

‘English as an additional language’, ‘multilingual’, and ‘vulnerable’: a reflexive account of the labelling practices surrounding school pupils in a researcher-practitioner collaboration.

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Abstract

Despite their diversity, UK school pupils with non-English home languages are uniformly labelled English as an additional language (EAL), presupposing linguistic deficiencies and academic challenges; thus, equating multilingualism with vulnerability. As part of a researcher-practitioner collaboration with a London primary school, we explore how researchers and educators assign and contest the labels EAL, *multilingual*, and *vulnerable*. Through this, we reflexively consider whether changing discourses around multilingualism can minimise potential vulnerabilities associated with EAL. We argue that researchers play a crucial role in mitigating *a priori* categorization of EAL pupils and expose the impact of our agenda on potentially vulnerable pupils.

Translated Abstract (Spanish/Español)

En las escuelas británicas, los alumnos que usan idiomas aparte del inglés en casa son uniformemente etiquetados como ‘inglés como lengua adicional’ (EAL), presuponiendo deficiencias lingüísticas y académicas que equiparan multilingüismo con vulnerabilidad. Colaborando con una escuela primaria londinense, investigamos el uso de las etiquetas EAL, *multilingüe* y *vulnerable* por parte de investigadores y educadores. Utilizando un enfoque reflexivo, examinamos si cambiar la conceptualización del multilingüismo puede minimizar potenciales vulnerabilidades asociadas con EAL. Así, sostenemos que los investigadores

juegan un rol crucial en mitigar categorizaciones tempranas de estos alumnos y exponemos el impacto de nuestra agenda en estudiantes potencialmente vulnerables.

Keywords

English as an additional language (EAL); multilingualism; vulnerability, reflexivity, labelling practices

Introduction

English as an additional language (EAL), new arrival, English as a second language (ESL), English language learner (ELL), limited English proficient (LEP) . . . there is no shortage of labels used to describe students in the UK and beyond who do not fit antiquated ideals of monolingual, homogenous classroom environments. Despite differing conceptualisations, what these terms have in common is that they position learners as lacking, defining them by what they do not (yet) have and taking a deficit view towards learners' linguistic skills (Cummins, 2021; Sutton, 2017). Beyond the classroom, similar (and opposing) discourses are circulating, 'one that sees multilingualism as an opportunity and value, and one that frames it as a problem' (Jaworska & Themistocleous, 2018, p. 73). While positive framings of multilingualism are connected to prestigious languages and elite multilingualism (Barakos & Selleck, 2019) often via traditional schooling routes, problematic multilingualism is linked to those for whom English is not a first language.

A widespread view of multilingualism as deficit in the UK leaves out the rich diversity of these learners (Cunningham & Little, 2022). This approach not only presupposes a risk factor affecting academic achievement (Bell Foundation, 2024a), but equates not having English as a first language with vulnerability within the educational system; with

vulnerability understood as a ‘mutable and even contestable concept’ (Aldridge, 2015, p. 11) employed to define individuals who are susceptible to risk and harm (Cunningham & Hall, 2021). In this respect, it could be argued that the EAL label not only has a strong – although problematic – connection with multilingualism, but also with migration and vulnerability. Additionally, these children ‘are framed as immigrants and linked with burdens on public services and issues with literacy’ (Jaworska & Themistocleous, 2018, p. 73), which can have a detrimental impact on student identities, especially when their language(s) are perceived negatively.

This paper draws on the planning and implementation stages of a research collaboration between university researchers and a primary school in East London which developed and supported initiatives that promote, celebrate, and give visibility to the diversity of languages that pupils bring to the educational system. Researcher decisions, motivations, and subjectivities impact the research we carry out (Sharma, 2021). Thus, by adopting a reflexive approach (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023) and ‘making conscious and explicit our practices, beliefs and dispositions’ (Alejandro, 2021, p. 152), we explore how and to what extent the research process, and we as researchers, reproduce, reinforce and challenge the perceived vulnerability of pupils classified as EAL through labelling, (in)visibility, (de)prioritisation, and assumptions. In particular, we reflect on how our interactions with teachers and staff, the activities we propose and implement, and our presence in the school impact discourses around so-called EAL learners, resulting in a more transparent and rigorous research process (Aldridge, 2015).

Literature Review

EAL and other labels: A deficit view

There are a range of labels used to classify English language learners within educational contexts. In the US, ESL and ELL are commonly used, while the UK prefers EAL, and Australia has an EAL/D classification (*English as an additional language/dialect*). Further terms include *second language learner* (SLL), *language minority student* (LMS), and *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD). An ‘analysis of perplexing ESL-related terminology’ (Webster & Lu, 2012, p. 83) stresses their lack of neutrality and identifies a shocking fourteen labels in educational databases. Pointing out problems arising from such disparate labelling practices, they suggest yet another label, *learner of English as an additional language* (LEAL) as more politically correct and additive. Such classifications reveal a link between (lack of) competence in English and raciolinguistic profiling, with a dichotomised other positioned against idealised (monolingual) users of English as a first language (Chaka, 2021). Similarly, the use of these labels exposes a deficit perspective to languages and language use as seen in English-only ideologies glorifying standard English (see Cunningham, 2019, for a critical review of labelling practices in the UK and Kanno et al., 2024 for an analysis of the US context). Further, the *English Learner* (EL) classification, criticised for its association with ‘limited English proficiency’ (Martínez, 2018), lowers teacher perceptions of students’ academic skills (Umansky & Dumont, 2019), while labelling practices themselves can negatively impact mental health (Link & Phelan, 2013).

