Exploring Intersectionality in Identity Research in Multicultural Education: Reflecting on the Past to Forge a More Equitable Future

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ABSTRACT

This paper used a semi-systematic review of 59 empirical studies and 31 theoretical papers published post-2000 to explore intersectional research in identity development in multicultural educational contexts. The growing emphasis on intersectionality as a critical lens for understanding identity development aligns with recent changes in how identity is conceptualised. Traditional frameworks often overlook the nuanced realities faced by individuals who navigate multiple, often conflicting, identities. Despite progress in intersectional research, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding underrepresented geographical contexts and marginalised ethnic and cultural communities. Many studies focus on discrete identity categories rather than their interplay, leading to a fragmented understanding of identity development. This paper advocates for inclusive research methodologies that amplify the voices of marginalised individuals while recognising the complexities of their dynamically interrelated identities.

Keywords: identity, intersectional, language and identity, multicultural education, power and identity, educational context

Educational research has increasingly applied an intersectional lens to understand students holistically, challenge one-size-fits-all pedagogies, and explore and highlight the impact of various levels of inequality (Coote et al., 2022). This is especially true for identity research, which has a complex history, shaped by diverse academic disciplines. Scholars have examined various aspects of identity development within educational contexts, including ethnic identity within minority communities (Aldridge et al., 2016; Camacho et al., 2018; Pinetta et al., 2025), cultural identity within multicultural contexts (Cruz et al., 2023; Natsi & Vitsou, 2025; Suri & Chandra, 2021; Sapancı, 2014; Weeks et al., 2010; Houdyshell & Sanabria, 2025), and minority sexual identities (Driver, 2015; Kuper et al., 2018; Parmenter et al., 2022; Dey & Maluleke, 2026). Within educational contexts, the formation of communities and the assignment of roles influence the development of cultural and social identities, underscoring the need for an intersectional understanding of not only the social outcomes but also the processes that lead to them (Harwood, 2021; Norton, 2014; Umana-Taylor et al., 2014; Hightower, H. H. (2024).

This paper aims to conduct a semi-systematic review of identity conceptualisations across various academic domains (Snyder, 2019). To identify appropriate studies, keywords were used in isolation or in combination in the online Mahidol library system from which articles were downloaded. These keywords include intersectionality, identity development, student identity development, multicultural school, and multiculturalism, among others. Within this framework, 100 empirical studies and 50 theoretical papers were identified. Of these, 41 empirical studies and 19 theoretical papers were excluded either due to their publication date being before

2000 or the study's focus not being sufficiently focused on the educational context. This analysis examines the remaining 59 empirical studies and 31 theoretical papers published after 2000, exploring the theoretical frameworks used in combination with an intersectional lens to answer the following questions.

1. How has an intersectional lens been combined with other theoretical frameworks in research on identity development within multicultural educational contexts, and to what impact?
2. What gaps remain in the literature regarding populations, educational contexts, and forms of identity that have been underexplored using an intersectional lens?

Theoretical frameworks

The studies incorporated a variety of theoretical frameworks, including Bourdieu, Critical theories, and Social Identity theory. All papers employed a combination of these theories to deepen understanding, foster innovative solutions, and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, all of which are vital for identity research (Wedege, 2009).

Bourdieu

Bourdieu identified three key components of identity: habitus, cultural capital, and social class (Huang, 2019). His emphasis on power dynamics makes his work compatible with intersectional analyses. Bourdieu's concepts are widely cited in research on identity within multicultural educational settings. For instance, Edensor (2002) explored how identities are co-constructed through various social influences, while Khatib and Ghamari (2011) highlighted how power dynamics can limit individual agency. Studies by Darvin and Norton (2015) examined how social identities shape language learners' experiences and opportunities. At the same time, other studies critique Bourdieu's theory as being overly deterministic, ignoring the complexity of identity development through socialisation and group membership (Block, 2010; Busholtz & Hall, 2005). Research often applies Bourdieu's framework to marginalised groups, particularly migrants in educational settings, making it especially fertile ground for an intersectional examination of compounding, marginalised identities. For example, a frequently marginalised population within North America is the Latino migrant population, which has been examined by Khatib & Ghamari (2011), Moje & Luke (2009), and Portes & Rivas (2011).

