Life-story pedagogy for identity:Through linguistic and cultural recognition to participation and equity

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Identity as a life story is constructed in social interaction with the surrounding world in a narrative continuum through language. When given pedagogic recognition for active meaning-making and construction of personal identity, the student is encountered in a just and holistic manner. In school, skills related to identity construction are taught especially in language education. In Finland, the central aim established in the Core Curriculum for learning mother tongue and literature is to teach students linguistic skills with which to word, interpret, understand, make meaning and construct oneself and the world in interaction with others. Although the identity-mission is shared by all curricular activities, the importance of mother tongue and literature gives reason to call it the 'identity subject' proper. Yet, in multilingual educational contexts, not everyone's mother tongue is equal, as analysed in multi-professional interview data in this paper. For migrant-language speakers, there is a major expectation to learn one of the national languages for participation and active citizenship. This leads to undermining two things. First, the process can also take place vice versa: participation enhances feelings of belonging, which enhances language learning. Second, the first language plays a central role in constructing life-story identity. Although identity construction is cherished in the Core Curriculum, it is not automatically valued, offered, or endorsed in the context of migrant students learning their own first languages. Linguistic and cultural recognition helps to support the significance of life-story identity, and acknowledging it in structural support and in pedagogic practices will further promote all students' equity and participation as active involvement.

Keywords: language learning, narrative identity, life story, mother tongue, heritage language, belonging, participation, translanguaging, pedagogy
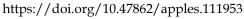
1 Introduction

The conception and knowing of self, of others and the world is constructed in narrative means through language (Polkinghorne, 1988). The primary language of meaning making, inner negotiation and thinking is the first language. It is learnt

in early interaction with one's caregivers and is important to identity (e.g., Alisaari et al., 2021; Jalongo, 2019; Puroila, 2019; Reese et al., 2010). It is with the first language that memories are constructed, meanings are attached to experiences and, importantly, autobiographies, and narrated identities, are developed. Also, it is used to encode prior knowledge (Cummins, 2013) and acknowledged by multilingual students as meaningful, natural-born, and easy to use (Tarnanen et al., 2017). However, second or foreign languages or other languages can gradually also participate in identity construction and knowledge processing (Jaatinen, 2003).

Identity construction is a key target of education, and everyone should have equal opportunities to use their first language in the process. However, there is a major lack of understanding how to support multilingual students' life-story identities. In this paper, we are interested in how multilingual students' identity construction based on their first language is acknowledged in school, both in practice and in the national documents guiding education. In particular, we consider how accessible first language teaching, multilingual resources, and translanguaging are, as well as how multilingual students' life-story identities are supported pedagogically in school. We use *life-story* and *narrative identity* as synonyms in the paper; through the life-story approach, we aim at an enhanced implementation of 'identity' in education.

Terminologically, we follow Alisaari et al. (2021) in using 'multilingual student' to refer to students who were born outside of Finland or whose parents, or one of them, were born elsewhere than Finland *and* whose first language differs from the language of schooling. Similarly, we opt for the term 'first language' to highlight the priority of that language for identity.

Following McAdams and McLean (2013) and Fivush et al. (2011), we recognise and acknowledge identity as constructed narratively in time in relation to place, other people, memories and the self, and to explore how such stories are lived by in relation with each other in social interaction in school (Clandinin et al., 2006). Identity is a constantly evolving story about the self, positioning one as a member of groups and communities in the dynamic networks of the globe, and in relation to school subjects such as second language (L2) (Ropo, 2019; see Cummins et al., 2015). Identity means the structuring of different meanings and experiences and striving for visions on prospects based on hope. Language plays an important role in this process (van Lier, 2004; Goodson et al., 2010). The ability to use language to make meaning and construct emerging identities begins in early childhood and is enriched throughout life (Puroila & Estola, 2014; Puroila, 2019; Reese et al., 2011; 2010).

Narrative identity and language are rooted in culture, and the understanding of life-course and culturally shaped and desired 'scripts' and forms may vary between different societal or cultural contexts (Bohn & Berntsen, 2013; 2008; Fivush et al., 2011; see Lucas & Villegas, 2013). This is the framework within which life-story identities are born. Importantly, as a growing body of literature in narrative identity theory suggests, autobiography influences learning and knowing (Goodson et al., 2010; Goodson & Gill, 2011; Jaatinen, 2003; Kinossalo, 2015, 2020; McNeil & Douglas, 2017; Ropo, 2015b; 2019). In offering their support for life-story identities, educators take a crucial step away from encountering students primarily as migrants who contrast with their native students (Kurki, 2019). This paves way for students' liberation from under a racialising or 'othering' gaze, granting them an opportunity to feel they are persons with a right to be seen as they are.