Focusing on the UK context, school pupils in England may be classified as EAL if they are ‘exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English’ (Department for Education, 2020). This definition associates multilingualism with a lack of English skills and presents those with additional languages as homogenous, when in reality ‘English learners vary a great deal in terms of language background, country of origin, immigration status, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, level of English proficiency,

educational background, and countless other dimensions’ (Martínez, 2018, p. 516). In a similar vein, *new arrival* describes ‘children who are international migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers, children of people working or studying in England and economic migrants from overseas’, implying that they come from outside the UK and are not fluent English speakers (The Bell Foundation, 2024b). These labelling practices show that, instead of valuing individual diversities, variables are conflated and perceived as detrimental for academic achievement (The Bell Foundation, 2024a), with reports failing to distinguish between pupils’ ‘diverse linguistic, cultural, ethnic and educational backgrounds’ (Demie, 2018, p. 213).

While labels may be used as ‘a shared shorthand’ (Spack, 1997), they can be imposed from an outsider's perspective. Dominant labels related to English emphasise what ‘students supposedly do not know instead of highlighting what they do know’ (Martínez, 2018, p. 515). In one example, Demie (2018) compared EAL and non-EAL primary school pupils and reported that while ‘non-fluent’ EAL students underachieve in comparison to monolingual English speakers, ‘fluent’ EAL students tend to outperform monolingual students. This raises further questions about the suitability of EAL as an all-encompassing label to predict academic achievement. In addition, labels are linked to identity practices (Cummins, 2021; Flores et al., 2015) and ‘in the process of labelling students, we put ourselves in the powerful position of rhetorically constructing their identities’ (Spack, 1997, p. 765).

Multilingualism and the ‘multilingual learner’

While multilingualism is an everyday reality for many, increased mobility and migration has heightened linguistic and cultural contact, particularly in *superdiverse* urban centres (Creese & Blackledge, 2018; Vertovec, 2007). Although wider societal discourses

around multilingualism tend to take a fractional view based on fluency and competence, a more holistic view of multilingualism sees languages as resources within one's linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2012; 2017; Li, 2018). By acknowledging the existence of diverse linguistic repertoires, boundaries between languages are softened, making room for creative and hybrid multilingual language practices (García, 2009; Li & Zhu, 2013; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2009). This opens the door for consideration of a multilingual individual as 'anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading)' (Li, 2008, p. 4) and shifts discourses towards multilingualism as an asset.

Against this backdrop, there is movement towards acknowledging non-English languages within English primary schools (Cunningham & Little, 2022) and recognising students' multilingual repertoires (Conteh, 2023; Martínez, 2018). An influx in publications considering so-called 'multilingual learners' provides evidence for this conceptual shift (e.g., Cummins, 2021; De Oliveira & Jones, 2023). One challenge that remains is that 'even though classrooms tend to be made up of multilingual students, classroom practices and pedagogies are overwhelmingly (English) monolingual and students' linguistic repertoires are often seen as barriers to learning rather than potential resources for learning' (Costley & Leung, 2020, p. 3).

This reveals a risk of what Quehl (2022, p. 24) calls 'multilingualism light,' a 'symbolic take on multilingualism' enacted alongside the 'monolingual norm'. There are thus concerns around celebratory multilingualism, where a 'proliferation of discourses celebrating multilingualism' can lead to commodification of linguistic skills or oversimplification of language roles (Martín Rojo, 2018, p. 551), while the valuation and promotion of multilingualism can result in new hierarchies that may (re)produce difference and inequality (Duchêne, 2020). On a practical, pedagogical note, '[m]ultilingualism may recently have

been hyped, but this has not relieved teachers from the duty of transmitting a monolingual standard variety in view of pupils' access to higher education and the labour market' (Jaspers, 2022, p. 288).

Increasingly, following the multilingual turn in linguistics (May, 2014), there is a shift from labels such as EAL and ESL, with a preference emerging for terms that emphasise multilingualism as a characteristic of the learner. Conteh (2023), for example, introduces 'multilingual and EAL learners,' using the terms side by side when highlighting the complexities and diversity of these pupils. Cummins (2021, p. xxxvii) suggests that due to the multiplicity of 'identities that students adopt for themselves and the shifting identity positions that are projected upon them by societal institutions and educational practices and policies', different terms are needed. He exemplifies how more inclusive terms such as *multilingual learners*, *multilingual language learners*, and *plurilingual learners*, can represent specific and contextualised ways to refer to students who speak languages other than, or in addition to, the language(s) dominant in their society. However, using these alternatives may still imply that these students deviate from an unspoken (monolingual) 'norm'.

