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Exploring Multilingualism to Inform Linguistically and Culturally Responsive English Language Education

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Abstract: Linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies (LCRPs) recognize students' multilingual and cultural resources as central to inclusive and equitable learning. While such approaches are increasingly promoted in English language education (ELE), there remains limited understanding of the complexity of students' multilingual trajectories—particularly in contexts marked by migration and linguistic diversity. This article addresses this gap by presenting findings from the Udele project, which explores the lived experiences of multilingual learners in urban Austrian middle schools. Using an embedded case study design, we draw on a rich set of qualitative methods—including observations, interviews, fieldnotes, student artifacts, and language portraits—to explore how two students navigate their linguistic repertoires, identities, and learning experiences. Our analysis reveals that students' language-related self-positionings influence their classroom engagement and broader identity narratives. The findings demonstrate how shifts in self-perception affect participation and motivation, and how the students actively negotiate their multilingual identities within and beyond the classroom context. The complexity uncovered in their multilingual repertoires and life experiences underscores the critical need for longitudinal, multilingual research approaches to fully capture the dynamic and nuanced trajectories of language learners. These findings challenge prevailing conceptualizations of multilingualism in ELE, highlighting the importance of incorporating students' lived linguistic experiences into pedagogical frameworks.

Keywords: linguistically and culturally responsive education; multilingualism; English language education; Spracherleben

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1. Introduction

Linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies (LCRPs) recognize and value students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, integrating them into education to create an inclusive environment that acknowledges diversity as a resource for learning. Research shows that such pedagogies can enhance learner outcomes broadly, and in English language education (ELE) specifically (Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2025; Le Pichon et al., 2024). However, to fully realize the potential of these pedagogies, more nuanced understanding is needed of the complex linguistic experiences and life trajectories of multilingual students. Despite the prevalence of multilingual students and those with migration backgrounds in education systems globally, as well as in Austria, these learners' diverse multilingual realities are not well understood (Røyneland & Blackwood, 2022). Consequently, educational systems often fall short in providing the tailored support needed to fully harness students' multilingual competencies as assets for learning.

The Udele project (Understanding Disparities in English Language Education[1]), which runs from 2022–2026, aims to address this gap through an innovative research approach in ELE. It investigates how greater insight into students' multilingualism can inform and strengthen the implementation of LCRPs in diverse urban middle schools in Austria. Although research on LCRPs and translanguaging is expanding, there remains a lack of studies in the Austrian context that explore multilingual students' lived experiences using longitudinal and multilingual qualitative methods. By focusing on linguistically diverse urban middle schools, Udele seeks to deepen understanding of students' complex linguistic trajectories and identities to enhance their English learning. Such understanding is essential for developing LCRPs that draw on students' full linguistic repertoires, address the heterogeneity of today's classrooms, and promote more equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

In this article, we present an embedded case study of two students from a participating middle school, which draws on a rich range of multilingual research methods, including observations, interviews, fieldwork, student artifacts, and language portraits, to gain insights into the complexity of these students' linguistic repertoires and biographical trajectories. This multi-method approach enables deep, triangulated insights into how students experience and make sense of their language practices across school and home domains. Utiligng Busch's (2015) concept of Spracherleben, the lived experience of language, we explore how students position themselves in relation to their languages and how these self-perceptions align with their broader identity narratives, their motivation and engagement in the classroom, and their academic performance in ELE. Finally, we reflect on how these in-depth, student-centered insights offer methodological implications for researching multilingualism within linguistically and culturally responsive frameworks.

2. Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Approaches to Research and Practice in ELE

Linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogies (LCRPs) recognize and celebrate the languages, cultures, and identities of students, leveraging these as resources to enhance learning (Lucas, 2010). They promote teaching practices that acknowledge the diversity of students' experiences and perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging and agency in learners (Gay, 2018; Jalil, 2023; Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Wessendorf, 2016). Closely aligned with LCRPs is translanguaging pedagogy, which recognizes that multilinguals draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning and navigate their educational experiences (cf. García & Kleyn, 2016; Kleyn & García, 2019). In such approaches, learners are encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires for learning and expression. Together, LCRPs and translanguaging pedagogies support deeper learning, promote language development, and validate students' full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2025; Kim & Weng, 2022; Prilutskaya, 2021; Tai & Li, 2024). They can also support affective outcomes such as self-esteem, identity affirmation, and engagement in learning (Cummins, 2001; Duarte & Günther-van Der Meij, 2020; García, 2009). In ELE, these approaches challenge monolingual norms by positioning multilingualism as an asset, fostering cross-linguistic and cross-cultural connections and enhancing both language proficiency and cognitive development (Weidl, 2022; Jalil, 2023).

Classrooms are often highly diverse, with students coming from backgrounds that differ substantially from their teachers'. For LCRPs to be meaningfully implemented, teachers need a deeper understanding of their students' lived experiences, languages, and cultural knowledge. The funds of identity framework—building on the concept of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992)—offers a way to recognize and value the personal, social, and linguistic resources that students draw upon. Funds of identity emphasize the role

of identity, encompassing language practices, cultural traditions, and life experiences, as central to how students learn and engage in the classroom. Embedding the funds of identity approach within LCRPs allows teachers to more fully appreciate their students' multilingual and multicultural identities, moving beyond deficit views to recognize these as assets for learning. This perspective fosters more empathetic, inclusive classrooms and enables the use of students' language biographies to support additional language development.

Closely linked to funds of identity is the concept of multilingual identity, which shifts the focus from discrete 'linguistic identities' to a dynamic, participatory understanding of how individuals see themselves as language users (Fisher et al., 2020; Forbes et al., 2021, 2024). Multilingual identity is shaped by language use, emotional connections, social interactions, and beliefs about language. Like all aspects of identity, it is dynamic and constantly evolving (Darvin & Norton, 2014). Bringing this perspective into ELE encourages both teachers and their students to reflect on the personal relevance of language learning and to make visible and value the full linguistic repertoires.

A practical way to explore both funds of identity and multilingual identity in ELE is through language portraits (Busch, 2018). These visual tools invite students to map their linguistic experiences onto a body silhouette, often prompting deep reflection on the languages, dialects, and expressions that shape their lives. Such portraits challenge static or hierarchical models of language and highlight the fluid, multifaceted nature of multilingualism. Students are asked to place languages, lects, and varieties that play a role in their lives onto different parts of a body outline, choosing a color or pattern to represent each one. These representations are often closely tied to the emotional significance of the language for the repertoire users; e.g., languages, lects, or varieties that are central to their identity and daily life are frequently placed near the heart, working languages in the hand/arm. Therefore, language portraits are also a great starting point for further discussions during interviews. Combining language portraits in longitudinal research allows for a richer, more multifaceted, and evolving picture of students' linguistic trajectories (Weidl & Goodchild, 2025). As the following section outlines, this study builds on this potential by incorporating language portraits into a broader methodological design that attends closely to students' identities and experiences over time.

3. Methodology

This article draws on an in-depth case study that forms part of the broader Udele project (cf. Erling & Weidl, 2025a). It is being conducted at one of the partner middle schools in our project (hereafter Case-MS). At this school, we collaborate with the teachers of two classes, and this case study includes two embedded student cases. In the following, we describe this approach, as well as the individual methods that make up the research design.

3.1. The Case Study Approach

We employ a case study methodology to explore the multifaceted dynamics shaping educational equity and quality in multilingual school contexts. This approach enables a layered analysis of classroom interactions (micro-level), set within the wider frames of school culture and teacher beliefs (meso-level), and broader educational policy and social discourses (macro-level) (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Case study research is particularly well suited to capturing the contextualized nature of educational practices, allowing researchers to trace how structural conditions and individual agency jointly shape learning processes over time (Strunk & Locke, 2019).

