

ELT Research Papers 13–02

Identity in foreign language learning and teaching: why listening to our students' and teachers' voices really matters

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ISBN 978-0-86355-709-5

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Abstract

The notions of self and identity have generated a considerable amount of literature, their relationship to language also being the subject of numerous conceptual and research papers. Few studies, however, have investigated the relationship between identity perceptions and achievement, especially in different academic subjects. Our project addressed this need, comparing the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language and the learning and teaching of mathematics in Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. Our participants were 4,151 students who completed an online questionnaire about their identity perceptions in learning English and, one week later, a second questionnaire about learning mathematics, as well as 161 teachers of English and 97 teachers of mathematics. This paper presents some of our key findings, providing evidence for the relationship between identity perceptions, declared learner achievement and teacher perceptions. We discuss the importance of providing a personally relevant learning and teaching environment and provide several practical suggestions of how this can be achieved.

Introduction

While identity has been a popular topic in language-learning literature for several decades now, few studies have explored the practical significance of encouraging identity development in the foreign language classroom. This paper reports on a cross-sectional European study that has addressed this need by comparing identity perceptions to declared achievement in two academic subjects: English as a foreign language and mathematics. Before providing a necessarily brief literature background, the paper presents succinct methodological details of our project and key findings, which are then discussed from a practical standpoint. The paper concludes by acknowledging some of the limitations of the study and re-emphasising the need for further research.

In this paper, the notion of identity is understood to mean the aggregate of a person's self beliefs, which may be private or public and may differ from one relational context to another (Taylor, 2013a, forthcoming). Throughout the paper, the phrase 'relational context' will be used to refer to a given social situation where the individual interacts with other persons in a particular social capacity, responding to particular social expectations. Examples of such relational contexts are teacher-pupil, peer-group or family interactions, where social roles and expectations are usually clearly defined (Taylor, 2013b, forthcoming).

1

Background: identity in foreign language learning and teaching

Terms such as self and identity are very popular in language-learning literature, and relevant volumes and papers that are published every year. This is not surprising, given that language is the main vehicle of expressing the self (Ochs, 2008) and learning a new language is sometimes said to mean learning a new identity (Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). For many years, exploring the relationship between identity and language development has been largely limited to second language acquisition research – mainly immigrant communities in the USA, Canada and Australia – learners being regarded from the perspective of the influence that social environment has on their identity processes (Goldstein, 1997; McKay and Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). In foreign language learning contexts, however, identity has only recently begun to attract research attention – perhaps as a result of calls for foreign language learners to be regarded as real people at the hub of intricate social networks (e.g., Riley, 2006; Ushioda, 2009).

The popularity of Dörnyei's (e.g., 2009) L2 Motivational Self System shows there is much interest in the individual's perspective in foreign language learning. The model is an application to language learning of two earlier theories – possible selves (e.g., Markus and Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy (e.g., Higgins, 1987) – and has three components: the *ideal L2 self*, the *ought-to L2 self* and the *L2 learning experience*. The strongest component of the model is the ideal L2 self, which the author characterises as 'a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves' (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Nevertheless, the model does not include an actual self and, as such, it is unclear how the ideal self can be a powerful motivator to distance oneself from one's actual self, when no attention is given to the actual self. In practical educational terms, it is unclear, for example, how a teacher can help a student reduce the discrepancy between their actual self and their ideal self if they do not know much about the starting point of this motivational process – the actual or current self.

Recent publications (e.g., Mercer, 2011; Murray, Gao and Lamb, 2011) signal an emergent qualitative approach to identity in foreign language learning which favours an ever-shifting definition of the notion. This approach is very welcome in that it places the language learner in the social context. Being by nature highly context-dependent, however, such approaches cannot lead to generalisable results with the potential to influence educational policy or practice elsewhere, nor to 'easily interpretable forms of pedagogical advice' (Mercer, 2011, p. 4). More importantly, the studies reported in these publications concentrate almost exclusively on adult language learners (with the exception of Lamb, 2011) and while their declared approach is social, identity dynamics involving different socio-relational contexts are virtually absent from their methodologies and discussions.

The link between foreign language learning and adolescent identity has not inspired much research to date, although the topic warrants close scrutiny because foreign language learning occurs mostly in adolescence, usually at school, and therefore identity issues associated with learning a new language (e.g., Lightbown and Spada, 2006) overlap with identity issues associated with adolescence (e.g., Côté, 2009). It is the period when youngsters begin to compare themselves to their significant others, which results in the self displayed to a group of peers being frequently different from the self displayed to one's best friends, family or teachers (e.g., Harter, 2012). Although many practitioners are familiar with such dynamics that result in strategic identity display in the classroom (i.e., pupils appearing very interested in learning when interacting with the teacher, but very disinterested academically when interacting with their peers), hardly any published research has addressed the topic in foreign language learning. Several authors (e.g., Bartram, 2010; Kyriacou and Zhu, 2008; Williams and Burden, 1999) have described the impact of different relational contexts on language learners from various theoretical perspectives, but studies like the ones conducted by Juvonen and colleagues (e.g., Juvonen, 1996; Juvonen and Murdock, 1993) showing that strategic self-presentation is rife in classroom settings have not had much echo in foreign language learning literature.

This research need prompted Taylor (2010) to propose, test and validate a new theoretical framework that builds on several educational psychology theories – in particular the private self/public self dichotomy (e.g., Baumeister, 1986), self-presentation and impression management (e.g., Leary, 1995), self-discrepancy (e.g., Higgins, 1987) and relational contexts in adolescence (e.g., Harter, 2012). The new model – which constitutes the theoretical framework used in the present project – regards identity as a composite notion characterised by two self dimensions (possible/actual and internal/external) resulting in four components of the self system (see Table 1):

- **Private self (actual, internal):** a person’s intimate representation of his/her present attributes, which may or may not transpire socially;
- **Public selves (actual, external):** various social presentations that a person may display depending on the relational context and audience;
- **Ideal self (possible, internal):** a personal representation of what somebody would like to be in the future, irrespective of other people’s desires and expectations; and
- **Imposed selves (possible, external):** representations of other people’s hopes, desires and expectations of what an individual should achieve, the number of such representations depending on the number of social relational contexts in which the individual functions.

Table 1: A quadripartite model of identity

Self dimension	Internal	External
possible	ideal	imposed
actual	private	public

These external self components were hypothesised and shown to vary from one relational context to another. Taylor (2010) also obtained strong support for the hypothesis that these four self components appear to cluster into one of the following main configurations at a given time in a given relational context:

- **Submissive:** a strong imposed self generates responses against the ideal self (e.g., a student always doing what they are told despite having different intentions);
- **Duplicitous:** a different ideal and imposed self generate parallel responses (e.g., a student pretending to be very interested in an academic subject but actually putting in as little effort as possible and following their own alternative agenda);
- **Rebellious:** a strong ideal self generates responses against the imposed self (e.g., a student who feels strong peer pressure to be ‘one of the gang’ by playing truant but who follows their own goal of studying for university); and

- **Harmonious:** convergent ideal and imposed selves generate congruent responses (e.g., an adolescent who works hard to become a journalist and is strongly encouraged by their family to become a journalist).

