

# Honouring multilingual repertoires and identities: Our languages, our stories

Vally Lytra, Soukeina Tharoo, Emanuela Banfi, Zhan Chengyan, Carla Costa, Maria Eleftheriou-Kaparti, Zoe Meyer and Polina Schmid-Ilina explore the paradox of multilingualism in international schools

International schools are important sites of multilingualism. They pride themselves on educating a linguistically and culturally diverse student population and on fostering intercultural understanding through an appreciation of students' identities and cultures, as well as those of the wider community.

While students' cultures and heritages take centre stage in planned whole-school events, such as International Day, and in school-sponsored cultural and religious celebrations, we have observed that their rich language and cultural repertoires and experiences tend to be less visible and audible as resources for learning in everyday school life. In other words, international schools recognise and celebrate students' lived multilingualism; however, students' multilingual abilities and knowledge are not consistently or systematically leveraged and integrated in pedagogic routines and

practices. Our observations reminded us of studies in mainstream UK state schools that have highlighted a tokenistic approach to linguistic diversity (Bourne, 2001; Cunningham, 2019; Welply, 2017).

Our "Home Language Collaborative Project" sought to problematise this inherent contradiction by exploring how students can deploy their multilingual repertoires and identities in the home language classroom and experience their home language learning from a "language-as-a-resource" perspective (Ruiz, 1984).

## Setting the scene

Our project was conducted between November 2019 and February 2020 at the International School of Lausanne, Switzerland. Officially a multilingual country, Switzerland has four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. The school is located in the French-speaking Canton de Vaud which has experienced high levels of international mobility and

migration since the early 2000s. This has transformed the Canton into a linguistically and culturally rich area, with one in three residents being non-Swiss nationals.

The International School of Lausanne is a non-profit, English-medium IB (International Baccalaureate) school for students aged 3 to 18. Although the majority of students (approximately 60%) have English as their dominant school language, students speak a number of additional languages. The school has a robust EAL (English as an Additional Language) programme and supports students' additional language learning. French is taught as the first foreign language from the age of 3, and students study German or Spanish as a second foreign language in Year 8 (age 12) for a minimum of two years. Moreover, the school facilitates a separate fee-paying Home Language Programme as part of its after-school, extra-curricular provision.

During the project, the programme had 45 registered students and nine qualified language teachers offering classes in Italian, Mandarin, Greek, Russian, German, Dutch, Turkish, Portuguese and French. The majority of these students were in primary school. Thirty students and six teachers chose to participate in the project.

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Image 1: Lily's language portrait and autobiographical language narrative

We conceived the project as an opportunity to valorise home language teaching and learning and raise the visibility of the home language programme for the whole school. First, we aimed to create a collaborative and collegial culture among home language teachers as teachers had limited interactions with one another in the programme and with other teachers. Although the school provides administrative support and material resources, teachers work independently: they set learning objectives, design curriculum content and choose pedagogic methods and approaches for their classes. We sought to build a professional learning community to enable collaboration and to share, develop and enhance pedagogic practice through a reflective approach.

The second aim was to work with teachers to develop a repertoire of teaching approaches that emphasised teacher-student collaboration and a learner-centred orientation to home language and literacy learning. Conceptually, the project was inspired by a dynamic view of bilingualism where language users draw upon all their language repertoires and meaning-making modes in an integrated way for communication, learning, belonging and well-being

(García & Sylvan, 2011). Drawing on translanguaging research as pedagogy (García & Wei, 2014), these teaching approaches aspired to create learning arrangements where students could critically reflect upon, question and integrate their diverse languages and cultural experiences, as part of their language and literacy activities in the home language classroom.

The activities aimed to develop students' language and literacy skills in the home language and to valorise students' multilingual identities and the normalcy of their multilingual experiences that often fade into the background in their everyday school lives. They aligned with biographical approaches to applied linguistics and language education that adopt a speaker-oriented perspective, 'the perspective of the experiencing and speaking subject' (Busch, 2017: 46). The outcome of these activities was a series of multimodal texts under the topic: 'Our languages, our stories.'

### Collaborative text-making: "Our languages, our stories"

We met with the six participating home-language teachers four times (roughly once a month), to introduce the project and its theoretical and pedagogical principles and to familiarise teachers with pedagogic

practices in the school and with the PYP (Primary Years Programme) curriculum. Teachers were also encouraged to consider possible links between the project and the curriculum and to experiment with a range of visual and other methods and resources. Subsequent meetings focused on the process of developing the project and the challenges and opportunities teachers and students had encountered. Teachers worked with their students over two months to co-design and co-produce the multimodal texts, which were shared with the entire school to celebrate International Mother Tongue Day (21 February 2020). After the project was completed, we conducted post-production individual discussions with teachers and group discussions with students.