This paper addresses multilingualism, language learning, and life-story identities. Two cases can be distinguished from one another yet there is similarity between

them. The first case concerns the language(s) we use to make meaning, learn, and interpret something as personal and meaningful, and the second the language(s) we use to form relationships in new types of social interactions, such as upon arrival in a foreign country. The connection between the two lies in the issues of sense of belonging and participation. As to the first case, a sense of belonging can be promoted through recognising students and any people as active, interpretative and meaning-making human beings constructing their narrative identities by admitting voice to them and involving them in the shaping of their own social conditions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the second case, personal participation is promoted by the individual learning the new language on the one hand and by a culture that provides multiple opportunities for individuals' linguistic participation in society on the other (see Norton, 2013). Importantly, it is a two-way street in that a sense of belonging enhances language learning (Intke-Hernandez, 2020). When discussing integration practices enhancing participation on a macro-level (Finnish *kotouttaminen*) or of a sense of belonging from an individual's viewpoint (Finnish *kotoutuminen*), both questions should be recognised as equally central for identity construction and multilingual students' education. Further, we argue that through recognising both types of cases, they accompany and enrich the possibilities of experiences of equity and of participation in its fullest sense with an increased sense of belonging. A rather serious remark should be made while reading this paper: the multifaceted meaning and role of language(s) should not be overlooked in broader integration practices and policies.

2 Recognising multilingual life-story identities

This article rests on two cornerstones. The first is the interrelationship between narrative identity, language learning, and belonging. The second contextualises this research into Finnish school settings which build on the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 ([NCCBE]; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014) where the role of students' identity is explicitly articulated.

2.1 Narrative identity, language learning, and belonging

Acknowledging identity as a complex and multidimensional concept, we align with those researchers who suggest a holistic view on students' life-story identity, language repertoire in meaning making and language learning (e.g., Cummins, 2013; Goodson et al., 2010; Kinossalo, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Ropo, 2015b). In this, we adopt a narrative approach according to which the past, present and future all construct an autobiographical identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013 for a review): a storied understanding of one's life that is formed through language and eventually experienced with a new language (e.g., Jaatinen, 2003). In making meaning, one draws semantic conclusions from the episodic, autobiographical memories of one's own experiences that may eventually constitute parts in one's life-story identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 236; Reese et al., 2010). The inner knowledge about one's life is autobiographical knowledge and has complex effects on how a person acts, learns and makes decisions. In Jaatinen's (2003, p. 77) view, embedding autobiography *in* pedagogy shows an aim towards understanding the students and the impact of their past to education in the present.

School is a crucial place for identity development (Cummins et al., 2015; Kaplan & Flum, 2012; Ropo, 2015a). It is a place where students share stories about themselves and their lives with teachers as well as with each other (Clandinin et al., 2006). It is there that students encounter institutional discourses which play an important role for identities, learning and agency. The school is an institution where prevailing narratives are circulated. The school therefore provides a stage for students' identity stories and navigation towards finding meaningful positions in the settings (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; see Gee, 2000). Teachers can take an active role in supporting students' identity construction (Cummins & Early, 2011; Harrel-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010; Kinossalo, 2015; 2020). We, too, suggest that by acknowledging students' autobiographies, the effects of experiences on learning can be better understood and considered in relation to the effects of the social, psychological, physical, and cultural environment on their school well-being, learning and hindrances to learning.

Identity narratives in and across time are always present in students' lives; however, school learning is often assumed to occur loosely related to autobiographies, if at all; in the school activities of students with a migrant background they may be overlooked altogether (see Cummins et al., 2015; Gay, 2018). For example, Harju-Autti and Sinkkonen (2020) found that teachers do not know the backgrounds of multilingual students very well although teachers find them meaningful. In addition, narrative construction of identity in pedagogy is a relatively new understanding. In Finland, the basis for this is established in the NCCBE (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014), as discussed in the next section, but is missing from the documents that guide the structures for multilingual instruction and teacher education (Ropo, 2015a; Kinossalo, 2015). Further, policy makers in different countries seem to have misread or ignored research on the role of first language not merely for identity construction but also for the processing of knowledge (see Cummins, 2013) and memories. For instance, Norton (2013) has shown that native country memories influence how adult migrants grasp their relation to the public world in Canada, their new country, and that this, in turn, affects their positions as speakers of English, their new language (Norton, 2013, pp. 71–72). Thus, in Finland, too, a better understanding is welcome in terms of how life memories and autobiographies affect young students' negotiated positions in learning the target language or how they position themselves in the classroom in relation to other students (see Cummins et al., 2015; Davies & Harré, 1990; Kinossalo, 2020; Ropo, 2019).

To theorise language learning and sense of belonging, a narrative, life-story approach on identity in school can be successfully complemented by an ecological view of language. In van Lier's (2000, 2004) terms, learning and language use require active engagement by the individual while they always happen in the context of and in interaction with the environment. According to van Lier (2000, 252), the physical and social environment provides language users with semiotic resources and *affordances*, possibilities for learning, and it is out of these that an individual perceives and chooses the ones that seem the most meaningful for him/her to make meaning. This bilateral relationship between the individual and the environment resonates with narrative identity theory; identity, too, is shaped in and by social interaction. Learners constantly negotiate their identities and positions in relation to and as affected by their environment: other people, the overall context, and different layers of history (Davies & Harre, 1990; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Ropo, 2015a).