A further reconceptualisation for languages and language users is *languages beyond English* (LBE), which seeks to avoid deficit views and political positionings (Cunningham, 2019). Yet another attempt is *emergent bilingual*, which acknowledges the process of language learning as a trajectory rather than a static trait (Eames, 2022; García, 2009). While these shifts are welcome, questions emerge such as when to label students as multilingual and which identities we may impose when labelling pupils in this way. Some students may not identify as multilingual (e.g. if their linguistic background and/or proficiency do not match idealised notions of multilingualism), with their feelings of belonging dependant on how languages are conceived, defined, and presented. Thus, we must ask, who benefits from these

identifications, since the terminology used to refer to the language(s) of individuals is never neutral (Webster & Liu, 2012).

Vulnerability as a label

Although difficult to define, vulnerability is traditionally associated with an inability to make decisions about the self and act independently (Moore & Miller, 1999, in Liamputtong, 2007). This has led to the association of specific groups (e.g., EAL pupils) with vulnerability, and to ‘categories of vulnerability’ (Aldridge, 2015, p. 11) that ignore its socially constructed and contextual reality. As Luna (2019, p. 86) points out, ‘[a]ffixing the label “vulnerability” to a particular subpopulation suggests a simplistic answer to a complicated problem’. These practices can lead to stereotyping and reinforce stigmatisation while ignoring context and the uniqueness of individuals (Shepperd, 2022), with stigma and labelling practices linked to disadvantage and mental illness (Link & Phelan, 2013).

Considering the interplay between multilingualism, labelling practices, and vulnerability, we view vulnerability as the risk associated with ‘susceptibility to harm’ and ‘exposure to unwanted consequences’ (Cunningham & Hall, 2021, p.2) and recognise the fluidity of this state across individuals and contexts. In this respect, school pupils tend to be considered vulnerable, particularly in the eyes of educational researchers and academic ethics boards (Busher & Fox, 2019). As such, being a school pupil and speaking a minoritised language at home could enhance the perceived vulnerability of a child.

As previously mentioned, the EAL classification tends to be associated with risk factors that may impact student achievement. Numerous studies have explored this impact (e.g., Demie, 2018; Strand & Demie, 2005; Whiteside et al., 2016), but simply classifying students as EAL, while ignoring their singularities, may itself contribute to broadening the

gap between EAL and non-EAL students. In turn, this may reinforce the perceived vulnerability of school pupils with languages other than English at home. The quality of being vulnerable, in this case, presents itself as a further label for these children, particularly when their multilingualism is seen as an obstacle and framed in deficit terms. Therefore, systematically labelling EAL learners as vulnerable not only could further reproduce discourses of problematic multilingualism but could remove agency from children who would reject these labels.

Recent theorising refers to vulnerability as a complex system of layers and suggests that individuals navigate different – and sometimes overlapping – forms of vulnerability (Luna, 2019). Such an approach acknowledges the fluid, contextual, and individual nature of vulnerability; challenges top-down approaches that unquestioningly label groups or individuals as vulnerable; and calls for careful consideration of factors that contribute to different vulnerabilities. Layers of vulnerability affect individuals in different ways, even within the same social groups given diverse personal, contextual, and social elements (ibid.). In this respect, researchers working with multilingual individuals, especially when proficiency in a common language is not shared, have raised concerns about how methodological practices can reinforce the potential vulnerability of their participants (e.g., Georgiou, 2022; Shepperd, 2022). Therefore, research projects which focus on individuals institutionally described as vulnerable should evaluate the extent to which this label is reinforced through their activities.

The research project

The context of the study

This work draws on a research project that developed a partnership between our North London university and a primary school in the East London borough of Newham to support initiatives that value, celebrate, and give visibility to the linguistic diversity of the school. Newham is one of England's local authorities with the highest proportion of pupils (75%) that speak languages other than (or in addition to) English at home (NALDIC, 2015). The school itself has a particularly diverse student body in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and home languages, with over 88% of students labelled as EAL. This multitude of languages and cultures is introduced into an educational system with expectations for English language learning that can result in tensions for communities, students, and educators; bringing with it questions about the perceived value of home languages and their relationships with English.

The wider project explores the impact of this partnership and considers discourses around multilingualism surrounding students, practitioners, and the community. In practice, we organised a series of knowledge exchanges with staff, observed classrooms, conducted interviews with teachers and school leaders, and created a multilingual library that supported our multilingual reading programme (see an activity overview in Table 1). During community-oriented school events, we encouraged local community members to make their linguistic diversity visible through games, experiences, and storytelling. We were also invited to participate in school meetings with representatives of the local authority and the wider educational community, finding ourselves part of activities and events that we did not plan or anticipate.

