Belonging and Identity Negotiation among Japanese-Background Learners in Greek Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Japanese-background primary and secondary school students attending Greek schools experience belonging and academic participation, with particular attention to the affirmation of their bilingual and bicultural identities in everyday classroom life. Focusing on learners' perspectives, it investigates the extent to which their linguistic repertoires, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences are acknowledged and mobilized as learning resources. Eighteen students participated in semi-structured interviews, and eleven produced identity texts that offered additional insights into their sense-making, self-representation, and educational experiences. Thematic analysis indicated that most students navigate schooling within predominantly monolingual and textbook-driven environments in which their Japanese language, cultural expertise, and transnational experiences remain largely peripheral. Moments of recognition, often arising from individual teachers' initiatives, strongly contributed to students' confidence, motivation, and sense of belonging; however, such instances were inconsistent and not embedded within school-wide practices. The findings underscore the need for more coherent, culturally sustaining pedagogies that validate students' hybrid identities and create systematic opportunities for drawing on their cultural and linguistic resources within learning processes. By foregrounding students' voices, this study highlights the importance of learner-centered, inclusive approaches in increasingly multicultural Greek school settings.

Keywords: Japanese-background students, identity affirmation, belonging, bilingual and bicultural identities, culturally sustaining pedagogy

The inclusion of increasingly diverse student populations in European educational systems-propelled by globalization and large-scale migration-has reshaped schooling and posed complex pedagogical demands. This growing linguistic and cultural diversity highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that recognize learners' multilingual repertoires, cultural knowledge and lived experiences as central to meaningful participation and academic well-being. Research across international and European contexts consistently demonstrates that inclusive, culturally sustaining pedagogies support students' identity expression, strengthen engagement, and foster equitable learning environments (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012; Cummins, 2001; Cummins & Early, 2011; Cummins et al., 2015; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Despite this evidence, many school systems, including Greece, continue to rely on teacher-centered, textbook-driven models that privilege a single linguistic and cultural norm (García, 2017; Gkaintartzi et al., 2015; Natsi & Vitsou, 2022). These orientations are underpinned by dominant language ideologies that shape educational decision-making. As Motsiou and Kostoulas (2021) argue, mainstream schooling in Greece tends to favor the standard language variety and reproduce assumptions of linguistic homogeneity. Such ideologies

restrict space for multilingual expression and reinforce narrow norms of cultural and linguistic legitimacy within classrooms.

As a result, students' linguistic and cultural repertoires often remain unacknowledged in Greek classrooms, limiting opportunities for meaningful participation and hindering the development of what Cummins (2001) terms identities of competence. Although teachers frequently express positive attitudes towards diversity, research suggests a persistent gap between theory and practice: conventional instructional routines continue to dominate, leaving little room for incorporating students' lived experiences, languages or cultural backgrounds (Kaldi et al., 2018; Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2023).

Within this broader context, Japanese-background students represent a group that remains largely underrepresented in Greek educational research. Their cultural values, linguistic practices, and transnational experiences differ significantly from those of dominant culture populations, yet their perspectives and educational needs have not been systematically examined (Natsi & Vitsou, 2022). Consequently, there is limited understanding of how their particular linguistic and cultural trajectories, including the wider resources they draw on beyond school, interact with the expectations of the Greek educational system and shape their experiences within that context.

This study can thus provide valuable data about Japanese background learners' needs and the challenges they face in the Greek classrooms by foregrounding their perspectives and examining how they experience belonging, identity recognition, and participation in Greek schools. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with eighteen students and eleven identity texts they created, it provides an in-depth account of how learners make sense of their linguistic, cultural and educational experiences. The analysis considers how students perceive the pedagogical approaches used in their classrooms, how their linguistic repertoires and cultural connections to Japan are acknowledged or silenced, how they imagine these resources being integrated into learning, and how everyday classroom practices shape their identity negotiation and sense of belonging.

By centering students' voices, through interviews and identity texts, this study contributes new empirical evidence on how Japanese-background learners experience Greek schooling and illuminates the extent to which classrooms provide (or fail to provide) opportunities for students to participate with their full selves. The findings show that students navigate predominantly monolingual, textbook environments where their Japanese language and cultural knowledge remain largely peripheral, while isolated moments of recognition-often dependent on individual teachers-positively shaped their confidence and sense of belonging.

These results contribute to broader scholarly discussions on identity, multilingualism, and equity in education, while offering context-specific insights into the Greek schooling landscape. More broadly, the study underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that move beyond symbolic inclusion towards practices that genuinely value students' hybrid, bilingual identities and support their academic and holistic well-being. The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature, outlines the methodological approach followed, presents the findings, and discusses their implications for policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multilingualism, Identity and Belonging

A substantial body of research positions multilingual learners' linguistic and cultural repertoires as resources that support learning, identity development, and a sense of belonging (Cummins, 2001; García & Wei, 2017; Peercy et al., 2023). In sociocultural and post-structural perspectives, identity is understood as dynamic and socially constructed, shaped through interactions, language practices, and the ways individuals are positioned within particular contexts (Gee, 2000; Maalouf, 2001; Ngo, 2013; Norton, 2013). For multilingual students, school becomes a significant site where identities are either affirmed or constrained, largely depending on how their languages, cultures and lived experiences are positioned by educators and peers.

