



Learner identity and belonging: inclusive education for newly arrived migrant students in Sweden

Identidad del aprendiz y sentido de pertenencia: educación inclusiva para estudiantes migrantes recién llegados en Suecia

Authors

Laid Bouakaz ^{*1}
Leila Benseddik ²
Laroussi Chemlali ³
Rachel Takriti ⁴
Zeineb Naouar ⁵
Dennis Beach ⁶

¹ Malmö University (Sweden)

² Canadian University Dubai (United Arab Emirates)

³ Ajman University (United Arab Emirates)

⁴ United Arab Emirates University (United Arab Emirates)

⁵ Canadian University Dubai (United Arab Emirates)

⁶ University of Gothenburg (Sweden)

Corresponding author:

Laid Bouakaz

Lbeducation12f@gmail.com

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Abstract

Introduction: The education of newly arrived migrant students in Sweden requires an understanding of how their identities are shaped in relation to school reception and transition. Recognition, trust, and belonging play a central role in their educational experiences.

Objective: The study aimed to identify the factors that influence the formation of learner identities and support successful transitions for newly arrived students within Sweden's education system.

Methodology: The research combined meta-ethnography using semi-structured interview narratives developed in extended research conversations with students enrolled in introductory upper-secondary school programs in Sweden.

Results: The findings showed that experiences of positive encouragement, belief, and trust contributed to the students' personal growth and learning, strengthening their sense of self-efficacy and inclusion within the Swedish school system. In contrast, mistrust, institutional barriers, and exclusion created obstacles to their inclusion in the school system and progress. Results indicate that physical education (PE) provided newly arrived students with opportunities to participate, demonstrate skills, and gain recognition independent of language proficiency. These experiences fostered self-efficacy, inclusion in the Swedish school system, and the development of dynamic learner identities.

Discussion: The results reinforced insights from previous studies that emphasized the role of recognition and supportive relationships in fostering resilience and academic success among migrant learners. At the same time, they highlighted how systemic challenges continue to hinder full participation and how subjects such as PE can minimize their exclusion.

Conclusions: The study concluded that seeing and treating migrant students as capable, hopeful, and resourceful individuals is essential for their self-efficacy and inclusion in the Swedish school system. Such recognition is a foundation for inclusive and culturally sensitive pedagogy that enables positive educational transitions.

Keywords

Educational belonging; inclusive education; learner identity; migrant students; Physical Education.

Resumen

Introducción: La educación de los estudiantes migrantes recién llegados en Suecia exige comprender cómo se configuran sus identidades en relación con la acogida escolar y los procesos de transición. El reconocimiento, la confianza y el sentido de pertenencia desempeñan un papel central en sus experiencias educativas.

Objetivo: El estudio buscó identificar los factores que influyen en la formación de identidades de aprendizaje y que favorecen transiciones exitosas en el sistema educativo sueco.

Metodología: Se combinó un enfoque de meta etnografía con narrativas de entrevistas desarrolladas en conversaciones de investigación prolongadas con estudiantes matriculados en programas introductorios de secundaria superior en Suecia.

Resultados: Los hallazgos mostraron que el estímulo positivo, la confianza y el reconocimiento favorecieron el crecimiento personal y académico, reforzando la autoeficacia de los estudiantes. En cambio, la desconfianza, las barreras institucionales y la exclusión actuaron como obstáculos para su inclusión en el sistema escolar y progreso. Los resultados indican que la educación física brindó a los estudiantes recién llegados oportunidades para participar, demostrar habilidades y obtener reconocimiento de manera independiente de su competencia lingüística. Estas experiencias fomentaron la autoeficacia, la integración social y el desarrollo de identidades de aprendizaje dinámicas.

Discusión: Los resultados coincidieron con estudios previos que destacan el papel del reconocimiento y de las relaciones de apoyo en la resiliencia y el éxito académico de los alumnos migrantes. Asimismo, evidenciaron cómo los desafíos estructurales continúan limitando su plena participación. **Conclusiones:** El estudio concluyó que reconocer y tratar a los estudiantes migrantes como individuos capaces, esperanzados y con recursos es esencial para su autoeficacia e inclusión. Este reconocimiento constituye la base de una pedagogía inclusiva y culturalmente sensible que posibilita transiciones educativas positivas.

Palabras clave

Pertenencia educativa; educación inclusiva; identidad del aprendiz; estudiantes migrantes; Educación Física.