Table 1. Overview of research activities

Activity	Brief Description	Timeframe
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Knowledge exchange sessions	Meetings between university researchers and school teachers to share teaching practices and related research	Nov 2022, Apr 2023
Staff trainings	School proposed, researcher-led gatherings for all school staff	Sept 2022, Jan 2023
Winter fair	School-organised community event where researchers created and staffed a multilingual ‘stall’ and hosted a multilingual storyteller	Dec 2022
Multilingual Story Time	An afterschool multilingual literacy programme; volunteer university students, parents, and researchers read books from our multilingual library with school pupils	27 Feb, 23 Mar, 11, 25, May 2023
Interviews	Interviews conducted with five teachers, the assistant headteacher, and the headteacher	Nov & Dec 2022; Feb & Jun 2023
Classroom observations	Researchers observed five teachers giving one lesson each	Mar & May 2023

The methodology

By focusing on a single school, we adopted an intrinsic case study approach (Duff, 2018; Stake, 2005) due to our interest in the particularities of that specific context. These included: the number of so-called EAL students, the location, and the fact that they were already implementing multilingual approaches they sought to share. This school, which we deliberately choose not to identify here to avoid contributing to the potential vulnerability of pupils, was chosen in part due to their existing initiatives around languages and the school’s view of multilingualism as an asset. While risks factors typically associated with the EAL label could arguably be expected to have a negative impact on achievement and vulnerability, the school achievements have been recognised with OFSTED results of ‘Outstanding’ in 2016 and 2021, while implementing its own curriculum that explicitly names and addresses multilingualism. In this respect, a driving factor for the project was to observe how risks associated with multilingualism are overcome within a majority EAL context recognised for excellence.

Since we were particularly interested in what made this specific school a story of ‘success’, we viewed the school not as a place for the extraction of data, but as a setting where insider knowledge would be required to appreciate and understand the realities of the school. To minimise the potential vulnerabilities of our participants, we drew on ethnographically informed approaches and Liamputtong’s (2007) suggestions regarding sensitive research methods. These methodological ‘decisions’ were therefore made as part of the research process, rather than presented as an *a priori* framework. We used ‘flexible and collaborative investigative methods,’ as recommended for researchers working on vulnerability or conducting investigations with vulnerable individuals (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 118), even though the children were not our direct participants. Instead, pupils were considered recipients and bystanders who might share experiences informally, but not direct sources of data – a decision taken to protect potentially vulnerable children in the space.

Ethics clearance was obtained through the researchers’ university and we abided by the school’s own safeguarding procedures. While our primary participants included teachers, school leaders, and administrative staff, students became ‘*de facto* participants’ by taking part in our activities, regardless of our initial intentions. Through and beyond the decisions we made, we wanted ourselves – as researchers – and the participants – as practitioners – to benefit from working collaboratively as ‘it is essential that great care is taken to ensure that these vulnerable participants will benefit from research and not be further exploited and marginalised’ (Liamputtong, 2007, p.129). It was therefore crucial that, even when being viewed as ‘experts,’ we embraced those in the school as experts in their own right, regarding our participants as authoritative sources of knowledge (Liamputtong, 2007).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate whether and how our research practices during the planning and implementation stages of the project helped to perpetuate, expose, and/or challenge labelling practices and potential vulnerabilities affecting pupils in

the context of study. We reflect on our decisions and explicitly acknowledge our researcher agency and impact by engaging in reflexive practices (see Consoli & Ganassin, 2023), while contributing to recent calls to make multilingual research processes more explicit (Rolland et al., 2023). Such a critical approach is intended to further support the data analysis stage of the research process and offer insights that could benefit similar projects.

Reflexivity as part of the research process

To offer a detailed account of how decisions surrounding the implementation of our research project were influenced by our subjectivities, prejudices, personal histories, and relationships with the participants, we adopt reflexivity as an approach for the consideration of our practices. In a general sense, reflexivity is understood as ‘the sets of dispositions and activities by which researchers locate themselves within the research processes whilst also attending to how their presence, values, beliefs, knowledge, and personal and professional histories shape their research spaces, relationships, and outcomes’ (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023, p. 1). Given the complex and multidimensional nature of the study, particularly in relation to the relationships between and among researchers and participants, a focus on reflexivity can expose potential biases that shaped our actions (and those of our participants), resulting in more honest, trustworthy, and rigorous output. Although reflexivity demands the use of reflection – the action of examining and interpreting past events in an individual and introspective way (Lumsden et al., 2019; Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019) – reflexivity also ‘requires researchers to clarify how they construct their beliefs... and how these beliefs influence the data collection in their research endeavours’ (Liamputtong, 2007, p.17).

In practice, we use reflexivity as the lens through which we frame the planning and implementation stages of our project. Doing so *throughout* and reporting on the process is

essential as, '[t]he problem with reflexivity is that it often happens in hindsight' (Ladegaard, 2023, p. 190). Our work also responds to calls for more transparent research practices in multilingual contexts, particularly around *linguistic reflexivity* (Rolland et al., 2023) as 'the literature focusing on how to implement reflexivity in practice is scarce and scattered' (Alejandro, 2021, p. 151). Our reflexive accounts are presented sequentially below, considering the starting point of the research process, our time in the school, and where we are now. Essentially, these accounts are informed by our ethnographic experiences, interactions, and observations and do not report analysed data.

