Colored in language: exploring linguistic identity perception of young children in Maldivian schools

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The interrelationships between the language learner and the social world have been much explored, with recent research highlighting the importance of identity for successful language learning. Individual self-perception is particularly vulnerable at certain transitional stages in life, with the first year of school being a crucial one for children. Children in the Maldives grow up in a society where the English language threatens to overshadow the local language of Dhivehi; they are educated in an English-dominant bilingual model of schooling. This power struggle between the global and local language is likely to affect how children see themselves.

This study therefore explores how young children in Maldivian schools perceive their linguistic identity. Seventy-five children colored in silhouettes of child figures according to the languages they felt determined their identity. Recurring patterns in the colored silhouettes were further correlated with the dominant language in the home environment. The results indicate that learners displayed strong linguistic identities when the school environment supported the home language. The study also showed that where families largely spoke in English at home, the child gave little importance to the home language. The findings have important implications for language-in-education policies and to spread awareness among parents on adopting positive language practices in the home.