Taylor (2010) tested the foreign language learning facets of these self components, that is, the L2 private self and the L2 ideal self, as well as the L2 public and imposed selves in four relational contexts (teachers, classmates, best friends and family) with 1,045 teenagers learning English as a foreign language in Romania. She found that not only were the public selves significantly and very highly correlated with the imposed selves, but – critically – the correlations between the public selves and the private selves were very low. This suggested the presence of strategic identity display, which was often unrelated to what language learners believed they were as individuals. In addition, her findings indicate that students who felt they could not reveal their private selves to the English teacher, were being pushed into strategic identity display, had weaker private, ideal and public selves than those who felt appreciated as real individuals and had been encouraged to develop along their desired future paths. In other words, students who did not feel appreciated as individuals by the English teacher felt less competent, less interested in careers related to the English language and less inclined to respond to teacher expectations in the classroom than students who did feel appreciated as individuals. The implications for practice were very important: declared achievement and perceived competence in language learning appeared to depend on the teacher’s appreciation of the student’s individual identity in class.

While previous studies of foreign language learners’ identity have all contributed useful insights into the topic, hardly any published research has to date offered empirical evaluations of: language-specific effects (by comparisons with other academic subjects) on the learners’ identities in interaction with various relational contexts; the relationship between identity perceptions, perceived competence and achievement in learning language versus a control academic subject; the relationship between teachers’ identity perceptions and their acknowledgement of students’ identities; and cross-country comparisons of such perspectives. This research need constituted the rationale for our cross-sectional European project, which used the research design described briefly below.

2

Key methodological details

Research questions. Our project aimed to further explore the role of identity in foreign language learning and teaching by answering the following questions:

1. How do participant learners perceive their private, public, ideal and imposed selves in relation to learning English as a foreign language and mathematics?
2. How do the students' identity perceptions relate to their declared academic achievement in English and mathematics?
3. Are there any differences between the participant learners' identity perceptions in three relational contexts (teachers, peers, family)?
4. What is the relationship between the teachers' declared appreciation of students in class and the teachers' own perceived competence?
5. What is the relationship between the teachers' declared appreciation of students in class and the teachers' own perceived appreciation in three relational contexts (students, colleagues, headteacher)?
6. Are there any differences between the four participant countries in terms of student/teacher identity perceptions?

Participants. We sought answers to these questions by targeting a sample of 4,000 learners of English and mathematics aged 14–19 in Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. The target number of participants was intended to provide a probability sample at 95 per cent confidence level and 3 per cent confidence interval (Agresti and Finlay, 1997; L. Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) for each country. This was necessary in order to ensure the relative generalisability of some of our findings and maximise the impact of our project on educational policy and practice, as well as to allow sub-group comparisons within and between countries. In addition to the student participants, a target sample of 20 teachers of English in each country was invited to participate in our survey, together with as many mathematics teachers as possible. (Please see the Key findings section, page 7, for the final number of participants.)

Methods and instruments. The project had a cross-sectional quantitative research design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data via online

questionnaires. The students were surveyed twice: first testing their identity perceptions in learning English, then, one week later, testing their identity perceptions in learning mathematics (control subject). The control subject was chosen because maths self-perceptions have been shown to be unrelated to language-related self-perceptions (e.g., Marsh, 1990) and students in all participant countries study maths as well as English. The instrument we used was validated by Taylor (2010) and contained: a) one vignette section (testing self systems in three relational contexts); b) five continuous scales: private self (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$), public selves ($\alpha = .90, .91$ and $.88$ in the three relational contexts, respectively), ideal self ($\alpha = .76$), imposed selves ($\alpha = .86, .90$ and $.79$ in the three relational contexts, respectively) and perceived appreciation in class ($\alpha = .82$); c) an open-ended item about perceptions in learning other subjects; d) and a biodata section. The questionnaire was translated into the four languages and students completed it in their own language. (The complete instrument can be downloaded from www.iris-database.org).

Both English and maths teachers completed one online questionnaire that contained two continuous scales: teachers' perceived appreciation of students in class, and perceived appreciation of teachers in three relational contexts (by students, colleagues and headteacher), open-ended items eliciting attitudes regarding the importance of identity in teaching and learning, as well as perceived differences as to the role of identity in language learning and in other subjects; an open-ended item eliciting opinions of what constitutes a good teacher, followed by a rating scale where teachers were asked to estimate how far they feel they fulfilled their understanding of 'a good teacher' on a scale of 1–6. Biodata were also collected. The English teachers completed the questionnaire in English, while the maths teachers completed a translation into their own language. All instruments were piloted with similar participants in all four research contexts and refined before the main study. Students participated in groups (with the option to withdraw) and teacher participants were self-selected. Responses were anonymous and confidentiality was maintained at all stages, no participant or institution being identified in any report of this research.

3

Key findings

This section briefly presents some of the key quantitative findings of our project. The final number of participants (students and teachers) in our study was 4,409, details being shown in Table 2. The same groups of students took both the English and the maths questionnaire, the fact that the total for maths is lower than for English being explained through participant attrition and school/group availability.

Table 2: Participant numbers

	Students		Teachers	
	English	Maths	English	Maths
Bulgaria	1,117	782	44	19
Germany	1,054	895	59	32
Netherlands	1,041	858	34	24
Spain	939	888	24	22
Total	4,151	3,423	161	97

The key results of our study will be organised in two sections: student perceptions and teacher perceptions, being followed by a general discussion emphasising the implications of our findings and recommendations for teaching practice.

Student perceptions

Students' perceptions will be presented from the perspectives of identity perceptions in the two subjects, self component correlations showing strong strategic identity display, self system frequencies, achievement implications and specific country differences.

Identity perceptions in English versus mathematics

With regards to the four components of the self system (private self, ideal self, public self and imposed self), without exception the mean values we obtained for English were higher than the means for maths (see Table 3: one-way analysis of variance –ANOVA – with Bonferroni adjustment). This may be an indication that, as expected, mathematics is not as close to one's sense of self as a foreign language can be, given that the latter often allows for the expression of personally relevant and subjective content in a way that mathematics does not. It is quite revealing that, while the difference between the two subjects was statistically significant for all self components (Table 3), the only medium-effect sizes were obtained for the private self and the ideal self (Cohen's $d = .45$ and $.58$, respectively)¹. This shows that the two subjects are quite similar on the external self axis – public and imposed selves – that is, students feel similar social expectations and have a similar identity response for both subjects. In more concrete terms, both for English and for maths we can see that the teacher and the family exercise a significant perceived pressure on the students (imposed selves), which is mirrored by the perceived importance of showing the teacher and the family that both subjects are important in one's life. Conversely, in the classmates' relational context, the pressure (imposed self) is low, and so is the public self. This corroborates other findings reported in the literature (e.g., Juvonen, 1996; Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002) that show students resort to strategic identity display in the classroom – showing the teacher (or, by extension, the family) that they are engaged academically, as it may serve them better, while appearing academically disaffected to their peers, which may ensure better group acceptance.