Recent critical perspectives further caution against essentialist understandings of culture and identity in multilingual education. Dervin (2016) conceptualizes identity as fluid, relational, and situational, emphasizing how individuals continuously negotiate belonging across social and institutional settings. This non-essentialist view is particularly relevant for transnational and multilingual students, whose linguistic and cultural affiliations are shaped by shifting power relations within schooling contexts. In educational practice, however, essentialist orientations persist, often reducing diversity to the presence of students from different backgrounds and reinforcing views of culture as fixed, homogeneous, and bounded by nationality (Dervin & Simpson, 2021; Holliday, 2021).

As a result, diversity is frequently understood primarily in terms of nationality, while students' lived experiences, transnational trajectories, and complex identity negotiations remain largely unacknowledged. From this perspective, Norton's (2013) notion of identity as investment complements Dervin's work by highlighting how recognition of learners' resources shapes access to participation and belonging. Students bring culturally and

historically situated experiences, along with material and symbolic resources, into classroom interaction (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Research consistently demonstrates that multilingual learners flourish in educational environments that treat diversity as a genuine intellectual and cultural resource. Such inclusive practices allow learners of different backgrounds to interact and learn side by side, in ways that acknowledge and value their differences (Chumak-Horbatch, 2012; Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Szelei et al., 2020; Vitsou & Papadopoulou, 2023). For young people, navigating transnational childhoods, their sense of belonging is closely tied to the extent to which schools create space for their hybrid, evolving cultural and linguistic identities within everyday classroom life (Christensen & Aldridge, 2012; Gkaintartzi et al., 2024).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a theoretical foundation for educational approaches that value students' linguistic, cultural, and meaning-making resources (Paris & Alim, 2017; Paris, 2021). Rather than treating these resources as peripheral or in need of adjustment to monolingual norms, culturally sustaining pedagogy positions them as central to learners' academic, social, and identity development. It foregrounds students as legitimate knowledge holders whose repertoires contribute meaningfully to equitable classroom learning (Paris & Alim, 2017). In doing so, it challenges deficit-oriented perspectives and affirms learners' right to participate in schooling with all aspects of their linguistic, cultural, and experiential identities.

Within this framework, diversity is regarded as an asset that enhances both individual well-being and collective democratic life. Practices that affirm heritage languages and cultural identities strengthen engagement, promote social cohesion, and enable learners to critique and navigate dominant norms (UNESCO, 2018). Such practices include valuing alternative ways of knowing, integrating cultural narratives in the curriculum, and designing activities that encourage equitable participation (Paris & Alim, 2017). Culturally sustaining pedagogy therefore underscores the importance of pedagogies that foster critical awareness, invite student agency, and disrupt inequitable power relations within classroom life-a concern reinforced by recent international frameworks that call for more inclusive and participatory educational approaches (UNESCO, 2021).

In practice, however, implementation often remains superficial. Schools may incorporate cultural celebrations or symbolic displays of diversity while maintaining monolingual, textbook-driven routines (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Although such celebrations can play a positive role in acknowledging cultural presence, they become insufficient when they are not accompanied by deeper shifts in instructional practice. These approaches showcase multicultural symbols-such as food, festivals, or flags-without meaningfully altering the underlying instructional norms that privilege a single language and cultural framework (Mills, 2008). Such superficial inclusion can obscure power relations, reinforce assimilationist expectations, and limit opportunities for identity validation (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). For multilingual learners, this often translates into pressure to privatize their linguistic repertoires in order to avoid stigma.

Multilingual Meaning-Making and Identity Affirmation

Translanguaging describes how bilingual and multilingual speakers draw flexibly on all their linguistic and semiotic resources as a single, integrated repertoire (Otheguy et al., 2015). Rather than viewing languages as separate, bounded systems, translanguaging highlights the fluid ways individuals combine resources to make meaning in social contexts (Cummins, 2017; García, 2009; García, 2017; Li & Luo, 2017). As a pedagogical approach, it legitimizes learners' full repertoires, facilitates comprehension and critical thinking, and positions bilingual identities as integral to learning (Hornberger & Link, 2012; Li & Luo, 2017).

Effective translanguaging pedagogy extends beyond simply permitting the use of home languages, emphasizing the purposeful use of semiotic resources-such as bilingual glossaries, dual language artifacts, peer tutoring, and multilingual displays-creating conditions in which learners' repertoires function as active tools for learning (Li & Luo, 2017). Research shows that translanguaging spaces can reduce anxiety and enhance academic performance, particularly for minoritized learners (Hornberger & Link, 2012; Cummins, 2019; García, 2017; Seltzer & García, 2020).