3.1.1. The Macro-Level: Middle Schools in Austria

Schools in Austria, like in many other European countries, are becoming increasingly diverse due to the growing number of students with migration backgrounds. In 2021, official numbers showed that around a quarter of Austria's population had a migration background, rising to nearly half in Vienna (Statistics Austria, 2022). Apart from German, the most spoken languages in these households include Bosnian–Croatian–Serbian (BCS)[2], Turkish, English, Hungarian, Polish, Albanian, and Slovenian (Expertenrat für Integration, 2019). Approximately 27% of students in Austria and 53% in Vienna are officially classified as having German as an additional language, with 77.2% in middle schools (Statistics Austria, 2022). However, language competence varies, as 58% report German as their primary daily language, while 86% speak at least two languages (Expertenrat für Integration, 2019).

Mittelschulen (middle schools), such as the Case-MS in this study, primarily serve students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—particularly in urban areas—including many with migration histories, learning difficulties or parents with limited formal education. This school type, which focuses on vocational preparation, contrasts with the more academically oriented Gymnasium. Austria's early tracking system has faced criticism for limiting social mobility and hindering the integration of students from migrant backgrounds (Erling & Foltz, 2024; Oberwimmer et al., 2019). Furthermore, residential segregation exacerbates educational inequality, with high-status schools predominantly located in affluent areas and middle and vocational schools in less wealthy districts (Kohlbacher & Reeger, 2020). Schools in disadvantaged areas face multiple challenges, including a high concentration of students with diverse linguistic and educational needs (Akkan & Buğra, 2021).

3.1.2. The Meso-Level: Case Middle School (Case-MS)

Case-MS is situated in a diverse urban district of Vienna and serves as a representative example of schools with a high proportion of students from migration backgrounds. Many students have recently arrived in Austria, some with interrupted schooling due to refugee experiences. The student body is marked by remarkable linguistic diversity, with interviews and group activities identifying over 30 languages spoken across the two classes studied—including varieties of Arabic, Bosnian, Croatian, Dari, English, Farsi, German, Hindi, Kurdish, Pashto, Polish, Romani, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Urdu. All but one student reported using languages other than German at home, with German often not being the dominant language in their daily lives (Weidl & Erling, 2023). Students bring a wide range of educational experiences and support needs, including special educational needs and economic constraints that can affect participation in school trips and extracurricular activities.

Since February 2023, our research team has collaborated closely with the head teacher and two English teachers at Case-MS, engaging regularly in lessons, school events, and parent meetings. This longitudinal study began in the students' first year of middle school (Year 5) and will continue until they finish in Year 8, enabling the development of strong relationships with the school community. At the time of writing, the students are in Year 7 and are around 13–15 years old. So far, around 50 students have been in the two classes we focus on.

The school's stance on multilingualism is shaped by a tension between promoting linguistic diversity and enforcing restrictive language policies. While the two English teachers we work with adopt translanguaging strategies to support multilingualism to a certain extent, the school also displays signs such as *Wir sprechen nur Sprachen, die wir alle verstehen* ('We only speak languages we all understand') (MW observation, 2024). In addition, less prestigious or widely spoken languages may be implicitly marginalized (Schroedler et al., 2024).

3.1.3. The Micro-Level: The Embedded Cases of Liona and Ronald

In this article, we employ an embedded case study approach to explore the multifaceted experiences of two students, Liona and Ronald[3], within their educational environment. This methodology, as outlined by Yin (2014), involves analyzing a main case that encompasses multiple sub-units, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of complex phenomena in their real-life contexts. Here, the broader school environment serves as the main case, with Liona and Ronald representing the embedded sub-units. This design enables us to investigate how their identities evolve in response to external social factors, such as societal perceptions within the school and family influences, and to examine classroom dynamics and the students' self-presentation in relation to identity and learning.

Liona and Ronald were selected for their distinct backgrounds, English learning trajectories and active participation in the research. Their cases offer a nuanced view of how diverse factors influence linguistic development, cultural affiliation, motivation, and learning in a linguistically diverse educational setting (cf. Duff, 2015). Their experiences illustrate the complex interplay between engagement, pedagogy, and language outcomes, as well as how students navigate multiple linguistic and cultural identities at school (Darvin & Norton, 2014).

3.2. Data Collection

As typical of case study research, we use a mixed-method approach for data collection (Johnson et al., 2007; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015) to explore school cultures, teacher beliefs and practices, and students and their linguistic profiles. Immersing ourselves in participants' worlds (cf. Blackledge & Creese, 2023; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015), we adopted a predominantly multilingual approach—blending German and English—and incorporating students' home languages whenever possible. Multilingual student research assistants play a key role in supporting communication with students and parents, fostering meaningful engagement. For these embedded cases, data includes classroom observations (cf. Granström et al., 2023), interviews and informal conversations (cf. Karatsareas, 2022), samples of schoolwork and language portraits. This diverse dataset allows for triangulation, strengthening the validity and depth of our findings (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this article, we focus on data collected with two students.

3.2.1. Observations

Observations of students take place during our regular classroom observations, where we focus on how learners navigate multilingual and multicultural environments and interact with peers and teachers. As two of us are normally present in the classroom, one of us usually focuses on the teacher, while the other focuses on the students. Particular attention is given to any linguistically and culturally responsive teaching that occurs, including translanguaging practices that encourage students to use multiple languages and explore their identities. The case study draws on insights from over 40 classroom observations involving the focal students.

3.2.2. Student Interviews

Semi-structured narrative interviews are conducted annually with students during the summer term, using a narrative approach that encourages informal, conversational exchanges in a supportive atmosphere (cf. Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Narrative interviews offer participants the opportunity to share their biographies, experiences, and perspectives in their own words. These accounts are shaped by memory, perception, and context and may include inconsistencies that reflect the evolving nature of identity rather than misinformation (Watson, 2006).

Interview schedules have been informed by prior research in Austria and other ELE contexts (Erling et al., 2022a, 2022b) and are further developed based on previous interviews to include emerging themes. The first round of semi-structured interviews explored self-representation, language use and cultural affiliation; the second, conducted with pairs of students, fostered reflection on social interactions and experiences in ELE. These interviews offer insights into how students navigate languages and perceive their roles in academic settings. Interviews with Liona and Ronald took place in 2023 and 2024, conducted by the authors (MW and EJE), with support from two research assistants: Mbarka Romdhane (AMR) (for Arabic) and Amina Račević (AAR) (for BCS). These assistants support the project through their knowledge of languages and varieties spoken by students within their social and familial networks. Their contributions are central to conducting and interpreting multilingual interviews, assisting with transcription and translation, and analyzing multilingual interactions involving Arabic, BCS, German, and English as used by participants during the interviews.

3.2.3. Ethnographic Fieldwork

Our ethnographic fieldwork extends beyond formal observations and interviews to encompass informal engagements such as spontaneous conversations and attendance at school events. Interacting with students before, during and after classes offers insights into their multilingual and multicultural identities in everyday contexts. These informal encounters foster familiarity and trust, encouraging more open participation in formal interviews (Swain & King, 2022). Many students even request additional sessions, appreciating the attention given to their perspectives. Moreover, the class teacher plays a crucial role in our research (see Erling & Weidl, 2025b). Through reflective dialogues, she helps contextualize the students' linguistic practices and offers insights into classroom dynamics and the wider school environment. Additionally, we attend a wide range of school events, including reading nights (*Lesenacht*), school festivals, and theatre performances. These experiences enhance our rapport and deepen our understanding of the school's social dynamics and how linguistic diversity is navigated across formal and informal spaces.

