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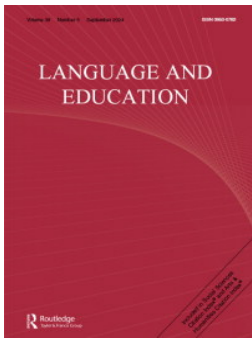
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Complementary schools as ‘breathing spaces’: identity, multilingualism and critical pedagogies in heritage language education

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ABSTRACT

Whilst mainstream schools in England may encourage multilingualism by insisting on the study of foreign languages, multilingual children are not always provided with support for the maintenance of their heritage languages and cultures. In response to this shortcoming, communities organise themselves to support their young members by setting up extra-curricular education institutions or associations, also called complementary schools, which contribute to the cultural and linguistic maintenance of minority communities. Through emblematic extracts from a fourteen-month ethnographic research in an Italian complementary school in London, this article examines how HL learners engage in and reflect on their multilingual practices and how they develop agency in their learning environment. The findings illustrate how critical modes of teaching and learning that make space for multilingualism can provide children with unique opportunities to discover, explore and experiment with their multilingual and multicultural selves, which, in turn, permit them to access linguistic resources and legitimise multilingual learner identities. Expanding on Fishman’s notion of ‘breathing space’, the article suggests that complementary schools represent a space where minority languages but also pedagogical practices can breathe and develop.

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1. Introduction

It is storytelling time in the Italian complementary school. The teacher asks the children what characters they have chosen for their stories and a pupil exclaims ‘My character is half British, half Italian, half French, and half Irish, just like me!’. Her classmate, whose concentration has long gone, looks puzzled now and says, ‘Four halves is two wholes, it’s like you are two people...’. He loves maths, and he felt the urge to comment on this incongruence: four halves for one whole. Luisa was writing a story in Italian, one of her heritage languages (HLs), trying to bring together her multiple background but the proposed identity did not seem to ‘add up’. This anecdote exemplifies the complexity surrounding the theme of identity in contexts of superdiversity and multilingualism.

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The present study is part of a larger ethnographic research that aims to understand how children make sense of their multilingual selves in education by exploring their experience of language learning in an Italian complementary school in London. Complementary schools (CSs), also called ‘community’, ‘Saturday’ or ‘supplementary’ schools, are community-based organisations that provide extra-curricular classes for the maintenance and development of community and heritage languages (Li Wei, 2006). Although such educational settings are conceived for the learning of community languages and cultures, and they are not specifically set up for promoting multilingualism, in CSs both students and teachers use a wide range of linguistic resources making them *de facto* ‘sites of multilingualism’ (Lytra and Martin 2010). The growing scholarship on the social, cultural and linguistic significance of these schools shows the complexity of language and identity management in such educational settings and the possibility and the potential of translanguaging approaches to language education (Creese and Blackledge 2010; Li Wei, 2014, for example; Grosse 2022). The empirical research in CSs to date documents the range of linguistic practices at play, how such practices reflect identity positioning and negotiating, and the role of translanguaging as a practice and pedagogy, but less attention has been paid to some education processes such as critical pedagogies.

This study seeks to unfold the pedagogical practices occurring in an Italian HL programme for primary school children in post-Brexit England exploring the implications for identity when multilingual approaches are combined with critical pedagogies. The analysis of classroom interactions revealed how the participatory style of the teaching approach adopted for the HL classes in this CS played a crucial role in shaping social dynamics and language practices. Overall, the data show that children were able to develop a sense of agency in their learning environment, enabled by the participatory and game-based design of the lessons, and that in turn, they acquired a sense of legitimacy in using their full linguistic repertoires to communicate and to learn. The result is the development of creative multilingual and critical modes of teaching and learning.

Whereas the notion of ‘breathing space’ (Fishman 1991) has been often used in relation to minority languages, but never in relation to complementary schooling, this article expands on this notion by illustrating how complementary schools provide opportunities for the development of multilingual and critical approaches to language education, generating breathing spaces for languages but also for pedagogical practices. Against a neoliberal understanding of education, this article joins the debate about the relationship between power, agency, and the practice of teaching and learning multilingually.

2. Research background

2.1. Multilingual learners in monolingual systems

Many scholars in the field of multilingual education urged us ‘to go beyond acceptance or tolerance of children’s languages’ (Creese and Blackledge 2010, p. 103) and consider the whole linguistic repertoire of children as a resource for social development as they address the need to create ‘breathing spaces’ where minority languages can be freely used, and allowed to ‘breathe’ (Fishman 1991; García 2009). However, multilingual children in mainstream schools are still rarely provided with opportunities for using their heritage languages. Although, in principle, education policies in England praise and celebrate linguistic diversity,

in practical terms such diversity does not often find space in mainstream schools teaching and learning practices (e.g. Costley and Leung 2020; Cushing 2020). In teacher training programmes, guidance on working with language diversity is scarce or absent (Foley et al. 2018) and we still witness a lack of curriculum guidance for teachers on how to use languages other than English in their classrooms (Costley and Leung 2020). The consequence is that children with a migratory background in England may not get the opportunity to discover, express and experiment with their multilingual selves in education, and sometimes they adopt English as their main and only language.