Introduction

The present article takes its point of departure in connection to the lived experiences and voices of new-arrival migrant students in Swedish upper secondary school programme reception, inclusion, and transition. It concerns students' experiences with reference primarily to newly arrived migrant students who are navigating pathways into and through the education school system. These students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. They study initially in introductory classes (förberedelselklasser) to develop their Swedish language and acclimatise to the school system. They then transition into mainstream classrooms. This transition is intended to enable them to overcome what Nilsson and Bunar (2016) describe as a Post-Migration Educational Ecology. Such an ecology can create a landscape where students face educational barriers rather than bridges and find it difficult to integrate within the broader educational scenario (cf. Brännström & Ottemo, 2024; Högberg et al., 2020; van Korlaar & Voorend, 2024). These are experiences that newly arrived migrant students and others are at risk of developing (Nilsson and Bunar, 2016; Jonsson & Beach, 2015), which can lead these students to disengage from school (cf. Civitillo et al., 2024) and educators face challenges therefore in order to understand how to effectively teach in multicultural environments in ways that maximize opportunities for positive engagement and identity development (cf. Kesak & Basic, 2023; Makarova & Birman, 2015; Obondo, Lahdenperä & Sandevärn, 2016). Recognizing and validating cultural identities could be crucial to supporting student self-efficacy as they navigate their way into and through their educational journeys (cf. Beach, 2017, 2020; Dweck, 2006; Högberg et al., 2020). While recent work in has addressed inclusive Physical Education primarily in relation to students with disabilities (e.g., Martínez-Morales, 2024), there remains a significant gap concerning the inclusion of immigrant students, particularly in how Physical Education can contribute to their sense of belonging and inclusion in the school system. Another study done by Carter-Thuillier et al. (2024) found that even though teacher attitudes are relatively positive and there is recognition of the need for intercultural training, there is still a lack of concrete strategies for integrating immigrant students' cultural practices into Physical Education. The study also revealed a mismatch between what teachers and stakeholders believe is being implemented and what immigrant students and their parents actually perceive. This highlights a gap in the research concerning newly arrived immigrant students and their inclusion in school systems such as Sweden's. In particular, it raises questions about how certain school subjects, such as physical education, may be structured to be more inclusive than others, and how these experiences contribute to learners' identity formation, sense of belonging, and engagement in the educational process.

The development of a strong learner identity is vital to students' ability to thrive in school—but for newly arrived migrant students, this journey is often fraught with challenges that go beyond the academic (Brännström & Ottemo, 2024; van Korlaar & Voorend, 2024) and while policies emphasize inclusion, the lived realities of students often reveal a more complex picture (Nilsson and Bunar, 2016; Jonsson & Beach, 2015). The present study recognises this and using meta-ethnography and partially pre-structured interview methods, explores how newly arrived students in Sweden may experience and construct their learner identities to attain positive transitions and successful inclusion in the school system or not (cf. Brännström, 2021; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). The personal stories of three students—Malika, Omar, and Salim—have a central position in forming the research, which examines how feelings of visibility, respect, and cultural understanding influence whether students develop confidence in their ability to learn or fall into patterns of disengagement. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do newly arrived students in Sweden experience introductory classes as a preparation for regular school programs?
- How do they describe their experiences of teacher-student relationships, peer dynamics, and institutional structures? Do they highlight experiences of cultural recognition—or the lack thereof?
- Do these experiences appear to affect their academic engagement?

The questions address issues related to challenges the inclusion of new arrivals can encounter within a new school system such as the Swedish one. They arise from various factors, including linguistic barriers, cultural differences and previous educational experiences, levels of adaptation to individual circumstances.



Previous Research

Inclusion of newly arrived migrant students in Swedish schools presents a multiple challenge (Brännström, 2021). While inclusion in education refers according to Pantić et al. (2025) to the practice of ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equal access to quality education within the same learning environment. This approach emphasizes the importance of creating educational settings that accommodate diverse needs, fostering a sense of belonging and participation for every student. Nilsson and Bunar (2016) discuss the importance of understanding post-migration ecology in this context, to support migrant students to mitigate the obstacles they may face. They point out also that recognizing that the inclusion of newly arrived students is not simply an educational problem, but a complex socio-cultural one (Biermann et al., 2025; Bunar, 2023; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016) that depends on a multifaceted approach that encompasses organizational models of ecological understanding and personalized support for individual students from various and diverse backgrounds and identity. The existing literature on the learning identities of immigrant students reveals complex dynamics related to recognition and academic confidence where the educational trajectories of immigrant students are shaped not only by environmental factors, but also by stereotype threats and experiences related to academic trust (cf. Beach & Jonsson, 2015; Weber, Kronberger & Appel, 2018). Fruja Amthor and Roxas (2016) emphasize the need for a more inclusive multicultural education structure for these challenges where educational institutions recognize the multifaceted identities of immigrant students and how the intersection of social class, identity and experience can affect the socio-emotional well-being of immigrant students and their academic results (cf. Brown, 2015; Darvin and Norton, 2014).

These ideas are supported also by Adair (2015), who explored how early education experiences shape the identities of children from immigrant families and showed that recognition and validation of cultural origins can increase self-confidence and help students to thrive academically rather than succumbing to negative impacts of exclusion or bias. Schachner et al. (2019) also claim that a climate of cultural diversity of support promotes involvement and belonging among immigrant and non-immigrant students, thus increasing academic results. The wrestling between various cultural values can reinforce or prevent their academic confidence, suggesting that educators should provide different support to increase successful results.

Literacy can also factor into this equation of self-efficacy in relation to educational inclusion, transition, and success. Campano for instance (2019) emphasized the critical nature of literacy in the formation of the identities of migrant students through reading, writing and the ability to narrate one's story contributing to a sense of ownership of educational experiences and a positive academic self-concept that increases performance. The dynamics of recognition is intrinsically linked to these concepts of belonging and engagement, as it shapes the academic experiences of migrant students and helps them overcome complexities that may emerge from different expectations and cultural values within the educational system (cf. Orellana, 2015). They once again highlight the importance of recognizing the sociopolitical complexities that migrant students can face and that can greatly influence their motivation and academic performance (Gonzales, Heredia & Negrón-Gonzales, 2015).