Critical theories

Critical theory has been widely used to examine identity due to its focus on power within social structures, institutions, and interactions (Norton, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2004; Azmitia et al., 2022; Coyne-Beasley et al., 2024). Studies applying an intersectional critical lens frequently foreground the lived experiences of marginalised communities, particularly in educational contexts where dominant cultural narratives shape access, legitimacy, and belonging.

Within language and education research, critical theory has been used to demonstrate how power operates through linguistic practices to legitimise some identities while marginalising others (Rovira, 2008; Norton, 2014, 2017). These studies show how language intersects with race, migration status, and social class to constrain learners' access to resources and future identity possibilities. Similar dynamics are evident across diverse contexts, including secondary schooling in the United States (Rodriguez et al., 2004), the integration of Roma children into primary education in Hungary (Foldesi, 2013), and postcolonial linguistic hierarchies in Tanzania and Malaysia (Babaci-Wilhite, 2013).

More recent work extends this analysis to compounding systems of oppression, highlighting how intersecting identities related to race, gender, sexuality, and class intensify marginalisation and limit identity recognition (Azmitia et al., 2022; Coyne-Beasley et al., 2024; Pinetta et al., 2025; Abreu, 2026). Collectively, these studies demonstrate the value of combining critical theory with intersectionality to expose structural inequalities and inform more equitable educational practices.

Culture-based theories

Culture-based theoretical frameworks explore how culture-specific norms and values shape individual and community identities, often focusing on the dynamics between minority and majority cultures in shaping the migrant experience (Altintas & Baydilek, 2023; Fitzsimons, 2019; Quinlan & Curtin, 2017). Research primarily emphasises the interaction of cultures in modern education. In Ireland, McBride (2015) discussed the need for inclusivity regarding ethnicity and gender, while McNally (2015) examined racism against newcomer students. McTigue (2015) highlighted the importance of validating diverse identities, and Quinlan and Curtin (2017) noted that cultural disparities can lead to student alienation.

The United States of America is another frequently studied context. This can be seen in Umana-Taylor (2014), who studied the intersectional nature of ethnic-racial identities with sexual orientation, while Parkhouse et al. (2019) focused on the experiences of Black and Latino students of their racial, ethnic, and socio-economic identities. Meanwhile, Speigler et al. (2018) examined ethnic and national identity development among marginalised children in Germany, and Altintas and Baydilek (2023) explored how cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds shape identities among preschoolers in Turkey. At international schools, cultural identity formation is analysed through an intersectional lens. Bradley (2015) researched Third Culture Kids (TCKs), Fitzsimons (2019) examined the complexities of cultural identity development within systems that favour Anglo-Western norms, and Marginson (2013) discussed how intersecting identities affect the lived experiences of international students. Across all of these contexts, the focus on marginalised identities is evident.

Ecological theories

Many studies using an ecological framework reference Bronfenbrenner's theory, which posits that a child's identity develops across and within various environmental systems (Guy-Evans, 2024). This theory has informed research on identity across contexts, including work by Aldridge et al. (2016), Aschbacher et al. (2009), and others. An intersectional lens within this framework examines how context affects marginalised communities. For instance, Aschbacher et al. (2009) examined how gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status influence the development of science identities, thereby shaping the demographics of individuals pursuing education and careers in STEM fields. Also within the United States of America, Brown and Chu (2012) examined how the interaction of ethnic identity and systemic discrimination, in conjunction with the school ecological framework, influences the academic outcomes of minority students in complex and dynamic ways, while DeCuir-Gunby and Cooper (2012) explored how the micro- and mesosystems of school and community life shape the racial identity of African American adolescents. Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) examined how the identities of Afro-Caribbean international students are shaped by multiple contexts within their academic and wider social communities.

Language-based theories

Language is crucial for identity development as it facilitates communication required for social interactions, sustains cultural norms, influences self-perception, and shapes the structure of communities and institutions (Darwin & Evizariza, 2024). For example, Block (2010) examined the roles of accent, vocabulary, and syntax in shaping the types of social identities and communities individuals can access, as well as the impact of those social identities on one another. Oh and Fuligni (2010) examined how heritage language maintenance supports ethnic identity development in immigrant Latino and Asian adolescents amidst a dominant culture that often marginalises them. Another study focused on immigrants was Miller (2010), which examined recently arrived students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in Australian high schools and explored how their multiple identities were shaped by their language proficiency, social interactions, and the cultural contexts of those interactions. The study found that language, ethnicity, and social membership interact dynamically in the formation of identity among second-language learners, necessitating an intersectional analysis to fully understand this process.