This lack of opportunities brings about implications in terms of identity development and wellbeing because ‘when educational practices reinforce language hierarchies and subordinate students’ existing identities and language practices, schools can become sites of institutional denigration of the learner’s sense of self’ (Leeman et al. 2011b, p. 483). Linguistic subordination can lead to a sense of dis-empowerment or even to the rejection of a foundational element of the child’s experience of society, the language(s) of their family. As Heller (1996) maintains ‘[w]hat goes on in classroom interaction teaches students about their position both in the school and in the community’ (p. 156) and the linguistic hierarchies that underlie some teaching practices run the risk of transmitting the idea that some languages and language varieties (and consequently, some identity options) are more legitimate than others. In sum, by insisting (often unsuccessfully) on the promotion of foreign languages and by ignoring the linguistic repertoires already present in mainstream school classrooms, the English education system is complicit in the process of delegitimisation of minority identity options and ‘monolingualisation’ of multilingual children.

To make space for minority languages, communities organise themselves and set up educational spaces for the maintenance of their cultural and linguistic heritage. I refer to such extra-curricular education institutions or associations as complementary schools and opt for this term to stress their complementing role to mainstream education, since diversity, especially in the UK, does not usually find a place in mainstream schools’ teaching and learning practices (Cushing et al. 2021). Children in CSs are mostly multilingual but have varying levels of language proficiency and literacy skills in the HL, therefore learning objectives cannot be standardised. They are, instead, tailored to the students’ abilities and needs. Also, there are very few published learning resources specifically designed for HL learners, especially for Italian, and HL learning programmes at primary school level in England are not usually exam-oriented, therefore they are not shaped by curricular policies and procedures that aim at preparing the students ‘to pass a test’. For these reasons, compared to teachers in mainstream schools, CSs educators may hold greater agency as they need to develop new learning resources and try different approaches to manage the linguistic diversity and the differences in proficiency levels in their classes.

2.2. Multilingualism and critical pedagogies in HL education

The scholarship on critical pedagogy stems from the work of Paulo Freire (1921–1997) who vastly critiqued the ‘banking’ model of traditional education and laid the foundations for an alternative paradigm for the conceptualisation of teaching and learning. In developing an emancipatory idea of education, work on critical pedagogy placed participation at the

heart of learning (Freire 1970, 1998; Giroux 1988). In the banking model (Freire 1970) teachers ‘deposit knowledge’ into the students who need to memorise and learn based on an idea of knowledge as mere commodity to pass exams, specialise and access work. Instead, pedagogies that take a critical stance value dialogue for the active participation of all learners (students and teachers alike). By disrupting teacher-student relations and moving beyond the idea of education as a process of ‘knowledge transfer’, learning spaces become contexts for human connection and democratic relations, as places where to become ‘fully human’ (Freire 1970, 1998). To attain this, pedagogy must be dialogical from the outset, and language is an essential tool for dialogue.

As Gounari (2014) rightly points out, ‘[o]ne of the basic premises of critical pedagogy is that education is not neutral; it is inherently political’ since teaching and learning practices are shaped by positions of power and ideologies and rest on ‘deliberate choices about what constitute ‘knowledge’ and how it is produced, what experiences and languages it legitimises and/or marginalises’ (p. 262). Approaching critically the process of language learning means, then, understanding the difference in value and legitimacy that different discourses confer to different named languages and varieties. The meaning conveyed between two interlocutors is always influenced by dynamics of power which assign symbolic value to speech, and consequently to its speakers (Bourdieu 1977). If language carries symbolic value, and different languages and varieties are associated to specific values, hence potentially (mis) recognised as superior or inferior, one’s language(s) can be defined as the symbolic capital that determines what one can or cannot do in the social arena. Consequently, one’s repertoire (or linguistic capital) becomes inseparable from one’s own sense of value, power, and therefore legitimacy.

The scholarship on translanguaging in CSs offers a perspective on legitimacy in language learning. Research on HL education suggests that CS students do not conform to standardised uses of language (Creese et al. 2006; Abourehab and Azaz 2023, for example; Lytra and Karatsareas 2023) and, even in front of predominantly monolingual policies, the language practices observed in complementary school classrooms involve a complex and creative use of a wide range of linguistic resources to communicate and to learn (Creese and Blackledge 2010; Li Wei 2014).

In their research in multilingual and multidialectal language settings, Grosse (2022) and Abourehab and Azaz (2023) provide insightful examples of how translanguaging can support the children’s learning and how enabling the exploration of different linguistic resources can translate in the celebration of multiple (and changing) identity options. Grosse (2022) investigated language and identity in a German Saturday school in the UK and through the analysis of the students’ language portraits she showed how ‘simplistic labels such as heritage language learner, bilingual or German may fail to take account of the complexity of young people’s linguistic identities’ (p. 14). Grosse analysed the different portraits that some students completed at different points in time and illustrated how their linguistic repertoires were changing and evolving as their biographies and their practices in the CS continued to shape their (organic) linguistic identities.

In a study on Arabic HL courses in the U.S., Abourehab and Azaz (2023) illustrate how the teachers allowed for space to celebrate the diverse linguistic identities of the children by enabling them to translanguange and explore their repertoires. In one of their observations, the teacher was introducing the past tense of the verb ‘to go’ in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and was using the sentence ‘She went to the store’. Since the verb ‘to go’ and the word

for 'shop' are different in the different varieties of Arabic, the students started working their way to the sentence using their dialects, and when they listed the different ways in which they would say it, the teacher said that all of the terms used were 'correct', while guiding them to building the sentence in MSA. The teacher did not strictly adhere to a standard Arabic-only approach. Instead, she was observed to be 'strategically navigating the linguistic repertoires of the learners' (p. 304), allowing for the dialogic construction of a free space where the diverse linguistic resources of all participants in the learning process could be employed, and celebrated. As they further explain, this method 'created 'linguistic security' for the learners and removed the affective barriers established between their home dialects and MSA' (Abourehab and Azaz 2023, p. 408).