Bjorklund Jr. (2018), in a literature review of undocumented students in higher education, corroborates this issue of recognising the sociopolitical complexities, whilst Gunderson (2017) critically analyses instructional practices in English alone, postulating that the wrong methods can inadvertently marginalize immigrant students and the potential of these students as active constituents of rather than impediments to their own learning. He defends the recognition of linguistic diversity, academic trust, social recognition, community support, the need and value of collaborations between the family, the school, and the community (Sibley & Brabeck, 2017). Vigo-Arrazola and Soriano Bozalongo (2015) highlight this as a feature for generating educational self-belief, inclusion and success for any pupil and most schools, with a focus in their research on small rural community schools.

These partnerships create platforms for sharing experiences, thus promoting shared recognition and enhancing academic identity and self-confidence, where recognition is not just an institutional responsibility, but also an enterprise that stretches throughout the community (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2015). This endorses further the value of posing questions about how promoting inclusive envi-

ronments that prioritize recognition and support, might improve the educational experiences and results of migrant students and could contribute to a more equitable academic scenario. Two themes characterize creative teaching for enhanced social inclusion (TES) in curriculum exchanges and classroom learning events using digital technology: Collaboration and teamwork using dialectical feedback looping to develop progression through organizational practices that provide social/emotional/behavioral instructional support for learners in their learning appears to be significant. There are sources of both support and opposition to the creation of classroom conditions conducive to these developments. The article aims to uncover, describe and analyze them from the learners' perspectives using inclusive participant research. It thus responds to the lack of educational research on the everyday, situated dynamics through which schools recognize—or fail to recognize—young people as learners and the consequences this lack of recognition can have significant for students' self-perception and engagement (Fal-safi, 2010). Previous research has focused on axes such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture, whilst the notion of learning identity—and particularly its relation to recognition—has remained under-theorized and insufficiently explored. Yet an individual's experiences as a student can deeply influence their educational trajectory and academic outcomes.

Theory

Drawing on Dweck's (2006) work on implicit theories of growth and fixed mindset related to learner identity development, becomes evident that individuals often hold different beliefs about learning and learner identity development, as things that are innate and biologically determined or as a dynamic process. The first, associated with a fixed learning identity and a static self-perception, over time can result in learned inadequacy and helplessness, whilst the second is more progressive. When they have a dynamic perspective on learning and intelligence students are more likely to engage in adaptive learning strategies, develop resilience toward setbacks, and pursue academic self-mastery (cf. Abrams, 1999). The development of a dynamic learning identity is not an individual endeavor alone, however (Cantor et al., 2018). It is deeply influenced by the surrounding environment, including family, school culture, and broader societal expectations (Dweck, 2006). Students must actively negotiate these layers of influence, often devising strategies to resist or adapt to structures that threaten their sense of belonging or competence. In this context, recognition—from teachers, peers, and institutions—plays a central role. Without it, even the most motivated students may find it difficult to sustain a positive sense of themselves as learners (cf. Jonsson & Beach, 2015). As Dweck (2006) argues, cultivating a mindset oriented toward growth and possibility allows students to see themselves as active agents in their educational journeys (Feldman et al., 2017).

Method

Participants, data, and analysis

For this investigation we have combined a research review with semi-structured interviews with three students of migrant background studying in schools in Sweden during the spring term 2024. Our focus is primarily on experiences in relation to upper-secondary schools and student reception and transition into regular studies. Recurrent in-depth interviews with three pseudonyms are used for the students; called here Malika, Omar, and Salim; form a central element. While the sample is small, this design aligns with the study's qualitative case study approach, prioritizing depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These students had completed the introductory class for newly arrived students and had since transitioned to regular vocational programs. Recurrent interviews enabled us to address the ways in which routine activities shaped their experiences within their project of dealing with the uncertainties of their situation in school and added to the insights from the research review. They highlight transformative journeys and experiences in the formation of a learner identity. The interview guide was developed from themes identified in the research review focusing on: (1) the interaction between background and identity in educational structures; (2) self-mastery, resilience, and the development of a dynamic learning identity; (3) obstacles to building a positive learner identity; and (4)

strategies for fostering positive learner identities. Open-ended questions were used to encourage students to narrate their everyday school lives while allowing unanticipated issues to surface (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Seidman, 2019). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and forty minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated from Swedish into English for analysis. Particular emphasis was placed on how the learning environment and classroom practices supported or hindered a positive identity construction and included observing Malika's interactions as she developed a stronger academic identity, and comparing these with Omar and Salim's behavioral patterns, which suggested a struggle with learner identity formation, and positive learner identity developed described in ethnographic studies (cf. Beach, 2017, 2020; Beach et al, 2013, 2019). The recurrent design enabled us to trace developments over time and to capture how routine school activities shaped the students' adaptation, uncertainty, and participation. In this study, identity was not measured quantitatively but explored qualitatively through recurrent semi-structured interviews. These interviews encouraged students to narrate their experiences of schooling, belonging, and resilience over time. The construction of identity was interpreted from recurring patterns in the students' narratives, such as how they described their interactions with peers and teachers, their self-perceptions as learners, and the obstacles and resources that shaped their sense of inclusion.