From the onset, teachers sought to activate students' diverse and complex language and cultural knowledge as a resource for learning and to enhance a sense of agency, empowerment and ownership of their work. Reflecting on how she shifted her pedagogical stance to make it more responsive to her students' experiences and desires, Carla, the Portuguese home language teacher, described her understanding of students as knowledgeable and active meaning-makers and her commitment

to making their voices heard.

This pedagogical stance required a repositioning of her role from transmitter of curriculum content to co-learner and co-designer.

“I let my students include in their work what was most significant for them. This was a new experience for them and for me. I let go to see what they would accomplish. I kept it open-ended. I'm very proud of what they have done”.

In the Portuguese classes, five students aged 10-11 drafted letters to a Portuguese idol of their choice. Vincente, Salvador and Antonio chose to write letters to Portuguese football players. “Ronaldo is the best player in the world and I play a lot of football too,” explained Vincent. Antonio added that he had chosen João Félix because he had played for his hometown team, Benfica. The other two students addressed their letters to their mother and to a famous TV chef, respectively. Students then sent their letters to their idols via email and social media (Facebook and Instagram) and wrote guided personal reflections. The learning objectives of the letter-writing activity entitled “Carta do meu ídolo” (*Letter to my idol*) went beyond merely practising how to draft a formal letter in Portuguese using appropriate syntax and lexis. Carla wanted her students to invest in their Portuguese language learning, to build a connection to aspects of their home culture and to affirm their developing language identities. As she stressed:

“I wanted them not to be scared to expose themselves, to express themselves in their mother tongue, to try and express themselves in Portuguese, to speak in Portuguese. They speak better than they thought they did before the project”.

### Leveraging students' entire meaning-making resources

Presenting the text-making to the whole school brought to the fore the following challenge: students discussed and debated ways to create

texts that would be accessible to the wider school community, whose members do not understand or speak Portuguese, Italian or Greek. Some students were initially reluctant about presenting their work to the whole school. Despite international schools' emphasis on home language maintenance and development in their school language policy, students often perceive their home languages as a private matter that is disconnected from their everyday school lives. Moreover, students seem to regard home language learning as a form of informal learning - “a private lesson” as Maria, the Greek home language teacher pointed out - that does not appear to enjoy the same level of visibility or status in the school as other forms of curricular and extra-curricular activities.

One way of addressing this challenge was by students leveraging their digital literacies and shared popular culture references. The group of Portuguese students worked together to create a poster entitled “Um pouco de nós” (*A little of us*) with labelled images they thought best represented Portugal. To contextualise their poster, Antonio created a QR code with a presentation of Portugal in English, which he produced in his EAL class. To complete their text-making, the group created another poster inspired by the Disney film *Finding Nemo*. They chose to present one of the most popular songs “Continue a nadar” (*Keep swimming*). Interestingly, the message of the song is about continuing to try and not giving up, perhaps a nod to their own language learning trajectories. The students used QR codes to include two clips from the movie in its original English version, for the benefit of their non-Portuguese speaking peers.

Other students drew explicitly and purposefully on the meaning-making potential of their bilingual/multilingual resources and literacies. Two secondary school students studying Italian made a collage with images

and autobiographical narratives in Italian, followed by English translations, mapping out the web of their multilingual language practices and how they were connected with different people, places and activities in their transnational lives. Two primary students studying French created texts that creatively juxtaposed their different linguistic resources. Lilly (age 8) annotated her language portrait (Mon portrait langagier) in English, accompanied by an autobiographical narrative “Les langues que je parle” (*The languages I speak*).

In her narrative, she remarked on the ubiquitous presence of German in products sold in supermarkets, reflecting how “in Switzerland people speak German.” Lily added a QR code next to her narrative with a note “scan me so that you can hear my presentation :).” She proudly concluded her narrative with: “Tous les langues que je parle je les adore. J'aimerai en apprendre d'autres” (*I love all the languages I speak and I would love to learn other languages*) (image 1). In a similar vein, when we asked six-year-old Nina what she would have done differently in her poster documenting her favourite books across three languages (Italian, Russian and English), without hesitation, she remarked: “Add another paper with a French book so that I have all four languages” (image 2).