Against a modernist view of 'pure languages' that legitimises members of a culture based on phonetic homologation and language proficiency in given standard varieties, the translanguaging approach challenges the hegemonic discourse of named languages and makes space for new identity and membership options. However, translanguaging practices and pedagogies do not necessarily or directly translate into critical reflections on matters of power.

Like translanguaging problematises language, critical pedagogies problematise power in the classroom. It is in the United States that scholars started to elaborate on the idea of integrating critical pedagogies in HL education building often on the case of Spanish for HL speakers. Correa (2011), for example, emphasises the importance of developing critical and sociolinguistic awareness to manage possible language discrimination, with a focus on the Spanish varieties present in the U.S., as she reminds us that only through an emancipatory pedagogy HL learners are enabled to 'critically embrace the cultural and linguistic identity that they bring with them to the learning context' (p. 318) and, how she specifies in a later publication (Correa 2018), the HL classroom is not only a place of language learning and HL maintenance but also, and crucially so, 'a site of linguistic discovery' (p. 6).

Leeman (2005) equally places emphasis on critical pedagogies as she addresses the challenge represented by dominant educational paradigms that may deny students agency and presents the results of a service-learning initiative that sees university students of Spanish engaging in HL education in a primary school (Leeman et al. 2011a). The data show how 'the experience helped [the students] take their critical language agency beyond the classroom walls and integrate university, school and community knowledges' (Leeman et al. 2011a, p. 293). However, the scholarship on HL education does not yet provide a picture of the dynamics at play in critical HL courses for primary school children. This article presents some empirical evidence on how combined elements of critical pedagogy and translanguaging in the HL classroom can support young learners in positively exploring and legitimising multilingual learner identities.

3. Research context and methodology

This study explored language and education practices in an Italian HL learning programme with the objective of gaining an insight into how children make sense of and navigate their multilingual identities within this educational context. The need to interpret social communication prompted an ethnographic approach for this research because of its interpretative design and interdisciplinary overture (Copland and Creese 2015).

The Italian complementary school that took part in this research was managed in partnership by one of the promoting organisations for the Italian consulate of London, supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a grassroots organisation operating locally in a London borough. The CS run Italian classes in out of school hours, mainly between 4 pm and 7 pm from Monday to Friday, operating on average 33 weeks per year. Children attended their classes once a week and lessons lasted between one and one and a half hour, depending on the age group. Students were usually based in the neighbourhood, and some travelled from other neighbourhoods for up to half an hour journey.

The children enrolled in this CS attended primary and secondary schools, with an age ranging from 4 to 14 (from Reception class to Year 11). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the year of this study the school activated courses in this borough only for primary school children and organised them in two groups (KS1 and KS2) counting 10 children per class. One teacher and 17 children in total took part in this study. The children were between 6 and 10 years old, they were all born and/or raised in England and spoke Italian as a heritage language because at least one of their parents was born and/or grew up in Italy, relocated to the UK, and transmitted the language by continuing to speak Italian with them. The participants were part of two different class groups but had the same teacher and were organised based on age and not on proficiency levels. The teacher grew up in Italy, had a postgraduate degree in TESOL from a UK institution and before joining the school, she worked as a research assistant for academic projects on multilingualism, making her enthusiastic about participating in this study.

During the school year 2021/2022, I conducted classroom observations in the two groups as well as interviewing the children and their parents. In the last school term, children also contributed to the observations producing their own fieldnotes. The data corpus of the full research project included questionnaires, fieldnotes, photographs, audio-recordings of classroom observations, audio-recording and full transcripts of the interviews with children and parents, documents and language portraits, the children's fieldnotes and copies of children's work. The study went through the University of Essex ethical clearance procedures,¹ all the participants provided written consent and pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure confidentiality.

Building on the theories of Bourdieu (1986, 1991) and Freire (1970), I adopted a Marxist-based approach for the analysis of the language teaching and learning in the CS as I engaged with a type of analysis that would allow me to explore the multiple and changing identity positions of the participants in dynamics of power, but took a more post-structuralist stance for the study of multilingual practices since looking at communication through the lens of translanguaging means accepting a certain degree of epistemological relativism. For the analysis of ethnographic data, I made use of thematic analysis following Braun and Clark's six phase process (2012, 2023) and included some elements of discourse analysis to gain a deeper understanding of uncovering subject positions and discourses. The organisation of data in themes is the result of a process that consists of multiple readings of the fieldnotes (mine and those produced by the children) and the transcripts of lessons and interviews, open data coding, the exploration of broader patterns of meaning across the dataset and the collation of themes-related data which, eventually, delineated an ethnographic narrative for the teaching and learning experiences of these participants. In some instances, elements of discourse analysis (Gee 2011) were included to examine the ways in which grammar

was used ‘to build and design structures and meanings’ (p. 48) and how that contributed to the inclusion of alternative discourses about power and learning.

Finally, transcriptions of recorded data² are presented in their original version with a proposed translation. Dialogues often occurred multilingually and since children’s competence in their HL, Italian, is specific to their experience of multilingualism, the language used (both in speaking and in writing) is often not standard. Therefore, a direct translation to standard English was not applicable nor desirable, hence the label ‘proposed translation.’