Building on these principles, identity texts offer a complementary approach that also centers learners' full communicative repertoires. Identity texts refer to learners' creative work produced within pedagogical spaces that invite students to draw on their linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources (Cummins & Early, 2011; Cummins et al., 2015). They are learner-created artifacts-written, visual, digital, or multimodal-that embed students' languages, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences, making identity affirmation an explicit part of classroom practice. Through these productions, learners integrate prior knowledge and invest aspects of their identities in cognitively demanding tasks (Cummins, 2001, 2006). As an educational approach, identity texts are inclusive and encourage students' active participation and creative thinking. They can also offer valuable research insights,

functioning as artifacts that document and illuminate learners' lived experiences (Kompiadou and Tsokalidou, 2014).

Adding to this body of work, research by Vitsou (2019) demonstrates the potential of creative, drama-based activities to support young learners, offering evidence that aligns closely with translanguaging and identity-text pedagogies, particularly in how they foreground students' lived experiences. Taking into account Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which highlights the impact of emotional factors on learning and well-being, her work shows that approaches such as puppet theater can create emotionally supportive conditions that enable self-expression. Subsequent research shows that drama-based pedagogies promote translanguaging, enhance peer relationships, and foster intercultural understanding through collaborative and imaginative interaction (Vitsou et al., 2019; Vitsou & Papadopoulou, 2020).

Ideological Stances and Teachers' Pedagogical Agency In Multilingual Classrooms

Underlying pedagogical choices are the language ideologies that shape how diversity is understood and enacted in classrooms. Cummins (2000) distinguishes between coercive and collaborative relations of power: coercive relations reproduce inequalities by privileging dominant linguistic and cultural norms, while collaborative relations enable empowerment through dialogue, shared decision-making, and recognition of students' agency. Recent raciolinguistic scholarship has further problematized dominant understandings of academic language in schooling, arguing that such norms can function ideologically to position racialized students as linguistically lacking (Flores, 2020). Educators' beliefs and everyday practices, therefore, play a decisive role in legitimizing or suppressing multilingual learners' resources (Chumak-Horbatch, 2012; García, 2009; Hornberger, 2004).

Although national policy increasingly places greater emphasis on inclusion, monolingual norms and assimilationist expectations still shape everyday classroom life (Fyssa et al., 2014; Giannakou & Karalia, 2023; Gkaintartzi et al., 2018; Maligkoudi & Nikolaou, 2017; Mertzani, 2023; Natsi & Vitsou, 2022). Dominant educational structures tend to privilege the standard language variety and uphold assumptions of linguistic homogeneity, reinforcing coercive relations of power in school settings (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011; Kaldi et al., 2011; Motsiou & Kostoulas, 2021).

Despite these constraints, research highlights promising examples of pedagogical innovation that challenge monolingual assumptions in subtle yet meaningful ways. Creative and multimodal approaches-including drama-based activities and identity text projects-demonstrate that responsive practices can be implemented even within restrictive structures (Kompiadou & Tsokalidou, 2014; Vitsou et al., 2019; Vitsou & Papadopoulou, 2020). These examples illustrate how alternative pedagogical pathways can open spaces for multilingual participation and recognition, even within structurally constrained educational environments.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives, Participants and Data Collection

This study explores how students with Japanese background perceive their linguistic and cultural identities within Greek school contexts, examining the ways in which their linguistic repertoires, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences are acknowledged, overlooked, or incorporated into everyday classroom practices. It also considers how these practices shape students' sense of belonging, their ongoing negotiation of identity, and their academic participation. The study further investigates students' views on how their resources could be more meaningfully integrated into the school environment and learning process. These perspectives are considered alongside the broader linguistic and cultural resources that students draw on beyond school.

A qualitative, interpretivist design was adopted to explore how learners make meaning of their school experiences. From a constructivist perspective, meaning is understood as co-constructed through interaction and shaped by sociocultural contexts (Creswell, 2014). This approach aligns with the study's focus on students' subjective interpretations of identity, belonging, and linguistic recognition. Given the emphasis on depth rather than breadth, the study employed an embedded case study approach, enabling a detailed exploration of the experiences of a specific group of learners situated within particular sociocultural and educational settings (Duff, 2012; Yin, 2009). Consistent with contemporary case study research in applied linguistics, the focus is on the learners as multidimensional individuals whose identities, linguistic practices, and trajectories are shaped within transnational and institutional contexts (Duff, 2014). The aim was not statistical generalization, but the generation of context-rich insights into the learning environments that Japanese-background students navigate in Greek schools.

The study involved 18 Japanese-background learners aged 7-14 attending primary and lower-secondary classes in Greek schools. Recruitment took place through the Greek-Japanese Association in Athens, whose members were invited to participate in the research and to share information with other families. The sample

included 11 girls and 7 boys, all of whom were residing in Greece at the time of data collection. Families had established stable residence in the country and were not living in Greece on short-term or contract-based visas. Accordingly, all students were enrolled in Greek schools on a long-term basis rather than as exchange or visiting students.