The study used thematic analysis to interpret the data. The interview transcripts were coded thematically. Codes were based on the four guiding themes from the literature. This iterative process allowed us to refine the categories and ensure that they were grounded in the students' narratives while also informed by existing theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first is familiarization by reading and re-reading the total data, noting down ideas from which to generate initial codes, and exploring each individual data component in a systematic fashion before collating data relevant to each code and organizing codes into potential themes. It involves coding data for emergent patterns and organizing in the present case into themes that reflect different learner identity trajectories. The process is iterative and reflexive. It requires paying attention to the evolving narratives of the participants and the over-arching emerging research narrative relating to the socio-cultural context comprised and composed by the learning environments of the different programs in different schools. This meant that individual narratives were analyzed for content and what it seemed capable (and able) to relate in correspondence with structural and contextual features of the research sites (Riessman, 2008). The intention here was to assist in identifying (even collaboratively: cf. Beach, 2020) moments of transition, tension, and transformation within the educational journey of the different students.

Results

The findings are organized around narrative accounts that correspond to the factors that influenced the construction of either a dynamic or fixed learner identity among newly arrived students when seen in relation to the over-arching research review. By analyzing both the successes and challenges they encountered they offer practical insights into fostering engagement, resilience, and a sense of belonging within education pathways (cf. Beach, 2017, 2020). Organized and presented in relation to thematic sub-headings, each narrative highlights the meaning of support relationships in educational journeys from reception through transition when navigating in new cultural landscapes and their challenges. The thematic subheadings are, inter alia; Interaction between background and identity in educational structure; Self-mastery, resilience, and a dynamic learning identity; (Re-)claiming agency; obstacles toward the development of a positive learner identity; and; Building positive learner identities.

With an emphasis on the development of positive agency, each these thus relates to an aspect of structural relations within the experienced conditions of education reception and engagement for the development, possibility, exercise and possible frustration of human possibilities within educational exchanges. There is thus, an emphasis on an active and creative citizen and an assumption that there is a dialectical relationship between human social practices, human consciousness and social structures, which each thematic section attempts to describe and account for. Schools are places that have developed in ethno-racial and class-divided societies. Change and transformations thus do not take place independently from structure, but neither is structure necessary to see in opposition to agency. Instead, there is a dialectical balance of structure and agency comparable to the way grammar organizes meaning in language. Structure is thus something that can both restrain agency or form spaces of possibility



for it. At the same time, individuals contribute to the joint re-/co-/construction of a fertile learning environment and to their individual and collective identity constitution as learners and social actors.

Interaction between background and identity in educational structure

Dávila (2017) identified how young newly arrived immigrants often negotiate their identities in the context of their educational experiences, and how this process is essential to promote involvement and belonging. Björk, Danielsson and Basic (2019) write similarly on this matter, concerning how teachers can promote an encouraging environment to identity formation, by allowing students to articulate their previous experiences and perspectives (cf. Ennerberg, 2022). Also, in the interviews, students emphasized and illustrated how interactions between teachers and migrant students could reflect or exclude the negotiation of national values, thus contributing to or forming oppositional structures toward the development of a supportive climate.

It wasn't easy at all and when I spoke, they laughed and would whisper to each other and make gestures. The first thing I thought of was what are they talking about and, I will not learn this, it's very difficult. I want to go back to my friends. I looked forward to the breaks, just so I could go back to my other class—the introductory class. That's where I felt like I belonged. I cried like a little child. But what hurt the most wasn't the laughter it was when a teacher dismissed what was happening as if it wasn't serious. However, I also had a very kind teacher. I was so close to her that I never wanted to let her go of.... She made you feel like her child almost. She wanted us to achieve something. ...She learned Arabic and sometimes she wrote in Arabic on the board, "is this the word do you understand?" She was very kind. (Malika)

Malika is speaking here of her transition from an introductory class to a regular class and, on the one hand, a clash of cultures that influenced her sense of security and identity and, on the other, being in an environment where teachers offered support, encouragement, and recognition in a way that made a difference compared to when relationships may feel distant (cf. Wilken & Roseth, 2015). This is what Malika suggests above. Namely that when students feel seen, supported, and respected, they're more likely to invest in their learning and feel part of the school community (cf. Quin, 2017), whilst feeling the opposite can lead instead to withdrawal and distrust, with negative effects on motivation and senses of belonging, leading possibly to frustration, reduced motivation, and even cynicism and the undermining of reforms aimed at promoting student agency (cf. Ryder et al., 2018). Malika describes what we could call "*human love*" in the classroom—a sense of care, warmth, and understanding- and suggests that respectful humanizing relationships create structural conditions in which students can develop learning identities grounded in growth and curiosity driving interactions. Forgas Anaya (2023) echoes this point. Positive self-perception significantly influences social participation and identity and encourages active commitment in social contexts, improving her interpersonal relationships (Marsh et al., 2017). However, if students experience intense alienation they can choose to withdraw and to even adopt an "un-social" demeanor (cf. Conigrave, 2018), leading to isolation and reluctance in interpersonal commitments and feelings of insufficiency that can affect relationships negatively (Rattan and Dweck, 2018).

It felt safer to just be quiet. I'm a social person. I love hanging out with people. I chose to lie and say, I'm antisocial.... I cannot talk to people. (Malika)

In other words, a positive self-perception and social identity is fundamental to participation and promoting positive self-consciousness can mitigate the effects of social anxiety (Isroilova, 2024). Positive self-perception encourages social connections, social anxiety opposes them. Salim speaks with warmth and vulnerability about a teacher who made a real difference in his life:

"She was a really nice teacher. She was always there for us. That's why we got close, you know? I'd talk about myself, and she'd talk about herself. We understood each other more. She helped me a lot... But I didn't take the chance, you know? I was noisy back then. But now I've calmed down. Now I know what I'm doing. And I succeeded that year."