4. Findings

4.1. Participating in learning

There are two premises to the way in which a critical approach developed in this school: the use of space and the game-informed design of the classes. The organisation of space proved crucial in defining the children’s opportunities to participate in learning. The classroom in this CS was characterised by a whole-class desk for the children and the teacher, in a space configuration that favoured both verbal and non-verbal communication and most importantly, removed physical projections of power dynamics between the children and the educator. The whiteboard was rarely used by the teacher and was mainly used by the children during game activities constituting a space of convergence for children to learn from one another.

The teaching staff developed a game-informed design (Reinhardt 2018) for most of their learning activities to meet learning goals while ensuring that children were encouraged to participate despite the after-school time of the class. The teachers employed customisable games as learning tools and a small number of games could be used to introduce and revise a whole variety of grammar and literacy topics while keeping a sense of continuity in the structure of the classes. This way of teaching allowed the teachers to include the children in the lesson planning, as it noticed in the following fieldnotes extracts:

| | Original | Proposed translation |
|--------------------|---|---|
| 2nd November 2021 | I bambini suggeriscono idee per la terza attività del giorno dopo la proposta della battaglia. Sembrano sentirsi parte attiva della lezione da poter contribuire alla programmazione | The children suggest ideas for the third activity of the day after the suggestion of the battleship. They seem to feel active part of the class that they can contribute to the lesson planning |
| 14th December 2021 | In this initial part of the session children are often invited to say what they would like to do (what game to play) and I noticed that children are now more confident in sharing and have their say on what they would like to play | |
| 28th March 2022 | Negozano sulle attività per l’ultima lezione. Per scegliere fanno un sondaggio. Peter è alla lavagna e scrive le proposte e le crocette | They are negotiating the activities for the last lesson. To choose, they do a survey. Peter is at the whiteboard and writes down the suggestions and ticks the points |

These notes reflect three different points in time in the school year, between the beginning of November and the end of March. What I observed was a gradual and organic progression of the children’s participation in taking decisions about the lesson. At the beginning of the school year, the children were choosing one of the activities that they wanted

to do after the ones proposed by the teacher. In the last extract, instead, children were negotiating the activities for the class and one of the students was at the whiteboard to keep track of suggestions through a form of survey. In taking a critical stance, the educator here challenged educational practices that embody hierarchies and hierarchical power dynamics and ensured a space in the temporal organisation of the lesson for students to actively participate in the lesson planning, as highlighted in the second extract, in which they are regularly invited to say what games they would like to play.

Indeed, all classes started with some time for conversation and for the lesson planning, creating a dialogical atmosphere from the beginning of the lesson. Throughout the lesson, then, the teacher was observed to encourage further peer-to-peer communication. A way in which the teacher facilitated the dialogue between students was by re-directing questions. In the following extract, the children are engaged in an activity of grammar analysis in which they need to colour their text using a specific colour for each word based on the grammar categories. Alex is unsure about the analysis for the word *giochi* and asks Emma, the teacher, about it.

| | |
|---------|--|
| Alex | che è giochi? che è giochi? <what's 'giochi'? what's 'giochi'?> |
| Emma | cos'è giochi? Ma guarda che hai uno due tre quattro cinque sei sette compagni di classe a cui [chiedere <what's giochi? But look you have one two three four five six, seven classmates to whom [to ask]> |
| Annabel | [un nome! <a noun!> |

As it can be noticed in this excerpt, the teacher established a participatory atmosphere and created opportunities for the children to have access to the expertise of their peers by removing herself from the position of exclusive knowledge holder and avoiding providing an answer every time that a pupil asked a question. Instead, to questions addressed to her she replied that there were other people in the room that may know the answer, redirecting the learning dialogue to a peer-to-peer dimension. Some children adopted this behaviour earlier than others, and children were often ready to provide answers.

An additional aspect observed in such interaction is the tone used by the teacher, with humour and in a style that does not differ from her communication with her own peers. In other words, she made choices that were appropriate to the age of the students but did not make differences between children and adults in aspects like the modulation of her voice or the use of more colloquial language (*'ma guarda'*), with a sense of 'being-in' the teacher-student relationship and feeling relaxed in that relationship, hence humanising the educational experience (Giles 2011, p. 66). Such a sense of friendship lowered the emotional distance between participants in learning. All learners became part of an active exchange, beyond given roles of power and authority as their 'dialogue becomes a 'game' in which identities and positions are established and disjoined and participants multiply and produce new modes of being together' (Albrecht-Crane 2005, p. 492).

Creating conditions for emergent connections through space configuration and time for dialogue, combined with the use of irony and/or friendship-like communication, contributed to the construction of relationships of trust between learners and educators for the development of democratic relations. The teacher-student relationship became a space for fostering connection and developing a sense of agency. The following excerpt is an example of agency for which a pupil, Valentina (age 9), engages in dialogue with the teacher to contest her decisional power.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| Emma | vi ricordate quel gioco che abbiamo fatto con i suoni duri e i suoni dolci? <do you remember that game we played about hard and soft sounds?> [...] |
| Emma | però le squadre le faccio io oggi <but today I do the teams> |
| Valentina | no:: <no::> |
| Emma | mh mh ((affirmative tone)) ((Valentina raises her hand)) |
| Emma | dimmi <tell me> |
| Valentina | due cose (.) ma l'ultima volta tu hai fatto le squadre:: <two things (.) but last time you did the teams> |
| Emma | le ho fatte io:: <I: did> |
| Valentina | la seconda cosa è posso andare in bagno? <the second thing is can I go to the toilet?> |
| Emma | ma la prima cosa perchè me la dici? Perchè vuoi fare tu le squadre? <but the first thing, why do you say it to me? Is it because you want to do the teams?> |
| Valentina | si! <yes!> |