The participant group reflected a range of family backgrounds and migratory trajectories. Students came from families with ongoing ties to Japan through parental and transnational family connections. Some students were born and raised in Greece, while others had spent part of their early childhood or schooling in Japan before relocating. Several participants maintained contact with Japanese language and culture through family practices and community-based activities, including supplementary or community-based programs. These trajectories shaped students' linguistic repertoires, cultural affiliations, and educational experiences. While participants were at different stages of primary and lower-secondary education, differences related to age and schooling were considered analytically rather than treated as separate groups.

Approval was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Written consent was secured from parents, and verbal or written assent was obtained from all student participants. To maintain confidentiality while presenting the results clearly, all student participants were assigned pseudonymous identifiers (S1-S18), which are used throughout the findings section. Parents and students received detailed information about the purpose and procedures of the study, presented in accessible and age-appropriate language. Participation was voluntary, and students were reminded that they could decline to answer, choose not to produce identity texts, or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences (Flewitt, 2005).

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and identity texts. Each student participated in an individual semi-structured interview, a method selected because it enables participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while providing the opportunity to examine emerging ideas in greater depth (Creswell, 2014). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Questions focused on students' everyday language use, cultural interests, school experiences, interactions with teachers and peers, and reflections on classroom practices related to inclusion. Students' accounts served as the primary source of insight into classroom life, reflecting the interpretivist emphasis on learners' understandings.

In addition, eleven students created identity texts-personal artifacts such as drawings, written texts, and visual compositions that draw on their linguistic, cultural, and multimodal resources (Cummins & Early, 2011; Cummins et al., 2015). Students discussed their identity texts during follow-up conversations, which allowed them to elaborate on meanings, experiences, and aspects of identity that might not surface in interviews alone. The discussions accompanying the artifacts were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed alongside the interview data, enriching the overall dataset with visual and narrative dimensions, while providing further insight into how the learners represented themselves and their experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The process began with verbatim transcription and repeated readings of the interview material to facilitate familiarity with the dataset (Creswell, 2014). A reflexive log and analytic notes were kept throughout to document emerging impressions and researcher reflections. Coding focused on identifying meaningful segments related to identity, belonging, linguistic recognition, and classroom practices. Codes were compared across participants, refined, and grouped into broader categories. Themes were then developed through an iterative review, ensuring they accurately presented patterns across the dataset and aligned with the research questions of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Identity texts were analyzed in conjunction with students' oral explanations, which provided essential contextualization of the artifacts' meanings. As Hall (2009) notes, children's artifacts may not convey the meanings adults attribute to them. Accordingly, students' own explanations guided the analysis to minimize the risk of misinterpretation (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). This interpretive process highlighted how students visually and narratively constructed their hybrid identities and positioned themselves within the school environment. Triangulation across interview data, identity texts, and participant explanations enhanced the trustworthiness and depth of the analysis (McDonough & McDonough, 2014; Patton, 1999).

RESULTS

Japanese-Background Students' Perspectives On Classroom Practices

Students generally expressed positive feelings about school, highlighting their enjoyment of learning, friendships, and supportive relationships with teachers. S3 explained, "I like learning new things and having friends." Despite this positive orientation, their accounts consistently depicted classroom environments characterized by teacher-centered instruction and heavy reliance on textbooks, with little differentiation or

adaptation to learner diversity. All students except S1 described pedagogical routines that adhered strictly to the curriculum, leaving limited room for personalized learning, creative activities or the acknowledgment of their cultural backgrounds. Many noted that classroom tasks did not draw on their interests or lived experiences. As S14 stated about his Japanese background, "It is not something important in the classroom that I am from Japan…It does not influence the lesson." S15 added, "We never do anything about Japan," and S12 remarked "We follow the books, this is what we do."

Most students reported that their teachers seldom incorporated their cultural or linguistic knowledge into lessons. A few recalled isolated moments triggered by textbook references, yet these instances appeared incidental rather than purposefully integrated into instruction. S13 noted: "I never say anything about Japan in the classroom... No, the teacher asked me once about origami," while S18 similarly observed that Japan was rarely mentioned: "Sometimes, if there is something in the book about Japan, we may discuss it." Such accounts reinforce students' perceptions that any recognition of their backgrounds occurred sporadically rather than as part of a systematic pedagogical approach. Several students also mentioned that the brief references did little to change the broader learning environment, which continued to prioritize the textbook over students' interests and lived experiences. Overall, the practices followed did not appear to promote a culturally responsive pedagogy, leaving students' linguistic and cultural identities largely unacknowledged within everyday classroom life.