3.2.4. Student Work

Our research includes analysis of various student artifacts—work samples, notebooks, curricular materials, and grades—which offer insights into learning processes and academic development. Classroom and workshop activities have further illuminated students' language use and engagement (Erling & Weidl, 2025a; Weidl & Erling, 2023). Access to formal assessment data has offered an objective measure of competencies in key subjects. These diverse data sources enrich our understanding of students' educational experiences.

3.2.5. Students' Language Portraits

An additional type of data collected from students are their language portraits, a method developed by Busch (2012, 2018), which invites individuals to use colors or patterns to fill a human silhouette, representing the languages, dialects, and expressive modes they use, hear, feel connected to, or aspire to learn. This visual, deeply personal approach reveals how students live and experience language, centering on Spracherleben—the embodied, emotional and social experience of language. Language portraits move beyond rigid language categories, instead reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of linguistic identities. For example, a student might place Turkish in the heart to signify emotional connection, German in the hands for school use, English in the head as a language of aspiration and Arabic around the body as part of their environment. Analyzing these portraits and the accompanying narratives offers valuable insights for teachers and researchers into how students relate to their languages and how such understandings can foster more inclusive

and responsive pedagogical practices. Additionally, the portraits open up space for critical reflection and dialogue about language, identity and power (Yuval-Davis, 2006). We conducted this activity multiple times with both classes at Case-MS and have portraits from both students in the embedded case.

3.2.6. Parent Interviews

Our data collection extends beyond the classroom to encompass informal interactions with students' parents, when the opportunity arises. While we have not been able to interview all parents of students in the project, both due to their availability and the limits of the language expertise in our team, so far interviews have been conducted in Arabic, BCS, Dari, Farsi, German and Turkish. Parent interviews provide insights into how multilingualism is navigated both at home and school (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Moll et al., 1992), as well as parents' perception of the value of English learning and the role of the school and teacher therein. With regard to the embedded case study featured here, we have so far conducted two interviews with one student's mother with the help of a research assistant (AAR).

3.3. Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and the British Association for Applied Linguistics' guidelines (BAAL, 2021). Formal approval was granted by the University of Vienna's Ethics Committee (Ref. 00963), and informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parental consent for students under 14. The aims of the project were explained multilingually to ensure that all participants fully understood the purpose and scope of the research.

All data collected is treated as confidential and was pseudonymized directly after collection to protect participants' identities. In accordance with the University of Vienna's regulations, the data is securely stored with restricted access limited to the research team. At the end of the project, the data will be fully anonymized. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any point before the project's conclusion, provided that their data has not yet been published in an anonymized form. Parents of the students were clearly informed about the ongoing research, regularly updated on the project's progress and provided signed consent forms for their children. Additionally, students' participation in the project is entirely voluntary and unconnected to assessment; any refusal to participate is accepted without question.

Our research aims to respect participants' time, minimize risks and offer tangible benefits, in line with principles of good scientific practice (cf. Hultgren et al., 2016). As adult researchers collecting data in schools, we strive to minimize power dynamics between ourselves and the students by developing rapport over time. We also involve research assistants who represent the participants' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While no formal incentives are offered to participants, we offer support, such as help with classroom activities and homework, whenever desired and possible.

3.4. Data Processing

We organize data into work packages centered on individual case study schools. Interviews in supported languages are transcribed using the AI tool konch.ai (Pro Version) in accordance with strict ethical standards. For other languages and multilingual interviews, trained research assistants with expertise in the relevant languages handle transcription. All transcripts are carefully reviewed and corrected for accuracy. Our transcriptions focus primarily on content, with minimal inclusion of pauses and non-verbal phenomena (e.g., laughter), following standard conventions (Selting et al., 2009). Transcriptions are retained in their original form and translated into English where necessary to ensure international readability (cf. Taber, 2018).

3.5. Data Analyses

We analyze our data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, a flexible framework that helps identify patterns and their broader social significance. We immerse ourselves in the data to generate initial codes, which are then organized into overarching themes through iterative analysis. This process is supported by ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, German). Key themes include students' attitudes toward their languages, their ability to express identities in the classroom, and the role of translanguaging in either fostering or limiting these expressions. We explore these themes both emically, from the students' perspectives, and etically, from the perspectives of researchers, teachers, and parents, integrating data from interviews, observations, and artifacts to understand how students' identities evolve in the educational setting (cf. Weidl & Goodchild, 2025). In addition to thematic analysis, we draw on Busch's (2018) approach to analyzing language portraits, viewing them as dynamic, semiotic texts that offer insight into students' lived experiences with language, including their emotional connections, social positioning, and perceptions of language hierarchies—such as which languages they feel are more or less valued (Busch, 2018).

4. Findings

In the following section, we present an analysis of the data collected in relation to the embedded case study students, Liona and Ronald. The findings examine how each student navigates their linguistic and cultural identities, the role of the school environment, and the role of pedagogical practices in their language development and sense of belonging.

4.1. Liona: Educational and Linguistic Trajectory

We first met Liona during an English lesson in March 2023, shortly after she had transferred to Case-MS. Her teacher introduced her as a Syrian refugee who had spent several years in Vienna and had recently moved from a *Gymnasium*—a more academically oriented form of secondary education—to this middle school. While the reasons for her transfer were not specified, such moves are often linked to academic challenges. Since then, Liona has participated in three interviews for this project: in May and June 2023 on her own (the latter focused on her language portrait), and in March 2024 with a friend. Aware of her proficiency in Syrian Arabic, we conducted the first recorded interview in May 2023 multilingually, with the support of an Arabic-speaking research assistant (AMR). When given the option, Liona chose to speak Arabic throughout, occasionally switching to German for specific school-related terms. An excerpt from this interview transcript illustrates this dynamic (see Figure 1):

01	MW	Magst du's lieber auf Arabisch machen? (SFA: Ja!) Gut, dann, bitteschön! *Would you rather do it in Arabic? (SFA: Yes!) Good, then, here you go!*
02	AMR	اذا انت كنت تعيشين بالاردن ؟ *So you used to live in Jordan?*
03	Liona	أجل *Yes*
04	AMR	هل كنت تذهبين إلى المدرسة هناك؟ *Did you go to school there?*
05	Liona	لا لا لقد كنت في ذلك الحين صغيرة *No, no, I was young then*

Figure 1. Interview with Liona, MW and AMR; 23 May 2023; about her trajectory.

4.1.1. Background

At the time of her first interview, Liona was either 11 or 13. In the interview, she shared that she was born in Syria and lived there for approximately two years before moving to Jordan, where she spent an estimated three years before relocating to Austria. Her earliest childhood memories are from Jordan. Her official documents list two different birthdates, one of which would make her older than expected for her current school level, despite not having repeated a grade—an inconsistency also noted by her teacher. Liona's own timeline adds further ambiguity: she recalls arriving in Austria at age five, though records suggest she was three. What is clear is that she had lived in Austria for at least two years before starting at Case-MS.

4.1.2. Family and Social Networks

Liona reported that she lives in Vienna with her parents and has six siblings—four older and two younger. Most of her family is in Austria, though one sibling, now married, lives either in Syria or the Emirates; Liona is unsure. She shares little about her family, noting only that her father works late daily but cannot specify his job, suggesting either limited knowledge or reservation to discuss personal matters. None of the project researchers have met Liona's parents, and her teacher recalls meeting her mother only once, with communication typically mediated by Liona's older sister, who also attends parent-teacher evenings. Despite this, Liona follows a different routine from many of her peers—most of whom buy food on the street. She leaves school at noon to eat at home, where her mother cooks, before returning for afternoon classes.

