hand, they also felt that their fluent use of English gave rise to false assumptions about their beliefs and background (i.e. identity).

While Belgian learning environments are shaped by monolingual instruction norms, some Swedish school environments may be shaped by dual-language instruction (Swedish and English) with multiple informal practices also taking place in non-CLIL mainstream schools. Language support personnel were also mentioned in Swedish interviews as providing help in the classroom setting for multilingual students through their home language. Language resource support was described as helping to bridge the gap between multilingual students and their developing Swedish skills. It seems that Belgium emphasises control, aiming to protect Dutch language proficiency, while in Sweden functional language practices included varied amounts of English use in tuition or mother tongue support of subject content learning in various school contexts. Across both contexts, pupils consistently report that their home languages are only partially recognised within the learning environment. Despite substantial structural and policy differences between Belgium and Sweden, pupils navigate these spaces in similar ways: they switch languages creatively when teachers are absent, permissive, or when peer support is needed, demonstrating that their multilingual

competencies operate beneath or beyond formal school norms. What becomes striking in the comparison is that beliefs, rather than formalised policy are the primary drivers of multilingual practices in both systems. In Flanders and Sweden alike, local language policies are either absent, vague, or non-binding, which means that institutions and individual practitioners effectively define what multilingualism can or cannot look like in everyday school life.

Such flexibility can be beneficial, allowing teachers to experiment, collaborate, and tailor practices to pupil needs. However, the lack of clear local policy also carries significant drawbacks. Without coherent guidance or strategic frameworks, multilingual practices become inconsistent, highly dependent on individual teacher beliefs, and vulnerable to arbitrary enforcement. As a result, pupils' rich linguistic repertoires and the identities tied to them are not systematically acknowledged, supported, or integrated into learning. The Swedish and Flemish cases therefore illustrate a paradox: decentralisation offers contextual freedom, yet it also creates a patchwork of practices that can leave multilingual pupils without the consistent recognition and pedagogical support they require.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the Belgian and Swedish qualitative datasets shows that, despite very different linguistic ecologies, schools in both contexts struggle to translate multilingual ideals into consistent, coherent multilingual learning environments. In both systems, pupils and teachers inhabit multilingual spaces, but the institutional logic that shapes these spaces differ: the Belgian education system protects Dutch-medium instruction, while the Swedish system extends English-medium instruction through CLIL. These structural differences create contrasting opportunities and tensions for plurilingual identity development.

In Belgium, the learning environment is mainly characterised by monolingual norms that prioritise Dutch as both the language of learning and the marker of legitimate participation. Teachers acknowledge linguistic diversity and often appreciate its intrinsic value, but day-to-

day educational practices emphasise the acquisition and use of Dutch and behavioural control. Pupils report restricted opportunities to enact their multilingual identities and face sanctions when diverging from Dutch-only expectations. The learning environment thus becomes a site where multilingual identities are negotiated under constraint.

In Sweden, English as a compulsory subject is a central part of the curriculum in CLIL and non-CLIL environments. However, home and heritage languages are not similarly prioritised. Additionally, CLIL programmes enable high levels of English exposure and foster strong multilingual identities centred on English and Swedish. Yet pupils report gaps in their academic Swedish proficiency and limited use of home languages for learning. Non-CLIL environments resemble Belgian classrooms in their monolingual Swedish norms, albeit without the same degree of policing described in Belgium. Across both settings, pupils perceive that teacher beliefs—not policy—determine which multilingual practices are possible.

Our analyses show that the learning environment is an important space where multilingual identity develops or is constrained, shaped as much by implicit norms as by explicit rules. Belgian pupils experience stricter enforcement and clearer boundaries related to Dutch; Swedish pupils experience more linguistic fluidity but still face boundaries shaped by instructional language choices. In neither context do pupils experience consistent, coherent multilingual pedagogies that integrate their full linguistic repertoires.

Across both countries, teachers express a wish for clearer, more strategic support regarding multilingual pedagogies, not least during pre- and in-service training. Pupils, meanwhile, express a desire for the recognition of their home languages and for learning environments where multilingualism is treated as an asset.

Overall, the schools involved in the study from Belgium and Sweden offer different but complementary ways of handling multilingualism. Belgian schools illustrate the consequences of strict monolingual norms within highly diverse populations, while Swedish

schools illustrate the complexities of bilingual (Swedish/English) learning environments amid increasing linguistic diversity.

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