Reflexive accounts of the research process

Our place in all of this

Although we, as authors of this piece, are portrayed as the 'doers' in this researcher-practitioner collaboration, it was a school staff member who initiated contact. They were looking for partnerships with universities (so-called 'experts') to support initiatives that promoted the development of first languages and multilingualism at their school. After meeting online, it was clear that a partnership would be suitable. We, as academics, would support the school's promotion of multilingualism by facilitating access to theories and approaches related to multilingual education (e.g., translanguaging pedagogies, multilingualism theory) and, in return, the school would open its doors for us to explore how students achieve satisfactory academic results and develop positive attitudes towards languages despite risk factors traditionally associated with an EAL label.

After the collaboration was agreed, we submitted an external application for funding. Since researcher discourses are a 'key site for the practice of reflexivity' (Alejandro, 2021, p.

152), looking back on this form, we see ways in which we were already framing the school pupils. While the document does not make explicit reference to potential vulnerabilities in the school, we clearly (and deliberately) avoided referring to students with a non-English first language as EAL. Instead, in line with current trends that position multilingualism as an asset (e.g., Cummins, 2021; García, 2009; Li, 2008; May, 2014), we referred to the ‘multilingual reality’ of the school as an opportunity for impactful research, the school’s ‘multilingual agenda’ as a source of knowledge, the value of ‘multilingual repertoires’ in multicultural contexts, and the contribution that our own ‘multilingual students’ could make to the university-school collaboration.

While we may not have been aware at the time, reflecting on our own positioning of multilingualism exposes positive biases towards languages and diversity, impacting our research goals and outcomes. Such discourses concerning multilingualism affected the initiatives that we planned as well as those that already existed in the school. For example, the researcher-led knowledge exchanges explored staff members’ own *relationships with multilingualism*; we proposed the creation of a *multilingual library* (see Figure 1) and led a *multilingual reading programme* (‘Multilingual Story Time,’ see Figure 2); and we organised a *multilingual storytelling* event and a *multilingual stand* where members of the local community and researchers could exchange views regarding their languages. Through and within the conceptualisation and planning of these activities, we introduced, (re)produced, and perhaps even imposed a value-laden understanding of multilingualism which said *you* are multilingual, *everyone* is multilingual. In sum, our explicit, and somewhat unquestioned, promotion of multilingualism permeated the early planning stages of the research process, which reinforces the need to consider the dual role of the researcher as both ‘knowledgemaker’ and ‘object of analysis’ (Sharma, 2021, p. 232).



Figure 1. The multilingual library on display at the school



Figure 2. Multilingual Story Time in action

While planning the project, we participated in a research seminar entitled *Researching Vulnerable Multilinguals*. In preparation, we began to consider if and how our project might include so-called ‘vulnerable multilinguals’, something we had not given sufficient

consideration to beforehand. Hearing from and discussing with other scholars galvanised our reflections on vulnerability that have continued throughout. Indeed, looking back at our ethics form, we framed the school pupils as vulnerable by referring to them as ‘potentially vulnerable children because of their age and the fact that English is not their dominant language’. The ethics panel did something similar, raising concerns about the need for parental consent if we were to work with children. In this regard, we were able to follow the school’s internal regulations and guidelines. However, we anticipated challenges with obtaining direct consent from parents, which contributed to the idea of conducting research *about* the pupils rather than *directly with* them. One thing we had not considered, however, was that this decision, meant as a protective, precautionary measure, would result in the unintended consequence of educators and researchers alike talking *about* the children.

Threads in the tapestry: Reflections from within

Walking into the school, the space was colourful and welcoming, with hallways and classrooms covered in student work, a clear contrast with the bare walls of our university. The school was visibly multilingual, boasting a linguistic landscape of officially generated content (e.g., toilet signs in various languages) and student-made (perhaps teacher-driven) work (e.g., artistic renderings of trees with language names upon the leaves) as in Figure 3. The languages of the school were also present in the activities on offer. There were school-organised ‘language clubs’ where a student of Romanian heritage was just as likely to attend the Tamil club as a Tamil child. Additionally, ‘language cafes’ to ‘learn about the importance of home languages’, served to connect parents and community members, bringing together those who may share linguistic resources in groupings such as Tamil-Malayalam-Telugu. The positive representation of languages in the school’s linguistic landscape and their initiatives

were indicators that multilingualism was a central (and valued) element of the school experience.



Figure 3: The school's multilingual linguistic landscape

As part of our project, we organised a series of teacher-centred knowledge exchanges (see Figure 4) in which we informed teachers and staff about our work, discussed recent developments in multilingualism and multilingual education, and openly criticised the EAL label. We now acknowledge that these activities explicitly promoted a holistic view of multilingualism and urged participants to recognise and value their own languages (although that agenda went unquestioned at the time). Indeed, our own view of EAL was shared on one of our slides, showing clear positionality as follows:

We believe that the common conceptualisation of multilingual pupils in UK schools as English as an Additional Language (EAL) is problematic. Labelling students in this way reinforces a deficit view, to the extent that even exposure to languages other than English (LOTE) is seen as detrimental. We see this failure to acknowledge cultural and linguistic resources as discriminatory as it perpetuates the glorification of English over minority languages in education and beyond. Our project challenges this notion and offers a platform to diverse, multilingual voices, recognising the language rights of all students.