4.1.3. Schooling Experience

Liona describes herself as generally happy at school, particularly enjoying the social aspects. However, she reports difficulty retaining what is taught, suggesting challenges with comprehension or memory. To support her learning, she attends regular tutoring sessions run by pre-service teachers at the University of Vienna, an indication of both her academic struggles and proactive support efforts.

Liona speaks positively about her teachers, particularly her English teachers, whom she respects and appreciates. She expresses a clear preference for English over her other main subjects, Mathematics and German, largely due to her connection with the teacher. In English lessons, Liona feels heard, seen, and supported in her identity. She notes a shift from finding the lessons merely "okay" in her first year to experiencing them as more dynamic and engaging in the second, crediting this change to the teacher's approach and understanding of her background. In contrast, Liona experiences German class as exclusionary. In an unrecorded conversation (MW, Nov.sep 2023), she shared that her German teacher neither knows nor seeks to understand her or her cultural background. The teacher, she says, focuses narrowly on correct language use, showing little personal interest. As a result, Liona often feels unable to meet expectations and perceives a lack of recognition for the challenges she faces in learning German.

4.1.4. Linguistic Practices and Identity

At the time of her initial interview, Liona identified Arabic as her strongest language, used predominantly in her home and religious life. She communicates with her parents exclusively in Arabic, as they do not speak German, while German is primarily used with her older siblings. Though confident in spoken Arabic, she feels less proficient in writing and attends weekly Arabic lessons at the mosque to improve her literacy. Her participation in these lessons appears to be parental rather than self-driven, as she expresses mixed feelings about them.

Liona explains that she often uses German at school so that all her friends can understand her, but she speaks Arabic with another girl in the class who is also from Syria. When asked if she speaks Arabic during lessons, she responds in an interview: 'No, we must speak German' (لا، يجب أن نتحدث الألمانية; MW, 23 May 2024). However, she notes that she uses Arabic during breaks, as teachers generally do not monitor language use at that time.

When creating her language portrait, Liona included several languages and places that represent varieties significant to her, including "Syrian, Jordan, Saudi arab, Fransch, italienisch, Spanisch, Swedisch, Turkisch, Portugal" (sic, see Figure 2). She seemed to enjoy talking about the importance of these languages in her life.



Figure 2. Language portrait, Liona (14 June 2023).

When explaining her language portrait in a short interview, Liona spoke a fluid mix of English, German, and Arabic. In the following transcript excerpt, she shares that she is from Syria, likes Jordan best, and has a great-great-grandfather from Saudi Arabia (see Figure 3):

01	Liona	I am from *Syrien* and Jordan is my favorite land
02	MW	Why
03	Liona	Because I living there *na*: before *acht Jahren* Because I living there *no*, before *eight years*
04	MW	*Ah, für acht Jahre oder vor acht Jahren?* *Ah, for eight years or eight years ago?*
05	Liona	*Vor acht Jahren* I was living in Jordan. Saudi Arabien, my *ur-ur-ur-ur-ur-ur-ur Opa* comes from *Saudi Arabien* *Eight years ago* I was living in Jordan. Saudi Arabien, my *grand-grand-grand-grand-grand-grand-grand-grandfahter* comes from *Saudi Arabien*
06	MW	*Aha, wirklich?* *Aha, really?*
07	Liona	*Ja,* **Wallah** *Yes,* ***I swear to God***
08	MW	*Und du kennst die Geschichte von deiner Familie?* *And you know the history of your family?*
09	Liona	**Wallah** *nein, aber ja, mein Vater hat mir erzählt, seitdem ja.* **I swear to God** *no, but yes, my dad told me, since then yes.*

Figure 3. Interview with Liona and MW, 14 June 2023; discussion of language portrait.

In her portrait, Liona labeled her legs with the German word for Syria ("Syrien") and pronounced the country's name in German during the interview, suggesting that she associates this aspect of her identity with her experiences in the German-speaking context of Austria. She explained that this language represents the language and identity that served as her first means of communication and moved around with her. She positioned "Jordan" and "Saud Arab" on her arm, which she called the greeting arm, depicting them as smaller yet still essential to her sense of self. Liona explained that she loves French ("Fransch"), Italian ("Italienisch") and Spanish ("Spanisch") for their beauty, sound and a Spanish film she watched. She included Swedish ("Schwedisch") due to a memorable visit to her aunt who lives in Sweden, Turkish ("Turkisch") because of its significance in her social life in Vienna and Portuguese ("Portugal") due to her interest in football. She expressed a desire to learn more languages but noted that there was no space left on her body. Notably, she omitted German and English from her language portrait, despite their apparent importance in her daily life and school, and even though the portrait was designed in an English lesson. This interview clearly demonstrates that Liona felt comfortable drawing on her full linguistic repertoire, translanguaging fluidly throughout.

About a year later, we interviewed Liona together with a friend who partly identifies as Turkish. The interview was primarily conducted in German, as Liona explained she avoided using English out of consideration for her friend, who doesn't like speaking the language. A notable shift since the first interview was Liona's view of her strongest language: while she initially identified Arabic, she now considers German easier to speak, citing a limited Arabic vocabulary. To strengthen her Arabic writing, her parents arranged weekly tutoring alongside mosque lessons. She now reports being able to read and write in Arabic and uses it to text her parents when needed. In everyday life, she mainly uses German but considers Arabic and English her most important languages—highlighting English for its global reach, saying it allows communication with "gefühlt jedem" (pretty much everyone) (MW, 21 March 2024). Although she increasingly relies on German, she prefers watching films in Arabic or English and sometimes consumes social media content in English.

Liona shared that she enjoys spending time outside with friends and prefers being at school over staying at home or being on vacation. She appreciates school primarily for the social interaction, saying her friends make her laugh and that she enjoys their company. Communication at home, she explained, is generally minimal due to conflicting schedules and the busyness of family life. Like many teenagers, she finds home routines less stimulating than school and friendships, noting that she mostly spends time at home resting or using her phone. This impression was reinforced during a class book project, in which students were asked to discuss a book with their parents. In an interview with Liona and her friend S03, she clearly stated that she does not talk about such topics with her family, as reflected in the transcript in Figure 4:

01	AAR:	Und seid ihr dann alleine zu Hause am Nachmittag? *And are you alone at home in the afternoon?*
02	Liona	Nein. Halt mit Mutter oder manchmal Vater. (S03: mit Mama) Aber wir reden eh nicht zu Hause. Halt, ja. *No. Just with mom or sometimes dad.(S03: with mom) But we don't talk at home anyway. And, yes.*

Figure 4. Interview with Liona, MW, and AAR; 21 March 2024; about language at home.

Certain events offered valuable insights into Liona's identity negotiations, such as a school festival where she had the Syrian flag painted on her cheek. Several of her peers similarly chose flags representing the countries they identified with at that moment. When

she encountered EJE, she accompanied this with the phrase "Free Syria". When asked about it, Liona's response suggested that it was less a political statement and more a way of participating in a collective moment of identity expression and group belonging, aligning herself with her peers in that context.

Looking ahead, Liona says she plans to attend university and become a doctor in Austria who can speak Arabic with her patients. She also dreams of spending a gap year travelling and getting to know other countries. However, she continues to struggle academically and there appears to be limited awareness of how crucial her current school outcomes are for achieving these long-term goals.