Emma decided to create the teams for time reasons. Immediately, Valentina contested the teacher's power by reminding her that she, the teacher, already had her turn in deciding the groups. She initially had a more spontaneous reaction in verbalising a long 'no:'. She then raised her hand to take the floor and contest the teacher's decision to form the teams. This instance is emblematic of the agitative power that an approach orientated to participation and critical engagement can have. By providing the children with recurrent opportunities to join the lesson planning process, decide their teams or where to sit and what game to play, the teacher created a routine for which taking unilateral decisions becomes odd to the eyes of the children. Valentina does not directly say that she wants to form the teams but makes a comment on the fact that the teacher had already had her turn, hence she is not respecting the collaborative and democratic dynamics of the group. This emblematic extract shows how access to classroom language is related to how children are positioned and how they are able to position themselves. In this, the classroom practices observed can be described as critical pedagogies because they allowed space for challenging relations of power.

Finally, the sense of participation and emancipation described so far can be perceived by the children themselves in the development of classroom activities as displayed in the following fieldnotes extract produced by Amelia (age 8) towards the end of the school year (Figure 1).

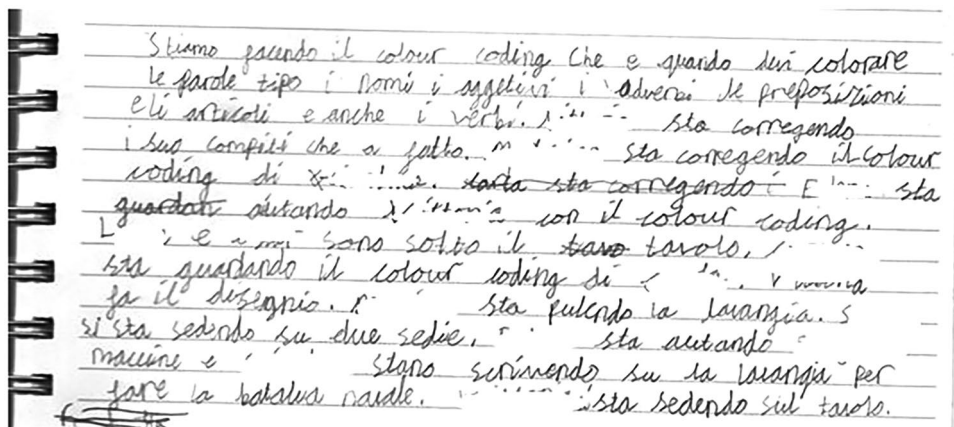


Figure 1. Amelia's fieldnotes.

| Original transcription | Proposed translation |
|--|--|
| Stiamo facendo il colour coding che è quando devi colorare le parole tipo i nomi i aggettivi l'adverbi [...] Valentina sta correggendo i suo compiti che a fatto. Maria sta correggendo il colour coding di Ludovico. Emma sta aiutando Valentina con il colour coding. [...] Maria sta pulendo la lavagna. Giovanni si sta sedendo su due sedie. Emma sta aiutando Giovanni. Maria e Ludovico stanno scrivendo su la lavangia per fare la batalia navale. | We are doing the colour coding, which is when you have to colour words such as nouns, adjectives and adverbs [...] <i>Valentina is correcting</i> her homework which is done. <i>Maria is correcting</i> Ludovico's colour coding. <i>Emma is helping</i> Valentina with colour coding. [...] Maria is cleaning the whiteboard. Giovanni is sitting on two chairs. <i>Emma is helping</i> Giovanni. Maria and Ludovico are writing on the whiteboard to make the battleship. |

In this note, Emma (the teacher) is reported to be 'helping' others, whilst Valentina and Maria, two of the children, are 'correcting' other's homework and colour-coding activities and other children are setting up the next activity by writing on the whiteboard. This classroom observation note is symbolic of how, by the end of the school year, the teacher came to be perceived as a facilitator and how students learned to learn from one another engaging in choral work for legitimate participation.

4.2. Multilingual practices and agency

Drawing on some interconnected data extracts, this section provides an overview of this participatory approach as combined with the multilingual practices observed in this CS. It illustrates how participants employed their communicative repertoires to learn and socially connect and how practices relate to the children's sense of agency in their learning environment.

In the extract below, Guido asked for permission to use English because he said that did not know how to say that in Italian. The teacher's answer not only encouraged Guido's full expression, but it also included the group in the linguistic exploration.

| | |
|-------|---|
| Emma | ora vi dico una parola e voi mi dite tutto quello che vi viene in mente. Tutte le parole che vi vengono in mente ok? pensate... a... la scuola <now I will tell you a word and you tell me all that comes to your mind. All the words that come to your mind ok? Think of... the school> [...] |
| Guido | mmm posso dire un po' di parole in inglese che non lo so come dire in italiano? <mmm can I say some words in English that I don't know how to say in Italian?> |
| Emma | certo. E poi vediamo se lo sappiamo dire in italiano <of course. And then we see if we know how to say them in Italian> |
| Guido | mmm mio partner che fa il brutto mmm bad manners and also ... he is quite disruptive |
| Emma | quindi il tuo compagno di classe? <so your classmate?> |

The use of Italian was encouraged but children were not expected to use it all the time. Instead, the teacher ensured that children could use their own voice to communicate, having dialogue at the core of the activities, and then guided a collective reflection on the ways things could be said, exploring with the children existing *and* new parts of their repertoire. Instead of 'fixing' language and imposing a separate and standard use of it, the teacher was observed to work towards an expansion of the repertoires at the time and pace of each learner by promoting a collective discovery through the use, in this case, of the first-person plural: 'then *we* see if *we* know it'.

