Enacting identities: children’s narratives on person, place and experience in fixed and hybrid spaces

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Abstract

Where adults go, children follow. The reality of a globalized, interconnected world, characterised by the mobility of people, goods and knowledge, across physical and virtual spaces and time, has had a significant impact on children’s early experiences of language, literacy and identity. Children are not peripheral to, but constitute an integral part of these transnational, translocal experiences. Consequently, they learn to function in diverse language contact situations from birth or from a very young age. This paper explores how these early multiple language and literacy experiences lay the foundations for the construction of a multilingual identity. The study investigates how children, aged 5 to 12, construct their identity across languages, literacies and educational spaces: their mainstream French classroom; an out-of-school English literacy course; an after-school heritage language programme. Based on a child-centred methodology, including interviews with children and their parents, children’s drawings and writings, and chosen symbolic objects, this study gives children a voice in exploring their sense of place in the world. The children’s multimodal narratives suggest they negotiate identity positions within fixed (national) and hybrid (transnational) spaces, in interaction with real people, in tangible places, and via lived experiences, which have value for the children.

Keywords: Children, parents, identity, literacy, multilingualism, hybridity

Introduction

This paper looks at how nine children, five boys and four girls, in the pre-primary and primary years explored, enacted and mediated the construction of a multilingual identity in fixed and hybrid spaces. The central focus of this study was eliciting children’s attitudes, perceptions and interpretations of their trilingual/tri-literate identity. This brings to the study of child bi-/multilingualism the perspective of the child/learner—stakeholder, a voice that is often ignored and underestimated. Children lack agency in the initial enterprise of multilingualism or multi-literacy, which depends on decisions taken by the adults in the family, the schools or the national context (Ibrahim 2014). This study, based on a multimodal methodology, gives children a voice to explore, apprehend and express their unfolding multilingual identity, beyond the constraints of the national school system, and despite the

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“monolingualist and monoculturalist ideologies” (Lüdi and Py 2009, 160) that may be dominant in their various language communities.

The children in this study had been socialised into and participated in the fast-moving, interconnected world of ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007), which characterises the complex reality of the 21st century. Consequently, they developed their multiple language repertoires across ‘local’ and ‘translocal’ spaces (Blommaert 2010, 9): for instance, at a local level these children lived in Paris, they functioned in French in the community and in school, and had built peer or sibling identities through the French language. Yet, as we see in Tables 1 and 2, they used several languages and literacies on a daily basis to communicate with binational parents, to maintain family ties with monolingual relatives and to integrate new language communities. Furthermore, language experiences, initiated in the home and mediated by the parents, were consolidated in multiple school contexts: mainstream French school; an out-of-school English literacy course; and heritage language programmes (Korean, Russian, German, Spanish, Japanese, Farsi/Persian), depending on the child’s linguistic background (see Table 2). This scenario reflects the “dynamic, hybrid, and transnational linguistic repertoires of multilingual (often migrant) speakers in rapidly diversifying urban conurbations worldwide” (May 2014, 1). These children inhabited a multitude of linguistic, sociocultural and educational spaces that constantly overlapped and displaced expected ethnic national boundaries (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004).

**Theoretical background**

This paper draws on sociolinguistic, sociocultural and social constructionist considerations in the acquisition of multiple languages, literacy development and identity construction. Language and literacy are socially, culturally and historically

| Name     | Place of birth | Age in France | Age at study | Mum             | Dad         | Heritage language |
|----------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Oliver-Maru Anna-Arra | England | 2.5 | 5.11 | Korean | French | Korean |
| Melinda | France | 0 | 7.6 | Scottish | American | German/Italian |
| Victor | England | 3 | 8.6 | English/ German | Ukrainian | Russian |
| Tala | France | 0 | 10.3 | Iranian | Iranian | Persian |
| Kiana | France | 0 | 11.11 | Iranian | Iranian | Persian |
| Mathieu | France | 0 | 11.8 | Spanish | French | Spanish |
| Taku | France | 0 | 11.10 | Japanese | Japanese | Japanese |
| Edwin | England | 7 | 12.11 | English/ German | Ukrainian | Russian |
situated practices (Street 1984, 1995) and used by individuals in the home, the school and the community to mediate experience. Language also plays an important role in the construction of identity, as it provides a site for negotiating, foregrounding or backgrounding (Anzaldúa 1987), rejecting and affirming identities.

Based on such overarching theoretical considerations, this study is framed within a multilingual orientation, refuting “double monolingualism” (Grosjean 1982) or “dual-monolingualism, a simple addition of languages” (Cruz 2012, 4). This multilingual lens includes the concept of multilinguality, which describes “the inherent, intrinsic characteristics of the multilingual” (Hoffmann and Ytsma 2004, 17) and goes beyond language knowledge itself: it includes attitudes, perceptions and influences; choices, preferences and emotions; psycholinguistic effects, cognitive changes and metalinguistic awareness.