While Liona's story illustrates an interesting migration trajectory and how it relates to language, identity and school performance, the next portrait highlights a different set of challenges and resources in the case of a student with a more distant migration background and a very different trajectory and linguistic repertoire.

4.2. Ronald: Educational and Linguistic Trajectory

Ronald is an outspoken, energetic student who stood out due to his difficulty sitting still and waiting his turn. While often disruptive—frequently standing, interrupting and voicing strong opinions—these same traits made him a lively and insightful interviewee. The openness of both Ronald and his mother offered valuable perspectives on classroom life. We conducted six interviews with or about Ronald to explore his background, languages, identity and school experiences. These included two interviews with Ronald alone (May and November 2023), one with a friend (September 2024), one with his mother alone (November 2023) and one with Ronald and his mother together (November 2024). Three interviews were conducted by MW and AAR, with MW leading the language portrait discussion and AAR interviewing Ronald's mother. The interviews flowed mainly between German and BCS. Ronald comfortably switched to BCS and expressed a clear preference for this language, as reflected in the transcript in Figure 5:

01	AAR	(...) hoćeš li da pričamo na Srpski? *Do you want us to speak in Serbian?*
02	Ronald	Pa, može. *Well, that's fine.*

Figure 5. Interview with Ronald, MW, and AAR; 22 May 2023; about language choice.

4.2.1. Background

At the time of the first interview, Ronald was 11 years old and in his first year of secondary school. Born in Vienna and holding Austrian citizenship, he is the only child of parents born abroad. He reported growing up speaking mostly Serbian at home and learning German through school and social interactions. Although he has lived his entire life in Vienna, Ronald feels a strong connection to Serbia and identifies as either Serbian or Austrian depending on the context. His mother initially hoped he would attend a Gymnasium, but after he was not accepted, she enrolled him in his current school.

4.2.2. Family and Social Networks

Ronald's mother has lived in Austria for nearly 20 years. She had to leave school after completing five years of primary education due to illness, and she is committed to providing better opportunities for her son. Throughout our conversations, her dedication to Ronald's wellbeing was clear, including accompanying him to school so he does not have to walk alone. As a single parent working full-time, she struggles to balance her job with supporting Ronald's education. Although often exhausted by the time she gets home, she still tries to help him with his schoolwork.

In our first interview—held immediately after her meeting with Ronald's class teacher—she expressed general satisfaction with his academic performance but raised concerns about his social development and difficult peer interactions, without providing specific examples. Hoping to support him more, she mentioned plans to spend more time with him. She also arranged for him to eat school lunch daily and attend *Lernzeit* (after-school study time) Monday through Thursday, to keep him off the streets in the afternoons. Ronald is comfortable with this routine, even though only three students from his year group stay for lunch.

Regarding language use at home, they primarily speak Serbian, with occasional use of German. She also emphasized the importance of English—a language she never had the chance to learn—stating her belief that it holds great value: "It is simply worth more" (*više vrijedi jednostavno*; AAR, 23 November 2023).

4.2.3. Schooling Experience

Ronald expresses satisfaction with his academic performance and was generally happy with his grades at the end of Year 5. However, he sees himself as someone who finds language learning difficult and lacks confidence in his abilities, as the excerpt in Figure 6 shows:

01	AAR	Jeli misliš, da nisi dobar u jezicima? *Do you think that you're not good at languages?*
02	Ronald	Ne. Pa nisam tako dobar u (unverständlich). *No. Well, I'm not that good at (inaudible).*

Figure 6. Interview Ronald with MW and AAR; 22 May 2023; about language ability.

In the classroom, Ronald occasionally uses Serbian to communicate with peers who share the language. Although he often feels that he is more fluent in spoken German, he is more frequently exposed to Serbian in daily life—speaking it within his social networks and watching Serbian television, though he also consumes online videos in German. Regarding English, Ronald reports that he turns to his Serbian-speaking classmate for help when needed. He finds speaking English the easiest, while writing remains the most challenging, mirroring his experiences with German. During the interview, he acknowledged using English occasionally, especially with friends, when watching videos and in connection with his passion for football. He enjoys speaking English and receives homework support from his cousin, as his mother is unable to assist him.

4.2.4. Linguistic Practices and Identity

In the first interview, Ronald identified Serbian and German as his languages, without mentioning English. He reported speaking exclusively Serbian with his mother but also using German with a cousin who lives in their home, making German a part of his home environment as well. Serbian is the language he considers his strongest (even though he also says he is most fluent in speaking German). He has taught himself to read and write in Serbian and primarily engages with Serbian-language content, particularly about football. As classroom observers, we noted Ronald's strong Serbian identity, which he frequently expressed through the use of the Serbian language and clear cultural affiliation during conversations. He often used externally attributed identities to address his peers, making distinctions based on national or ethnic backgrounds. For example, in one observation, we noted the following:

> "Kurz vor Pause an der Tür: 'Die Türken und die Serben raus!' [Shortly before the break, at the door: 'The Turks and the Serbs outside!'] Then sings something in Turkish. Second time that he makes origin a subject of 'decision'. Seems to be important for him" (observations, EJE complemented by MW, 17 March 2023)

This type of behavior occurred frequently to the point where we began to view it as problematically essentialist and nationalist.

During our first workshop, Ronald drew the language portrait in Figure 7:



Figure 7. Language portrait, Ronald; 14 June 2023.

At the time, his language portrait displayed only the flags of Macedonia, Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia (from top to bottom), without any mention of specific languages. He chose to express his identity through the countries—or people from those countries—he feels connected to. He was not interested in discussing the portrait during the interview. However, in a workshop during the following school year, he refined the portrait (see Figure 8) and explained it further in a recorded session (23 November 2023).

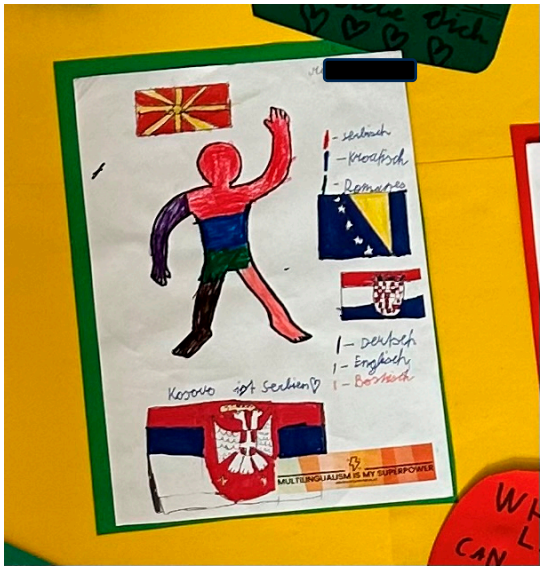


Figure 8. Language portrait, Ronald; 23 November 2023.

The change in Ronald's language portrait was noteworthy, as he mentioned languages he had not referred to before. In addition to English (Englisch) and German (Deutsch), he also listed Croatian (Kroatisch) and Bosnian (Bosnisch). While it was not surprising that he understood these languages, what stood out was his identification with them and their

perceived relevance to his identity and daily life. The most unexpected revelation, however, was his mention of Romani[4], a language he had never acknowledged before.