Intke-Hernandez's (2020) findings support the significance of interpersonal and social support in language learning (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Norton, 2013) relating to sense of belonging, that is, having an experience of firm, long and meaningful relationships, is fundamental to well-being and is essential to academic success (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2016). Indeed, she describes the dynamic nature of learning and identity where the sense of belonging also comes to mean language socialisation: a sense of belonging can be experienced even when there is no common language since it arises in situations when one becomes seen and heard. A sense of belonging is crucial in encouraging the learner to participate in different interactive situations in different contexts of everyday life and in those situations in which language skills increase and develop. When an individual participates in the community's daily life and activities, they are given the opportunity to socialise into the language and become an active agent in the target language, which supports participation (Intke-Hernandez, 2020). Therefore, in its fullest sense, participation means not only the experience of inclusion but also the opportunity to make decisions and be the driver of one's own life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The process is two-way: social positioning and experiences of involvement, or the lack of it, affect identity and the way of repositioning oneself in relation to communities. The possibilities for socialisation into the new language need to be recognised and made use of in communities on an everyday basis.

In broader discussions on immigrants and integration policies, it seems that first language is often neglected as an important language for meaning making for those entering new societies, searching, and finding their place (Cummins, 2013). However, it would be useful to consider all activities and participation (or inclusion) in them from the perspectives of both first language and other languages as well as of other communication strategies (Piippo, 2017; Sierens & Avermaet, 2013; Yli-Jokipii et al., 2020). There can hardly be any room for dismissing personal interpretation in one's own first language of meaningful inclusion. In Intke-Hernandez's (2020) terms, to manage successful socialisation into a new language and inclusion to a new country, a sense of meaningful participation is needed because knowing the new language, although beneficial, does not guarantee that the language learner feels 'included' or 'integrated'.

Thus, for meaningful inclusion, the first language of L2 learners deserves more attention. Recently, Heikkola et al. (2022) have argued for linguistically responsive teaching in pointing out that first language proficiency directly affects learning the target language. Drawing on García and Wei (2014), among others, they claim that knowledge transfers between languages and that "students benefit greatly when teachers allow and encourage them to use all of their linguistic resources (Kibler, 2010)" (Heikkola et al., 2022, p. 4). Earlier, García and Wei (2014) have referred to this as translanguaging; it is the flexible utilisation of the resources provided by different languages, language forms and registers (García et al., 2017; Lehtonen, 2021; Wei, 2018). To develop narrative identity, as McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 235) argue, students must learn the "particular cultural parameters" within groups for story-telling and sharing. It is therefore fruitful to recognise translanguaging as one possible means for students to construct and share personal stories and engage in learning in multilingual classrooms.

2.2 Identity in the curriculum

In school, skills related to identity construction are practised especially in language education. In the NCCBE (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014), the central aim in learning the Finnish or Swedish mother tongue and literature is to teach students linguistic skills with which to word, interpret, understand, make meanings, and construct identities and the world in interaction with others. Mother tongue and literature, as a subject, is also the school's means of providing transversal skills needed for learning other subjects. Although the identity-mission is shared by all curricular activities, the importance of mother tongue and literature gives reason to call it an 'identity subject' proper.

Yet, in the multilingual educational contexts increasingly common in today's Finland, not everyone's first language stands in an equal position as we will show. For multilingual speakers, there is a major expectation to learn one of the national languages for participation and active citizenship. While meeting this expectation is surely beneficial, this tunnel vision leads to undermining two things. First, the process can also take place reversely, as described in the first section: participation enhances the sense of belonging which enhances language learning. Second, the first language plays a central role in the processing of knowledge (Cummins, 2013) and constructing life-story identity, as shown in the second section. Although identity construction is cherished in the NCCBE, it is not automatically valued, offered, or endorsed in the context of multilingual students learning their first languages. When it is, it often limits 'identity' to cover questions of language and culture, ignoring life-stories (Kinossalo, 2015; Kinossalo et al., 2020). Hence, identity as a concept is only mentioned twice in the Curriculum for Preparatory Instruction for Basic Education ([CPIBE]; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015) with reference to language and cultural identity. First language is mentioned as a learning path towards learning Finnish or Swedish.

This is not to say first languages are not acknowledged in the curriculum. Using the Finnish constitution as a backdrop, the NCCBE (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 87) admits that students have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture and that their own first languages are taught where possible. In a similar vein, the NCCBE does promote linguistic and cultural awareness and indeed takes a favourable stance on supporting the multilingualism of students and the development of their identity and self-esteem insofar as these make up key competences for living a balanced life as an active member of Finnish society.

A closer look at the appendices of the NCCBE helps to understand the more precise aims of first language teaching. These aims are differentiated for grades 1–2, 3–6 and 7–9 and for different areas of language learning. For the purposes of this paper, the most relevant area is the entity 'language, literature and culture'. For the first two years, the learning aim in this area is that students acknowledge the meaning of their own first language and create a positive relationship with it (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 463). In the second period, the aim is to deepen this relationship (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 465) and to help the students to understand language identity and cultural identity and consider the meaning of the first language (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 468). The aim of the third period resembles and reiterates the aims of the second period, adding to it that the students familiarise themselves

with first language media, art, and culture (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 469).

In establishing the learning aims for first language in ways described above, the NCCBE maintains first language as a clinical school subject. Students are advised to *observe* and *consider* different languages and cultures from almost an etic perspective without any implication to absorb them or, indeed, construct their identity through them. Identity building should definitely not be forced from the outside yet the simple lack of mentioning this as a possibility is alarming.