**Multilingualism and identity**

These multiple language experiences constitute a complex panorama of interaction, subjectivities (Weedon 1997, 32 in Block 2014, 17) and relationships (Llamas and Watt 2010) within which children negotiate their identity. Identity is a discursive
construct that emerges in interactional processes that go beyond the individual and fixed social or national structures (Bucholtz and Hall 2010; Joseph 2004). Firstly, the process of learning to self-represent and to appropriate an identity is learnt not inherited (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000). Secondly, identity is conceptualised as dynamic, emergent and relational (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004) and becomes a “product of social interaction [...] facilitated and canalised by language” (Riley 2007, 16). Identity construction is a fluid, shifting and never-ending process as individuals negotiate identity positions using the multiple discursive tools available to them in interaction.

Davies and Harré (1990, 48) posit the positioning theory as “the process by which selves are located in conversation as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines, informed by particular discourses.” The concept of positioning gives individuals choices and agentive powers to displace, subvert and even manipulate their sense of belonging to a predefined ethnic-national community. Children in the present study explored and presented simultaneous identity positions as they moved between fixed language-national spaces and the hybrid ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1994).

Bauman’s (2001) notion of a solid identity, which associates an individual with static, linear national-linguistic boundaries, versus a liquid identity, which implies a fluid approach of overlapping and intersecting components, can be used to illustrate the two identity positions that children claim as theirs. Children in this study chose to identify with the essentialist notions of belonging reflected in the environment, for instance, discrete language or national boundaries (Edwin: *I’m French*; Oliver-Maru: *I was born in England*; Edwin: *I speak Russian with Dad*), yet simultaneously subverted or destabilised this fixed worldview as linguistic, national and cultural peripheries became porous, permeable and flexible (May 2014, 9). They pushed the boundaries of the ‘either/or’ approach to actively co-construct their understanding of cultural and linguistic experiences by seizing the semiotic discourses available to them. For example, they appropriated the data collection tools (written and oral narratives, drawings and chosen objects) to create their ‘identity texts’ (Cummins and Early 2011), as the research itself became a site of identity exploration and construction.

**Multilingual literacies and identity**

As people and languages travel the world, children are required to develop literacy in multiple languages in order to integrate different educational sites or maintain ties with family and friends in different cross-national contexts. Consequently, this study views literacy as an inherent feature of children’s multilingual identity, which affords children another layer of resources with which to negotiate. The study explores, through the children’s narratives, how “distant literacies are taken hold of
in specific ways, whether absorbed into previous communicative practices or used to mediate the outside and the inside” (Street 2004, 328 in Warriner 2009, 160). Furthermore, communicating in the world today includes multiple languages, scripts and dialects, as well as multiple modes (technological, pictorial, artefactual).

This paper adopts the concept of ‘pluriliteracies’ (Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen 2007, Garcia 2009), which emphasises the hybridity of literacy practices. This notion acknowledges the complexity of multilingual repertoires in local and global socio-cultural contexts, and includes multimodal approaches where “written–linguistic modes of meaning are intricately bound up with other visual, audio, and spatial semiotic systems” (11). The concept of ‘hybridity’ (Anzaldúa 1987; Bakhtin 1981; Bhabha 1994) describes the dynamic, integrated, simultaneous and mobile processes of communication between local and transnational contexts, where the interplay of linguistic systems exists beyond the traditional compartmentalisation of languages. Through their multilingual literacies (Martin-Jones and Jones 2000), such children embark on “a journey of self-discovery and a way to reconcile different perspectives, opinions, and beliefs about language and literacy” (Kabuto 2011, xiv). As a result, developing pluriliteracies will shape children’s concept of language as well as their self-image as they navigate through “simultaneous worlds” (Kenner 2004). Kenner described children’s use of their multiple literacy resources in different educational contexts, sometimes mixing literacies and sometimes switching between literacy traditions.

The experience of biliteracy meant that children always had more than one set of resources available when writing. At some moments children drew on both sets at once, whilst at others they switched from using one set to using another. (44)

Multilingualism and multiliteracies do not depend solely on the national education system but on a multitude of educational, personal and transnational experiences that transcend daily classroom interaction. As children’s separate educational contexts fail to mirror the “variability, hybridity and sense-making processes that characterise out-of-school multilingual practises today” (Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas and Torres-Guzman 2006, 34), they find alternative, multiple pathways to maintain their languages and literacies as sites of identity construction.