We recognize that individuals with Romani backgrounds may sometimes conceal their language and aspects of their identity due to negative experiences and the stigmatization of Romani language and culture. Neither Ronald nor his mother had previously mentioned Romani as part of their linguistic repertoire. However, during an interview with a student from another class who clearly identifies as Romani, the student mentioned that he is related to Ronald, further suggesting Ronald's connection to that background. Moreover, during a classroom observation (15 February 2024), EJE witnessed an interaction where Ronald's English teacher asked him, "Ronald, Romani?" prompting him to translate an English phrase into Romani. This exchange indicated that the teacher was aware of Ronald's proficiency in the language. EJE, surprised by this, asked, "Kannst du Romani?" (Do you speak Romani?), to which Ronald responded with laughter, dismissing the question by saying, "Nein nein, Zigeunerisch"[5] (No no, '*Zigeunerisch*'), before turning away. Further tensions around Romani use emerged when a research assistant included a Romani sentence on a classroom worksheet. She later noted: "Ronald in [class] told me that the translation into Romani didn't make any sense (apparently it was in an 'accent' they didn't understand)" (note by AAG, 13 December 2024). This highlights the internal diversity within Romani and Ronald's awareness of different varieties. These instances also underscore the complexities surrounding the visibility and ongoing stigmatization of Romani identity and language use. Given that Ronald has never explicitly claimed Romani as part of his linguistic repertoire, we have not yet followed up directly with him or asked questions that might make him feel exposed or pressured to discuss aspects of his identity he may not wish to share.

Ronald's language portrait also included the phrase "Kosovo ist Serbien" (Kosovo is Serbia) in German, accompanied by a heart, reinforcing our impression of his nationalist tendencies. This raised concerns about its implications for identity and interethnic relations. Given the sensitivity of the statement and the context in which the portraits would be displayed, we discussed it with the teacher and decided to cover it before showing the portraits in the school hallway. Ronald strongly protested this decision, only agreeing after an extended discussion, further highlighting his attachment to national identity markers and the significance he places on linguistic and cultural affiliations.

The next recorded interview with Ronald occurred in Year 7, shortly after the summer vacation, when we observed a shift in his personality and self-representation. In this group interview with a friend who identifies as Serbian, they discussed their experiences in Serbia over the summer at length. The entire interview was conducted in German, despite the presence of AAR and the option to speak BCS. Interestingly, the students did not feel the need to switch to BCS, using it only for a few specific words (see Figure 9).

The way the students refer to Serbia as "*mein Ausland', also in Serbien*" (my abroad, meaning in Serbia) despite their familial ties to the country reflects a complex negotiation of cultural identity. This phrasing suggests both a sense of distance from their parents' country of origin and a simultaneous affiliation with it, as they still claim it as their own. Ronald expresses that summers in Serbia are no longer enjoyable because something has changed and he feels different, indicating a shift in his perception of home and belonging. He also emphasizes a preference for school over vacation time. Ronald is committed to working hard this school year and appreciates his English teacher, feeling welcomed and heard in class. However, he occasionally experiences boredom, likely due to finding the lessons too easy, as he can follow them without extra study, which, at times, leads to disengagement.

01	AAR	Warst du in Wien oder warst du weg? *Were you in Vienna, or were you away?*
02	Ronald	Ich war in mein Ausland, also in Serbien. *I was in my abroad, meaning in Serbia*
03	S04	Ich war dort so zwei, drei Wochen. Und dann bin ich wieder in Wien gekommen und wir wollten nach Türkei fliegen. Aber es ging sich nicht aus. (AAR Ok) Es war Schule, Schulbeginn, und ja. *I was there for about two or three weeks. And then I came back to Vienna, and we wanted to fly to Turkey. But it didn't work out. (AAR: Ok) School was starting, and yeah.*
04	MW	Was ist jetzt anders in den Sommerferien, als es früher war? *What is different about the summer holidays now compared to before?*
05	Ronald	Es macht keinen Spaß mehr. (MW Ja?) Ja, es macht wirklich keinen Spaß mehr. *It's not fun anymore. (MW: Yeah?) Yeah, it's really not fun anymore.*
06	S04	Früher hat man mit Familie so-- *Before, you would do things with family—*
07	Ronald	--Ja, man hat mehr Aktivitäten gemacht als jetzt. *—Yeah, you did more activities than now.*
08	MW	Und warum ist das jetzt anders? *And why is it different now?*
09	Ronald	Keine Ahnung. Halt für mich ist immer ein Gefühl. Es ist halt anders. Ich weiß auch nicht. *No idea. For me, it's just a feeling. It's just different. I don't know either.*

Figure 9. Interview of Ronald and S04 with MW and AAR; 17 September 2024; about summer in Serbia.

In the second interview with Ronald and his mother, his mother, having again just spoken with Ronald's teacher, was very pleased with his positive development. Ronald's grades had improved, and he appeared calmer at school, with the issues from previous years no longer present. This aligned with our observation that Ronald seemed more moderate and open towards other cultures and languages, which helped reduce issues in the classroom and with teachers. His mother reiterated her desire for Ronald to learn as many languages as possible: "*(. . .) bi uvek bila za tim da znaci sto vise jezika ući*" ("I would always be in favour of him, so to speak, learning as many languages as possible.") and says that it is important to be able to speak many languages (MW, 21 November 2024). However, the languages she named—English, French, Spanish and Italian—are all European languages, which she associates with socioeconomic advancement for Ronald. This contrast was particularly notable when we compared her views on the languages important for Ronald with Ronald's own report, as can be seen in Figure 10:

01	AAR	I imam još jedno pitanje. Koje jezike su bitne za SMM? Šta vi mislite sad? *And I have one more question. Which languages are important for SMM? What do you think now?*
02	Ronalds mum	Pa da sto perfekt-ono, gramatički bas priča **Deutsch**, jel, mislim da je ok, ali…mhm, još bi trebo možda bolje, ali dobro. Engleski. Šta ja znam, šta bi on još vise volio. Šta znam-to, Engleski, **Deutsch**, šta bi još, šta ja znam. *Well, that he speaks perfect – I mean, grammatically really good – German, because, I think it's ok, but... hmm, maybe he should be a bit better, but it's fine. English. I don't know what else he might like. I don't know, English, German, what else would he, I don't know.*

Figure 10. Interview with Ronald and his mother, MW, and AAR; 17 September 2024; about languages.

When asked which languages were important to him, Ronald responded that Serbian was the most important—the language he identifies with the most—even though his mother had not mentioned it (see Figure 11).

01	AAR:	Was würdest du sagen, welche Sprachen sind für dich wichtig? What would you say, which languages are important to you?
02	Ronald	Also zuerst Serbisch, Deutsch, Englisch. Und vielleicht dann Spanisch und Russisch. Vielleicht die noch, und sonst keine mehr. Well, first Serbian, German, English. And maybe then Spanish and Russian. Maybe those, and no others.
03	Ronalds mum	Italianisch? Italien?
04	Ronald	Nein. (Ronalds mum: Nein, *lacht*) No. (Ronalds mum: no, laughs)
05	MW	Warum Spanisch und Russisch? Why Spanish and Russian?
06	Ronald	Ich mag diese beide Länder und ich find die Sprache ist.....spannend, lustig und/und keine Ahnung. (alle lachen) I like both of those countries, and I think the language is... exciting, fun and/and no idea. (everyone laughs)

Figure 11. Interview with Ronald and his mother, MW, and AAR; 17 September 2024; about important languages.