¹ A value of 0.20 is considered small, 0.50 is medium and 0.80 is large (J.W. Cohen, 1988).

Table 3: Mean differences between the self components for English and maths

		n	Mean	SD	SE	Sig.	Cohen's d	
Private self	English	4048	3.82	1.07	0.02	p<.001	.45	
	Maths	3304	3.31	1.17	0.02			
Ideal self	English	4048	3.85	1.11	0.02	p<.001	.58	
	Maths	3304	3.15	1.29	0.02			
Public self	Teacher	English	3975	4.31	1.16	0.02	p<.05	.07
		Maths	3233	4.23	1.23	0.02		
	Classmates	English	3975	2.79	1.23	0.02	p<.001	.18
		Maths	3233	2.56	1.26	0.02		
	Family	English	3975	4.39	1.09	0.02	p<.001	.16
		Maths	3233	4.21	1.18	0.02		
Imposed self	Teacher	English	3993	4.16	1.07	0.02	p<.001	.11
		Maths	3258	4.03	1.20	0.02		
	Classmates	English	3993	2.76	1.09	0.02	p<.001	.22
		Maths	3258	2.51	1.16	0.02		
	Family	English	3993	4.19	0.97	0.02	p<.001	.26
		Maths	3258	3.92	1.12	0.02		

Notes. n = valid responses included in the analysis; SD = standard deviation, SE = standard error of mean; Sig. = statistical significance; range 1–6, except for ideal self: 1–5; Cohen's d effect size obtained from means and standard deviations using the online effect-size calculator available at www.uccs.edu/~lbecker/

However, when considering the effect size of the differences in perception between English and mathematics, the only notable differences are in terms of the private and ideal self. While social expectations and social responses are similar for the two subjects, the really personal self components are much stronger for English than maths: the private self (showing what individuals believe about themselves as language/ maths learners) and especially the ideal self (showing how important they consider the subject to be for their future). This may be explained by higher perceived difficulty of mathematics and more versatility offered by a foreign language for a variety of careers, as well as perhaps lower perceived difficulty.

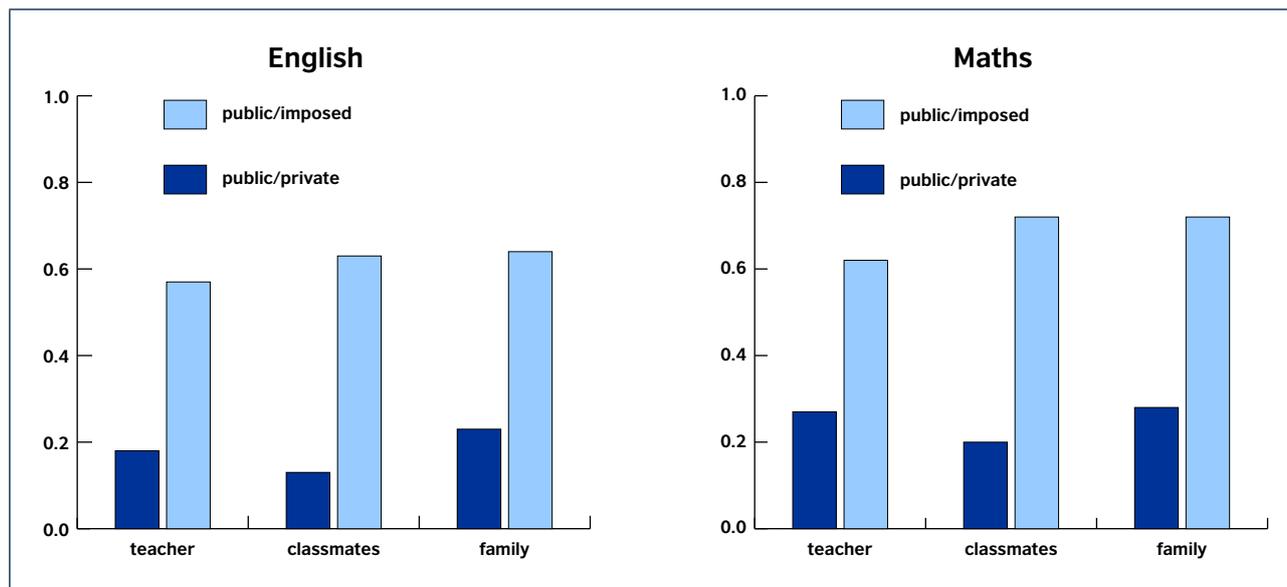
Strategic identity display (self correlations)

Interesting results, confirming previous findings (Taylor, 2010), regarded the correlations between the self components, in particular between the private self and the public self, on the one hand, and the correlations between the public self and the imposed self, on the other hand. As Figure 1 shows, self correlations are quite similar for English and for maths, with some exceptions, where they are slightly higher for maths. For example, the relationship between the private self and the self imposed by the teacher (.27 versus .18), indicating perhaps a stronger expectation of maths teachers that students may not

do so well. Contrary to our expectations, correlations between the public self and the imposed self were higher for maths in all three relational contexts, but in particular for family (.72 versus .64) and classmates (.72 versus .63). This suggests that identity display may be more pronounced in learning mathematics than in learning a foreign language.

Figure 1 shows clearly the presence of strategic identity display in all three relational contexts, for both subjects – again corroborating previous findings reported for the first time in second-language acquisition (SLA) research by Taylor (2010). The figure is a graphical representation of two types of correlations: between the participants' private selves and their public selves (dark), and the correlation between their public selves and imposed selves (light hatched) in each relational context, separately for the two academic subjects. The dark bars indicate a tendency for participants to hide their private selves in social interaction, or to give impressions that they personally think are not part of their private selves. In stark opposition to the private/public correlations, the relationship between the public selves that these students display and the perceived imposed self in each relational context is very strong, in particular for classmates and family with respect to mathematics.