Comments like these highlight the power of relational pedagogy as a way of teaching grounded in empathy, dialogue, and mutual understanding (cf. Walton & Darkes-Sutcliffe, 2023).

Self-mastery, resilience, and a dynamic learning identity

With a dynamic learning identity, the student remains unwaveringly focused on successful learning, even in the face of challenges and does not surrender to despair in adversity, seeking instead new avenues to acquire knowledge and finding opportunities to grow (cf. Geoff's mindset described in Beach, 2020). Dweck calls this type of mindset one that provides self-motivating behaviour (Dweck, 2000, p. 10) where encountering adversity does not lead to a questioning of one's abilities but instead prompts persistence and the exploration of novel solutions as an illustrative example of the way in which the visualization of challenges can lead to transformative experiences and growth (cf. Dweck et al., 2014; Feldman et al., 2017). Mindsets matter for linguistic minority students perhaps in particular (cf. Lou & Noels, 2020). Research indicates this as a kind of resilience linked to personal mastery and taking advantage of available social support to overcome obstacles and maintain motivation and commitment. Self-control and resilience allow students to prosper academically and personally. Despite facing setbacks and challenges towards one's ambitions it is important to strive to be forward-looking.

I skipped school to be with him (a fiancé) and missed classes because he didn't want me going to schooland I didn't feel like I was going to become anything anyway. But eventually I thought, what am I doing? A friend said, what if you just gave school a real chance. That was the turning point. When I started working hard in school and gained knowledge, I understood that here in Sweden, I have so many paths open to me—not just one. And definitely not only marriage and staying at home. I realized I can support myself [and] be safe without a man. I have deleted my Facebook account to avoid distractions and build stronger study habits. I attend all my lessons and only stay home when I'm sick. I do all my homework, take the tests and feel proud. (Malika)

The friend didn't lecture or judge but just reminded Malika of her potential and gave her self-belief that she could turn things around. She got encouragement from someone she trusted, and it was incredibly empowering. Research has shown that support from peers plays a crucial role in shaping how young people see themselves and their ability to succeed in school (Beach, 2020) and that peer relationships that model hope and resilience can be powerful drivers of motivation and identity formation during adolescence (Wentzel, 2005). They help in reclaiming agency and developing what Zimmerman (2002) describes as self-regulated learning and an ability to plan, monitor, and adapt one's learning process in line with personal goals. Experiencing that someone believes in you when it's hard to believe in yourself is a strong force it seems. Developing a positive learning identity is about feeling able, and becoming committed to try harder (Lou & Noels, 2020). However, it is also about being seen differently and having someone believe in your ability to grow, especially when you've stopped believing it yourself.

Without that, it's easy to get stuck in a mindset that quietly says, "Why bother?" I was a zero. I knew nothing. I could not discuss, could not raise my hand. I sat with my mobile and texted. I also skipped off a lot. But now I study, now I am successful. I enjoy my life. I see my life from different angles. Different perspectives. A girl who always got IG is on the verge. She's started to develop. A little anyway. (Malika)

Rather than seeing her past struggles as evidence of failure, Malika now views them as steps along a pathway of learning and growth, and as a foundation for a mindset she's eager to share with others. Accordingly, she uses her experience by sharing it to try to lift others and has become a positive role model who now wants to help other girls feel inspired to do better, 'not just for themselves but for each other' by gaining an education as opposed to simply working to get through school (cf. Arnot & Dillabough, 2000; Reay, 2003):

I've been through a lot. And someone needs to know about it. Someone needs to know that you can change. You can take several steps forward. Not just one. Several steps. Continuously. (Malika)

As Falsafi (2010) reminds us, identity is co-constructed and shaped by how we see ourselves and how others respond to us. It involves not only claiming a space within the school but also taking agency to work as part of something larger. The opposite represents what Carol Dweck (2006) describes as a fixed mindset—the belief that your abilities are set in stone, and there's no point in trying because you won't get better (cf. Jonsson & Beach, 2015). Omar and Salim have slipped into a pattern of giving up on school in this way, feeling like success just isn't for them.

Identifying obstacles toward the development of a positive learner identity

Omar and Salim have faced difficult moments in the classroom when they felt misunderstood, judged, or simply not good enough. However, instead of meeting these setbacks as things you can work through, learn from and be better because of, they see them as proof that they are just not cut out for school. There is a developed sense of helplessness (Dweck 2006)—a growing belief that “I’m not good enough” and “school just isn’t for me.”

Failing a test feels like it confirms your worst fears. It gets harder to speak up in class, to ask for help, or to even imagine things being different. You start to protect yourself by not trying—because trying and failing hurts more. I didn’t behave that well in class—but not because I didn’t care. I just didn’t understand. I really tried. I did my best, but when I don’t get something, that’s it for me. If I can’t do it, then I just can’t. That’s how it is for me. (Omar)

Yet even this situation, though experienced as almost set in stone and fully predictable, is contingent and an outcome of a process of development. There appears to be a combination of a sense of shame, frustration, and to a degree resistance, rather than an attempt to deliberately cause trouble. What might look like bad behaviour is often a signal—an attempt to stay present when learning feels out of reach. Later that it can become something more:

I used to listen to the teachers—especially that first year. I really tried. But no matter how much I listened, I still failed. My mind... was somewhere else. I couldn’t focus when the teacher was talking. I wasn’t that good at Swedish either, so while I was trying to figure out what the teacher had just said, I’d already missed what they were saying next. I’d fall behind right there in the moment. And then I’d think, ‘What did she say? Ugh, never mind—it’s not worth it. I can’t keep up anyway.’ I’d go quiet and sometimes I’d be joking around and distracting others who were open to it. But I didn’t disturb the whole class—just the ones who were okay with it. The ones like me who wanted to be disturbed. I did it in a good way.