Aware that his mother had not mentioned Serbian at all, AAR asked again about the language, as can be seen in Figure 12:

01	AAR	Zato što vi sad niste rekli da je Srpski bitno za njeg. Because you didn't say that Serbian is important to him.
02	Ronalds mum	Pa, jeste! Dobro, ali ovde živimo. Ne? Well, it is! Sure, but we live here. Don't we?
03	AAR	Ali je li lijepo da znate Srpski, ili... But it's nice that you know Serbian, or...
04	Ronalds mum	Jeste/jeste. Ja stojim iza tim. Ja stojim iza toga samo sto, za mene, ja sam malo odsutna iskreno, zbog toga sto žurimo. Čekaju nas dole. (AAR ok) Moramo do lekara. On okej priča srpski, kako je, ovde se rodio, ovdje odrasto, priča Srpski. Ali mi smo u takvom okruženju, da je, iskreno, lepo je to, da zna, nemam ništa protiv, (AAR Ja) to je naš materni jezik. Ja to podržavam. Ali mi smo u krugu, da njemu taj, nažalost, nije potrebno. Jeste, eto vidite, kako vi sad. (AAR Da) To je super/to je super (AAR da) I to je dobro. Ljudi koji ne razume I koji se plaše kao ja da pričaju **Deutsch**, da ne bih rekla nešto sto je kontra. Ovaj, to je dobro, dobro je sto on priča. Ne izgovara neke reci cisto ali ok, priča Srpski. (AAR super) Prica Srpski. I dobro, šta ja znam. Is it / Is it. I stand behind that. I stand behind that, but, for me, I'm a bit absent, to be honest, because we're in a hurry. They're waiting for us downstairs. We have to go to the doctor. He speaks okay Serbian, for someone who was born and raised here, he speaks Serbian. But we are in an environment where, honestly, it's nice that he can speak it, I have nothing against it, it's our mother tongue. I support that. But we are in a circle where unfortunately, it's not necessary. Yes, look, like you now. (AAR Yes) That's great / that's great (AAR Yes) and that's good. People who don't understand it and who, like me, are afraid to speak **German** so that I don't say something wrong. So, it's good, it's good that he speaks it. He doesn't pronounce a few words clearly but okay, he speaks Serbian. He speaks Serbian. And well, what do I know.

Figure 12. Interview with Ronald and his mother, MW, and AAR; 17 September 2024; about Serbian.

After being prompted, Ronald's mother refers to Serbian as their "mother tongue"; however, she also states that they live in a social environment where the language is not necessary. The conversation becomes more emotional, and his mother says she must leave, but then decides to explain further. She reports that she tries to speak German at home to learn from her son. She also mentions that her son does not speak Serbian very well, as he mispronounces certain words. This, in turn, motivates Ronald to say, '*Ona i ne priča*

tako dobro srpski' ("She doesn't speak Serbian that well either"), which makes his mother laugh and change the subject. This exchange, however, raises questions about whether Serbian is the main language of their home or whether they primarily communicate in Romani, especially since Ronald's mother is not proficient enough for daily conversations in German.

For Ronald's mother, it is clear that her son needs to develop an Austrian identity, as expressed in her statement "*naravno on je Staatsbürgerschaft österreichische*" (Of course, he is (sic!) Austrian citizenship; 17 September 2024). In contrast, Ronald seems to be redefining his own sense of identity. While his mother strongly supports his goal of becoming a Serbian-speaking police officer in Austria—a career aspiration they've shared since our first encounters—she also personally prefers he pursue a career in banking or accounting. Despite this, both mother and son clearly envision their future in Austria and actively plan in line with their family's needs. Ronald's English teacher plays a key role in supporting him through this journey, helping guide him as he navigates his aspirations.

5. Discussion: Navigating Complex Linguistic and Cultural Identities in the Education Sector

The experiences of Ronald and Liona illustrate the complex and often contradictory nature of multilingual identity development in educational settings. Their narratives, collected longitudinally, reflect how identity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic, lived process—shaped by linguistic repertoires, family expectations, peer interactions, and institutional practices. Our approach offers insights into students' Spracherleben and their fluid senses of belonging, and we consider this in relation to their (English) language learning.

5.1. The Role of School in Shaping Multilingual Identity

While school serves as a site of learning, it also plays a crucial role in identity negotiation and development (Hölscher et al., 2024). For both Ronald and Liona, school provides stability, structure, and a meaningful social space. Liona explicitly states that school often feels "better than being at home" and both students show signs of building a sense of community, with German playing a key role in their daily interactions. Ronald's language learning trajectory is especially noteworthy: unlike some peers, he appears to have learned English primarily through school instruction, steadily improving over time. Liona, in contrast, is highly motivated, but continues to struggle with English (and other subjects) despite her efforts, demonstrating that motivation does not always translate into measurable outcomes (Norton, 2013). These contrasting paths reflect the varied ways multilingual identity and learning unfold in institutional settings (Fisher et al., 2020). Exploration of these students' trajectories and histories provides insight into their families' funds of knowledge—the cultural, linguistic and social resources that influence their identity development (Gonzalez et al., 2006). These funds, however, are not static; they are reshaped in the context of a new environment. Both students initially cling to symbols of their places of "origin"—Ronald, with the Serbian flag on his language portrait, and Liona, with a Syrian flag painted on her cheek.

Yet, over time, these connections seem to fade or shift. Summers in Serbia no longer hold the same excitement, time away from school becomes less fulfilling, and competence in Arabic or Serbian is gradually accompanied by growing proficiency in German and English, which now form stronger parts of their linguistic repertoires. As their experiences expand, these students draw from a broader array of funds of identity—personal histories, friendships, values, aspirations, and desires (Esteban-Guitart, 2016). These internal resources help them navigate their educational journeys and remain motivated at school with dreams about their professions beyond school, even in the face of challenges. Their

evolving sense of self is not defined by where they come from but also by how they engage with the world around them, find purpose in their studies and build new, locally grounded identities. While both students actively imagine their futures in Austria, they envision a locally grounded life where they can use their multiple languages as an asset. This reflects a dynamic, fluid sense of belonging, where their sense of self is anchored more in their current and imagined realities than in essentialized notions of heritage or origin (Darvin & Norton, 2014). At the same time, external perceptions often continue to mark them as 'foreign,' both in and outside of school. This disjuncture highlights the politics of recognition at play in multilingual identity construction (Yuval-Davis, 2006), where the tension between individual identity and societal labels becomes a central element of the lived experience of multilingual students.

5.2. Belongings and the Pressure of Categorization

Liona and Ronald's experiences illustrate the complexities of identity formation and belonging among multilingual students in diverse educational settings. Both relate to linguistic repertoires, identity languages, and cultural affiliations that are far more intricate than externally imposed categories often suggest (Busch, 2012).

Liona, a student from Syria, has no personal memories of the country but refers to it as her home. In contrast, Ronald, born in Austria, strongly identifies with a Serbian nationalist identity, while seemingly downplaying or concealing his Romani roots. His Romani language is neither acknowledged nor supported within the school setting, and his mother minimalizes the relevance of Serbian in Ronald's current life, suggesting it holds little importance for his present experiences. Both students plan their futures and professional careers in Austria and feel part of the community in Vienna, with German playing a central role in their everyday lives. Yet, they continue to be perceived from the outside as migrants or foreigners. For Liona, this sense of foreignness relates to a place she has never fully experienced, as she identifies with, and is identified as being from, a place she barely remembers, one that has been devastated by war. In her case, identity may be shaped more by present affiliations and lived experiences than by heritage or origin (García et al., 2012; Melo-Pfeifer, 2014). For Ronald, a present, tangible reality actively shapes his identity formation. Similarly, Liona navigates her own complex identity terrain, negotiating cultural expectations and a sense of belonging shaped by her family's migration history. Like many second-generation migrants, both students experience overlapping feelings of inclusion and estrangement (Wessendorf, 2016).