A crucial step for implementing the NCCBE propositions into practice takes place at the local level. This means that the decision to provide teaching on first languages, the ways in which this teaching is organised, and the overall measures taken to support the development of language and cultural identity are all decided in municipalities and in individual schools (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 88). Piippo (2017) and Yli-Jokipii et al. (2020) have already pointed out there is great variability regarding this for both teachers and students and that the teaching and status of first languages should be carefully reconsidered in an increasingly multilingual society. We will return to these arguments later in this paper and highlight their relevance in the context of new data.

3 Data and method

To explore how multilingual students' identities are met in school, we sought to answer two research questions:

> **RQ1** What kinds of challenges do professionals identify in multilingual students' access to first language teaching and first language use in Finnish basic education?
>
> **RQ2** How do professionals describe multilingual students as meaning making individuals?

The data were collected in the Horizon2020-funded research and development project CHILD-UP[1] (2019–2022) that aims at producing knowledge of and finding ways of enhancing expectations, participation, and levels of trust among migrant children in education and social protection in Europe. The data used in this paper were collected in Finland among different respondent groups as presented in Table 1. The data include structured theme interviews and open-ended survey responses that were collected through a web survey offered as an alternative way of participating in research in spring 2020 due to the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. All data were collected in Finnish, and in regions that have not been previously studied from this perspective, the Tampere region, and South Ostrobothnia.

The questionnaires were designed in conjunction with the international research team of the project. Both types of data collection included questions on professional experiences of working with multilingual students or children; views on students' educational, social and psychological needs; thoughts and views about multiculturalism in education, and (teachers) supporting students' identity construction as framed by the NCCBE (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014); and comments and suggestions for enhancing integration measures.

Table 1. Description of data.

Type of respondent	Type of data	Number of interviews or questionnaires	Working experience in the field
Teachers (T1–13) working in primary and lower secondary grades including - preparatory instruction teachers (5) - Finnish L2 teachers (2) - first language teachers (2); A teacher working in preparatory instruction in vocational school (1); Classroom assistants working with migrants together with teachers (3)	Individual interviews lasting 35–60 min each	13	2–25 years
School social workers (SW1–5) working in primary and lower secondary grades	Individual interviews lasting 50–70 each	5	6–30 years
Social workers in social service centres (SSC1–4) including - asylum seeking centres (2) - city social services for immigrants (1) - youth work centres for immigrants (1) - 10 interviewees all together	Focus groups (2–3 interviewees per group) lasting 60–80 min each	4	5–36 years
Teachers (in, writing TW) working in primary and lower secondary grades including preparatory instruction teachers	Open ended web-survey	9	

Relying on narrative methodology (Barkhuizen, 2015; Clandinin et al., 2006; Riessman, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1995), we[2] approached the data as narratives produced by professionals to us as researchers on their experiences with multilingual students. To gain an overview of the data, we conducted a preliminary content analysis (Riessman, 2008). The analysis was guided by and inductively read through, first, theories of narrative identity as a storied continuum (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013) that has complex effects on learning (such as presented by Jaatinen, 2003; Norton, 2013; Ropo, 2019; see also Cummins et al., 2015; Gee, 2000) and, second, by Intke-Hernandez's (2020; van Lier, 2004) findings on the multi-layered possibilities of constructing a sense of belonging.

The data was thematically coded for professionals' narratives on 1) students' identities and 2) issues related to language. These were further divided into different categories as shown in Table 2. Overall, professionals were found to recognise the complex relations between identity, language learning, and possibilities for participation, as well as their supportive role for students and also the challenges students face in education; and, importantly, that professionals have, or rather, do not have, practical measures to face these challenges in their work. However, not all teachers recognised the meaning of the first language for the multilingual students. In presenting the findings in section four, we reproduce data excerpts and elaborate on the contents of the categories.

Table 2. Description of categories of practices and recognition of relations between language, learning identity and sense of belonging.

Research question 1	Approach	Category
What kinds of challenges do teachers identify in multilingual students' access to first language teaching and first language use in Finnish basic education?	PRACTICE	1) L1 not registered as a subject in the national curriculum
		2) organising L1 lessons not obligatory in municipalities
		3) insufficient training for encountering multilingual students with their language abilities and experiences
		4) minor use of translanguaging
	RECOGNITION	5) unappreciation of L1 as a proper subject by both students and teachers
		6) recognising barriers in social inclusion with L1 and with poor skills in L2
		7) unrecognisability of relations between first language, sense of belonging and learning L2
		8) unrecognisability of relations between first language, identity and learning L2

Research question 2	Approach	Category
How do professionals describe multilingual students as meaning making individuals?	PRACTICE	1) supporting identity construction as key mission
		2) respecting students' roots in practice
		3) no nationwide practices or guidance for supporting multilingual students' identity construction in relation to autobiography and learning
	RECOGNITION	4) recognising teachers' active role in supporting students' identity work
		5) encountering every student as a student while also promoting diversity
		6) recognising unique, personal growth independent of one's background
		7) understanding student's life as a continuum
		8) recognising relations between autobiography, identity, and learning
		9) recognising the meaning of first language for identity
		10) understanding the great meaning of (both) languages in forming relationships with peers and adults

3.1 Ethics

The study followed the ethical principles of human sciences in Finland (TENK 2019) and was evaluated by the ethical committees of both the project's ethical advisory board and the local institution. Permissions from the participants were requested on paper through participant consent forms. Participants were able to withdraw their consent at any time during the process. Since the data concern the vulnerable group of children, an overtly sensitive approach was applied during the entire research process (Sikes, 2010).