Now things are different. I don’t go to school—not because I don’t understand, but because I can’t cope with the teachers. I understand what they’re saying. But if I don’t like a teacher, I won’t listen. I just don’t care what they say. If they treat me badly, I won’t respect them—because if they don’t respect me, I don’t respect them back. That’s how I am. (Omar)

Archer and Francis (2007) have described examples such as this one as indicating the centrality of mutual recognition in enabling learning to flourish, because when students feel seen and valued by their teachers they begin to invest emotionally and academically in their schooling but when they don’t feel this the opposite can develop. Recognition and respect matter (cf. Honneth, 1995) and when recognition is absent however, or replaced by disrespect, this fosters disconnection. Experiences of racism and discrimination figure here (cf. Civitillo et al., 2024). Salim and Omar describe how they constantly confront (and are confronted by) the realities of racism and discrimination both in and beyond school and how these experiences eat away (at) the foundations of trust. One example was when a teacher openly used a racial slur against a Somali student in front of the entire class:

We told the principal. She said she’d handle it, but we needed evidence. I said, ‘There were witnesses,’ and she replied, ‘No, we don’t want witnesses.’ But how am I supposed to prove it? I didn’t record it. It happened in class—everyone was there! She wanted proof. It’s like you can never win. (Omar).

Salim and Omar point to inconsistencies between their school’s stated values; like equality and inclusion; and the realities they encounter (cf. Beach, 2017, 2022). Even when students raise concerns about discriminatory behavior, they feel dismissed but the racism they meet is treated as an isolated issue, not a systemic problem that erodes trust, fosters a “them versus us” dynamic between students and staff, and impacts how students see themselves as learners (Civitillo et al., 2024). Instead of being able to focus on growth, students are forced to spend energy defending their cultural and personal identities, which further shifts their attention away from schoolwork and toward survival within the institution in ways that undermine both learning and well-being in conditions that they perceive as manipulative in controlling rather than caring environments. As Dweck (2006) notes, environments that rely on external threats or rewards tend to reinforce fixed mindsets and suppress internal motivation. add to their disillusionment. They add to a growing disillusionment where school becomes something to resist, not embrace. An example:



They call me out in class. I sit there, and the teacher says, 'If you don't come to school, you won't get your CSN.' But there's no feeling behind it. It doesn't feel like they really care. Just that they want to control us. (Salim)

Unlike Malika, Omar and Salim lack a positive peer to encourage persistence and resilience and support them in developing their abilities to bounce back from academic and emotional challenges (Wentzel, 2005). Mac An Ghail describes the importance of these horizontal networks in his book *Young Gifted and Black* (Mac An Ghail, 1988). Shields (2021) reasons similarly in relation to advancing educational careers and positive learner identities among working class girls. They identify again how the formation of a learner identity is not an individual journey alone but one shaped by context and how, when key elements are missing or undermined, even the most basic aspirations can feel out of reach, whilst when they are present foundations can develop for seriously important critical learning (Philips et al., 2013). They involve bridge-building through social contact, intercultural dialogue, understanding and local co-operation (cf. Cruz Diaz, 2025; Shields, 2021).

Geoff, in Beach (2020), illustrates some of the features of learner resilience. He described and analysed tensions and pressures experienced when learning in school and university from a curriculum dominated by white homophobic male upper middle-class culture, history and values and demonstrated evidence of a particular deconstruction of curriculum code that went beyond the goals expressed in his study programmes. There were several important points. They related to just inclusion in education as needing to help everyone to add new cognitive layers and richness to their existing understandings of the world, to enable them to establish capabilities for mixing and communicating with mutual respect with any- and everyone else in academic, civic and even political life. This rarely happened, Geoff said. Curriculum codes and modalities created difficulties so that instruction normally left people with quite different memories and feelings of affection and disaffection toward their experiences.

There is systemic racism in white capitalist education systems Geoff suggested. For successful individuals from white upper-class backgrounds, school experiences often helped to cement self-worth (cf. Beach, 2017). Yet for migrant and ethnic-minority pupils, or those whose parents and relatives are manual workers, school experiences came from a content that positioned very negatively the people who had generated the material conditions for modern civilisation. It described them as needing refinement and discipline from a curriculum that belittled them and culturally insulted their heritage and values.

This is of course not just a Swedish phenomenon but instead a form of epistemic violence that both reflects and feeds into cultural domination and opposes the possibilities to become educated and develop a sense of organic purposeful belonging within schools in multiple segregated white societies for black youth while maintaining positive social memories and respect toward kin, friendship groups, and parent culture. Just education inclusion has been elusive across western nations despite decades of politically expressed intentions expressed in system reforms. In Sweden these have increased common formal participation for Sweden's compulsory and upper-secondary school aged (7-16 and 16-19) pupils, but worsened conditions of just inclusion and education equality. Inclusion humiliated subaltern pupils, insulted their families, friends, knowledge, heritage and values through content and forms of communication that were symbolically violent.

