

Guest editorial: Navigating and developing identity in intercultural education practices

Journal for
Multicultural
Education

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Identity in intercultural education: is it the same old story?

How easy is it to answer questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who are we?”? These questions about identity are not merely abstract ideas; they are part of everyday life. Many of us probably assume that there comes a point when we finally know who we are. However, as our lives change, we find ourselves revisiting these questions and realising that our answers have changed too. Identity, therefore, is not a destination but an ongoing process of becoming (Buckingham, 2008). Crocetti *et al.* (2023) bring together developmental and socio-psychological perspectives to explain identity. The former sees identity as something that changes as we move through different stages of life. The latter views identity as something that does not develop in isolation but remains connected to our experiences, the relationships we build and the groups and communities to which we belong.

If identity develops through the social world around us, then it cannot be understood separately from the contexts in which it is formed. In education, schools, classrooms, colleges and universities, together with the formal and informal activities and interactions that take place within these settings, are contexts in which knowledge is not only transmitted but where students, teachers and other stakeholders encounter different perspectives, values, cultures and languages.

In this special issue, identity is examined within the context of intercultural education, which encourages individuals to engage in interactions and conversations across diverse groups that can inform curriculum development, pedagogical practices, governance and institutional culture in ways that reflect principles of diversity and inclusion (Conti, 2025; Elias and Mansouri, 2023). Intercultural education is not solely about facilitating intercultural exchange or equipping people with the skills and competencies to communicate across cultures but, building on these foundations, also has the potential to promote educational and societal change (Conti, 2025). Such intercultural encounters can consolidate existing understandings of identity while creating opportunities for individuals to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, critically reflect on their beliefs and perspectives and negotiate and develop their identities (Juárez and Terminel Ibarri, 2025; Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2022).

Having introduced this special issue, we do not believe that research on identity in intercultural education simply retells an old story. Identity has been at the heart of intercultural education for many years, but the questions we ask continue to evolve as education, society and the ways in which we interact with one another change. Today, geographical boundaries are less of a barrier to everyday communication, globalisation has brought people from different backgrounds into closer contact, and developments in technology, including artificial intelligence, are reshaping how we learn, communicate and build relationships. Questions of race, ethnicity, gender, language, migration and social class also remain central to educational life, raising complex questions about belonging, participation and inclusion. It is within these changing circumstances that intercultural education continues to develop. The papers in this special issue examine identity negotiation and development in intercultural education not because identity is a new topic, but because the contexts in which it is negotiated, experienced and understood continue to evolve.



Journal for Multicultural
Education
Vol. 20 No. 3, 2026
pp. 253-258
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2053-535X
DOI 10.1108/JME-07-2026-324

Contributions to the issue

The 12 papers included in this special issue approach identity from different educational contexts and perspectives. They are organised into four themes that reflect the main ideas explored in the collection.

Identity in international higher education

Discussions of international higher education often focus on students' experiences after they arrive in their host country. The first two papers suggest that identity begins to develop much earlier and continues to evolve as students encounter new academic expectations and educational cultures.

[Nguyen and Thinh \(2026\)](#) open the special issue by examining the often-overlooked stage of pre-mobility admissions. The study draws on the experiences of Vietnamese students preparing for postgraduate study abroad to demonstrate that admissions involve much more than administrative procedures. They are affective and intercultural spaces in which prospective students begin to negotiate who they are becoming as future international students. Using affective governance as an analytical lens, the authors examine the emotional labour associated with language tests, scholarship applications, interviews, family expectations and peer interactions, identifying pre-mobility as a significant stage in intercultural identity formation where applicants adapt their communication, manage emotion, present themselves clearly and negotiate the unequal demands of international higher education.

Students' experiences after arrival are explored by [Bohlmann \(2026\)](#). Focusing on international postgraduate taught students in Scotland, the paper examines how academic identity develops through independent learning, intercultural communication and participation in research communities during the rapid transition of a one-year master's programme. The findings also suggest that successful participation in higher education depends not only on students' ability to discern implicit expectations surrounding independent learning and intercultural interaction, but also on institutions making these expectations explicit and providing purposeful pedagogical support.