The teacher used various strategies to navigate the space between the named languages English and Italian. In the following excerpt, the children are engaged in a lexical domain activity where they drew a tree and decorated its leaves based on the color-coding technique

for different words by grammar categories. Nobody has yet found an adjective for the root ‘*gioc-*’ (from the domain of ‘playing’), and the teacher tries to help the children by building on their knowledge of English.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Emma | come si dice in inglese infatti? <how do you say it in English indeed?> |
| Alex | adjective |
| Emma | chiaro <sure> |
| Alex | cosa? <what?> |
| Emma | ma quando dite @lo voglio dire in italiano però @@@ qual è un sinonimo per questo aggettivo? <but when you say @I want to say it in Italian @@@ what is a synonym for this adjective?> |
| Carmen | stiamo parl- la stessa radice di play no?! <we are talk- the same root as play right?> |
| Emma | mh mh quando volete dire un aggettivo per play <mh mh when you want to say an adjective for play> |
| Annabel | giocare <to play> |
| Emma | pensaci anche in inglese eh <think about it in English as well> |
| | [...] |
| Amelia | playful? |
| Emma | l'ha trovato! come si dice playful in ing- in italiano? Pensiamo a una parola <she found it! How do you say playful in eng- in Italian? Let's think of a word> |
| Valentina | giochissimo |
| Emma | non proprio <not exactly> |
| | [...] |
| Annabel | giocona |
| Emma | e @vabbè! @@ <@oh well/whatever @@> |
| Lx | giocono! |
| Emma | giocos:- |
| Valentina | giocosolo! <playful!> |

During this activity, the students were tasked with expanding their vocabulary and grammar knowledge by finding as many words as possible that belonged to the same lexical root but that would fall into different grammar categories. The teacher guided them towards building the word ‘*giocosolo*’, which means playful in English, by explaining the concept in Italian and resorting to the children’s lexical knowledge in English. After some discussion, Amelia provided the answer in English by saying the word ‘playful’. Alex, Annabel, and Valentina continued to play with the word endings until the teacher made it obvious.

Two elements of this dialogue depict the translanguaging dimension of this class. First, the word ‘synonym’ is used here by the teacher to refer to words that have the same or nearly the same meaning but instead of being within the same language, in this case, the synonyms would be within the same repertoire but across named languages, ergo playful as a synonym of *giocosolo*. Secondly, the teacher created a translanguaging space by asking the children to find ‘un aggettivo per play’, which solicited a metalinguistic reflection on adjectives in Italian (*un aggettivo per*) while using English as the subject of the analysis (play).

In the same activity, a common doubt that the children had was about the grammar category for the word ‘*gioco*’, and so the colour that they would need to use for their leaves. Amelia asked the teacher if the leaf for *gioco* should be coloured in red like nouns or in green like verbs and in fact, *gioco* can be both a noun and a verb (meaning ‘game’ as well as ‘I play’). Annabel took the initiative and spontaneously answered to help her friend as illustrated in the following vignette.

| Original | Proposed translation |
|---|--|
| Annabel va ad aiutare Amelia e prova a spiegare perché 'gioco' è sia rosso sia verde, dunque nome e verbo e per spiegarlo inizia in inglese 'it depends on how you use it' per poi fare esempi in italiano. | Annabel goes to help Amelia and tries to explain why gioco is both red and green hence noun and verb and to explain it she starts in English 'it depends on how you use it' to then making examples in Italian |

Later on, Annabel took the decision to modify the activity and for the following lexical root word ('oper-') she wanted to draw a pizza instead of a tree. In this instance, it can be seen how she recurred to the semiotic resource of drawing to express herself. She first tested her idea with Maria (and not with Emma). Her classmate Maria liked the plan. Annabel changed seat and carried on drawing a pizza using the leaf-shaped papers as though they were pizza toppings.

At the end of each class, the teacher always gave a star sticker to one or more children when they did something special. On this occasion, Annabel won the star sticker because of her pizza. In the following vignette, against the assumption that a child wins the star if they were good and listened to the teacher, taking spontaneous creative initiative in this case was better regarded, drawing a contrast between passive and active learning (Figure 2).

| Original | Proposed translation |
|---|---|
| Annabel ha deciso di fare una pizza col radicale 'oper' instead of a tree. She discusses it with Maria and speaks Italian. [...] L'ultima fase della sessione è la stellina. La riceve Annabel. [...] La maestra spiega che è per la pizza e dunque per l'inventiva. Creativity and own initiative get praised. | Annabel decided to make a pizza instead of a tree for the root 'oper'. She discusses it with Maria and speaks Italian [...] The last phase of the session is the star of the day. Annabel receives it [...]. The teacher explains that it is because of the pizza and so for the inventiveness. Creativity and own initiative get praised |



Figure 2. Annabel's worksheets.

Two weeks later, the fact that Annabel took her own initiative and modified the activity is remembered by the children as seen in this last fieldnotes extract from the end of the school term.