Building positive learner identities

The stories provided by young people in our interviews and in research review constantly highlight how migrant (and other subaltern) students have not only a powerful desire and emotional commitment to succeed, but a clear understanding of what often holds them—and others—back. Patterns emerge, but one where what stands out in cases of successful learning is a refusal to fall into a pattern of helplessness and to seek tools—both emotional and practical—that help students move forward with purpose and self-belief (Beach, 2020; Mac An Ghail, 1988; Shields, 2021). A central theme is the importance of teachers going beyond rules and routines and working as educators rather than enforcers: as guides in how to learn, how to cope with challenges, and how to grow. Not just giving knowledge but teaching how to cope, giving examples, showing the way to do things, finding ways to nurture self-determination and for transforming unconscious capabilities into conscious strategies (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2022). Doing what Dweck (2000) describes as the transition from a fixed to a growth mindset.

What students are asking for isn't extraordinary. They're simply asking to be treated as human beings. They want teachers who recognize them, respect their backgrounds, and believe in their ability to grow



and who use what Axel Honneth (1995) calls recognition, which is a fundamental human need. For Salim, recognition isn't just about kindness:

I think teachers should ask, 'What do you want to do with your life?' and 'How do you want to succeed?' Ask: 'What bothers you? What do you think about me as a teacher?' Let the student say what the problem is, and let the teacher say their part too. That way, they understand each other. Because when teachers don't listen, students won't either. Maybe they can force me to come to school. But they can't force me to learn and gain knowledge. It doesn't work like that! I love the teachers who teach me fun things and respect me. (Salim)

This vision of school as a space for dialogue along lines like those described in Shields (2021) and Walton and Darkes-Sutcliffe (2023), aligns again with what Dweck (2000) calls a "secure base" for learning, where students feel free to take risks without fear of being judged or punished. This is important, for authentic learning is voluntary (cf. Bengtsson & Mickwitz, 2022). It does not thrive in environments of control but in spaces of curiosity and respect (Dweck, 2006; Rabin, 2024). Recognition and respect from teachers and from peers is what motivates learning. There is a need to feel valued not just for one's performance, but for who you are and what you bring:

I'm not kidding, you know. I'm pretty smart, not like super smart. But I have a goal. I'm here for a reason. I don't care how others see me. I just want to succeed. And I want others to see that I'm not a bad person. I don't fight. I don't shout at teachers. I don't want to be seen like that. (Omar)

This reflection indicates once again that when students are care-fully recognized, respected, and challenged they begin to see themselves as classroom-insiders and participants on their own learning journey. Goeff, in Beach (2020), the Black sisters in Mac An Ghail (1988), Shields (2021) white working-class girls, and Malika, Omar and Salim all highlight two key elements for fostering this environment:

1. Cultural recognition from teachers showing inter-cultural understanding
2. Respect from teachers who acknowledge and value students' identities and backgrounds
3. Motivation through an engaging pedagogy and culturally relevant learning experiences that spark interest and invite active participation

Together, these factors shape a space where students can claim their education as something meaningful and empowering (cf. Cruz Diaz, 2025).

The findings reveal that positive reinforcement, trust, and recognition played a central role in supporting newly arrived students' personal growth, learning, and self-efficacy which strengthen their positive learner identity. Among the subjects offered in introductory upper-secondary programs, physical education (PE) stood out as a particularly inclusive space. Unlike language-intensive subjects, PE allowed students to participate fully through movement, collaboration, and the demonstration of skills, creating an environment where actions could "speak louder than words."

Students consistently described PE as a setting where they felt seen, valued, and equal to their peers. Malika explained,

In other classes I felt lost because I couldn't follow everything the teacher said, but in PE it didn't matter if my Swedish wasn't good. I could still join the game, run, and play. That made me feel part of the group.

Similarly, Omar reflected,

PE was the first subject where I felt equal to the Swedish students. On the field, it was not about language—it was about what you can do. People saw me for my skills, not for my language or Swedish accent.

Salim highlighted the confidence that recognition in PE fostered:

Sports gave me confidence. Even when I didn't understand all the instructions, I could watch and then do it. I felt that my classmates respected me more when they saw what I could do in football.

These accounts illustrate that PE provided a space where students could demonstrate competence, gain social recognition, and experience inclusion despite linguistic barriers. The findings align with existing research emphasizing the unique capacity of PE to foster social inclusion and self-efficacy among migrant students (Nieva Boza & Lleixà Arribas, 2021; Carter-Thuillier et al., 2023; Lacoste et al., 2020).



Importantly, the participatory and inclusive nature of PE had a positive impact on students' learner identities, allowing them to move beyond static perceptions of ability toward more dynamic and evolving identities. In PE, recognition was not limited by language proficiency or cultural background; instead, students were given the space to grow, innovate, and demonstrate resilience. Such experiences resonate with the view that learner identities are shaped through recognition and participation (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) and highlight the role of supportive environments in reinforcing confidence and belonging (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). This perspective also reflects Dweck's (2006) theory of growth mindset, as PE enables students to see their abilities as improvable through effort and engagement, fostering both social inclusion and academic motivation.