The two studies suggest that identity is negotiated at different stages of international education, with mobility representing only one part of that process. Universities also play an important role in recognising and supporting the identity work that accompanies students before departure and throughout their engagement with new academic communities.

Professional identities in intercultural education

The relationship between identity and intercultural education is equally evident in the work of educators. The next five papers consider professional identity from various educational contexts, showing that it is continually negotiated throughout teachers' and academics' professional lives.

[Alabri et al. \(2026\)](#) begin with preservice teachers in Oman, examining how professional identity is formed within culturally, linguistically and institutionally diverse teacher education contexts. Drawing on data from 1,080 preservice teachers across six higher education institutions, the authors found that participants associated professional identity more strongly with confidence in their teaching abilities and opportunities for personal growth than with the broader social purpose of teaching and the challenges associated with the profession. Their findings underscore the importance of teacher education programmes that foster intercultural understanding, encourage critical reflection and integrate practicum experiences that support the development of professional identity.

Professional identity remains the focus in [Luong and Tran's \(2026\)](#) study of educators working in transnational programmes at Vietnamese universities. The authors explore how educators negotiate their professional identities by exercising transformative agency within unequal transnational partnerships. Their analysis draws attention to the need for greater recognition of local pedagogical expertise and the influence of unequal power relations on educators' work, highlighting persistent inequities in transnational higher education. The study suggests that more equitable approaches to internationalisation involve enabling local educators to adapt curricula, contribute to knowledge production and shape educational practices that respond to local contexts, rather than limiting their role to implementing externally determined programmes.

Language features prominently in the next two studies. [Strotmann et al. \(2026\)](#) examine English-medium instruction faculty in Spain, demonstrating how multilingual and multicultural identities become valuable professional resources in internationalised higher education. The study highlights how faculty draw on their multilingual repertoires to adapt their teaching, communicate across linguistic and cultural differences and position themselves as intercultural mediators, while also drawing attention to continuing tensions surrounding the growing role of English in higher education. [Demirbaş and Kaçar \(2026\)](#) examine professional identity through the experiences of Turkish and Italian language teachers in the USA. Their findings show that identity formation is influenced by a combination of teachers' pedagogical beliefs, ongoing development, earlier educational experiences, workplace conditions, emotional tensions and engagement with professional networks. In doing so, the study broadens discussions of language teacher identity beyond the dominant focus on English language teaching.

[Stojanović and Robinson \(2026\)](#) examine multilingual faculty working in adult education and human resource development programmes in US higher education. The authors explore how multilingualism, multicultural experiences and international identities relate to career identity. The inclusion of US-born multilingual faculty broadens conventional understandings of who is considered an "international" academic, suggesting that international identity extends beyond nationality or migration status. The study also shows how multilingual faculty negotiate English-dominant institutional norms, tenure expectations and experiences of belonging while recognising multilingualism as an important aspect of their professional lives.

The five papers suggest that professional identity cannot be separated from the educational contexts in which teaching takes place. Institutional structures, language policies, international partnerships and professional relationships all influence how educators understand their work and the decisions they make in practice. Preparing teachers for diverse classrooms is only one part of developing intercultural education. Equal attention also needs to be given to educational environments that recognise educators' professional identities as an integral part of intercultural teaching and learning.

Belonging, recognition and identity in intercultural education

Belonging and recognition are recurring concerns in discussions of identity. The next three papers approach these questions from different perspectives, illustrating how educational environments influence whether individuals feel recognised, included and able to participate fully.

This is particularly evident in [Nattheeraphong et al.'s \(2026\)](#) study of Thai LGBTQ university students. Identity is negotiated through everyday intercultural interactions, where cultural expectations and interpersonal relationships influence how participants express themselves and how they are perceived by others. The paper highlights both the constraints

and the opportunities that intercultural education can offer for fostering agency, belonging and more inclusive forms of participation.