Thomauske (2013) explored the role of home language use in shaping the social and cultural identities of minority children and their families. It also examined the intersectional relationships among linguistic identity, citizenship, national identity, and broader community belonging within the context of early childhood education. Finally, Lie (2017) examined the role of language development in fostering a successful academic environment for linguistic minority students, focusing on identity development in bilingual migrant communities. These studies primarily focused on linguistic minorities, using an intersectional lens to foreground their lived experiences of potentially compounding marginalised identities related to language, ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic status, among others.

Psychological theories

Psychology provides a foundational framework for studying identity development by examining the mind and its role in shaping behaviour across social contexts. Psychological approaches have been widely applied to identity research, often through an intersectional lens, to explore how identities are formed, negotiated, and constrained across the lifespan (Bergin, 2015; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Fisher et al., 2018; Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). While Social Identity Theory remains the most commonly used psychological framework, Erikson's Stages of Identity Development is the second most frequently applied, conceptualising identity formation as a lifelong process shaped by social, cultural, and developmental contexts (Erikson, 1959).

Previous studies applying Erikson's framework frequently focus on adolescence and emergent adulthood as critical periods of identity exploration and consolidation. This is evident in Umana-Taylor et al. (2014), which

focused on the role of exploration and commitment in forming a secure ethnic identity during adolescence, while Fisher et al. (2018) applied Erikson's stages of identity development and an intersectional lens to explore how individual, relational, and historical factors shape the identities of marginalised populations. Other studies combined Erikson's model with complementary frameworks, such as Marcia's identity status model, to demonstrate how socioeconomic status and school demographics intersect to shape the development of social identities and the lived experiences of marginalised student populations (Lannegrand-Williams & Bosma, 2009).

Beyond Eriksonian approaches, researchers have employed diverse psychological theories to address identity formation in specific contexts. These include sociolinguistic and psychodynamic perspectives on contested identities (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), social-psychological frameworks emphasising group belonging and identity protection (Swann & Bosson, 2010), and psychosocial models examining identity development in multicultural, educational, and transnational settings (Van der Zee et al., 2007; Verhoeven et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2010). Collectively, these approaches highlight psychology's capacity to account for the complexity, intersectionality, and contextual embeddedness of identity development.

Social identity theory

Social Identity Theory highlights the importance of group membership in identity development (Harwood, 2021). It has been applied in various studies, showcasing how overlapping social identities can lead to inclusion or discrimination (Altintas & Baydilek, 2023; Aschbacher et al., 2009). Research topics are diverse, with Nesdale and Flesser (2001) examining how children's perceptions of their marginalised identities can lead to low self-esteem and a desire to belong to an esteemed group, while Altintas and Baydilek (2023) focus on preschoolers' religious and ethnic identity development. Other studies explore athletic and psychosocial identities in relation to feelings of alienation (Carter & Marony, 2021; Boz & Kiremitci, 2023). Schmitt et al. (2003) and Yuan et al. (2013) investigate collective identities of migrant students, revealing social challenges. De Loughrey (2015) and Bruijnzeel et al. (2022) focused on how ethnic identity interacts with language within social settings, while Kelly (2009) and Hazari et al. (2009) and addressed the impact of ethnicity, gender, and social class on identity development. Studies on marginalised communities often uncover complex identity issues, such as those faced by heritage Taiwanese speakers and Black adolescents when they try to express their home identities (Heylen, 2005; Rogers et al., 2015). Interestingly, even similar ethnic groups can experience marginalisation, as shown by Yuan et al. (2013) among migrant students in China who relocate from rural to urban contexts. Within all of these studies, an intersectional lens enables a more refined examination, not of groups as a whole, but of the individuals that exist within them, giving full recognition to their full range of identities and lived experiences.

RESULTS

Analysing the theoretical frameworks of 59 empirical studies and 31 theoretical papers revealed interesting patterns in how theoretical frameworks were used to explore identity development within the multicultural educational context.

How has an intersectional lens been combined with other theoretical frameworks in research on identity development within multicultural educational contexts, and to what impact?