The study

Context and participants

This paper is part of a wider doctoral thesis that includes 13 children aged 5 to 17, living and learning in France. The present focus is on children aged 5 to 12 at the time of the data collection, which in France covers pre-primary and primary, and the first 2 years of middle school. They had a bilingual French–English profile with a third heritage language. About 67% were born in France, the other 40% having moved to France between the ages of two and seven. These children developed their
trilingualism in bilingual homes, in the community (see Table 1) and through education (see Table 2), becoming simultaneous or consecutive trilinguals (see Figure 1). There were three sets of siblings: Victor and Edwin; Tala and Kiana; and Oliver-Maru and Anna-Arra, who were twins. They all went to the after-school English literacy programme at the British Council Bilingual Section in Paris, where the interviews took place.

**French**

These children were “socialized into multilingualism” (Auleear Owodally 2014, 17–40) in a complex tandem of personal multilingual experiences within monolingual educational and political spaces. First and foremost, these children’s main educational context was the French school, which has, as its main objective, the teaching of the French language, enshrined in the constitution (Article 2 of the Constitution, National Assembly 1958) as the one and only official language of France. French has the political mission of unifying the nation and is the guarantor of the indivisibility of the state. Despite this monolingual nation-state ideology, France is a highly multilingual society. Harding-Esch and Riley (2003) stated that, with a multitude of regional and immigrant languages in the French territory, over 20% of the population of France is bilingual. This is corroborated by a number of studies: Cerquiglini (1999) identified 26% of French people as being raised by parents speaking other languages; Akinci (2003) found that 53% of the 12,000 primary school participants in his study declared using a language other than French at home, and 67 languages were identified in these schools; and official birth registrations indicate that 27.2% of children born in France in 2010 had at least one parent of foreign origin (Young 2014).

The children in this study fall comfortably into this statistical mass of multilinguals, yet beyond the official monolingualising and homogenising vision of the world lies the reality of contemporary, complex societies. This situation, far from being detrimental to their well-being (Moro 2012), is balanced by strong parental support for maintaining their heritage language, by positive images of these
cultural-linguistic spaces as well as positive experiences in the parent’s country of origin. Parents go beyond simply supporting their heritage languages. Victor and Edwin’s mother characterised the use of both parents’ languages in interaction with their children as a normal state of affairs and could not imagine doing otherwise:

> **OK, how do you have an alien child? … I think both of us would feel that wasn't our child … if our children couldn't read and write and speak in the same language as his parents … how can it happen … I don't understand.**

These children were actually well integrated into the French system. Regardless of some children’s late arrival in France, for example, Edwin at the age of seven, they were all following the age-appropriate French curriculum. At the time of the interview, Oliver-Maru and Anna-Arra were in the last year of *maternelle* (French preschool), where they were doing pre-reading and pre-writing activities. About 40% of the children attended state-funded primary or middle schools (Anna-Arra and Oliver-Maru, Melinda and Mathieu); 30% attended state-funded schools with a paid English section (Tala and Kiana); and 30% attended private bilingual English/French schools (Victor and Edwin, and Taku).

**Heritage language**

All of the children had access to literacy in their heritage language via a range of experiences from home schooling to following the national language curriculum. For example, Mathieu studied the Spanish language curriculum in an after-school programme at a Spanish school in Paris, Liceo Español Luis Bruñel. Children’s access to and development of the heritage language was mostly unsystematic, as it depended on the community offer and varied in quantity and quality. Oliver-Maru and Anna-Arra experienced emergent Korean literacy through storytelling, learning the alphabet and cultural activities such as tae kwon do, art classes, drama and music (Ibrahim 2014). Victor and Edwin, with a Ukrainian Russian-speaking father, attended Russian school on Saturdays to maintain their literacy skills. Tala and Kiana went to the Iranian Cultural Centre, Centre Culturel Zoroastrien de Paris, for Persian lessons and for the cultural experience. At the time of the interview the parents had decided to withdraw the two girls from the Cultural Centre as they were dissatisfied with the results and were teaching them Persian at home:

> **Father: But the problem was that there were pupils of different levels … it wasn’t very quiet … the teacher was very good … except that, as they said, she spend quite a lot of time in class talking of the splendour of Hammurabi … the empire of 2,000 years ago [laughter] …**

> **Mother: Which is one way of introducing them to the Persian culture but it was maybe too early for them.**

Melinda took German classes at the Goethe-Institut and had spent 1 year in a French–German kindergarten in Berlin. Melinda’s link to German and Italian was
via her sister, Lily, who also participated in the study, but belonged to the older group of students. Lily's father, who was not Melinda’s father, was originally from the Alto Adige or South Tyrol region in northern Italy, where both German and Italian are spoken. Taku learned Japanese literacy at a Wednesday afternoon programme. Taku's mother also invested a considerable amount of time in going over his Japanese lessons and helping him with further exercises.