An exception to this pattern was S1, whose school experience differed substantially from that of her peers. She described an environment in which teachers consistently valued and incorporated her cultural and linguistic expertise. S1 explained, "The teachers like that I am from two countries and need my help because I know so many things about Japan." Having her knowledge and experience actively drawn upon in classroom activities affirms her linguistic and cultural background. She expressed pride in being able to support her classmates and teachers and was eager to organize activities that promote greater awareness of Japan and other countries. S1 reported creating a book of Japanese letters for classmates and being invited by her teacher to 'teach Japanese every day.' She appeared to enjoy these experiences and have a strong sense of belonging. S1 mentioned that her teacher emphasized that they are 'very lucky I can teach them.' This contrasting account illustrates how sustained recognition of cultural knowledge can foster confidence, engagement, and inclusion.

Language Use, Cultural Interests, and Students' Connection to Japan

Although students conveyed enthusiasm for the Japanese language, five participants (S11, S12, S13, S15, S16) reported experiencing difficulties using it, particularly in writing. These difficulties appeared to be linked to limited opportunities for formal instruction and literacy development. As S11 explained, "I find it difficult to write… I get frustrated with writing," while S12 noted that although he likes Japanese 'it's too difficult.' Most students reported using multiple languages in their everyday lives, typically Greek, Japanese and English, while some also spoke French or German. With the exception of S1, all students reported feeling more comfortable using Greek in public or school contexts, with some refraining from using Japanese to avoid standing out or to align more closely with peers. In contrast, S1 expressed confidence using both Japanese and Greek across school and public settings.

Students maintained connections to Japan in diverse ways, shaped by their interests. Some described enjoying Japanese comics and books, while others engaged with TV programs, music videos, and films. Several students emphasized the importance of staying in contact with friends and relatives in Japan, which helped them sustain a sense of emotional and cultural closeness. As S3 stated, "I like talking to my grandparents in Japan, and I want to go there in the summer." Many students also identified the Japanese community as an important space for maintaining cultural and linguistic ties, offering opportunities to practice the language and learn about everyday life in Japan. S10 explained, "We learn many things about Japan, and I like going there with my mum."

The Japanese community also exposed students to values and behaviors associated with Japanese schooling. Principles such as self-discipline, hard work, respect, and responsibility were described as central to these sessions. According to S1, the community does more than support language learning and social interaction; it mirrors aspects of Japanese school philosophy: "We learn about working together and listening to each other, cleaning the school and respecting the elderly." S9 referred to the reflective questions frequently posed during sessions: "She [the teacher in the Japanese community] always asks us to imagine how we would feel in different situations, when we say a story, for example." When asked how he views this educational approach, S9 responded, "I like it because this is how they learn in Japan. … We also learn about rubbish and keeping the school tidy."

Students' Suggestions for the Inclusion of Their Linguistic and Cultural Resources in the Classroom

Students expressed strong emotional ties to Japan, often speaking with warmth about Japanese festivals, food, music, comics, and films. S1 described Japanese language and culture as something she adores and noted,

"Teaching Japanese to my classmates and talking about festivals is something I like." S5 expressed interest in teaching her classmates the language, noting that "It would be nice to learn Japanese." S6 emphasized her enjoyment of Japanese music and videos and suggested incorporating such music into school, noting, "Pop songs from Japan… The children would love them." These reflections highlight the continued importance of Japanese linguistic and cultural practices in their daily lives, even when such practices remain invisible at school.

A recurring theme involved classroom routines inspired by Japanese schools, particularly shared responsibilities for maintaining cleanliness and organization. Many students described the practice of cleaning classrooms in Japan and believed it would benefit their Greek schools. They mentioned that in Japan cleaning the school is regarded as part of students' education. S7, who had attended a Japanese school during the summer, suggested adopting this practice, noting, "We do it in Japan and I think it is very good," while S17 proposed, "Cleaning the school would be something Japanese that would be nice to do…At least pick up the trash." S1 had attempted to introduce this idea in her own school, though not all classmates embraced it, "I have already proposed cleaning the school ourselves but some children complained and we stopped."

Some students proposed keeping animals at school, reflecting practices they associated with Japanese education. S8 suggested that "we could have rabbits and feed them and take care of them," and S11 shared a similar idea: "Having animals as they do in the Japanese school." Others emphasized student decision-making through regular classroom meetings in which the students could discuss and decide for themselves about various school-related issues. S2 expressed a desire to "have meetings and decide for ourselves," while S8 hoped such discussions could include decorating the classroom with Japanese elements, "I would like us [the students] to decide…I would like to renovate the classroom and put some Japanese things."

Students also recommended incorporating cultural content in the lessons, including information about traditional Japanese festivals, food, music, and everyday life. S4 stressed the importance of helping peers understand distinctions between countries, mentioning "Learning about Japan would be great…to learn that China and Japan are not the same." S18 wanted to show classmates "the shops, the houses, the sweets of Japan and ramen" These ideas reflect students' eagerness to see their cultural knowledge integrated into learning, strengthening their sense of belonging while enriching the classroom community. Their suggestions indicate a desire for practices that recognize and make their identities more visible within the school environment.