Figure 4: Knowledge exchange

Teachers often seemed enthusiastic about their roles in this multilingual community. This was especially apparent in the classrooms we visited, whether in scheduled, ‘official’ observations or when passing by. One teacher, noticing the so-called ‘multilingual researchers’ at the door, skilfully shifted their maths lesson to incorporate linguistic

knowledge, asking a floor full of students about languages. Soon, the group was counting together as a chorus in Urdu, displaying students' interest in and knowledge of a variety of tongues. Over time, our presence was normalised, as students and teachers alike began to recognize us, sometimes by name, and nearly always as the 'multilingual experts' we were viewed as. We ate lunch there, attended performances and events, and even took part in a lively end-of-term quiz at the school's staff party. All of this changed us, the research, and the space.

Some of the multilingualism we encountered felt 'performative' through what teachers and staff chose to show us as observers. Given the frequent visitors who were there to witness the school's multilingual approach (e.g., visiting teachers, local authorities, researchers), the school regularly put their multilingualism on display. They did so for us as well, perhaps conflating the showcasing of the pupils' languages for externals with our desire as researchers to get a more comprehensive view of the context. This choice to display the school's multilingualism seemed evident in who our school contact selected for interviews, knowledge exchanges, and classroom observations (i.e., teachers known to implement multilingual strategies, classes with certain language profiles) as well as the pupils who were encouraged to participate in Multilingual Story Time (i.e. students invited or encouraged due to their home languages). Ultimately, it was the school that chose who and what we observed – a potential selection bias that necessitates acknowledgement and questioning, regardless of how common it is in practice.

As part of the research process, we designed two interview guides to collect data from five teachers selected by our collaborator, the assistant headteacher (our direct collaborator), and the school's headteacher. The interviews began a few months into the partnership, when we had already built rapport with the participants and developed an understanding of the everyday realities of the school. The first round of interviews focused on the interviewees'

personal relationships with multilingualism, the training they had (or had not) received regarding potential needs of children who do not speak English as a first language, and their own perceptions of the school's approach. Reviewing the first interview guide reveals that, once again, we avoided use of the term EAL, instead referring to *multilingual children* or *students*. Although it may be said that this practice corresponds with our research agenda to influence discourses around multilingualism, the school – through its curriculum and staff members – had begun to move away from the concept of EAL before we arrived.

The second set of interviews took place after the teachers were observed in their classrooms, with questions tailored to their individual teaching practices. Knowing that the school was questioning the use of EAL, we asked whether participants were comfortable with replacing EAL with 'multilingual learners' or if they preferred a different alternative. Further, these interviews provided an opportunity to explore the notion of vulnerability and ask whether teachers felt the label of 'vulnerable' applied to their pupils, particularly those not fluent in English.

Observations of labelling practices up to this point led us to ask about terminology directly in the interviews. One teacher who worked closely with students considered *new arrivals*, indicated that the label was applied behind the scenes, rather than used with students directly (Denise¹, Int 2), raising questions about institutionally important labels that may or may not affect students. Another teacher (Laura, Int 2), when asked how she refers to students, claimed not to use labels, however, she went on to describe labelling practices that differed depending on the number of students. For her, a group might be referred to as 'multilingual', while a single student would likely be described by their specific language

¹ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

(e.g., ‘their first language is Bulgarian’). We observed similar categorisation practices by nationality or language during Multilingual Story Time when discussing reading groups.

Further questions about the potential ‘vulnerability’ of multilingual students emerged in moments where students who had other languages were given an individual or different task to work on during class. This singled them out, for better or for worse, and made us reflect on the way school systems sometimes equate EAL and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) students (Demie, 2018). The teachers, however, when asked directly, did not classify multilingualism as a vulnerable trait, instead focusing on the potential lack of understanding and/or inability to communicate difficulties, which could see *any* student classed as ‘vulnerable’.

As noted above, the school’s move towards a multilingual approach started well before this project; however, shifts were also apparent during our time there. Not long after meeting our collaborator, we noticed a shift in their job title via e-mail signatures (from lead in EAL, to multilingualism), signifying an institutional prioritisation of multilingualism. This shift in titles was just one manifestation of the school’s wider push for multilingualism. In an interview, one teacher reiterated and positively evaluated this shift in terminology and outlook, indicating that the change has signalled a move away from deficit discourses (Hema, Int 2). An additional positive perception towards the term multilingual was expressed by another educator as having ‘opened so many doors’ and not being ‘just English, just English’ (Denise, Int 2). Although discourses are not easy to change, we rarely (if at all) heard the label EAL used during our visits, with *multilingual learners* having seemingly replaced the former, and some staff outwardly expressing opposition to using EAL. This raises questions about agency around this shift to multilingualism, with one teacher (Mark, Int 1²) indicating

² Please note, only 1 interview was conducted with Mark, thus the content corresponds roughly with that of interview 2 for other teachers.

that a managing member of staff was responsible for the change. Having found ourselves in the school at a later stage in this process, it is hard to know how smooth or problematic, top-down or bottom-up, the change has been.