**English**

These children’s access to English ranged from mother tongue to additional language, but all of the children had had comprehensive English language schooling in English-medium or bilingual schools and/or after-school programmes. Victor and Edwin’s and Melinda’s mothers were British and used English on a daily basis. Oliver-Maru and Anna-Arra’s parents had lived and studied in English-speaking countries: the mother lived in the United States for 10 years and the father, of Korean origin but adopted by a French couple, studied in the UK, where they met. English became the home language as neither parent could speak the language of the other. The children functioned in English and Korean with the mother and French with the father. Their English further developed in English and bilingual kindergartens and the after-school English literacy programme, where they learned English via phonics, children’s literature and project work. Mathieu, whose mother was Spanish and father was French, learned English in kindergarten in an international school in Dubai, where his parents worked for 3 years. Taku, from a monolingual Japanese home, acquired English through education, in the bilingual school from kindergarten; later English was reinforced in the after-school programme, which he had attended since the age of six. Besides the father’s attempts to introduce English in the home context, Tala and Kiana became fluent in English in the space of a year with an English-speaking babysitter. As a result, they were accepted into the English section of their French state school and the English literacy programme, which only takes children with high levels of oral proficiency.

**Writing scripts**

These literacy experiences also encompass several different scripts: Korean Hangul; Latin; Arabic; Japanese kanji, hiragana and katakana; and the Cyrillic alphabet. As in Kenner’s (2004) study of young children learning different writing systems, and the collection of papers investigating emergent biliteracy in Bauer and Gort (2012), these children were aware of the boundaries between their different writing systems and could easily differentiate or find connections between them. For example, the 5-year-old twins could differentiate between the cursive handwriting mostly learnt in French school, print in the English school, and replied to the researcher’s question about ‘doing cursive in Korean’ with a resounding ‘No!’ They also demonstrated skilful use of one language and its related symbols to describe the other.
Oliver-Maru, for instance, attempted to describe Korean writing through his knowledge of shapes and the English alphabet and by physically pointing to the appropriate symbols in his Korean name: We have to … well, we have to do squares, lines … like here or we can do it like here and like here … or a ‘s’ like here (see Figure 2).

These heterogeneous experiences, in the home and in diverse educational settings, acknowledge the kaleidoscopic situations in which these children were developing their multilingual literacies and identity.

**Methodology**

From a methodological perspective this qualitative study used a multi-method approach to eliciting and analysing data, which constituted children’s oral, written, pictorial and artefactual productions. It was based on the Mosaic approach (Clark 2004), which espouses a participatory and multimodal investigation of children’s lived experience. Children are viewed as social actors in their own right, able to use their unique knowledge to express what it means to be a child in their particular multilingual circumstances. It respects the communicative styles of the child participants, or children’s “preferred language” (Clark and Moss 2011, 54) via images, words, movement and symbolic objects.

**Sampling**

This multiple-case study used a purposive and opportunistic approach to case selection, as the research focus required a population sample of trilingual children learning to read and write in three languages simultaneously. These children were selected at the one educational setting they had in common, the after-school English literacy programme, constituting around 400 bilingual students between the ages of 5 and 17, and where the researcher works. Knowledge of the student population, collected at registration and in the first-day questionnaires completed by the children in class, indicated that children’s English/French bilingualism was only one aspect of their linguistic and cultural profile. A second and third selection identified children with a third language that they could read and write. Out of the 16 parents invited to participate in the research study, 9 families representing 13 children with a variety of backgrounds signed the consent forms.

Figure 2. Oliver-Maru’s name, written in Korean, depicting the ‘squares’, ‘lines’ and ‘s’ in his oral description.


**Data collection**

The data collection tools were chosen to reflect children’s unique ways of communicating and creativity in conveying meaning. Data collection is multi-method in nature and includes verbal and non-verbal tools:

- Group interviews with children, face-to-face interviews with parents and focus groups with teachers
- Children’s written and pictorial representations, constituting multimodal/plurisemiotic (Melo Pheifer and Schmidt 2012, 10) creations, sometimes integrating writing and drawing
- Physical artefacts (Pahl and Rowsell 2010), which anchor children’s imagination in the concrete world and connect their lived experience, via a language, to a specific learning context

**Data analysis**

The children’s multimodal performances included oral interviews, written texts, drawings with annotations, drawings without annotations, and artefacts. These artefacts, chosen to represent their three languages, were physical objects that children brought to the interview and/or drawings or descriptions thereof.

