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"I'm human" – multilingual investment of a young adult with a migration journey in Italy

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Abstract: This paper explores the multilingual identity construction and investment of Tanvir, a young adult from Pakistan. He arrived in Italy as an unaccompanied minor in 2018, after a migration journey, and currently lives between Italy and the UK. Research on identities and investment has been mainly conducted in EFL/ESL contexts. Far fewer studies explore them in LOTE contexts or in respect to first generation multilingual teenagers with a migration journey. This article reports on a case study approach to capturing the complexities of the lived experience of a single participant, Tanvir. Data were generated through in-depth, biographical, semi-structured interviews and were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal Tanvir's awareness of his competence as a multilingual and his ability to negotiate his identities as a transnational entrepreneur. His multilingual investment stems from his sense of agency, which allows him to inhabit transnational spaces by successfully overcoming ideological tensions and other social and structural obstacles to seize opportunities for his own personal fulfilment. The implications reflect on how school institutions can better support the agency and imagination of this under-researched and growing group of learners.

Keywords: multilingual investment; multilingual identity; LOTE; unaccompanied minors; L2 Italian

1 Introduction

Identity is inextricably bound with language learning and performance (Fisher et al. 2018). As the primary means of meaning making and socialization (Duff and Yamamoto 2024), languages are central in identity formation and participation in social communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). This is true for both one's first language (L1) and any additional languages. Norton (2013) argues that "every time language learners speak, read or write the target language, they are not only exchanging information with members of the target language, they are also reorganizing a sense

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of who they are and how they relate to the social world. As such, they are engaged in identity construction and negotiation" (4).

This study addresses the topic of multilingual identity and multilingual investment of a young adult from Pakistan, who came to Italy at the age of 15 as an unaccompanied minor. In Italy, this growing group of learners, mostly aged between 15 and 17, are subject to compulsory education and should be enrolled in secondary schools based on the age criterium (Cerrocchi and Porcaro 2023: 94–98). However, a teacher team could choose to enroll these learners in earlier classes or not to accept them, if their language and academic skills are considered inadequate. A parallel and more frequently travelled (CeSPI 2020) pathway to access a secondary school in Italy are via CPIAs (Centri Provinciali Istruzione Adulti). CPIAs are public centers for adult education offering literacy and secondary school programs to fulfil compulsory education requirements. Especially for young adults who have to enter the job market as quickly as possible, completing a middle school course in a CPIA can provide the opportunity to access evening upper secondary schools or vocational institutions while working, which is possible after the age of sixteen.

Set in the CPIA context where I work as an Italian L2 teacher, this empirical study aims to capture the account of a former learner, to trace his multilingual learning experience both inside and outside of school, with the aim of understanding how he succeeded in this system and what potential lessons can be drawn for other students going down the same pathway of education. The study takes a combined psychological and sociological perspective (Fisher et al. 2018; Sung 2023) to fill different literature gaps concerned with multilingual identity. On the one hand, as Zhao et al. (2025) point out, a few studies are set in a LOTE context. Among those, the majority deals with participants enrolled in higher education programs in China (Zhao et al. 2025: 6).

Moreover, this study investigates the trajectory of an under-represented type of learner, namely a so-called "grassroots multilingual" (Ortega 2019: 27), whose language learning experience is marked by circumstances of forced migration and performing a kind of multilingualism associated with globalization "from below", which is characterized by fluid, nonstandard linguistic practices resulting from uninstructed expansion of multilingual repertoires for localized purposes (Han 2013).

2 Literature review

2.1 Identity and investment

Since Norton's (2013) influential ethnographic study on immigrant women in Canada, second language identity has been conceptualized as complex, dynamic and "entangled with power relations which may constrain the kinds of practices that are

possible for language learners to participate in and the identities that they can claim and inhabit" (Miller 2024: 327).

Grounded in poststructuralist theories, Norton defines identity as: "How a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton 2013: 45). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) notion of habitus, Darvin and Norton (2015) suggest that "identity is a struggle of habitus and desire, of competing ideologies and imagined identities" (45). Habitus is conceived of as durable dispositions created during one's personal history, while desire allows learners to imagine and create new possibilities for their future. Darvin and Norton (2023) clarify that, "while habitus can predispose learners to think in a certain way, it is through desire that they are able to imagine new possibilities for themselves, to transgress these norms and expectations, and exercise agency" (93).

To better capture the dynamics between habitus and desire in relation to learning a target language, Norton also developed the notion of investment, which is defined as a person's "commitment to learn a language while navigating conditions of power in the process of aspiring for a wider range of symbolic and material resources" (Darvin and Norton 2022: 91). According to their model of investment, the commitment to learn a language results from the dynamic intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (Darvin and Norton 2015).

2.2 Multilingual identity

Even though poststructuralist theorists refuse the idea of a core identity, Fisher et al. (2018), argue in respect to multilingual identity that "while identities associated with different languages [i.e. linguistic identities] in our multilingual repertoire might change spatio-temporally, an identity as a multilingual might remain 'core'" (454). In their multi-theoretical framework, multilingual identity is therefore conceived of as an "'umbrella' identity, where one explicitly identifies as multilingual precisely because of an awareness of the linguistic repertoire one has" (449). In their multi-theoretical model, they further locate multilingual identity at the intersection of individual psychological and cognitive development, relational and social dimensions, and historical and contextual settings (455–456) (see Section 6). This model, in particular, proves to be highly appropriate for examining various dimensions of identity in detail, not only those linked to social contexts (Darvin and Norton 2022: 89) and was used for this study.