Figure 1: Public/private and public/imposed correlations in three relational contexts and two academic subjects

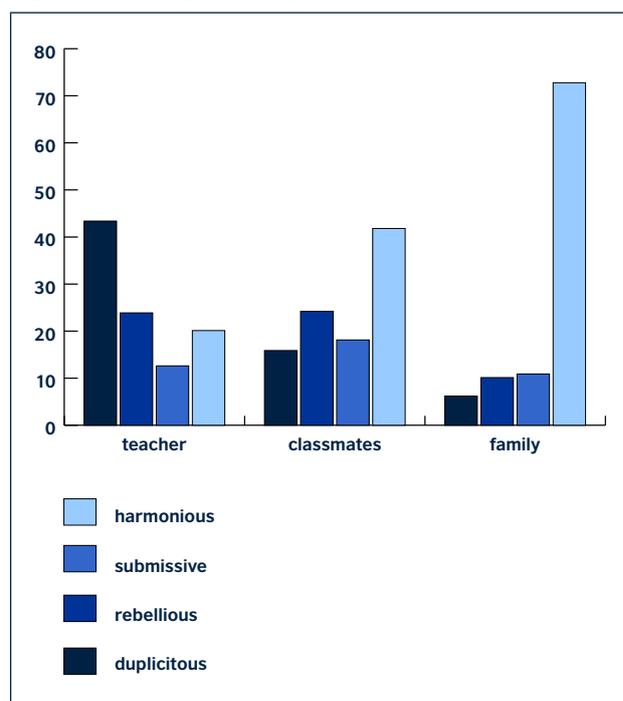


This is, again, an indication that students participating in this project resort to identity display that serves them best (e.g., showing their teachers and family that they are academically engaged and interested while displaying the expected academic disaffection in their peer interactions), all this being very different from what they believe about themselves as English/ maths learners.

Self systems

We saw above (Table 3) that teachers and families were characterised by similarly high perceived expectations (imposed selves), in contrast to the imposed selves originating in the classmates' relational context, and that the participants' public selves mirrored the high values for teachers and families, and the low for classmates. Analysing the data from the point of view of the self systems, however, we identify a different pattern (Figure 2): classmates are similar to families in generating the highest frequency of harmonious self systems in our participants (hardly any difference between subjects or countries, which strengthens the validity of the findings). The fact that most participants chose the harmonious self system for their family may be explained by a possible familial agreement as to what subjects the student should pursue, or, indeed, it may reflect the unconditional nurturing atmosphere of most families that encourages adolescents to develop harmoniously irrespective of their academic interests. This may also be the case in the classmates' relational contexts, where friendship and bonding is clearly unrelated to the expectations of one's academic success or the impressions that one strives to display.

Figure 2: Self systems by relational context

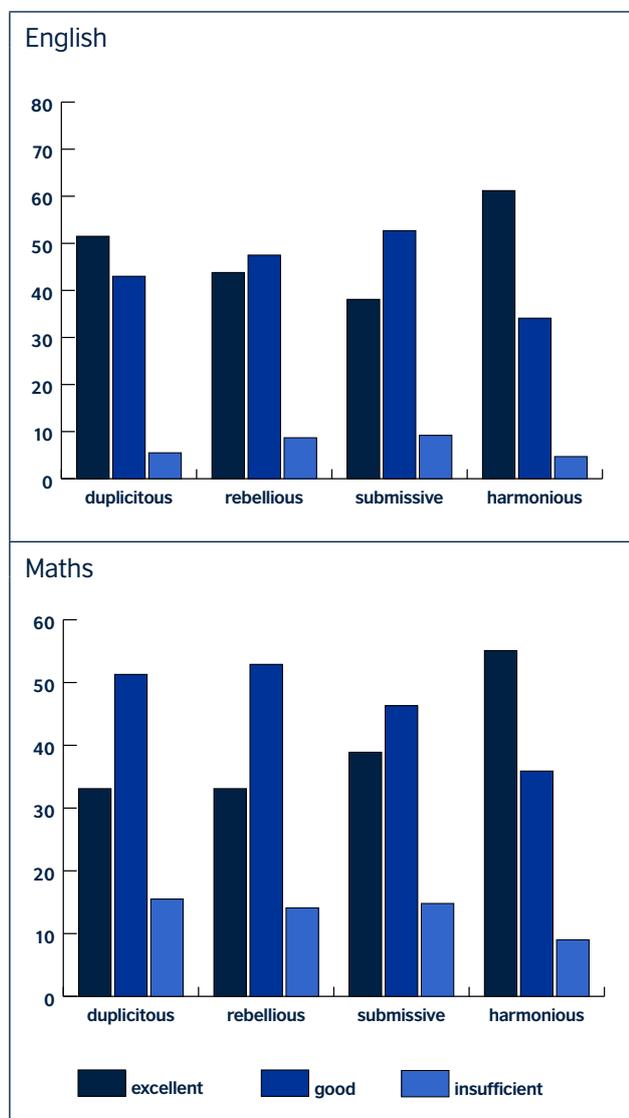


A worrying trend, which has been identified before (Taylor, 2010), is that most students chose the duplicitous self system for the teacher-relational context. This indicates that students feel the need to display an identity that is not necessarily theirs in their interaction with the English and maths teachers (see the self-system vignettes in the Appendix, page 21, for a clearer picture of the four self-system descriptions from which students chose).

Identity and achievement in interactions with the teacher

When cross-tabulating the teacher self system with the students' declared achievement (calibrated and recoded for all the countries as excellent/good/insufficient), we obtained the differences that can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Declared achievement by self system in the teacher-relational context



For English, few students declared they had insufficient results and, of these, the fewest fell into the harmonious and duplicitous categories. These are also the self systems where most students declared results that were coded as excellent. Interestingly, the lowest number of excellent results is associated with the submissive self system. In other words, when students feel they are appreciated as individuals, nurtured and encouraged to develop along a trajectory that they consider personally relevant and fulfilling (see Appendix, page 21), their declared results are higher than in any other situation.

When, however, they feel the need to submit to the teachers' requests without perhaps seeing the necessity or the relevance of these requests, their declared achievement is lower. This is an important insight, providing support to the hypothesis that an educational environment that allows the individual to thrive and develop in a personally meaningful way leads to better language learning.

This insight is even clearer for mathematics (Figure 3), in which the only teacher self system where the excellent results exceed the others is the harmonious one. While pretending to be the type of student they feel is expected of them (duplicitous self system) or rebelling against an identity imposed on them by the teacher, these students do obtain good results in maths learning, but most excellent results are found in contexts where they feel cherished and encouraged to develop as individuals. (However, our data do not allow for any causal inference.)

Apart from self components and self systems, we also collected data on the students' perceptions of being appreciated as individuals by the teacher. Perceived appreciation was measured on a scale of 1–6 and its mean values were 3.34 (SD .92) for English and 3.15 (SD .94) for maths, respectively. Cross-tabulating these two variables – being appreciated as an individual and declared achievement – we can see clearly that the highest perceived appreciation value is always related to reported excellent results (Chi square significant at $p < .001$).