Initial findings emerging from interviews with the children were categorised for three recurrent and overlapping themes, that is, children’s reference to person, place and experience. These narratives suggest that children enact their multilingual identity in interaction with real people, in tangible places and through meaningful events. If the children’s oral narratives were analysed from a content perspective, their written and pictorial productions used a semiotic analytical approach, keeping in mind that “where image is combined with writing [...], meanings are distributed across modes” (Mavers 2009, 263). The children’s objects were analysed using Pahl and Rowsell’s theory of artefactual literacies, linking “literacy, multimodality and material culture” (2010, 2). As the embodiment of lived experience, objects create links with people, places and experiences across time and space and connect to children’s everyday lives and cultural histories. Yet objects are not static, one-dimensional entities – children imbue their objects with personalized multilingual stories, creating possible sites for identity performance, for negotiating identity positions and negating a forced conformity to a narrow language-national link.

These overarching themes were then categorized into fixed (unique and narrow) and hybrid (overlapping and complex) spaces, as the children negotiated their identity between two polarized perspectives: the need to affirm a narrow
language-ethnicity or language-national link, and the inevitable multilingual and multimodal interaction in hybrid spaces. These are overlapping themes, representing concrete and interactive processes in the construction of a multilingual identity across multilingual spaces.

The multiple performances create a triangulation of data (oral, written, pictorial and artefactual) that supports the children’s multifaceted self-representations.

**Findings**

**Person, place and experience**

The need to communicate and maintain relationships was an important consideration for all ages. The language–person link has a strong emotional and relational foundation and is mostly cemented by the use of the parents’ mother tongue in the home or children’s chosen language of communication in different educational sites. This choice was evident in all of the children’s comments and is a common theme in building and maintaining the relationship, in specific learning and living spaces. For Oliver-Maru, his mothers’ bilingualism in English and French served as a trigger for his use of the two languages: *If she [mother] says something Korean we have to say something Korean ... if she says something English we have to say something English.* Yet, French was associated with my daddy (Anna-Arra). Taku identified Japanese as the family language: *For me it’s normal ... I speak at home Japanese with my sister, my mother, my dad ... Japanese with all my family ... even with my dog.* Edwin clearly relates his trilingualism to people in his family: *My dad Russian, my mum English and him (brother) French ... Russian with my dad ... and when I speak to my dad in English it’s very strange.*

If children’s heritage languages were identified in family relationships, French was the language of friendship and very often that of siblings. Furthermore, it played a preponderant role in education and integration into the French context. Taku developed his French *by speaking to my friends* in the school context, and Anna-Arra acknowledged her need to use French in school: *Like this I can talk to my friends and to my teacher.* Mathieu referred to all three themes: *Because my father is French, I live in France and I go to a French school and all my friends are French.* Kiana explained her language use in terms of need: *I need to speak French because I live in France, Persian because my parents are Iranian ... I think it’s important to speak the language of the parents ... English because it’s the most important language of the world.* Even though French predominated, Kiana’s mother and father also switched to English and Persian, mostly to develop the girl’s language skills.

Tala’s annotated drawings could be described as stereotypically representative of a particular cultural tradition.
For example, at first glance Tala’s complex plurisemiotic drawings reveal a tourist guide–type representation of her different cultural affiliations: an Iranian dish and Persian carpet; the Union Jack and Big Ben; and a basketful of baguettes, the Eiffel Tower and the words Liberte Egalite Fraternite. However, when further explanation was sought on the drawings, her narrative disclosed her intricate relationships with her languages, the people in her entourage and the places where the languages are used. The carpets reveal her experience of Iran through her mother’s Parisian apartment, which is covered in Persian carpets. Even though French was identified as the main language of the mother–child relationship, their ‘mother tongue’, the children’s link to Persian was very strong through the parents and the grandparents. The parents described Persian as the ‘emotional language’.

The children’s chosen objects represented their specific linguistic-national spaces: Mathieu’s black bull immediately brought Spanish bullfighting to mind. Victor and Edwin brought to the interview T-shirts with Russian cartoon characters and a little grey Lada, symbolic of the relationship with their grandfather, who possessed a black Lada. Books in various languages also figured in the objects and attested to the importance of the experience of literacy in all three languages. The following excerpt illustrates the importance of English books for Victor:

Researcher: What makes you feel English?
Victor: Everything. My mother, my books and my bed.
Researcher: Your bed! Why your bed? Is that where you dream in English?
Edwin: Because he reads a lot in it.