4 Findings

4.1 Challenges in accessing first language teaching and using it

First language, the mother tongue of a migrant student, was previously registered as a subject in the NCCBE. After it was removed and changed into an additional optional subject, professionals say there have been effects on students' motivation to choose and study it as a subject to begin with. They also argue lessons are not always accessible. These in turn reduce the appreciation of such subjects in both teachers' and students' view. The students do not necessarily see first language as a proper subject because they do not receive a grade for the work they put into it, as one teacher points out: "So it's really often that teachers complain or tell about teenage students losing their interest cause they feel they don't benefit from learning the first language in any way cause it's not graded numerically." In addition, teachers point out that the absence of first languages as a registered subject from the NCCBE has weakened their own professional status (Tarnanen et al., 2017; Yli-Jokipii et al., 2022).

When the subject is not dictated by the NCCBE, municipalities or single schools do not necessarily organise lessons. This may cause long-distance, self-organised, self-paid journeys to schools where a certain first language is taught, which makes teaching inaccessible to some.

> Some cannot access the teaching at all, like if you need to travel to some other school far away or if you have a class simultaneously, or if you live in a small municipality where teaching is not organised, cause, one, it's not in any way obligatory for municipalities to organise teaching in this(...) (T13.)

Language matters play an important and multidimensional role in professionals' descriptions about barriers to social inclusion and for concerns about how the students are able to learn, interact with Finnish peers, join hobbies or even discuss and share their experiences or emotions with educators or with each other. This is noteworthy because narrating personal experiences connects students to their communities (Fivush et al., 2011; Tarnanen et al., 2017) and "having the words" helps in sharing (Jalongo, 2019, p. 22; McAdams & McLean, 2013), which, in turn, increase the sense of belonging and enhance learning (Intke-Hernandez, 2020; see Chiu et al., 2016).

Language of schooling is essential for interaction with peers (Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Harju-Autti et al., 2021). However, students' all languages should be recognised and acknowledged as meaningful (Stathopoulou & Dassi, 2020).

> (...) A lot of students carry a language burden which is a richness on the one hand but then there's the concern with respect to education that they remain half-lingual. And when you think about this from your own professional perspective (...) With me, students can unfortunately only use Finnish or English but it's just that what is the student's emotional language, the one they can use for telling about home affairs? How does it work if there's yet a third language used at home? And how can they tell about their feelings in these different languages? (SW1.)

> But with poor language skills it's really difficult to start making friends when your older than that. Like it's really hard and many do suffer from it. They would very much want to have Finnish friends but when you're shy and it takes loads of courage to reach out to peers to find friends with those poor language skills. (T7.)

When the use of first languages in school is encouraged in general, it seems to increase migrant students' well-being, enhance positive identity development, and may help in positioning positively towards learning (Sierens & Avermaet, 2013). Similarly, different ways of promoting participation even without a shared language can turn out as effective for language learning and identity construction, as illustrated by the following example (Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

The fact that migration may involve traumatic experiences shows in the classrooms. Teachers find these difficult to encounter especially when not sharing the first language of the student to express or understand emotions. They challenge the learning of both content and language, and students' identity negotiations.

One teacher recalled an episode with a ten-year-old student with a highly traumatised background. The student had been suffering from depression, insomnia, aggression, and other symptoms for many months since starting in her class. The student had had major challenges in settling down for learning and had sought attention in ways considered negative. He had "systematically refused to speak Finnish"; however, the teacher had noticed the student was very clever, skilled at memorising vocabulary, and able to write and understand Finnish. One day the teacher brought her dog to the classroom but soon noticed the student turning anxious. Afraid of traumatising him even more, she explicitly addressed the student to calm him down and promised he was free to sit at the back of the class where she would not let the dog enter. During the 90-minute lesson, she was amazed and pleased to witness the student undressing his outerwear and gradually approaching the dog by the teacher's side in front of the classroom. At the end of the lesson, he was petting the dog, and he was doing so in Finnish.

> After the episode he has been speaking Finnish. He kind of overcame his fear for the dog but also his fear for speaking Finnish. I still remember the feeling when I was leaving and took the dog out and the student shouted to me like, teacher! teacher! can you please bring the dog with you also next time. I was like, this can't be true, he is speaking whole sentences to me! (T4.)

In the example above, the teacher described the student as talented but not motivated. In other words, the student had not positioned himself as a Finnish-speaking person yet: he had not needed to do so before (Norton, 2013; Ropo, 2019). However, in the episode with the dog, the student encountered a meaningful experience that possibly deepened his sense of belonging which helped him to take up this new identity position. In Norton's (2013, p. 198) words, the student became "aware of the opportunities available to [him] to use the target language in the wider community and how [he] might transform such possibilities in keeping with [his] desires for the future".

The teachers describe that even if the child is talented but not motivated in learning the new language, different experiences, as described in the episode above, may offer a personal meaning for communication; therefore, they can not only begin to change their own social conditions of the self but also enter into the culture in Finnish —to position themselves as Finnish-speaking persons with a sense of belonging (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Norton, 2013; Ropo, 2015a). Experiencing belonging strengthens the desire to 'belong more', to become more involved, and through that, the courage increases to use the target language for participating in different social situations and communities. This, in turn, boosts language learning through language socialisation (Intke-Hernandez, 2020; 2021).