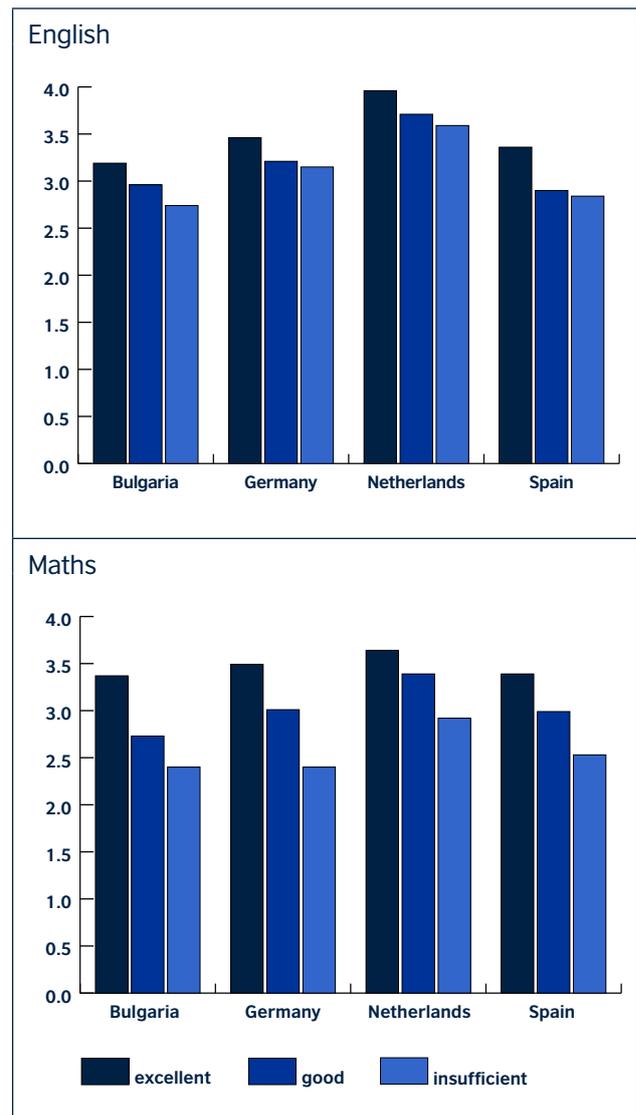
These statistically significant differences show that students who feel they are appreciated as individuals by the teacher do better than those who feel less so. This is the case in both subjects, but particularly in maths, with some small differences between countries.

Country differences

While, overall, our findings are similar for the four participating countries, there are some interesting differences. For example, Figure 4 shows differences in declared achievement between learners of English and maths in the four countries. As we can see in Figure 4, Bulgarian participants declared better learning achievement in English and maths than students in the other three countries, with a higher percentage of participants declaring 'excellent' results. (As mentioned above, respondents were asked for their average mark, which was then recoded into excellent/good/insufficient according to each country's marking scale.) Spanish learners of English also self-report that they are doing generally better, while the Netherlands and Spain have the highest percentages of declared insufficient results.

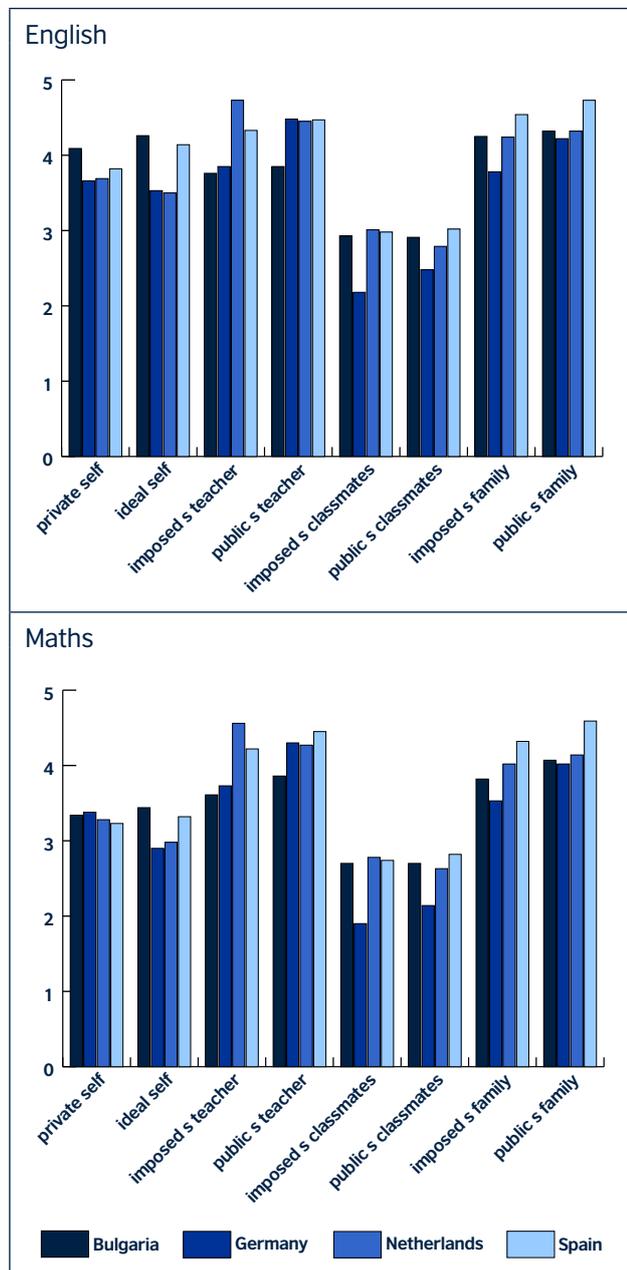
These findings must, of course, be interpreted with caution. On the basis of the data collected on this project, it is not possible to make any bold statements regarding achievement levels in these countries. These findings are based solely on the participants' declared responses, and they may be influenced by a variety of variables such as memory effects, different assessment systems, school types or, indeed, strategic identity display (participants' declaration possibly reflecting how they want to be seen by others rather than how they see themselves).

Figure 4: Cross-country comparison of students' declared achievement (plots represent response % frequencies)



In terms of identity perceptions, Figure 5 indicates that Bulgarian students also have higher private and ideal selves than other participants, which means that they feel generally more competent, love the subjects more and have stronger intentions to continue using the subjects in the future.

Figure 5: Cross-country comparison of students' identity perceptions (plots represent means; range: 1–6, except ideal self: 1–5)



Other immediately noticeable differences characterise Spanish learners, who appear to feel stronger pressure from their families and teachers, while also responding with stronger public selves in these relational contexts. The highest perceived teacher pressure, however, is registered in the Netherlands, while Germany is clearly the country where peer pressure is less important than in other environments, both the imposed self and the public self being lower in the classmates' relational context.

Teacher perceptions

As mentioned in Section 2, teachers were invited to answer questions regarding their perceived appreciation of students as individuals, as well as their own feelings of being appreciated as individuals by students, colleagues and headteachers. Data were also collected regarding the participants' teaching experience and their highest degree (completed or currently undertaken). Key findings related to these variables are reported briefly in this section.