While Ronald initially strongly clung to national identity—expressing pride in Serbian symbols and seemingly attempting to organize both himself and others around them—this stance shifts over time. His enthusiasm for visiting Serbia fades, even as the language continues to hold personal significance. Both he and his mother increasingly recognize the importance of German and English for his future in Austria, particularly in relation to his career aspirations. This gradual transformation reflects a growing awareness of the social and linguistic realities that shape his life, as well as a move away from fixed origin-based affiliations toward a more flexible, future-oriented identity. His evolving sense of self illustrates the complex negotiations involved in balancing inherited cultural frameworks with the pragmatic demands and opportunities of life in a new context (Darvin & Norton, 2014). At this point in their lives, both students appear to exist in an in-between space, caught between rigid notions of belonging to an essentialized place (cf. Joseph, 2022), rather than being supported in embracing fluid and evolving definitions of their identities. Their experiences resonate with the concept of the third space (Kaur, 2023), where individuals negotiate overlapping cultural identities without fully committing to a singular national affiliation.

5.3. Spracherleben and Language Ideologies

Students' experiences of lived language (Spracherleben) are deeply shaped by family language ideologies, which mediate how they position themselves within their linguistic repertoires and which languages are legitimized, nurtured, or marginalized in their everyday lives. Parental support for home language use positively shapes children's attitudes toward multilingualism (King et al., 2008). In Ronald's case, silencing and even dismissal of certain languages—such as Romani and, to some extent, Serbian—could actively contribute to their gradual erasure (De Houwer, 2020). Liona shifts to construct her language identity primarily around German and Arabic, though her attachment to Arabic, initially rooted in active, functional use, has noticeably diminished over the course of the project. She now perceives German as her strongest language, reflecting a shift in linguistic alignment shaped by both educational context and changing perceptions of language relevance. Despite her family's best efforts, she may not have access to adequate support or resources to sustain and develop all of her languages, which in turn influences how her repertoire is shaped and enacted. Her case illustrates how children may maintain affective ties to heritage languages while navigating dominant language expectations at school and home, ultimately prioritizing languages they associate with future mobility and belonging. These lived experiences of language, both spoken and unsaid, emphasize that identity is negotiated through language, but also constrained by what languages are heard, legitimized or left unspoken.

5.4. From Identity to Pedagogy: Implications for LCRPs

Our methodological approach foregrounds the lived, evolving experiences of students, allowing us to trace the layered and sometimes contradictory ways in which language and identity are negotiated over time and across contexts. By engaging with students' stories longitudinally, we are able to see identity not as fixed or tied to essentialist categories, but as fluid, multifaceted, and shaped by interactions between family, school, language ideologies, and personal aspirations. This nuanced understanding must be at the heart of LCRPs. If educational practices are to be truly inclusive, they must respond to who students actually are in the moment, not to imagined or essentialized versions of them (Weber, 2014). LCRPs grounded in this complexity acknowledge the full linguistic and cultural repertoires students bring into the classroom, including languages, histories, affective attachments, and identities that may be shifting or partially concealed. The stories of Liona and Ronald illustrate how LCRPs can create space for students to explore and affirm their multilingual identities. Rather than treating cultural affiliations as fixed or monolithic, responsive pedagogy invites teachers to see identity as dynamic and deeply contextual.

By drawing on students' funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016), including their aspirations, migration trajectories, family practices and language use, educators can foster belonging in ways that move beyond tokenism and avoid reductive identity frames. This means designing classroom environments that actively welcome complex multilingual identities, where students are invited to voice, question, and reimagine who they are and who they wish to become. It also requires attention to the invisible, marginalized, or contested aspects of identity, such as Liona's connection to Jordan or Ronald's Romani heritage, which may only surface if classrooms offer safety and recognition. As Brubaker (2004) cautions, nationalist narratives often reinscribe narrow ethnolinguistic boundaries; LCRPs must work deliberately to counter this by validating hybridity, translanguaging practices, and non-normative trajectories.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates the value of a theoretically grounded, linguistically and culturally responsive approach to researching and reimagining ELE in superdiverse classrooms. By centering students' *Spracherleben* (Busch, 2015) and drawing on frameworks such as funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016), we are able to capture the dynamic and situated nature of multilingual identity development, something that is often flattened or overlooked in conventional educational discourses. Liona and Ronald's trajectories remind us that multilingualism is not a fixed attribute, but an ongoing, affectively charged process shaped by institutional structures, familial ideologies and everyday encounters (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Liona, despite having no direct memories of Syria, maintains a strong affective connection to it, while envisioning a future as an Arabic-speaking doctor in Austria. Ronald's case revealed the tensions of navigating a publicly performed Serbian identity while silencing Romani, probably shaped by familial ideologies and a lack of institutional recognition. Both students inhabit a space of multiple belongings, where their lived experiences resist simple categorizations.

Our findings show that LCRPs are not simply supportive add-ons, but transformative approaches that challenge monolingual norms and reconfigure who and what counts in the language classroom (Cummins, 2001; García & Kleyn, 2016). These pedagogies position students' full linguistic repertoires as assets, foster academic engagement and support deeper identity work (Erling et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2020; Forbes et al., 2021). In doing so, they align with broader social justice goals by validating students' lived experiences and enabling them to author their own narratives of belonging and competence (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2025; Wessendorf, 2016).

Equally crucial, however, is that research into LCRPs itself be responsive. Longitudinal, multimodal and relational research approaches, as undertaken in this study, reveal how language affiliations, identity labels and even basic biographical details shift over time. Without such depth, key nuances are missed. Our methodology allowed for a more complex and accurate understanding of Liona and Ronald's multilingual realities, while also bridging home and school contexts (Gordon, 2022; King et al., 2008). Responsive, multilingual research thus becomes not only a methodological choice (Holmes, 2013) but a necessary condition for developing meaningful pedagogical responses.

Importantly, this work affirms that LCRPs are not simply about accommodating diversity; they are about fundamentally rethinking how we design, teach, and research language education. In increasingly multilingual societies, LCRPs offer a theoretically robust, pedagogically grounded, and ethically sound framework for cultivating classrooms where all learners can thrive, not despite, but because of, their linguistic and cultural complexity.

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Notes

1 An FWF funded project (Project V-975): https://udele2023.univie.ac.at/ (accessed on 24 May 2025).

2 We use the term *Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS)* (BKS in German) to refer to the mutually intelligible South Slavic varieties commonly spoken in the region. While students may self-identify with one specific variety, we refer to the language as BCS to acknowledge the linguistic proximity and shared features of varieties, while recognizing the socio-political weight of naming practices. Ronald and his mother, however, refer to the language(s) as Serbian.

3 The student names used in this article are pseudonyms, which have been selected by the students themselves. We have chosen to refer to them this way, instead of with the code used in our database to improve readability and narrative flow in this article.

4 The term "Romani" refers to the diverse Indo-Aryan languages spoken by Romani communities across Europe and beyond. As these varieties are often collectively referred to as "Romani" in academic and policy contexts, we use that term in this text, though speakers themselves may use different terms, such as "Romanes," depending on regional and cultural contexts (Halwachs, 2003). The language includes multiple dialects with significant variation in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, shaped by the communities' histories of migration and contact with other languages. While Romani is recognized as a minority language in several European countries, it often remains marginalized in formal education systems.

5 The term "Zigeunerisch" is an outdated and offensive label once used for the Romani language, associated with discrimination against Romani communities (New et al., 2017). However, we have observed that some students use this term when referring to their own linguistic repertoires.

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