Student's Identities and Sense of Belonging: Insights from Their Identity Texts

The eleven identity texts created by the students provided rich insights into how they perceive, negotiate, and represent their bilingual identities and how they position themselves within school contexts. Many used their artifacts to include cultural symbols, landscapes, or references to both Greece and Japan, offering a visual and narrative account of their internal identity negotiations. Across the artifacts, three overarching themes emerged: i) expressions of dual heritage, ii) cultural explanation and advocacy, and iii) navigating visibility and belonging at school.

Many students used their identity texts to portray themselves as simultaneously Greek and Japanese. Their drawings often incorporated elements associated with both countries. These multimodal expressions highlight the children's desire to affirm both heritages and challenge the implicit assumption that only one cultural identity is relevant in school contexts. Such representations demonstrate pride, belonging, and a wish for recognition of their backgrounds. S1, for example, illustrated two suns-one yellow for Greece and one red for Japan-alongside the Aegean Sea and Mount Fuji. She explained that she created the piece to express her deep appreciation for both cultures. She proudly presented her artifact, noting that it "shows two beautiful civilizations," and added, "I have two homelands inside me." Her identity text foregrounds her cultural backgrounds and highlights her sense of empowerment and confidence in her dual identity. As she affirmed, "I'm proud of my drawing because I'm proud of who I am."

Similarly, S7, S9, and S10 depicted themselves divided into Greek and Japanese halves, visually representing their bicultural identities. S7 included the Greek flag and the Japanese sun in her drawing and stated: "I could teach them (her classmates) Japanese and tell them about the school in Japan … but the truth is that there is no time for this." Commenting on his identity text S9 explained, "I'm both Japanese and Greek, and this is what I want to show with this drawing". Moreover, in the discussion that followed, the student highlighted his need for stronger recognition of his full linguistic and cultural resources within school practices to enhance his sense of belonging at school: "Yes, I would like it if we sometimes talked about Japan at school." S10 likewise commented, "I love both countries" and went on to say, "I would like it if we spoke about Japan because Japan is beautiful, but the children don't know".

A second theme involved students' efforts to use their identity texts as tools to explain Japanese culture to their peers and teachers. They expressed a desire to correct misconceptions or clarify cultural distinctions. S4, for example, incorporated elements from both cultures in his identity text, including an olive branch, identified as "a symbol of Greece and peace," and Japanese cherry blossoms, which he explained represent revival and hope,

alongside food from both countries and a map of Japan. He also used both Greek and Japanese because "both languages are beautiful," illustrating his intention to communicate cultural meanings to his peers. He emphasized that he wanted his classmates to learn about Japan and understand that Japan is different from China and noted that he is sometimes called 'Chinese.' His account highlights the absence of culturally sustaining pedagogies in the classroom and the resulting invisibility of his background, while also illustrating students' desire for more accurate understandings of Japan.

S2 contributed a similar form of cultural explanation. He drew the Olympic Games symbol and connected its origins in Greece with Tokyo's hosting of the Games in 2021, suggesting that this shared cultural link could encourage productive discussion because "children like the Olympic games." In discussing his identity text, S2 expressed a hope that his classmates might develop greater understanding of Japan, a wish also evident in the comments of S7 and S10, who emphasized their peers' limited awareness of Japanese culture and the lack of opportunities for cultural exchange. S13 also used his identity text to communicate cultural meaning, expressing his aspiration to one day own a restaurant that serves both Greek and Japanese food, an imagined space where his two cultural worlds would coexist.

The final theme concerns the children's efforts to navigate the (in)visibility of their Japanese identities in school. Several students depicted a contrast between how they present themselves in the classroom and how they experience their Japanese identities in other contexts. S6 drew herself holding the Greek flag on one side and wearing a kimono on the other, explaining: "I'm the girl on the left at school…When I go to the Japanese community, I can be Japanese if I like." Her drawing illustrates how school norms encourage her to downplay aspects of her linguistic and cultural identity in order to fit in. Similar tensions emerged in S15's identity text, in which she portrayed her mother as Japanese while describing herself as 'mainly Greek.' She explained: "I like Japan and I'm a little Japanese, but I'm more Greek at school." Her account underscores how the absence of cultural and linguistic recognition can shape how children position themselves in school settings.

S14's artifact also reflected ongoing negotiations of belonging. He combined drawings of Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms with a short written reflection in which he described aspects of Japanese culture. He explained, "I'm mainly Greek, but I wanted to make a drawing with beautiful things from Japan." Although he chose to depict iconic Japanese symbols, S14 emphasized that he feels securely positioned as a Greek student within the school context: "I speak Greek at the same level as my classmates, and they treat me as Greek, and this is good." His account highlights the complex ways some students balance cultural pride with a pragmatic sense of belonging rooted in the norms of the school environment.