Teachers' education and experience

Among the background data we collected about teachers was information on their highest degree completed and length of teaching experience, which we then compared to various perceptions using multinomial logistic regression. Interestingly, the highest degree completed did not predict declared appreciation of students or perceived appreciation by students, colleagues or headteachers, nor did it predict teaching qualities self-rating. Teaching experience predicted feelings of appreciation by colleagues and headteachers, as well as teaching qualities self-rating, but it did not predict declared appreciation of students or perceived appreciation by students. In other words, teachers' feelings of appreciating students and of being appreciated by students and colleagues as an individual person did not depend on their educational background. The more teaching experience they had, however, the more confident they felt about their teaching qualities, and the more appreciated they felt by their colleagues and headteachers. However, appreciation of students and by students did not depend on teaching experience, which indicates that empathy and care may be more important in building a solid teacher-student working relationship than teaching experience.

Identity perceptions in English versus mathematics

When comparing the teachers' identity perceptions in English and maths, together with their teaching qualities self-rating, we again obtained higher values for English than for maths (see Table 4: one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni adjustment).

As shown in Table 4, all the mean values are lower for maths than English, reinforcing, perhaps, the insight that maths is a less personal subject than English, allowing for less self-relevant content. (However, we have seen in Figure 3 that a more individualised environment leads to better results for students, especially for maths.) A very large effect size was identified for declared appreciation of students, where English teachers appear to care more about the individual wellbeing of their class. In turn, they also feel more appreciated by their

students than maths teachers do, and this is the second-largest (moderate) effect size. While all other values are higher for English teachers, the very small effect sizes and lack of statistical significance show that for these variables there is no actual difference between English and maths.

Table 4: Mean differences between the teacher perceptions for English and maths

		n	Mean	SD	SE	Sig.	Cohen's d
Appreciation of students	English	158	4.75	0.49	0.04	p<.001	.82
	Maths	92	4.28	0.64	0.07		
Being appreciated by students	English	149	4.09	0.61	0.05	p<.05	.33
	Maths	87	3.88	0.65	0.07		
Being appreciated by colleagues	English	149	4.50	0.76	0.06	non-sig	.12
	Maths	87	4.42	0.59	0.06		
Being appreciated by the head	English	149	4.06	0.80	0.07	non-sig	.06
	Maths	87	4.01	0.76	0.08		
Teaching qualities self-rating	English	149	4.75	0.85	0.07	non-sig	.07
	Maths	87	4.69	0.85	0.09		

Notes. n = valid responses included in the analysis; SD = standard deviation, SE = standard error of mean; Sig. = statistical significance; range 1–6; Cohen's d effect size obtained from means and standard deviations using the online effect-size calculator available at www.uccs.edu/~lbecker/

Correlations between these variables can be seen in Table 5 – English under the diagonal and maths above (alternate cells greyed out for ease of comparison between English and maths).

Teacher perception correlations

While for students English and maths correlations were very similar, for teachers we find some interesting differences. For instance, English teachers feel that being appreciated by students is not related to being appreciated by colleagues (small, non-significant correlation), whereas the two are related for maths teachers ($r = .33, p < .001$). Likewise, for English teachers there is no correlation between feeling appreciated by the headteacher and in turn appreciating one's students as individuals. This is not the case for maths teachers, for whom being appreciated by the head correlates moderately (.46) and significantly with appreciating students as individuals in the classroom. The correlation between being appreciated by the head and being appreciated by the students is also much higher for maths teachers (.52 versus .23, both $p < .001$), which indicates that feelings of appreciation are less context-dependent for maths teachers than for English ones.

Table 5: Correlation matrix for teacher perceptions
(English below the diagonal, maths above the diagonal)

Pearson correlations (nE = 161, nM = 97, pairwise deletion)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Appreciation of students		.58**	.20	.46**	.14
2. Being appreciated by students	.59**		.33**	.52**	-.03
3. Being appreciated by colleagues	-.08	.15		.52**	-.12
4. Being appreciated by the headteacher	.06	.23**	.53**		.11
5. Teaching qualities self-rating	.28**	.22**	-.16	.05	

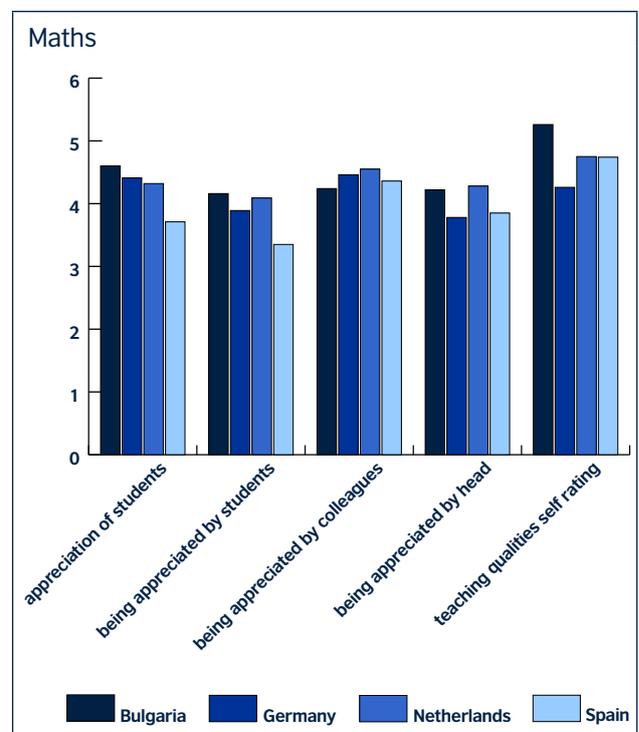
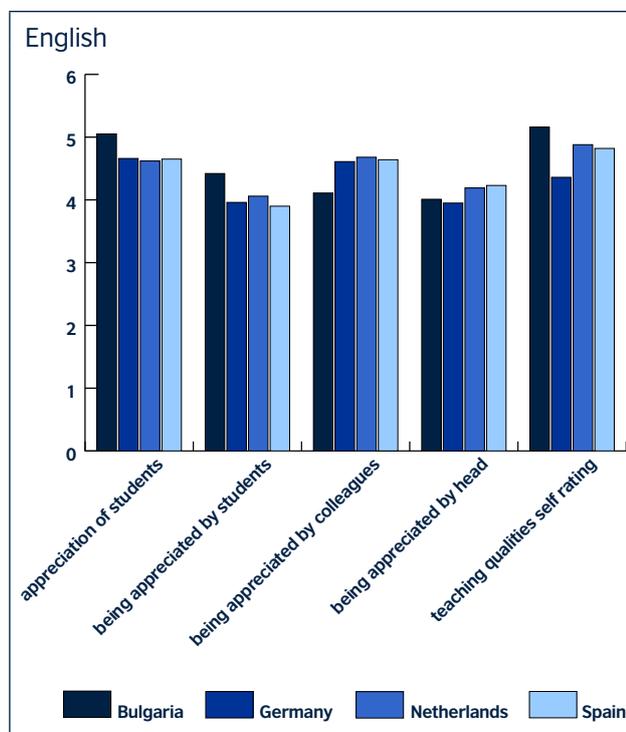
** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Two correlations that are significant (though small) for English teachers but not for maths are those between perceived competence (teaching qualities self-rating) and student appreciation (both by and of). In other words, there is no relationship between how competent maths teachers feel and how much they appreciate their students, or how much they feel appreciated by them, but for English teachers the higher the feeling of appreciation the higher their perceived competence, and vice versa. (It is important to note, however, that correlation does not mean causation. Any of these factors can be the cause or the effect, or they could all be caused by a different factor altogether.)