Discussion

The article discusses the complex and often challenging process of identity formation for migrant students and how young people navigate schooling while developing their learner identities. It underscores multiple factors of cultural background, language, and differing educational expectations that complicate and support or alternatively hinder (as bridge or barrier) their inclusion into the Swedish school system (cf. Dávila, 2017). They highlight the centrality of language acquisition in learner identity development and how struggles to learn the language influence academic progress, self-perception and social interaction. This is of course a well-known feature. Language, as Dávila (2017) emphasizes, mediates how immigrant youth construct their identities and access belonging. Confidence in language skills enable a dynamic interplay between linguistic development and learner self-concept to support the emergence of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) that assists when students actively claim a space in the classroom within what Nilsson and Bunar (2016) call a Post-Migration Ecology. Teacher awareness and responsiveness are critically important here for supporting students not just academically, but emotionally, and by recognizing and responding to the full scope of their lived experiences. This means giving recognition, as conceptualized by Honneth (1995). Without being seen and valued, students such as Omar and Salim (and for a while even Malika) struggle to self-identify as capable students. They risk adopting what Dweck (2006) calls a fixed mindset, where failure becomes internalized and limits a students' beliefs in their potential whilst juggling multiple affiliations and navigating tensions created often by the curriculum between home and school culture (cf. Beach, 2020) as intercultural identities (Kesak & Basic, 2023). As Bengtsson and Mickwitz (2022) note, the educational system could do more to acknowledge the diverse cultural capital students bring, especially when social inclusion is at stake. The narratives of Malika, Omar, and Salim reinforce this point, showing that school environments must go beyond surface-level diversity to actively cultivate culturally responsive spaces. Educational trajectories are deeply affected by students' previous schooling experiences and require tailored approaches and need holistic, inclusive, and relational approaches that respect students' backgrounds while empowering their academic journeys.

The three newly arrived students highlight also the critical role of physical education (PE) in shaping learner identity and mindset. The findings suggest that students who encountered encouragement, recognition, and trust in PE developed a view of abilities as malleable and improvable (cf. Dweck 2006). PE offered a unique environment where students could actively participate, showcase skills, and collaborate, receiving immediate feedback and social acknowledgment that reinforced self-efficacy and confidence.

Narratives from Malika, Omar, and Salim illustrate how PE enabled students to feel competent and valued regardless of linguistic proficiency. Malika's reflection—that she could participate fully in PE even when struggling with Swedish—demonstrates how inclusive, action-oriented environments support growth-oriented perceptions of ability. Similarly, Omar's experience of being recognized for his skills rather than his accent shows that social and skill-based acknowledgment reinforces a dynamic, evolving learner identity.

In contrast, subjects that rely heavily on language or structured academic performance may inadvertently reinforce a fixed mindset, where students perceive their abilities as static and avoid risk-taking. This contrast underscores the influence of pedagogical context on learner identity and motivation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). By emphasizing participation, collaboration, and recognition, PE fosters resilience, social inclusion, and a sense of belonging—conditions that are crucial



for the development of self-efficacious, growth-oriented learners (Carter-Thuillier et al., 2023; Lacoste et al., 2020). These findings suggest that schools can leverage the inclusive and participatory nature of PE to cultivate growth mindsets and dynamic learner identities, offering a model for supporting both the cognitive and socio-emotional development of culturally diverse student populations (Nieva Boza & Lleixà Arribas, 2021; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Conclusions

This study has explored the complex and deeply human process of learner identity formation among newly arrived students navigating the school system in a complex socio-cultural post-migration context or ecology (cf. Biermann et al., 2025; Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). It shows how identity is not simply shaped by curriculum or placement models but by the quality of relationships, the presence or absence of recognition, and the emotional atmosphere of learning spaces and illustrates the transformative power of relational support and self-belief. Educational success for newly arrived students depends not only on language instruction or academic support but on a pedagogy of recognition—one that affirms their cultural identities, acknowledges their struggles, and invites their full participation. If we are to truly foster inclusion and belonging in our schools, we must create environments where all students—regardless of background—can believe in their own potential to grow, succeed, and belong.

This study highlights that physical education (PE) is more than a space for physical activity—it serves as a critical context for fostering inclusion, confidence, and dynamic learner identities among newly arrived students. By enabling students to participate, demonstrate skills, and receive recognition independent of language proficiency, PE nurtures a growth mindset, allowing students to perceive their abilities as improvable and their potential as expansive.

Meaningful participation and acknowledgment help students develop resilience, social connectedness, and self-efficacy. In contrast, learning environments that rely heavily on language or limit engagement may reinforce a fixed mindset, constraining students' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging.

By intentionally designing learning environments that emphasize collaboration, recognition, and skill-based achievement—particularly within PE—schools can empower students to engage fully, integrate socially, and construct dynamic learner identities. Such approaches not only enhance academic and social outcomes but also cultivate resilient, confident, and self-efficacious learners capable of thriving in diverse educational contexts.

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Authors and translators' details:

Laid Bouakaz	Lbeducation12@gmail.com	Autor/a
Leila Benseddik	leila.benseddik@cuad.ac.ac	Autor/a
Laroussi Chemlali	l.chemlali@ajman.ac.ac	Autor/a
Rachel Takriti	r.takriti@uae.ac.ac	Autor/a
Dennis Beach	dennis.beach@ped.gu.se	Autor/a
Zeineb Naouar	zeineb.naouar@cuad.ac.ac	Autor/a