Figure 3. Tala’s plurisemiotic representations.
Language is associated with concrete learning and living spaces, which allow for the performance of identity through multisensory experiences. For example, food, both visual and gustatory, was mentioned by all children as a cultural marker and represented embodied practice of identity construction. However, the children crossed borders using the resources at their disposal (their different languages, translation, drawings and plurisemiotic representations) to describe their favourite dish: for Oliver-Maru and Anna-Arra ice cream tasted better in Korea; Victor mentioned a Ukrainian dessert... really nice pastry with chocolate around it... *Ukrainian... chocolate with cream inside*; Tala described an Iranian chicken dish in a combination of verbal explanation, drawing and writing, and drew a basket of baguettes as representative of France (see Figure 3).

**Discussion**

The children’s performance in the interviews, their pictorial productions and choice of symbolic objects reflected a complex process in the development of their multilingual identity. Children’s identity construction is anchored in lived experience through the languages they know and use: in interaction with real people, in concrete places where languages and cultures meet, and through relevant events that have value for the children. These three emerging themes encompass both separate and impenetrable concepts as well as the dynamic and concurrent views of identity, attesting to the interlacing complexity of multilingual living.

Children’s experience of identity is dependent on language and language experiences across cultural, educational and national sites. They describe identity as simultaneously unitary and essentialist (fixed) and multiple and heterogeneous (hybrid), and demonstrate the ability to manipulate identity positions between these polarised spaces. Children use their narratives, drawings and artefacts to create identity links to particular language-national perspectives, thus justifying and confirming their affiliation to a designated linguistic culture, within designated political and social boundaries. However, they also use the research tools to decentre this monolingual, monocultural perspective and create hybrid and transnational spaces, within which they enact a fluid and fluctuating identity.

*Identity in the fixed space*

The children demonstrated the ability and the desire to be identified as a fully recognised member of a particular linguistic-national group. First and foremost this identity link was achieved through a purposeful switch to monolingual mode. For example, Tala and Kiana’s parents described the children’s switch from French to Persian with amazement and admiration: *When they go back to Iran... Tala she never speaks Persian with me... but even with me, she speaks Persian.* Mathieu described his ability to be Spanish in a Spanish context: *Sometimes when I go*
in Spain and I speak Spanish [inaudible] people think that I’m only Spanish . . . and the same in French. Mathieu’s mother described a scene from his French school, whereby his classmates did not know he was Spanish. His mother’s surprise at his ‘hiding’ his Spanish side was met with a simple question: Why should I tell them I’m Spanish?

This pattern of behaviour can be seen as an identity skin that the children slipped into easily and completely. They demonstrated a need and a desire to belong to and be seen by society as being an integral part of a particular sociocultural context. They actively and purposefully separated their worlds in order to exist in a particular linguistic-national community and language became a significant marker of these choices.

**Identity between spaces**

The children’s narratives on person, place and experience indicated that they were aware of living between worlds, in which they were constantly negotiating identity positions. Living between spaces was a decentring experience that was initiated by the children or imposed by the perspective of a third party. The children seldom accepted the positioning of another; they responded by subverting and renegotiating a more appropriate one, or imposing the position they wanted to present to the world.

In the following example, Edwin illustrated this need to negotiate and affirm his French identity in the face of others’ perceptions. Although he identified himself as Ukrainian-English, and stated, But I’m not French, his French identity was mediated through his excellent skills in the French language, and he insisted on maintaining this relationship in French when in France: Sometimes it’s kind of offensive when they think I don’t speak French and they speak to me in bad English. I speak to them in French.

Edwin’s mother confirmed this observation:

They get annoyed sometimes because we’re in the metro and I speak to them in English and someone will come up and practice their English and they say: “Tell them I speak French as well.”

Taku also experienced this decentring narrative from Japanese people. In this case his proficiency in Japanese was a marker of difference, which distanced him from his ‘Japaneseness’: Sometimes [Japanese] people say, “You can speak very well but you don’t have the vocabulary” . . . they say, “Do you have a different nationality too?” . . . I say that I’m Japanese but I’m born in France. Taku’s mother validated this distinction between his languages and identity, accepting the perception of their Japanese compatriots:
Taku peut-être dit … ‘je suis japonais mais je peux parler français et anglais aussi. Oui … peut-être … je suis japonais spéciale’. (“Taku perhaps says … ‘I am Japanese but I speak French and English too … Yes … perhaps … I am a special Japanese person.’”)

She took his search for coherence to a different level and synthesised his identity into a ‘special Japanese’. Taku was identified, first and foremost, as Japanese but the use of the word ‘special’ reflected the mother’s attempt to maintain a certain positive equilibrium in relation to Taku’s identity, despite the acute awareness of gaps in his knowledge of the Japanese language and culture, evident in his comment on telling jokes: I don’t find some words for Japanese and I listen to jokes from French people so I can’t tell Japanese jokes.