Original

The teacher asks what they have done in this term and in order they reply: lupo mangiagrammatica, battaglia navale, preposizioni articolate, l'albero di gioc- <eating-grammar wolf, battleship, articulated prepositions, the tree of gioc->. Valentina remembers the aspect of flexibility started from the kids themselves and specifies that [the latter] could also be a flower or a pizza or anything you like

The data show how pupil agency is shaped by the pedagogical approach, which praises children's participation and initiatives, and how, in turn, it shapes the learning style, with peer-to-peer exchanges. In fact, 'structure and agency are mutually constitutive and shaping' (Lytra 2011, p. 25), and the structure provided by the critical approach adopted by this teacher is influenced and is influencing the way Annabel acted in the classroom and consequently, how other children made sense of her action as structure: 'it can be a flower a pizza or anything you like'.

4.3. Children's view of language use

This last section provides a snapshot of how critical and multilingual pedagogies shaped how children made sense of their multilingual selves in education in the complementary school. When I asked the children to describe their CS, and invited them to imagine that they were describing it to one of their classmates in their mainstream school, Guido (age 9) immediately referred to the language use options as the distinctive trait:

I would tell him that mostly you have teachers speaking Italian and that if you don't understand what ehm they said ehm you could and you need to answer or reply you could speak English, and even if you don't know what to say and you knew in English you could say and tell them that you need to do that and that ehm they would speak in Italian a lot of the time so you need to pay attention and ehm learn quickly and that kind of stuff

Guido carefully stressed the fact that teachers mostly speak Italian and that it is important to pay attention but that English can be used. The translanguaging approach adopted, with no compartmentalisation of named languages and varieties, appear to have promoted participation in classroom exchanges and legitimated the children's repertoires as appreciated also by Rosa who makes a point about the possibility of 'speaking all of the languages' and her perception of a sense of care in her learning environment. Rosa, age 7, states at first that the social dimension of the CS is different when she says that she has more friends in the CS and that 'they are more generous' making her feel like children and teachers in the CS 'care more' compared to those in her mainstream school. She then shares her view on language use in the two different educational settings, reiterating the fact that she can speak different languages in the CS and showing appreciation for such opportunity against the frustration deriving from an English-only policy in the mainstream school.

e mi piace di più questa visto che posso parlare in diferente lingue, a parte di un amico italiano che c'è alla scuola, ok diciamo che lui non c'è nella classe, non posso parlare con nessun'altro, solo inglese [...] It's bo::ring! Nobody that I can talk to in other languages I mean a parte di Dafne ehm parla spagnolo <and I like this more since I can speak in different languages, apart

from an Italian friend at school, ok let's say he is not in class, I can't speak with anyone else, only English [...] It's bo::ring! Nobody that I can talk to in other languages I mean apart from Dafne ehm she speaks Spanish> (Rosa)

Rosa described her educational experiences, the mainstream school and the complementary school, in relation to the use of language and the different approaches evoked emotions as she shared the way she feels about the limitations of a monolingual setting and she appreciated the opportunity to explore multilingualism in the CS. The critical approach promoted, based on participation, social connection and dialogue, combined with a flexible use of linguistic resources may constitute the basis on which Rosa developed an idea of her CS class as a place of care. Later, she described her own translanguaging practices and made up an example based on how she could speak with her brother:

| | |
|--------|---|
| Rosa | io gli posso rispondere 'a mi me gustan but they don't really look that good today ma mi piacciono normalmente' <I can answer him 'I like them ((Spanish)) but they don't look that good today ((English)) but I normally like them ((Italian))'> |
| Carmen | puoi mettere tutte le lingue in una frase <you can put all the languages in a sentence> |
| Rosa | sì! [...] |
| Carmen | how do feel about todas las lenguas en la misma frase? <how do you feel about all the languages in the same sentence?> |
| Rosa | bien <good> |

Although it would be virtually impossible for a researcher to establish that a child is indeed experiencing harmony and wellbeing overall, the conversations I had with the children in the course of this ethnographic study suggest that multilingualism and a flexible use of one's communicative resources in the CS was appreciated, in contrast with the sense of frustration raised in discussing language options in the mainstream school classroom (i.e. Rosa saying 'it's bo::ring!' with an intonation and a prosodic lengthening that explicitly revealed her negative feelings). Language learning and development cannot transcend belonging and identity, and consequently emotions and wellbeing. Data suggests that HL classes can provide children with the opportunity to explore and experiment with their social identity as multilingual and multicultural individuals, and to do so in a socially relevant environment with multilingual peers. The language and culture of origin are no longer elements of their own repertoire which are limited or confined to the family and the community as informal contexts. Rather, their heritage capital can be temporarily lifted from its minority status and gain (some) legitimacy by being experienced in an educational setting with other children with whom they share a communicative repertoire.

5. Discussion

Against essentialist views of language and culture, which confine cultural-linguistic systems into the boundaries of nation-states, and rigid views of education (i.e. banking concept of education), the experience of some Italian HL learners in London as illustrated here proved the possibility of alternative modes of learning in the process of HL maintenance. Crucial in this process was the intention of going beyond the objective of mere content acquisition, which sees language as a commodity and language learning as an individual experience. In

the analysis of Cushing et al. (2021), a functionalist view of language education in mainstream schools emerged as they explain that ‘[t]ypically, [teachers’] justifications were geared around a neoliberal, product-focused ontology of language: jobs, finances, employment and academic achievement’ (p. 1190). Indeed, the English education system is highly regulated by policies and oriented to prepare the students for the job market. As this case illustrates, having a variety of educational realities and a variety of educational experiences outside the limits of neoliberal goals can provide with space for linguistic and educational explorations and a ‘breathing space’ from learning modes that are determined by exam-oriented curricula and standardised monolingual teaching practices.