Looking ahead

As the title of the project that motivated this paper suggests (*‘Promoting multilingualism at school: How researcher and practitioner collaboration can support and inform the educator-student-community triad’*), our university-school partnership had the explicit aim of ‘promoting multilingualism at school’. Our understanding of multilingualism has been clearly influenced by a holistic approach (Grosjean, 2021) that values the complex configuration of linguistic resources that people have as *language*s. The impact of such a view was clear in how our participants, after being exposed to our new conceptualisations, began to acknowledge their own multilingualism, recognising their ability to understand, speak, and communicate in languages other than English despite not having the high levels of proficiency prescribed by dominant discourses around multilingualism. We, therefore, began to see our own terms and concepts reflected and adopted within the school.

Although we aimed to be inclusive, especially in relation to languages and cultural representations, framing our activities as ‘multilingual’ may have unintendedly reinforced existing dichotomies between individuals who identify – or are labelled – as multilingual and those who do not. In fact, using ‘multilingual’ in activity names (e.g., Multilingual Story Time) may have had unintended consequences, such as pupils who do not view themselves as multilingual feeling excluded. The focus on multilingualism also raises questions about what researchers and participants understand as ‘being monolingual’, particularly in contexts where multilingualism – the presence of different languages within a space – is the norm. Although ‘true monolingualism’ is arguably hard to maintain in today’s multicultural societies, there are children who are classified as or identify as English-speaking

monolinguals within educational systems and while these students represented a minority in this school, their needs also require consideration. Similarly, our reflections on our initiatives have made us question general use of the label ‘multilingual’, since the categorisation of pupils as ‘multilingual’ creates an inevitable opposition with the label ‘monolingual’.

Although we do believe that giving visibility to – and celebrating – the linguistic diversity of minoritised communities can be an act of social justice, a dualistic approach (i.e., monolingual vs. multilingual) does not account for the wide array of relationships that individuals have with languages and forces them to adopt an ‘either/or’ identity.

In relation to vulnerability, our presence in the school and our interactions with participants also influenced how we framed this concept. As teachers and staff became accustomed to and comfortable with seeing us at the school, some began to share their experiences in informal encounters, at times, naming specific pupils, which could render them vulnerable. Looking back, this unsolicited insider knowledge may have consciously and/or subconsciously influenced our planning, data collection, and activities. For example, we chose some books for our multilingual library with specific pupils in mind; grouped students and volunteers for Multilingual Story Time based on their linguistic repertoires; paid more attention to those pupils we knew about when observing their classrooms; and inquired about students known to us in the interviews. In a sense, knowing some students better – whether through direct interactions or indirectly via shared information – affected our responses to them, making us aware of certain students’ needs over others. Therefore, we suggest that it is these particularities of the research process, rather than specific attributes of the pupils themselves, that are likely to add layers of vulnerability (Luna, 2019) by singling out individuals and making them involuntary, indirect subjects of discussion and study.

By disclosing how the planning and implementation stages of our research have been shaped by our own positionalities, we do not intend to invalidate the impact of our work or

research more widely, but to offer a transparent and honest account of how commonly taken-for-granted experiences shape the stories we tell and the voices we emphasise (Liamputtong, 2007). This act of ongoing reflexivity has allowed us to unpack subjectivities in our research design and process, acknowledging that any form of academic inquiry will be affected by personal and institutional biases (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023), particularly when those under study are given *a priori* labels.

Discussion

The research process, labelling, and vulnerability

Due to numerous labels that are institutionally imposed on school pupils who do not conform to the linguistic expectations of the UK educational system (e.g., EAL, *new arrival*, *vulnerable*), researchers and other stakeholders are likely to reproduce and reinforce such classifications if these are not problematised in practice. In line with views of vulnerability as a fluid, contextual, and socially constructed trait (Aldridge, 2015; Liamputtong, 2007; Luna 2019), our participant teachers do not perceive vulnerability as fixed or equate it with a lack of proficiency in English. However, our project, through our planning and practices, reveals that notions of vulnerability surrounding so-called EAL pupils are co-constructed in the research process as researchers and participants engage in practices that (inadvertently) contribute to such an association. This was visible in how pupils were talked about by researchers, collaborators, and participants, especially when their individual characteristics are exposed by others; how researcher familiarity (or lack thereof) with students and their stories shaped their experiences; and how research activities can further reinforce ‘either/or’ classifications by imposing linguistic identities (e.g., multilingual/monolingual).

Adopting a reflexive lens has revealed tensions between our attempts to give voice and agency to individuals who may be *a priori* labelled as vulnerable, and the acknowledgment that our research may inadvertently generate such vulnerabilities. While pre-emptive considerations of vulnerability in preparing projects are essential as protective measures (e.g., ethical considerations, safeguarding, risk assessments), these requirements can influence who we choose to research and how ‘vulnerable’ we perceive potential participants to be, with researchers thus entering the site with preconceived ideas of vulnerability. An attempt to keep children safe by not including them as ‘participants,’ for example, may take away their agency, as not working directly with them means others are speaking *for* and *about* them. Within the research process, the conceptualisation of vulnerability is fluid and discourse-dependent (Aldridge, 2015; Luna, 2019) with labels easily repeated and reproduced through the language used.