Oliver-Maru described a frustrating experience in his French class, as he tried to affirm his Korean identity by dissociating himself from the generalised Asian identity of chinois (‘Chinese’), based on the similarity in physical appearance between him and a classmate of Chinese origin. Oliver-Maru’s mother delimited the Korean boundary by teaching him to say, No, I’m not Chinois. I’m Korean, thus distinguishing him from the Chinese child in his French class. Identity across spaces was mediated in social interaction with various interlocutors and included negotiating his Korean identity in the typified French context of the preschool and then recounting the experience in the interview in English, in an English-speaking context.

**Identity in the hybrid space**

The children’s identity narratives indicated an attempt to find coherence in their diversity by creating and/or referring to a ‘third space’. This third or hybrid space was a product of the children’s experiences, through their language use, in different sociocultural and educational contexts but also through the possibility afforded by the multimodal research tools to explore and express their multilingual identities. According to Bhabha (1990, 1994) the third space is “the place of enunciation”: it promotes the construction of knowledge and enables the appearance of new and alternative identity options. Furthermore, the new identity positions that are negotiated through these hybrid living and learning experiences break the constraints of the narrow cultural-national bias. Individuals are no longer representative of a culture or a nation or a national language, but they “diverge from the stereotypes they are assigned” (Machart 2013, 2). Through a subjective personal experience (Abdallah-Pretceille 2005) and in interaction with the social, cultural and political environment, individuals reconstitute and create new identities. These experiences legitimise children’s choices as they interact in the hybrid space, and empower their voice.
Tala’s plurisemiotic drawing of an Iranian dish (see Figure 3) is an example of a subjective, hybrid, affiliative and multimodal ‘identity text’, which she manipulated using the resources available to her. Her drawing of the dish is accompanied by its Persian name written in Arabic script and the English transcription ‘Zereshk Polo’, in Latin script. Her narrative included English and French and described the colourful constitution of her drawing:

Tala: ‘Zereshk Polo’. It’s rice with little red things with . . . how do you say safran?
Researcher: ‘Saffron’
Tala: Saffron and chicken. I really like this food.

The object Mathieu chose to represent the English language is another example of children’s negotiation of identity beyond language and national boundaries, as children bring resources from one tradition into different national, cultural and linguistic spaces. According to Pahl and Rowsell (2010), objects tell personal, individual stories, but this description does not account for children’s agency in telling their stories. Mathieu told a personalized story as he appropriated and gave his objects meanings that were embedded in his experience of language, thus creating further sites for identity performance. The choice of a camel and an Arab figurine, signifiers of the Middle East, as representative of English was both disconcerting and surprising (see Figure 4). However, Mathieu’s narrative described his first experience of English, in a kindergarten at an international school in Dubai, where his family lived for 3 years. Dubai was also the place where he met his long-standing best friend, with whom he shared reading experiences despite geographical and temporal distances; they read, recommended and posted English books to each other. The mother described this relationship as follows: Une amitié qui est très forte . . . une amitié solide en anglais . . . et qui maintenant commence à être un échange

Figure 4. Mathieu’s objects representing English.
culturelle (“A very strong friendship . . . a solid friendship in English . . . that is now becoming a cultural exchange”).

A salient feature of this study is the children’s search for coherence and a synthesis of their multiple cultures, selves and lives. These children took on aspects of different experiences, languages and cultures in the process of developing and shaping a new form of culture, which combined elements of the three languages via relationships, places and events. The children’s response to the question on how they self-represent was significant: If someone asks where you come from or who you are, how would you describe yourself . . . do you say ‘I’m Korean’ . . . or do you say ‘I’m French’ . . . or do you say ‘I’m English’? The children primarily described their ethnic background with some qualifiers to justify difference, but they were also very specific about the non-ethnic language: Taku: I say that I’m Japanese but I’m born in France; Edwin: Ukrainian–English. Well, I’m not French; Victor: I’m half Ukrainian, a quarter English, eighth American and eighth German; Kiana: I don’t think I’m English because we don’t have any . . . my family is not English . . . I don’t live in England . . . I say I’m French and Persian . . . and Iranian . . . I say “je suis française d’origine iranienne” . . . sometimes “je suis française et iranienne”. No, I think I say “je suis française d’origine iranienne”. Kiana’s comment seems to imply that she was experimenting with different ways of describing her identity, thus the ongoing process of identity construction occurring in the place of enunciation.

Oliver-Maru’s affirmation of being Korean was linked to his decentring experience of being associated with a Chinese classmate: I’m Korean. . . . but there’s one French who don’t know I’m Korean. However, Anna-Arra, not having experienced the same identity conflict as her brother, had a more holistic view: I say all. Anna-Arra and Oliver-Maru’s multilingual identity was tripartite and visible in their names: it included European names allowing integration into both the English and French culture (Anna and Oliver) hyphenated with their Korean names (Arra and Maru).