An intersectional lens is often applied to studies that explore the identity development of a marginalised group within the broader context of the dominant/privileged community. This is evident in the large number of studies that have focused either on the lived experiences of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities or on those of various types of immigrants, from international students to refugees. As the most widely used framework, 37 studies applied an intersectional lens to a critical theoretical framework, primarily to examine how power operates within structures and institutions to shape the identity development of marginalised groups. This research often foregrounded the impact of linguistic hierarchies and national immigration policies, how they intersectionally shape the unique forms of oppression experienced by specific minority communities. Second, 36 studies applied a culture-based identity theory, combined with an intersectional lens, to explore how cultural and societal norms shape individuals' experiences of social inclusion and exclusion, thereby informing the trajectory of identity development within multicultural educational contexts. This combination is often used to highlight the disparities between home and school cultural contexts, frequently leading to feelings of disenfranchisement when the two are misaligned or in conflict.

Third, psychological frameworks were used in 34 papers. These were predominantly used to map how identities emerge holistically as part of healthy cognitive and socioemotional development throughout a lifetime. This combination is often used to identify specific supportive factors that promote healthy development while also increasing understanding of how mechanisms of adaptation impact it across diverse contexts. Finally, ecological frameworks were applied alongside an intersectional lens in 29 papers. Bronfenbrenner's ecological

systems theory was the most widely applied theoretical framework for exploring how various contexts shape children's identities, with a focus primarily on the lived experiences of marginalised communities within dominant sociocultural contexts. The application of an intersectional lens, alongside other theoretical frameworks, enables the researcher to develop a more nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities embedded in institutional practices collectively shape how individuals assert and negotiate their identities through social interactions. The integration of this lens within educational research foregrounds marginalised voices, highlighting lived experiences that are often omitted from the formal framing narratives of academic institutions.

What gaps remain in the literature regarding populations, educational contexts, and forms of identity that have been underexplored using an intersectional lens?

Several systematic gaps in previous research offer potential areas of focus for future identity research within the multicultural educational context. Most notably, there is a significant geographical imbalance, with the majority of research conducted in the global north. Oftentimes, students from the rest of the world are only framed for study when they enter the global north as migrants or international students (Darvin & Norton, 2015; McNally, 2015; Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Timol, 2020). There is a need for more research applying an intersectional lens in South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, exploring the continued impact of colonial influence on local pedagogy and policy within educational contexts, or examining the lived experiences of children from indigenous or other socioeconomically disenfranchised groups as they seek educational opportunities.

Another significant gap in previous research is the age of participants, with younger children often eschewed in favour of those in adolescence (Lannegrand & Bosma, 2006; Pinetta et al., 2025; Weeks et al., 2010) or young adulthood (Kuper, 2015; Rogers et al., 2015). While older students are frequently prioritised because they are perceived as better able to articulate their identity experiences, this ignores the critical nature of identity development during childhood, which is foundational to future identity exploration and experimentation. Unfortunately, this limits our understanding of how identities are initially negotiated and experienced within early educational settings, as children experience a significant life transition away from the home context.

Finally, these gaps have shaped the types of identities that are examined. The dominance of research focused on older participants (adolescents and young adults) within the global north has foregrounded the ethnic, racial, and linguistic tensions that are ubiquitous within this context but not necessarily representative of the world as a whole. Going forward, greater attention needs to be paid to how young children experience the emergence of their cultural, linguistic, and place-based identities, with greater recognition of a wider variety of local contexts. Filling these gaps would help us better understand how identity develops in different people and places, especially within the multicultural educational context.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to map how intersectionality has been combined with other theoretical frameworks in identity research within multicultural educational contexts to understand its impact on the field. It was found that previous research predominantly focused on identity development among marginalised populations in the Global North, exploring the roles of power, language, and social positioning in shaping identity trajectories. Unfortunately, significant gaps remain regarding participants' ages and the study's geographical context. By addressing these gaps, future research can develop a more comprehensive, developmentally grounded framework of identity development that begins in early childhood, informing a more equitable education system that holistically supports children as they develop and experience their various identities.

Ethical statement

IRB approval was not required as this paper involved only the analysis of previously published literature. No human participants were involved, nor was any additional data collected.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests.

Author contributions

Sarah E Schefers: Gathered articles, performed analysis, wrote the original draft, reviewed, and edited

Data availability

All articles used are publicly availabile and no new data were generated.

AI disclosure

AI tools were used for editing support.

Biographical sketch

Sarah Elizabeth Schefers is a doctoral student researcher in the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia at Mahidol University, Thailand. She holds a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics and Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts from the University of Barcelona. Her research focuses on identity development in early childhood, with a particular interest in the impact of the multilingual and multicultural environment of international education on linguistic and cultural identity development.

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