For students like S8, the invisibility of their Japanese identities was closely tied to classroom practices. S8 created an artifact depicting the school in Japan and Greece. The Greek classroom appears on the left and the Japanese classroom on the right. She explained that she created this drawing to show the differences between the two educational systems: "I attended the Japanese school, and it is different from the Greek…The Japanese school is more organized, it is different." She further expressed a wish for aspects of Japanese schooling to be incorporated into her current school context, noting: "I would like to do some Japanese things in the Greek school, then it would be better". Her reflections highlight her desire to see her Japanese identity recognized within the classroom as a means of strengthening her sense of belonging.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Japanese-background students experience belonging, identity expression, and participation within Greek schools, with particular attention to how their linguistic repertoires and cultural ties to Japan are recognized, marginalized, or negotiated in everyday classroom life. Drawing on interviews with eighteen learners, eleven of whom also produced identity texts, the study offers an in-depth account of how classroom practices and language ideologies shape students' opportunities to participate as their full selves. The findings provide important insights into how this underrepresented group navigates questions of visibility and recognition within Greek schooling, revealing a persistent mismatch between students' rich linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources and the restrictive pedagogical frameworks that structure their classroom experiences.

These findings are interpreted through a theoretical lens drawing on sociocultural perspectives on belonging and self-positioning, particularly Cummins's work on identity, power, and the recognition of students' communicative resources (Cummins, 2001, 2017). In addition, the analysis is informed by post-structural and non-essentialist understandings of multilingual identity, which conceptualize it as dynamic, relational, and context dependent rather than fixed or singular (Dervin, 2016), as well as by scholarship on culturally sustaining pedagogy that emphasizes participation, agency, and recognition (Paris, 2021). The interpretive orientation of the study is consistent with qualitative case study research in applied linguistics and supports close engagement with students' perspectives as analytically meaningful (Duff, 2014).

Students' accounts consistently pointed to the near-invisibility of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as to the absence of meaningful integration of these resources into classroom practice. Seventeen of the

eighteen participants described strongly teacher-centered instruction, heavy reliance on textbooks, and minimal or no reference to their home languages or cultural experiences. This pattern aligns with research documenting assimilationist orientations and monolingual norms in Greek schooling (Fyssa et al., 2014; Giannakou & Karalia, 2023; Gkaintartzi et al., 2018; Kaldi et al., 2011; Mertzani, 2023). It also reflects broader analysis of language ideologies in Greece, which show that mainstream educational structures privilege the standard language variety and reproduce expectations of linguistic homogeneity, shaping what counts as legitimate language use in classrooms (Motsiou & Kostoulas, 2021). From this perspective, these practices undermine students' participation as legitimate contributors in classroom life (Cummins, 2001; Peercy et al., 2023).

At the same time, these findings resonate with international research on refugee and migrant education, suggesting that the dynamics observed in Greek classrooms are not unique to this national context. Across a range of education systems, particularly those characterized by centralized curricula and strong monolingual traditions, multilingual learners often encounter similar tensions between policy discourses of inclusion and everyday classroom practices that marginalize linguistic and cultural diversity (Cummins, 2019; García & Wei, 2017). As such, the Greek case offers analytically useful insights into how dominant language ideologies operate in practice and how they shape students' participation, belonging, and identity negotiation in other national settings (Anthias, 2016; Cummins, 2017). Focusing on Japanese-background learners also highlights the value of examining how learners from different migratory and sociolinguistic trajectories experience schooling across national contexts, opening up possibilities for comparative analysis beyond Greece.

Viewed through this theoretical framework, the absence of culturally sustaining pedagogy, highlighted by nearly all participants in this study with the exception of one student, creates conditions in which diversity is suppressed rather than supported. This carries significant implications for identity expression and perceptions of belonging (Anthias, 2016; Steenwegen et al., 2025). Many students reported withholding or downplaying their Japanese linguistic and cultural resources because they perceived Greek as the only legitimate set of norms within the school environment. This finding resonates with international research showing that the absence of inclusive practices may lead multilingual learners to restrict or privatize home languages to avoid stigma, misrecognition, or social risk (García, 2017; Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023). Similar processes of silencing have been reported among other minoritized groups in Greece, suggesting that these processes are structurally embedded rather than community-specific (Gkaintartzi et al., 2018).

Students' accounts also indicated that curriculum content was rarely adapted to reflect their linguistic or cultural backgrounds. When topics in the textbook provided an opening, learners might be asked to contribute to the lesson with their prior knowledge, yet participants emphasized that these moments were occasional and not systematic. From the students' perspective, such brief references amounted to a surface level rather than substantive engagement with diversity, reflecting what the literature describes as a superficial approach to multiculturalism (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Mills, 2008). These practices did not prompt deeper discussion or encourage critical reflection on cultural assumptions, so they did little to address power relations in students' lives and the subtle forms of misrecognition encountered (Cummins, 2017).