Although critical reflections on power and agency may be less explicit with primary school children compared to what can be seen with older learners (e.g. Leeman et al. 2011a; Correa 2018), the data show how this group of young learners responded to the approach with brightness and creativity. Due to the flexibility of the customisable games used for grammar and literacy, children could actively contribute to the lesson plan by choosing the games while the teacher was deciding the topics. Participating in lesson planning turned out to promote in the children a sense of agency which, in turn, equipped them with the tools to reach increasingly favourable positions in their learning and social space, like positions that would make the children feel approved and accepted among their peers and in a democratic relationship with their teacher (Albrecht-Crane 2005). Moreover, it facilitated the access to linguistic resources and enhanced learning by drawing on rich linguistic and communicative repertoires.

As observed in a number of studies (e.g. Abourehab and Azaz 2023), HL learning context are ‘ideal translanguaging spaces’ for identity negotiation and construction in education when students are given the opportunity to make use of their full linguistic repertoires (p. 398). The teacher in this study enabled the children to express themselves fully, providing occasions for learning how to use one’s full repertoire to enhance learning, and consequently, for exploring new possible identities in education. Her encouraging style about dialogue and participation, and multilingualism provided richer opportunities for the children to reflect on and expand their existing repertoires. Despite the fact that principles of critical pedagogy were not deliberately applied from theory, the circumstances generated by the translanguaging stance, as well as the game-informed design of the activities and the space configuration, created the prerequisites for the development of multilingual *and* critical modes of teaching and learning.

In sum, the teacher’s agentic power in this CS, with the decision to welcome all forms of speech and writing, combined with the absence of strict curricular objectives, allowed for the exploration of critical multilingual pedagogies. By ensuring opportunities for exploratory and creative ways of learning, the children were encouraged to express, experiment with and discover their multilingual selves, often silenced in mainstream schools. In other words, in contrast to the banking style of education in which students accumulate knowledge and develop competences for employability, in this educational setting, thanks to its flexible structure, children found the space to develop foremost as people, discovering more identity options and positions of power, hence legitimising their belonging to multiple worlds. Building on the scholarship on multilingualism and identity in complementary schools, this research sheds light on the role of critical pedagogies in HL education as a way to enhance the benefits of translanguaging approaches.

6. Conclusions

Children with a migratory background may grow up with a communicative repertoire that includes more than one named language and affiliate to multiple cultures and values. For this reason, they may encounter an extra layer of complexity in navigating identity formation and negotiation in a prevalently monolingual education system. This study illustrated how language, power and agency interconnected in a HL classroom, and how bringing together translanguaging practices with critical approaches provided avenues for the children's development of a sense of self as legitimate multilingual learners.

As an ethnographic work, the results are highly contextual, and the data presented are emblematic extracts from a large dataset. This article can only offer a snapshot of the children's learning experience in this school. However, the examples presented show the importance of providing primary school children that have a migratory background with a multilingual educational experience, and that there is scope for critical and multilingual ways of engaging with HL learning and learning more broadly.

The discovery of a multilingual learner identity in a critical participatory style is invaluable in an education system regimented by neoliberal policies and while research on how to include and welcome the children's repertoires in mainstream schools' curricula continues to develop and insist on the need for new educational policies in England (e.g. Costley and Leung 2020), implementations in teacher training programmes and meaningful communication between complementary schools and mainstream schools' practitioners would be an important first step towards a language education that respects the needs of multilingual students. Understanding the children's learning experience and the ways in which they are able to engage in education across named languages has the potential to support schoolteachers in developing an interest in and/or an understanding of the role of (heritage) languages in education by building on what is already happening in some complementary schools.

Indeed, schools for HL maintenance form part of an important educational reality: an extracurricular space in which teachers and students can breathe educationally by exploring creative ways of interacting and learning using their communicative repertoires and start truly unlocking their potential. An avenue for future research would be a comparative analysis of the illustrated approach across different communities and complementary schools to identify patterns between practices and make more generalisations about critical pedagogy in HL education with young learners.

To conclude, this study offers an example of how a multilingual and critical approach to heritage language education can allow children to explore more identity options, creative ways of learning, and develop a sense of self as legitimate multilingual learners. Most importantly, it shows how children can start exploring their multiple affiliation to languages and cultures and start organising a sense of who they are more harmoniously, to feel one English *and* Italian *and* French *and* Irish person instead of feeling like halves and quarters.

Notes

1. Ethical approval received from the Ethics Sub Committee 3 of the University of Essex on 26/08/2021 [ETH2122-1081]; reviewed and approved after amendments on 07/04/2022 [ETH2021-2084].

2. The transcription conventions are as follows:
- | | |
|--------|---|
| word | Speech or text in the original version. |
| wor- | Truncated word unit. |
| <word> | Proposed translation. |
| @ | Laugh. |
| [| Overlap. |
| : | Prosodic lengthening. |
| (.) | Intonation pause. |
| [...] | Skipped utterance or written unit. |
| (()) | Contextual information. |
| Lx | Unidentified speaker. |
| LL | Multiple speakers. |

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Data availability statement

Data available on request due to privacy and ethical restrictions

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