Country differences

With regards to country differences, we can see in Figure 6 that Bulgarian teachers, for example, tend to feel generally more appreciated by their students, while also appreciating students more than teachers in other countries. Their self-rating of teaching qualities is also higher than in other countries, which may be related to what appears to be a better working relationship with their students. However, both in English and maths they seem to feel less appreciated by their colleagues, and English teachers would appear to feel less appreciated by their headteachers than teachers of maths declare they do.

Figure 6: Cross-country comparison of teachers' perceptions (plots represent means; range: 1–6)



The other three countries look very similar in English, with the exception of teaching qualities self-rating, where German teachers rate themselves lower than the other countries. The difference is also visible in maths. (This does not necessarily mean they are not as good as teachers in other countries. It may simply mean they have higher expectations of their own teaching qualities or they may be more self-effacing.)

English teachers in the Netherlands and Spain appear to have similar perceptions of appreciation and teaching qualities, but maths teachers have higher feelings of appreciation (of and by students, by colleagues and by headteachers). Of all our teacher participants, maths teachers in Spain appear to feel the least appreciated by their students, while also appreciating students as individuals less than other teacher groups.

Overall, English teachers in Bulgaria would appear to be the most appreciated of all, while maths teachers in Spain seem to be the least appreciated in their professional environment. This may be linked to the country differences we saw earlier in Figure 5, where, interestingly, Bulgarian students appeared to have the best results overall, while Spanish maths students (together with the Dutch) appeared to have some of the highest rates of 'insufficient' ratings.

These findings facilitate interesting insights, but the extent to which they can be generalised is not straightforward. While for the student participants we did aim for a probability sample, many contextual factors (e.g., school type, regional variation) are expected to have influenced the composition of our final sample and the nature of our participants' responses. As for teacher participants, they were self-selected, which clearly had an influence on the type of responses we collected. Our results and interpretations seem to form a coherent, albeit tentative, picture of the role of identity perceptions in learning and teaching, but more research is needed that will further explore and elucidate the link between the two.

4

Discussion and implications

Overall, our findings have generated four important insights: that identity perceptions do appear to contribute to better learning achievement (and/or vice versa), that student and teacher identity perceptions are closely related, and that research comparisons of different subjects and different countries from an identity perspective is warranted.

Identity perceptions and learning achievement.

One of our crucial findings was that, both in English and maths, students felt the pressure to conform to contradictory social expectations coming from different social relational contexts. More specifically, in their interactions with the teachers and families, they perceived a strong expectation to do well and show that the two academic subjects are important for them, which was also reflected in the selves they displayed publicly in these contexts. In the classmates' relational context, however, the pressure to be engaged academically with the two subjects was low, and so was the impression that the participants gave in their interactions with their peers. Crucially, however, the selves they displayed in these three contexts bore almost no relation to what these participants believed of themselves as learners of English or maths. This corroborates previous findings reported by Taylor (2010, also, forthcoming, 2013a) and Juvonen (e.g., 1996), who found that students displayed the identity that served them best in their various social interactions. The result also echoes the findings of Williams et al. (2002), who report that some of their participants considered it was not cool to like languages, and, even if they did, they felt it was not appropriate to show it to their classmates. Bartram (2006) also reports similar findings. In addition, not only did we find that few students felt they were encouraged to develop harmoniously as individuals in their interactions with the teachers, but the students who chose the harmonious self system were associated with the highest rate of 'excellent' results in learning achievement, the same being the case for students who felt appreciated as individuals by the teacher. This represents one of the very first instances in SLA research where identity perceptions are clearly linked to declared learning achievement, and a persuasive indication that environments that encourage a holistic person-centred approach to education may help students do better academically

and socially (or vice versa). Allowing students to 'speak as themselves' (Ushioda, 2011), to bring their interests to class, to help design personally relevant learning activities, to contribute to group learning projects are a few examples of positive steps in this direction.

Students' and teachers' identity perceptions.

If 'excellent' student results were mostly associated with a harmonious teacher self system, similar trends are identifiable in the teacher group, although teachers responded to different, age-appropriate, questionnaire scales. We have seen that being appreciated as an individual by the students is correlated with feelings of appreciation of one's students, and this is different from feelings of being appreciated by colleagues or headteachers. Moreover, teachers who felt most appreciated by the students were also those who rated their teaching qualities highest of all, indicating a possible link between professional satisfaction and a personally enriching classroom atmosphere where individuals are appreciated for the subjectivity that they bring to class. Similar findings are reported by Klassen, Perry and Frenzel (2012), who found that relatedness with students is more important for teachers than relatedness with colleagues, leading to more professional engagement and more positive emotions. In our study, similar findings emerged from the English and maths teachers' responses, but we have found that, for maths, declared student achievement was lower and all self perceptions were lower than in English both for students and teachers. This is an indication that teachers of mathematics, in particular, may want to encourage a more individualised approach to teaching, helping students recognise better the personal relevance of their subject, which in turn may lead to better learning achievement. As the link between identity perceptions and learning achievement was also identified for English, teachers of both these subjects may want to find further ways of showing appreciation for their students and creating a classroom atmosphere that is nurturing and encouraging for their adolescent students, at a time when social support and understanding is of utmost importance (Harter, 2012; Kohn, 1999). Schools may also want to show more appreciation to their staff and cherish them as individuals who contribute different talents and values

to the teaching team, which in turn may increase their professional satisfaction, reduce burnout rates (Palmer, 1997) and, as we have seen, increase their perceived competence and their ability to help students learn better.