Although engaging reflexively has highlighted how labels can contribute to putting school pupils in vulnerable situations, in practice, they can be useful (Spack, 1997). In this respect, we, as researchers, alongside educators and other stakeholders, should examine our own labelling practices to question, reconsider, and challenge institutionalised labels, especially when they are linked to ideological assumptions based on individual characteristics (Chaka, 2021). A reflexive lens is shown to be a fruitful, and necessary, way to expose complexities, which may be particularly relevant in minoritised language and bi/multilingual contexts (Selleck & Barakos, 2023). Researchers should be aware of the lack of neutrality of labels (Webster & Liu, 2012) and avoid dualistic classifications that can impact participants. These reflexive approaches and activities are examples of decolonial research practices (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021) with the potential to challenge deeply rooted discourses that consider deviation from expected standards as abnormal. Put simply, challenging the systematic reproduction of labels surrounding so-called EAL learners can expose the extent

to which the link between EAL and vulnerability is sustained by social structures that ideologically position English in opposition to other languages.

Changing discourses?

Even though prior studies have noted the prevalence of deficit discourses surrounding multilingualism in education (Cunningham & Little, 2022; Sutton, 2017), the above account reveals one school's observed and documented shift towards discourses that value linguistic diversity. The positive impressions that teachers showed towards this changing rhetoric – observed in their views, practices, and openness to multilingualism – seem to be the result of a school-wide approach that goes beyond celebratory multilingualism (Martín-Rojo, 2018) or 'multilingualism light' (Qhehl, 2022). However, while this school models a much-needed shift towards inclusion in its changing discourses, a singular focus on the value of being multilingual creates an underlying opposition between 'good' multilingualism and 'bad' monolingualism. Hence, to make the necessary shift in perceptions of multilingualism without devaluing or ignoring those who identify with a single language, researchers and educators must ensure their discourses value a range of relationships to language(s).

Reflections and examples from our time in this school show that localised changes of discourse are possible and can make a difference, however they also suggest that a singular top-down or bottom-up approach may not be enough. While we support the idea that EAL as a label needs change (Sharples, 2023), we agree that a single label does not encapsulate the diversity of these pupils (Cummins, 2021). Like all terms, conceptualisations of multilingualism are also ideological, and valuing and promoting multilingualism can generate hierarchies that (re)produce difference and/or inequality (Duchêne, 2020). Thus, rather than imposing an alternative, there should be agency for all stakeholders, from educators and

school leaders, to students, parents, and community members. A holistic approach, which acknowledges and supports the languages of school pupils, is likely to be more sustainable.

By adopting the term *multilingual learners*, this school provides a template for a much-needed shift away from deficit labelling practices. Taken alone, this terminological change might seem trivial or performative, but our ethnographic experiences have shown the school's commitment to acknowledging and valuing languages. Indeed, performativity can be an important first step since questions of where, when, and how pupils see their own language(s) represented are issues of linguistic justice and identity. That said, performativity also affects the research process. Not only do we, as researchers, bring agendas and discourses that impact outcomes, so do participants and institutions. It is thus essential to consider the interplay of shared and/or conflicting motives throughout the research process, as well as in conclusions that are inevitably formed based on partial accounts selected by those with subjective motives of their own.

Regardless of these critiques, this school provides evidence that another way of looking at so-called EAL learners is possible by aligning itself with shifting academic theorisation and demonstrating how multilingual realities can look in pedagogical spaces. This corresponds with increasing awareness of non-English languages in English primary schools (Cunningham & Little, 2022), and pushes back against a deficit view since, in this context, having multiple languages is not necessarily seen as a risk factor. Lessons can be learned from this school, where shifting discourses in a localised space can open doors to changing wider perceptions.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of widely circulating deficit views on multilingualism, this project has explored an East London primary school's efforts to counter these narratives with a multilingual agenda. Using a reflexive lens to question, acknowledge, and account for our own positionalities *during* the research process, we respond to recent calls for transparency and visibility around methodological choices at all stages of investigation (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023; Ladegaard, 2023; Rolland et al., 2023). Drawing on illustrative examples and ethnographic observations, we argue that our roles, agendas, subjectivities, and decisions as researchers inevitably contribute to reproducing, maintaining, and challenging labels, and demonstrate how the planning and implementation stages of a research project can be influenced by discourses around participants' identities. In doing so, we make a new link between multilingualism, labelling practices, and vulnerability in research contexts.

Further, we stress how a reflexive approach can minimise imbalances regarding labels, particularly in relation to (mono and) multilingualism and vulnerability, indicating that *a priori* categorisation of individuals as *vulnerable*, *multilingual*, or EAL can lead to essentialisation (Ennser-Kananen & Saarinen, 2021) and remove agency. Vulnerability, like other labels associated with school pupils perceived to be at risk because of their linguistic background, should be seen as fluid, individual, and context-dependent. Therefore, engaging in and sharing these reflexive practices is essential as researchers document and problematise aspects of the research process that otherwise would be invisible, neglected, or ignored; uncovering ideologies and challenging the unquestioned reproduction of labels that may deepen inequalities.

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