The students' collaborative text-making was put up in the main lobby of the school for a week for students, parents and visitors to see. During one of the Primary lunchtime periods that week, the home language teachers organised a series of language and culture awareness raising activities with the help of some of their students. The activities included writing one's name in Chinese using a calligraphy brush and pinching Smarties with chopsticks, playing a board game in French, sampling traditional Italian sweets and playing with Italian cards featuring images of carnival costumes from different parts of Italy, and recognising letters in Greek and Russian in students' names and trying out their pronunciation. There was a steady flow of students participating in these activities. Most students were especially fascinated with comparing

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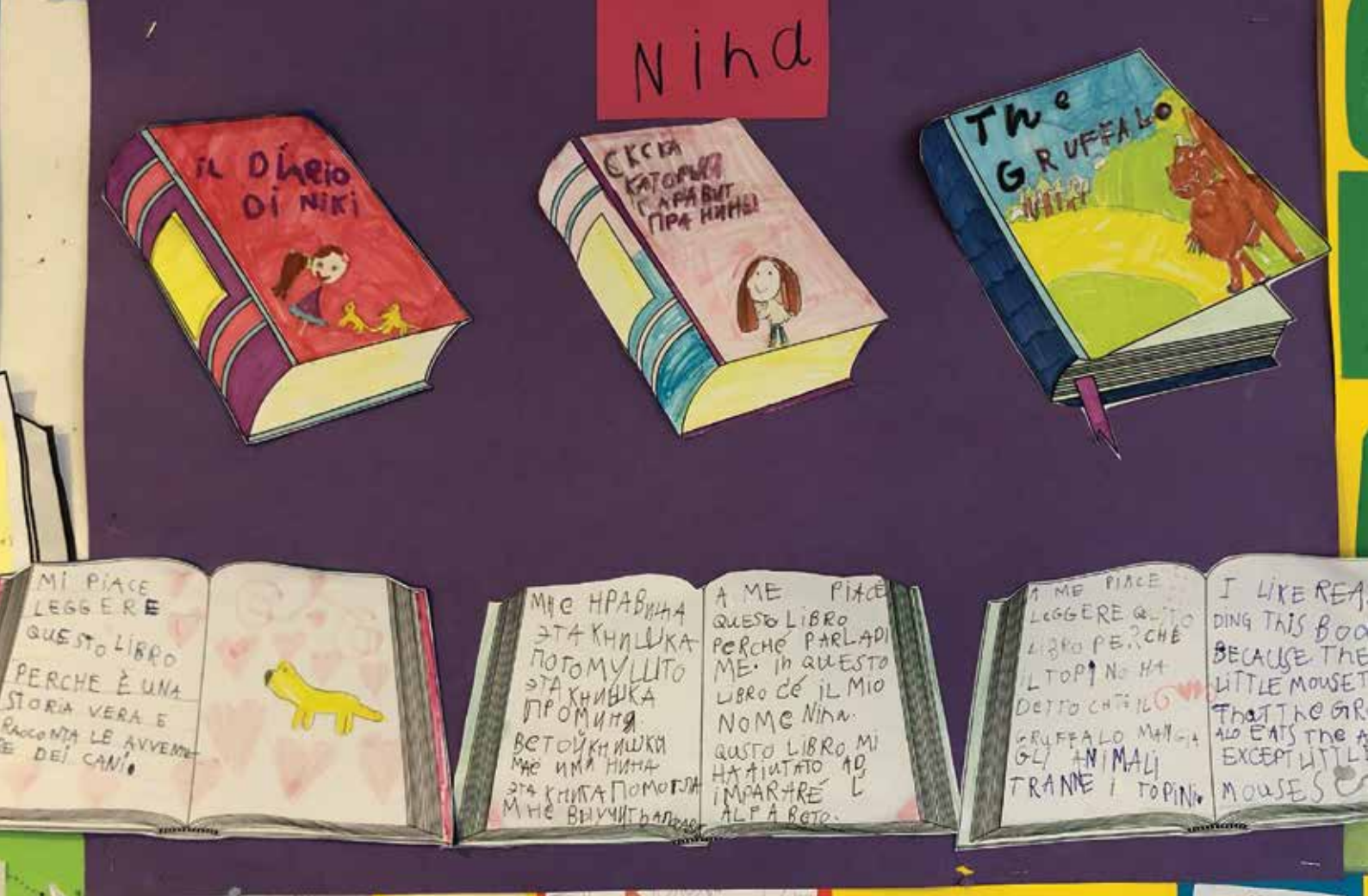


Image 2: Nina's poster featuring her favourite books in Italian, Russian and English

how their names were written in different scripts (Chinese, Russian and Greek) and collected samples of writing in different languages.

### Where do we go next?

We ask ourselves what we can take away from the “Home Language Collaborative Project” to support language policies and pedagogical practices that sustain (home) language teaching and learning in International Schools:

- Increase institutional support for home languages and open up language learning provision to all students who wish to study a language regardless of cultural background;

- Break down boundaries that often create divides between languages as medium of instruction, foreign languages and home languages;

- Raise the visibility of home languages in the school and as a legitimate resource for learning for all students through a pedagogical stance that supports the entire repertoire of students' languages, heritages and identities;

- Emphasise the importance of translanguaging as pedagogical strategy in content areas and normalise the use of multiple languages as legitimate resources for learning;

- Create pedagogical spaces that not only *acknowledge* multilingualism and linguistic diversity but also create opportunities for students to use their multilingual resources and multiple cultural experiences. ■

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