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

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Background

- Positive self identity is important for successful language learning.
- Individual self perception is particularly vulnerable at certain transitional stages in life.
- Power struggles between global and local languages are likely affect how children see themselves.
- Pressures to use English in the home environment can impact family dynamics negatively.
- Lack of support for a home language within an education program affects students’ identity perception.
Context of the study

- One single local language: Dhivehi
- English-dominant bilingual schooling.
- Since 2000: no schools that offer a mother-tongue based education.
- Prevalence of code switching.
- Increased use of English with young children at home.
- Loss of domain and prestige of Dhivehi.
Research Questions

1. How do children define their linguistic identity?

1. Does the language used at home affect young children’s depiction of their linguistic identity?
Method

- 75 children between 5 – 10 years
- Asked to select one colour for each language they spoke, and to use those colours to colour in the blank silhouette.
- Comments on their choices and depictions noted using think-aloud techniques
- Parent questionnaires on language background and use
Analysis

- Language portraits were categorised according to recurring patterns and the frequency of pattern occurrence.

- Recurring patterns in the coloured silhouettes were further correlated with the dominant language in the home environment.
No language identified: Decorative

4 out of 75 portraits
No language identified: Multiple colours

5 out of 75 portraits
Language depicted through pattern

4 out of 75 portraits
Blocks of colour

6 out of 75 portraits
Single language = single colour

12 out of 75 portraits
Divided into halves

13 out of 75 portraits
Proportionately coloured

15 out of 75 portraits

Green: Standard Dhivehi
Blue: Addu dialect
Beige: English

Green: Arabic
Red: English
Pink: Dhivehi

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Order of acquisition

- I first learned Dhivehi (green). Then I learned English (red).

Sara, Grade 2

5 out of 75 portraits

Green: Dhivehi
Red: English
I was born in Addu. So I learned the dialect first. Then we moved to Malé and I started learning [Standard] Dhivehi. Then I started school and I learned English so I coloured that on top. I also know some Hindi because I watch TV. Leen, Grade 3
Order of acquisition

- Green is for Dhivehi. I first started learning Dhivehi. But as I grow older, I began learning English, so I have used yellow for the top half of my body.

Maail, Grade 4

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My language is Dhivehi. I use it for most things. I used pink for Dhivehi because it is my favourite colour. But when I am in school, I have to think and write in English. So I have coloured part of my head red and one hand also red.

Iba, Grade 3

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I know three languages. English (blue), Dhivehi (green) and Arabic (red). I can read and speak in all these languages so I have coloured my eyes and mouth in these colours. But I can only write in Dhivehi and English so I have coloured my hands in these colours.

Nuhaik, Grade 2
I speak mostly in English and use English all the time. So I used yellow all over my body. But I am a Maldivian so I have Dhivehi in my heart. My father is from India and I speak some Hindi (green). I know to read in Arabic (orange) and I am also learning Korean (turquoise) and French (pink).

Yaish, Grade 4

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## Language Use at Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only/Mostly English</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both English and Dhivehi</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Dhivehi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Dhivehi</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple languages</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language Use at Home

![Bar chart showing language use at home for different age groups (5-6 yrs, 7-8 yrs, 9-10 yrs). The categories are:
- Only English
- Mostly English
- Mostly Dhivehi
- Only Dhivehi
- Multiple Languages
- Both English and Dhivehi.

The chart indicates that the majority of children use Dhivehi as their primary language, especially in the 5-6 yrs age group. There is a noticeable increase in the use of English in the 7-8 yrs and 9-10 yrs age groups. Multiple languages are used by a small percentage of children across all age groups. Both English and Dhivehi are used by a significant number of children in the 9-10 yrs age group.]
Discussion

- Children’s depicted linguistic identities influenced by the level of exposure to languages at home.
- Children who identified themselves as monolingual came from families that reported using only one language at home.
- Where families largely spoke in English at home, the child gave little importance to Dhivehi.
- When both languages were given prominence at home, learners emphasized importance of both.
- Increasing tendency for Dhivehi to be unused at home is worrying.
Conclusion & Recommendations

- Need to strengthen language education policies at school level, giving more prominence to Dhivehi.
- Need to spread awareness among parents on adopting positive language practices in the home.
- Need to elevate status of Dhivehi through increased language planning efforts.
Thank you for your attention.