Subject comparisons. Contrary to our expectations, we found that learning mathematics was associated with stronger identity display than learning English, although overall self perceptions were stronger for English than for maths. We also found that students declared lower levels of achievement in maths than in English. Taken together, these two results may show that mathematics is perhaps regarded as more difficult and less personally relevant in the countries investigated here, but as the pressure to do well is still present, students may have to strive harder to give teachers and families the impression that they are very interested and engaged with maths. While foreign languages and maths appear to belong to different areas of a students' academic self concept (e.g., Marsh, 1990), we did find that in both subjects a more individualised approach to learning and teaching was associated with better declared learning achievement and perceived teaching competence, respectively. These results suggest that a more personally relevant classroom atmosphere and content may contribute towards a better sense of achievement. Further research would also be necessary into the specific effect that identity may have on the learning and teaching of subjects as different as foreign languages and mathematics.

Country comparisons. Several cross-country differences were identified and discussed briefly above, confirming our expectation that numerous contextual differences surely influence responses to such large cross-sectional surveys. In the absence of in-depth qualitative exploration of these contextual differences, it is hard to comment on their practical significance. Although it can be safely assumed that teachers and schools need to provide a nurturing environment for their students and staff, the very notions of self and identity have contextually dependent meanings (Riley, 2007), which warrant further, more detailed, explorations.

Summary, recommendations for practice and concluding remarks

To sum up, the key findings of our project and our recommendations for practice are:

1. Both in English and in mathematics students feel strong encouragement to do well in interaction to their teachers and families and are very willing to show that they are interested and engaged in learning these academic subjects. While this has been shown to differ from what they believe about themselves as English/ maths learners,

the motivational potential of this willingness is enormous. Academically disengaged students, for example, may decide to work hard so as not to let their parents or teachers down and, in time, internalise this goal into their own personal priorities, especially if their efforts are valued and encouraged. Therefore, we believe that teachers can capitalise on this tendency by showing students how the subject they teach can be personally relevant and enriching, so that an initial tendency to please by showing a possibly superficial academic interest may be internalised and adopted as a personally relevant goal.

2. Both in English and maths, peer pressure was felt in the opposite direction, encouraging students to appear academically disengaged. While student participants confessed to being willing to display the academically disaffected self that was expected of them in their peer interaction, this self was different from what these students believed about themselves as learners. These dynamics may indicate the presence of a competitive ethos in our research setting, which teachers can discourage by avoiding competitions where one individual or group wins at the expense of all the others; by avoiding publicising assessment results; by avoiding praising ability instead of effort; and by encouraging peer co-operation, peer feedback and non-competitive group projects. Helping students to compare themselves to their own improvement goals (rather than to their peers), praising them for their efforts and helping them celebrate challenge and learn from their mistakes will encourage a learning ethos whereby the group can work together for the benefit of each of its members.
3. Most student participants felt they could not be themselves in their interaction with the English or maths teachers and students who could not be themselves appear to have lower results than those who felt valued as individuals and did not feel the pressure to display a self that they felt was not their own. Moreover, students who felt their interaction with their teacher was harmonious also declared the highest percentage of 'excellent' results. The strong relationship we identified between perceived individual appreciation and declared achievement suggests the possible benefit of showing our students that we value them as real people, each of whom has a precious contribution to our class. Assignments that allow them to collect information they are personally interested in, for example, in order to design a booklet or plan a presentation for their peers would not only allow students to work with personally relevant materials, but would also help

develop their information literacy and planning skills, while fostering autonomy, sustainable learning and better understanding of the academic subject.

4. Teachers' appreciation of students did not depend on the teachers' length of experience. Therefore, less experienced teachers can be as successful as more experienced ones in showing students that they matter and are appreciated as individuals in the classroom. Conversely, less experienced teachers could feel as appreciated by students as more experienced colleagues, as an empathetic working relationship does not appear to depend on teaching experience.
5. Teachers' appreciation of students and students' appreciation of teachers is closely related, showing that each of them needs to make an effort to show the other that they are valued as individuals. Teachers can do that by encouraging each student to participate in activities and value their participation irrespective of their level of proficiency or other background factors. By communicating with students in a friendly way, sharing anecdotes and personal learning experiences, teachers can also encourage students to appreciate them as individual persons, which was found to be related to teachers' own appreciation of students. As personal appreciation appears to be closely related to achievement, our results show that the learners' and the teachers' individual voices really do matter.

These recommendations will, of course, need to be adapted to the teaching context, the students' particular needs and their reasons for studying the academic subject. As no blanket recommendation or teaching method can work in all settings, at all times, classroom practitioners are best placed to understand and address their students' context-dependent needs. This advice is strongly supported by our findings, which show that an individual-focused approach is strongly related to better learning results.

Our project also has several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, we relied entirely on self-reported data, which may or may not be an accurate reflection of reality. Ironically, when researching identity perceptions, one must accept the risk that people do sometimes strive to appear like the persons they would like to be, rather than the persons they are. Alternative data sources, which were not accessible at this time (e.g., one-to-one interviews, learner diaries, teacher logs, classroom observation, registers, formal assessment results, meetings transcripts) would have strengthened our project and provided more reliable insights into the topic. Moreover, objective assessment results would have provided a more reliable reference point for our identity focus than our students' declared results (although assessment validity and cross-country comparability would perhaps have been an issue in some contexts). In general, however, there are limits to the objectivity of one's research approach when researching concepts like the self and identity, declared self-perceptions being quite revealing in themselves.

Nevertheless, we believe we have provided persuasive evidence that more research is needed into the links between identity, learning and teaching, as well as subject and country comparisons. We have shown that our students' and teachers' voices reveal important relationships with learning, and we have shown a clear association between cherishing learners as individuals and declared achievement. Future research results will, no doubt, help to corroborate these findings and extend them to other settings.

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Appendix

Self-system vignettes from the L2 Quadripolar Identity Questionnaire

(available from www.iris-database.org)

Participants were invited to choose one of the following vignettes for their teacher, one for their classmates and one for their family, according to how well they considered the description matched their identity processes in each relational context. The self-system types are given between brackets, but they were not communicated to the participants.

- a. They know very well what sort of person I am. What they would like me to do in life is different from what I would like to do, so that's why I prefer to give up my intentions and do what they think is better for me. What they want me to do in life is more important than what I'd have liked, so I'll do what they say. (**submissive**)
- b. They don't really know what sort of person I really am, and it's not important for me that they do. They would like me to do something else in life than I would, and that's why I'll pursue my own dreams without letting them know. At the same time, I'll give them the impression that I do what they ask me to, even though I'm actually seeing about my own business. I know better. (**duplicitous**)
- c. What they would like me to do in life is different from what I would like to do, so that's why I'll pursue my own dreams even if I have to rebel against them. They know me well, I haven't got anything to hide, and if they want to force me into doing something, I am likely to refuse it openly. What they want me to do is less important than what I want. (**rebellious**)
- d. They know me very well and appreciate me for what I am. My dreams for the future are very similar to what they'd like me to do in life. They don't want to impose anything on me, but give me the total liberty to choose, and they always appreciate my decisions about my future. They help me feel really fulfilled. (**harmonious**)

ISBN 978-0-86355-709-5

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