Teachers recognise the coexistence of different language identities and social positions (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Norton, 2013). In different situations and with different people, students choose to use one language or another. Although multilingual interaction is more often complex rather than clear-cut, different languages are important for students' social positioning with the particular language(s). Although teachers recognise the importance of different languages, one teacher reported how some colleagues found it peculiar that migrant children study their first language at school. Similarly, Harju-Autti and Sinkkonen (2020) discovered that none of the teachers they studied mentioned using students' first languages in learning. Thus, not all teachers are aware of how important first language is for personal growth, equity and participation —in Gubrium and Holstein's (2008) terms, the classroom may form a narrative environment where students' first languages are not acknowledged for personal storytelling.

Language skills incorporate linguistic abilities across languages, which should be acknowledged as means for identity and learning (Cummins, 2013; Stathopoulou & Dassi, 2020). In the following, one teacher describes the possibilities of multi- or translingual resources where students manage to use diverse languages for affordances, learning and problem-solving (Flores & García, 2013; Lehtonen, 2021).

> I teach immigrants only. Some are really skilled in hiding their inadequate language skills. Some appear very competent but easily end up understanding things the wrong way. For some, completing assignments is sometimes very difficult. However, poor language skills do not necessarily show in poor completion of assignments. Some use Google Translator and score no matter how bad their Finnish may be. (TW.)

The extract shows how students can express their competence through using all the possibilities that the learning environment offers if permitted and encouraged to do that. However, as Alisaari and Heikkola (2020) show, this is not always the case and teachers, especially other than language teachers, need more training on the possibilities of translanguaging.

While poor skills in the language of schooling may hinder academic skills from developing or blooming, a fair amount of first language lessons and lessons on Finnish as a second language may help to conquer obstacles for academic achievement, as shown in the following example:

> We often encounter these linguistic challenges and see they may play academic competences down. There's a lot of potential but then the linguistic difficulties may make up an obstacle. Often, when they've received teaching in their own mother tongue and in Finnish as a second language, we may see success stories quite quickly where those linguistic difficulties are overcome, and people get on with their lives. (SW5.)

The social worker's view above resonates with that of several teachers in pointing out that it is difficult to clarify whether poor academic achievement is due to poor Finnish skills or caused by a learning disability, which is in line with findings of Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen (2020). Thus, first language support or linguistic support may help to navigate these types of situations, as shown previously also elsewhere (Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

The challenges in accessing first language teaching are multiscalar and complex. Resonating with earlier findings (Honko & Mustonen, 2018; Piippo, 2017), they range from the practical organisation of lessons in terms of space and schedules to the negative evaluation of first language as a school subject by students and other teachers. All these hinder the realisation of equity and participation from the perspective of first language and life-story identity. They are caused by not understanding the greater meaning of linguistic awareness, everyday multilingualism, or translanguaging (Wei, 2018). However, teachers and other professionals recognise the influence of students' past experiences on their learning today, as shown in the next section.

4.2 Multilingual students as meaning making individuals

As discussed earlier, identity is a central concept in NCCBE and education must indeed promote identity construction (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). However, the concept is not as comprehensively described in the Curriculum for Preparatory Instruction for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2015) or in the aims for first language teaching where the definition is limited to language and culture only. Despite this, professionals across schools and social services, from preparatory teaching to first language teaching and inclusive classrooms, and from school social workers to reception centres recurrently describe multilingual students' identities as holistic and their lives as continuums (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

When asked about supporting students' identity construction, most teachers maintained it as one of their key missions and many continued to describe students' identities as multidimensional, which resonates with the findings of Alisaari et al. (2021). They recognised their active roles in students' identity construction (see Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010; Kinossalo, 2015). In the following example, the teacher underlines the power the teacher has for producing long-lasting and significant effects on students' lives and understanding of themselves (Clandinin et al., 2006):

> I do think [identity] is super important and all relationships we have influence it. And the relationship with the teacher is of course a very meaningful one for children and young people. A relationship that affects the core. The teacher has great power in saying things that touch you deeply and that stay with you for a long time. The teacher is definitely a creator of identity and a shaper of what it means to be human. And I do talk about this in class, like that identity can be diverse. That you don't have to think like, if you're migrant, that you only represent one nation but that you can simultaneously be like Finn and something else or that there can be even different identities within you. (T7.)

In addition, social workers spontaneously mentioned issues of identity although they, in contrast to teachers, were not directly asked about it:

> Our young people (…) they come with different kinds of backgrounds. And me too, I arrived in Finland as an asylum-seeker and I have a migrant background, of course that

> also affects the work I do (…) Everyone has a life story of their own with its own character, it's wonderful and beautiful. I think my experiences are highly positive (…) Our young people themselves, they're like, you let them be. They don't have to change themselves or their culture. They enter our activities with their cultures. And this makes our activities richer and then grants them like competence and tools cause here we let them be like for real let them be who they are. And that gives them courage and at the same time they learn new skills from others. And everyone learns from one another. (SSC1.)