The children’s identity discourse reflects a complex interplay of identity positions; they are physical and unique as the children latched onto something concrete and used cultural symbols to identify this difference. Yet these were permeable borders, as the identities were overlapping and hybrid. Ultimately, they used metaphorical identity discourse to describe the close relationship with their languages to the point where they became an integral part of their existence:

Mathieu: If we take off English or French or Spanish it’s like taking off a part of a person, a part of the body.

Parents as initiators and guardians of identity spaces
Parents play an important role in initiating, maintaining and supporting children’s multiple language/literacy journeys. In listening actively to children’s voices adults
can reposition them as active participants in the meaning-making process and better understand how they build solid, long-lasting relationships with their languages. Parents act as “cultural brokers” (Genesee 1981) between their children and the different language groups they represent, for example, Oliver-Maru’s mother’s mediation of his Korean identity.

Parents in the home context also serve as a springboard for emerging literacy and identity construction. The twins’ mother initiated and maintained emergent triliteracy in the home: *I really love reading all three languages. I read Korean books, English books and French books ... whatever they choose.* She then extended that experience to Korean school, which she described as *the environment with all the different Korean kids living here in France, so they can identify with them ... not have the identity problems afterwards.* Taku’s mother also described her role as a giver of access to the children’s languages and identity, through resources such as books, DVDs, television and education. Yet the children will eventually make their own choices: *J'ai préparé la situation pour étudier les langues française, anglaise, en même temps le japonais. C'est moi qui ai préparé la situation ... mais les enfants ont grandi et puis ... chacun a choisi la quantité et puis ... le livre aussi ... le thème aussi ... j'ai laissé choisir.* (“I prepared the conditions for them to study French, English and Japanese at the same time. I prepared the conditions but the children grew up and each one chose the quantity ... the books ... the themes ... I let them choose”).

All of the parents exemplified their positive attitudes to multilingualism and literacy, which they qualified as a benefit or an advantage for the children. The twin’s mother used the metaphor of the ‘window’ or the ‘door’ as a pathway to understanding and accepting difference. Mathieu’s mother described this as an ‘opportunity’. Victor and Edwin’s mother underlined the normality of the situation: *I don't even see it as a benefit, I just see it as completely normal ... I just can't imagine an alternative.*

**Conclusions**

Even though it is difficult to generalize conclusions from this study to all multilingual settings, these children’s exploration of their identity through trilingual and triliterate experiences gives us an insight into children’s understanding of multilingual living. By positioning themselves within and between fixed and hybrid notions of language, children make a statement about living in multiple worlds with complementary rather than conflicting identities.

Firstly, the findings from this study highlight the complexity of identity construction in multilingual contexts. They also emphasise the confidence that these children demonstrated as they simultaneously reconciled dissimilarities and asserted their difference and exclusivity. The children’s narratives indicate that identity is filtered and enabled by experience across discursive contexts. Literacy underscores
children’s tripartite reference to person–place–experience and thus expands “the repertoires of possible selves” (Franquiz 2012, 1). It gives children an insight into a part of themselves that they can further explore in the place where the experience occurs: a cultural centre, a classroom, a school in the country of origin, or the multitude of books and DVDs, artefacts and memories stocked in the home.

Secondly, the multimodal approach reflects how children use the resources at their disposal (linguistic, cultural, pictorial, artefactual, experiential) to constantly negotiate identity positions between fixed and hybrid spaces and across cultural, linguistic and educational contexts. This study goes beyond a verbocentric focus (Kendrick and McKay 2002, 2009) or drawings-only approach (Melo-Pfiefer 2015) to incorporating multiple modes of expression. If this is an innovative approach to eliciting children’s voices on language and identity, it needs more research in a variety of multilingual sociocultural and socio-economic contexts for a better understanding of children’s perceptions and experience.

Thirdly, children’s multimodal narratives are supported and nurtured by parents, who impact positively on children’s self-esteem as multilingual speakers/readers/writers. Both children and parents report on the home environment as the springboard for 21st century hybrid living, with multiple linguistic resources and experiences to choose from and appropriate. They also perceive this experience as normal: Mathieu: *Well, when we think about learning and speaking three languages it seems difficult but when we do it, it’s normal.* This normality belies and confirms the dynamic and complex interactions between experience, literacy development and identity construction in multilingual spaces.
Note
1 Even though ‘Farsi’ is the more commonly used term to refer the language of Iran, I have used ‘Persian’ in the article as that is the term the participants used in the interviews.
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