Recognition takes a different form in [Nguyen's \(2026\)](#) study of international boarding schools. Instead of focusing on individual identity negotiation, the study examines the educational conditions that contribute to students' sense of belonging in diverse residential school communities. Teachers emphasise the importance of classroom practice, school culture, institutional support and stronger connections between schools, families and home communities.

[Teo \(2026\)](#) examines belonging from another perspective. Through autoethnography, experiences of being Asian Australian become a way of reflecting on race, migration, gender and national identity. Personal narrative is used not simply to recount experiences but to examine how broader assumptions about race and who belongs within the nation influence the development of identity. The paper raises important questions about whose identities are recognised within multicultural societies and educational spaces and calls for more race-conscious approaches to curriculum and pedagogy that move beyond static or essentialised understandings of culture.

Despite examining different educational settings, these papers point to a shared concern. Belonging is closely connected to recognition and to the opportunities individuals have to express their identities within educational communities. Intercultural education, therefore, is concerned not only with bringing people together but also with creating environments in which different identities are recognised, valued and able to participate.

Identity, policy, and the future of intercultural education

Identity is not only relevant to learners and educators but also to the pedagogical approaches institutions adopt and the priorities that shape educational policy.

[González Novoa et al. \(2026\)](#) propose a Pedagogy of Hospitality, bringing together critical pedagogy, intercultural education and the ethics of hospitality. Language learning is presented as a relational process through which identities are negotiated and belonging is fostered. Accordingly, hospitality is understood as a pedagogical orientation that values dialogue, recognition and relationships within everyday classroom practice.

A similar concern is evident in [Smith and Samuell's \(2026\)](#) analysis of higher education internationalisation policy in Japan. The authors question approaches to internationalisation centred primarily on economic competitiveness, institutional prestige and human capital, advocating a more reciprocal and inclusive approach to intercultural learning in higher education.

Both papers connect identity with pedagogy and policy, suggesting that the ways identity is understood also influence the purposes of intercultural education and the educational priorities that guide institutional practice.

Concluding thoughts

The papers in this special issue suggest that identity remains central to intercultural education, but they also indicate that the field is asking different questions from those that dominated earlier discussions. Identity is no longer examined simply as an individual characteristic or an outcome of intercultural competence development. Instead, it is explored through admissions processes, multilingual classrooms, transnational partnerships, educational policy and everyday institutional practices. Drawing on research from East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia, the studies illustrate how identity is shaped by different histories of migration, language, race, policy and

internationalisation. They also show that understanding identity requires greater attention to the educational conditions in which it is negotiated, recognised and, at times, constrained.

This has important implications for educational practice. Intercultural education cannot rely solely on creating opportunities for interaction between culturally diverse groups or assume that intercultural learning begins only when students enter classrooms or cross national borders. Admissions, induction, assessment, teacher education, language policies, school culture and institutional relationships all influence how learners and educators experience identity. Although these aspects of education are often treated as administrative or organisational matters, they also shape opportunities for inclusion, recognition, participation and belonging. If intercultural education is committed to equity and inclusion, these everyday educational practices are just as important as intercultural encounters.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Educational transitions provide one important avenue, as several papers examine identity before mobility, during study abroad, within professional practice and across academic careers without considering how these stages connect over time. Following learners and educators through different stages of their educational journeys would provide a richer understanding of identity across the life course. Comparative research offers another promising direction by exploring how institutional structures, language policies and internationalisation agendas shape identity in different parts of the world. Continued attention is also needed to identities that remain underrepresented in intercultural education, particularly where experiences of race, gender, sexuality, migration and multilingualism intersect.

We began this editorial by asking whether identity in intercultural education is the same old story. The contributions to this special issue suggest that it is not. Identity is a familiar concept, but it is now examined through different educational experiences, from pre-mobility admissions and multilingual academic careers to international boarding schools and the purposes of internationalisation itself. The challenge for intercultural education has shifted from asking whether identity matters to understanding how educational institutions recognise, respond to and support increasingly diverse identities within contemporary education. We hope this special issue encourages continued dialogue, research and educational practice on these issues.

Thinh Pham

School of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK, and

Yao Wang

*School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences,
Newcastle University, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK*

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