The extract illustrates how important the concepts of identity, relationships and life story are in the type of social encounters that their work builds on (see Clandinin et al., 2006). The interviewee above emphasises the unique nature of each life story and the fact that every student wants to be encountered as an individual, not as an immigrant with any certain special definition, or indeed a person without history (Kurki, 2019).

The data show that all students have the same dreams and hopes independent of their background. The professionals consider all having rather normal prospects for life — and at the same time, especially young students with all kinds of backgrounds want to become astronauts or something less ordinary. This resonates with Bohn and Berntsen's (2013, 1239; see also 2008) finding on "adolescents seeking for unique identities while to some degree wanting also to become typical members of the society" in the cultural crossroads even if their former life experiences have been traumatic (see Fivush et al., 2011).

Professionals point out that the past experiences are present in the here-and-now of the students in school, sometimes by accident, but usually they sense the students carry more than the immediate experience of sitting in the classroom and assumedly "only" studying (see Goodson et al., 2010; Jaatinen, 2003; Kinossalo, 2015; McNeil & Douglas, 2017; Ropo, 2019).

Traumatic experiences, however, are a challenge at many levels: in terms with language and language learning as shown in chapter 4.1, and in terms with pedagogy and identity encounters. They challenge both students' life stories and well-being, and professionals' pedagogical approaches, expertise, and mental health. Recognising this, professionals describe they have no pedagogical or theoretical tools nor training to balance the positions in a scene where autobiography meets learning; how to act in situations where students' autobiographies "jump" to the front to play a leading role in class, leaving the academic contents aside? (see Stathopoulou & Dassi, 2020; UNESCO, 2019).

> These trauma cases that I come to think of have been a meaningful experience in my career. This has to do with 2015 when a lot of immigrants arrived into Finland, and in 2016 they moved from preparatory instruction to mainstream classes. 2016–2017 was like a rough, educational year. Back then, I met many students who were really vulnerable and broken. Like they just couldn't control their emotions and they could start crying in the middle of the lesson and learning was really difficult with all these things going on (…) After the autumn break we had a chat about how the vacation had been, and one of my students opened up to tell us that… 40 relatives had died in that week (…) What comes to teacherhood, I had no training for this. I did not know what to do. And I couldn't like...we don't have structures for this. I came to realise there is nowhere or no one I can direct that student to cause the language is constantly on the way. (T7.)

Teachers wish to understand how to encounter the student in such a situation as a holistic individual and how to support their meaningful meaning making towards learning and sense of belonging in the new environment.

Following from the recognition of the importance of identities as life stories on a continuum, professionals see how first language matters for identity construction, for every person is born with a natural need for being seen and heard as a whole (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988) with first language in familiar interaction (see Jalongo, 2019). In the next extract, a teacher describes the essential role of adults who speak the same first language than students (see Honko & Mustonen, 2018; McAdams & McLean, 2013):

> (…) if the student doesn't know Finnish properly yet, the first language teacher may be one who really understands the challenges in the student's learning, family life, and health. Sometimes I get to listen about parents' divorce or other sensitive issues that you don't necessarily want to tell to another teacher because you don't know the language or if, for some reason, you only trust the first language teacher. (T13.)

Here, the interviewee points out that with adults who speak the same language as students, students can talk about everyday matters at school or tell stories, similarly to how mainstream students can talk with their teachers or peers. This enhances narrative development, identity skills and sense of belonging at school, all of which encourages learning: sharing, listening and bonding matter (see Chiu et al., 2016; Clandinin et al., 2006; Goodson & Gill, 2011; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Acknowledging students with their diverse cultural and linguistic resources enhances the sense of belonging. Multilingualism, including the use of a first language, is no drawback in learning a new language, but as the example shows, it gives opportunities to share stories meaningful for identity construction and the sense of belonging (Intke-Hernandez, 2021).

Interviewees in all professional groups in the data point out that multilingual students tend to be categorised as immigrants in public discourse today. In contrast to viewing migrant students as a homogeneous entity, the professionals emphasise diversity. Indeed, they argue for students' strong need to be recognised and acknowledged as meaning-making individuals and as any youngsters without the label 'migrant'. In professionals' narratives, there is a desire to transform public discourse towards a more holistic understanding of the individual.

Even though at present there is no generally accepted comprehensive understanding of the pedagogy of encountering the challenges and possibilities of multilingual students in school, nor nationwide practices on supporting their identity work, encouraging their multilingual competences, decreasing marginalising and racialising discourses, or enhancing equity and participation, in professionals' narratives some means and ideas to promote these do show. In the data, professionals call for a pedagogical approach where students are encountered in a holistic manner, as individual persons in a simple manner — by listening to what is going on in their lives (see Clandinin et al., 2006).

> I think it would be wonderful to make schools a bit more like us here that we encounter every young person as an individual, just the way s/he is, we try to move away from treating them as a mass like this is the way girls/boys with a migrant background are, or this is the way young refugees are, or asylum-seekers, where we only see them through the challenges or problems. Towards seeing the young person holistically and trying to get to know them a little bit more in-depth. And to listen to the young, listen to their hopes and needs, what they want, and in that way also create motivation for studying, and not only through punishments and these kinds of things. (SSC1.)