In addition, the limited use of students' linguistic repertoires within classroom learning contrasts with extensive research demonstrating the benefits of translanguaging and identity-affirming pedagogies (Cummins, 2019; García, 2009; García, 2017; Li & Luo, 2017). With the exception of one case, students described classroom environments where such practices were not encouraged or structurally supported. The contrast between the expressive possibilities evident in identity texts and the limited opportunities available in daily classroom practice underscores a broader gap between research-informed approaches that support multilingual learners' well-being and the reality of Greek schooling, where institutionally bounded models of participation shape which forms of knowledge and identity are recognized as legitimate. This gap has been documented in diverse national contexts, highlighting the need for systemic, rather than isolated, pedagogical change (Cummins, 2017; García & Wei, 2017).

The experience of one participant, however, demonstrates the transformative potential of alternative pedagogical approaches. S1 reported her teacher's deliberate efforts to draw on her linguistic and cultural expertise, which enabled her to develop a strong sense of pride, agency, and belonging, offering a clear example of culturally sustaining pedagogy in practice (Paris & Alim, 2017; Paris, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2021). This form of recognition aligns with what Cummins (2001, 2017) describes as collaborative relations of power, whereby teachers validate students' repertoires and redistribute epistemic authority in ways that position students as knowledgeable contributors and affirm their identities. It also reflects Greek research showing the benefits of creative and multimodal pedagogies for identity affirmation and inclusive participation (Kompiadou and Tsokalidou, 2014; Vitsou, 2019; Vitsou et al., 2019).

Students' affective connections to Japan further illuminate the complexity of their identity negotiation. While students maintained strong cultural and emotional ties to Japan through family relationships, community-based activities, and everyday cultural practices, these aspects of themselves were largely experienced as situated outside

the boundaries of school life. This separation suggests that school structures regulate which identities are permitted to surface in formal educational spaces, with implications for learners' affirmation of identity and belonging (Anthias, 2016; Cummins, 2001, 2019). Viewed through Dervin's (2016) non-essentialist perspective, these patterns reflect institutional conditions that reproduce fixed understandings of identity, positioning students' transnational and cultural affiliations as marginal or irrelevant within classroom life. The resulting disconnect between children's diverse repertoires and the narrow expectations of the classroom points to a missed opportunity for fostering intercultural understanding, meaningful engagement, and community building.

Notably, students articulated clear and practical ideas about how their experiences and knowledge could be meaningfully integrated into everyday classroom practices. Their suggestions extended beyond symbolic or episodic cultural celebrations to include routine, relational practices, such as shared responsibilities, collaborative decision-making, and opportunities to contribute cultural knowledge. These proposals align closely with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which foreground participation, agency, and the integration of students' lived experiences into everyday classroom life (Paris, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017). Moreover, students expressed a desire for participation structures that embed their cultural resources into the ongoing functioning of the classroom, rather than relegating them to occasional or decorative activities. Their emphasis on participatory rather than performative inclusion reflects Gorski and Swalwell's (2015) critique of tokenistic multiculturalism and demonstrates that the knowledge required for more inclusive practices already exists within both research and students' lived experiences; what remains lacking is systemic uptake.

Overall, the study contributes to the limited body of research focusing on Japanese-background learners in Greece and to the growing international literature on multilingualism, migration, and education. It demonstrates the need for educational approaches that genuinely value multilingualism, affirm hybrid identities, and cultivate equitable classroom environments in which learners can participate as whole, culturally grounded individuals. While grounded in a specific national context, the findings offer insights relevant to other education systems grappling with linguistic diversity, migration, and questions of belonging. The study also highlights the importance of students' voices being heard and taken seriously in the design and implementation of classroom practices. Recognizing students' lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and multilingual resources as central to learning, rather than as peripheral, offers a pathway toward more socially just and culturally responsive educational environments.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

By foregrounding the lived experiences and perspectives of Japanese-background students, this study demonstrates how classroom practices and language ideologies shape opportunities for belonging, participation, and identity expression in Greek schools. The findings highlight both the constraints imposed by dominant monolingual norms and the possibilities that emerge when learners' linguistic and cultural resources are recognized as meaningful educational assets rather than treated as secondary or irrelevant. In doing so, the study contributes empirical evidence to ongoing debates on culturally sustaining pedagogy and more equitable approaches to multilingual education.

At the same time, the study opens up directions for further research aimed at developing a more comprehensive understanding of schooling in contexts of migration and multilingualism by focusing on multicultural school environments. Future research could examine how common language practices and institutional logics shape participation and belonging for learners from diverse backgrounds within shared educational spaces. In this way, the present study points toward research that critically examines how schools manage diversity in everyday practice, including comparative work across different contexts of migration.

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval for the study was obtained in accordance with institutional and national guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and verbal or written assent was obtained from all participating students. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author Contributions

Iliana Natsi and Magda Vitsou jointly contributed to the research concept and design. Iliana Natsi was responsible for data collection, data analysis, and drafting the manuscript. Magda Vitsou contributed to the critical revision of the article. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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