A similar type of a practice of acknowledging and trying to understand the student's perspective shows in the data, that a teacher (T2) a teacher explains how she encounters all children as they are, providing children with a chance to position themselves as meaningful persons: "(…) I can almost say that whether it's a Finnish child, or a newly-arrived one, or someone who's stayed in Finland for some time already, I don't categorise them in any way. The bottom line is that everyone's alike. (…)" The teacher assesses her acknowledgement of all students as children as a pedagogic talent. While "treating everyone the same" is somewhat ambiguous (e.g., Gay, 2018), the teacher's practice does also acknowledge diversity: she also recalls discussions with students where they were allowed to question their histories as well as their stay in Finland (Norton, 2013). This kind of an approach allowed the students to incorporate their life stories into the school, and the students welcomed the possibility. A pedagogic approach can respect both individual experiences (autobiographies) and cultural roots, as another teacher describes (Fivush et al., 2011; Jaatinen, 2003; Norton, 2013):

> We try to talk about one's own home country a lot and what did you do there and where did you live and we try to listen to music from that country and watch videos. We maintain it, it's not just like we're in Finland now and we stick to learning Finnish things. We try to respect the child's roots and background. (T8.)

Sometimes the pedagogical means are everyday practices, but all the more meaningful, inclusive spontaneous, yet structured actions; in these actions the sense of belonging enhances, as shown by Intke-Hernandez (2020). Even if they do not talk about learning or study academic matters, the effect is increasing students' sense of belonging and practising their meaning making skills, which in turn may result in students finding more possibilities to use the target language.

> They're often exhausted, but they do alright. We always have a break for a snack, 10–5 minutes in the middle of class when we spend time together and talk, we eat, drink, and discuss other things than learning. (T10.)

To promote everyone's sense of belonging, teachers use the method of students working in small groups (see Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020) as it helps to get everyone involved in learning; sharing and discussing also promote growth and identity skills (Jalongo, 2019; McAdams & McLean, 2013). In such activities, students meet each other as whole and can critically both learn from each other and to construct knowledge as a group and negotiate their identities as persons, citizens of Finland, and Finnish speakers (Norton, 2013), and construct their lives as continuums with the new language (Jaatinen, 2003).

5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have analysed interview data from among multi-professionals working in multicultural educational contexts in Finland through the lenses of narrative life-story identity, identity pedagogy and language socialisation. Based on this, we conclude that pedagogy that supports participation and identity construction also enhances the learning of the mainstream language in multicultural classrooms. Through acknowledging the existence of learners' life stories and understanding their potential effect on students' learning through

linguistic and cultural ways in any learning situation, pedagogical choices can enhance the participation and equity of students with diverse cultural or language backgrounds.

Municipalities' role in contributing to a successful integration process is undeniably to make economic investments and create purposeful structures (see Jousmäki, 2021). Yet, a much more grassroots level approach available to all communities and individuals is through language socialisation: acknowledging and accepting each newcomer with each their own lingual, paralingual and cultural resources (Intke-Hernadez, 2020; Gay, 2018). Supporting local language learning empowers individuals who can be provided with different roles in social activities; in multilingual contexts, the roles of novice and expert vary, and the recipient sometimes becomes a provider of assistance. Becoming seen and heard and appreciated strengthens one's identity and enriches the position for learning more.

Learning a mainstream language of the society one lives in paves way for agency and participation in activities at the many levels of society. However, life-story identity and interpretations of settling into one's new home country involves more than that —first language to begin with and not overlooking the affordances of multilingualism. The practical implementation of multilingual pedagogy can incorporate exercises which allow students to study who they are in their first language: it is possible to explore and try out identity narratives in the target language while maintaining respect for the status of the first language, for example by telling about oneself first in one's first language and then in the target language (see Cummins & Early, 2011; Kinossalo, 2020).

While teachers do have some means for this type of pedagogy at present, all teachers and students would benefit from more comprehensive training on linguistic and cultural recognition and identity pedagogy. In addition, the significance of first language for meaning making and construction of life-story identities should be acknowledged; therefore, similarly to Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen (2020), we argue that the accessibility and availability of first language teaching should be developed to support all students' equity. If it is not, the series of questions remains, some of which serve as fertile ground for future research: what if students find their first language essential for their identity? What if first languages are important to stay in touch with relatives in one's or one's parents' country of origin? How does the school support such an understanding? How does the school encourage or award this? Furthermore, what if it does not?

In summary, we suggest that the schools increasingly promote a sense of belonging as it enhances the potential and negotiating meaningful positions to learn the mainstream language. This can be achieved by acknowledging students as life-storied persons and by admitting the meaningfulness of their first language for identity, participation, empowerment and learning; these again will help them to build a sense of belonging. Further research is needed about the multilingual and translanguaging practices in school focusing on socialising with majority speaking peers since the role of peers is essential on the sense of belonging and learning the new language, as it was found here and earlier (Harju-Autti et al., 2021; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Intke-Hernandez, 2020). Also, the lack of a shared communication code between a teacher and students may prove especially troublesome in case of a trauma background. Even if there was a shared code, there are no widespread practices or guidelines for teachers encountering traumatised students in general.

Endnotes

1 Children hybrid integration: Learning dialogue as a way of upgrading policies of participation, CHILD-UP project 2019–2022. The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no 822400.

2 In this section, 'we' refers to the three authors of this paper.

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