2.3 Multilingual investment

In his study of mainland Chinese students in multilingual Hong Kong, Sung (2023) explores their multilingual learning experiences in their English-medium university and introduces the construct of 'multilingual investment'. Findings show that their emerging identities as competent multilingual language users, developed through their experience of learning Cantonese and English at university, enhanced their sense of agency and imagination, supporting former research on the ideal multilingual self (Henry and Thorsen 2017). At the same time, the study also revealed that ideologies generated tensions in the participants' social interactions with local students unwilling to validate their linguistic capital. By highlighting the role of contrasting ideologies such as that of native-speakerism and flexible multilingualism (see Section 5.2), the findings contribute to the conceptualization of multilingual investment as a complex process triggered by "reciprocal interaction between the multilingual identities co-constructed by the learner in interactions with others and the myriad language ideologies regarding multilingualism held by the learner and by others around him/her." (Sung 2023: 1178).

In summary, the construct of (multilingual) investment (Norton 2013; Sung 2023) indexes the interplay between psychological factors and power conditions in different social spheres, which reflects an individual's commitment to draw on multiple resources to make meaning and aspire to greater participation in transnational communities. These communities are dynamic formations of people who maintain active social, economic, and linguistic ties that stretch across and beyond national borders, driven by globalization (Han 2013). For this reason, multilingual identities and investment are useful theoretical tools to investigate the trajectory of a multilingual adolescent (now young adult) like Tanvir, whose language learning journey has been greatly influenced by his history of forced migration and adjustment into diverse foreign communities and language use settings.

3 Relevant studies for the present empirical research

Empirical studies on identity construction and investment, especially from a poststructuralist perspective, are abundant (Hajar and Mehmet 2024; Miller 2024). Nonetheless, the language learning experiences of adolescents with a journey of migration are under-researched, mainly set in ESL/EFL contexts (see for instance Darvin and Norton 2014; Darvin 2017; Babino and Stewart 2019; Massó and De Costa 2023; Flores-Curley et al. 2025) and rarely in LOTE contexts (Palm et al. 2019).

Massó and De Costa (2023) provide an important point of departure with their study of Maji, a Burundian refugee in the U.S. They show how his multilingual investment was constrained by dominant ideologies privileging English and by the lack of recognition of his cultural and linguistic capital within the school system. This illustrates how institutional failure to legitimize existing resources can directly restrict migrant learners' identity development. Their findings raise questions about whether similar dynamics occur in non-English-speaking contexts, such as Italy.

Similarly, Darvin and Norton (2014) highlight the impact of social class in the cases of two Filipino adolescents in Canada. Ayrton, from an affluent background, maintained his privileged social position through access to private schooling, while John, whose family lost social status post-migration, faced challenges in a public school. Using the concept of transnational habitus, the authors show how forms of capital structured across countries of origin and settlement shaped opportunities for agency and identity negotiation.

In the Italian context, research on identity from a poststructuralist perspective remains limited. A notable exception is di Lucca et al. (2008), a longitudinal ethnographic study of Moroccan children arrived in Italy before age 13. The study illustrates how school practices, underpinned by a dominant monolingual ideology, progressively marginalized Moroccan and standard Arabic, confining them to private domains, while Italian expanded as the language of prestige and peer networks. Despite official multilingual policies, the prevailing "Italian first and above all ideology" (68) strongly influenced identity formation.

Other similar and more recent classroom-based studies in ESL (Babino and Stewart 2019; Flores-Curley et al. 2025) and LOTE contexts (Palm et al. 2019) underscore the role of ethnic identity and family ties in sustaining investment in the L1. These studies show how adolescents strategically use their L1 to maintain cultural authenticity and, in some cases (Babino and Stewart 2019), challenge dominant monolingual ideologies. At the same time, English or the L2 (Swedish in Palm et al. 2019) is typically perceived as the key to academic and professional success in a strongly monolingual setting.

Across these very different contexts, these studies reveal the ambivalence of identity construction in migration. Investment in multilingual repertoires is shaped by class, habitus, and ideology, yet learners can exercise agency to negotiate constraints and pursue imagined identities. Sung (2023) further demonstrates that heightened awareness of multilingual identity and semiotic resources can enhance agency. As Darvin (2017) argues, social class poses significant constraints on agency but remains dynamic and open to negotiation across time and interactional spheres (Block 2022).

In line with Massó and De Cosa's (2023) call for more research on investment in multilingual repertoires of refugees from different parts of the world (2023: 160), this

study employs the constructs of multilingual identity (Fisher et al. 2018) and multilingual investment (Sung 2023) as theoretical lenses to address the following research questions and fill the gaps outlined above:

1. What are the characteristics of Tanvir's multilingual identity?
2. How have different language ideologies contributed to his multilingual investment?
3. How did Tanvir's transnational habitus and forms of capital contribute to his multilingual investment?

4 Methodology

This study reports on part of a larger PhD study investigating the identities of former CPIA learners in Italy. Tanvir was selected as a focal participant for this single case study because of his large number of transnational activities and his rich multilingual repertoire. Besides, his strong awareness of his multilingual identity, sets him apart from the other participants and justifies a detailed case study of his experience.

Between 2018 and 2020, he attended middle school classes held by colleagues of mine, who connected me to him in October 2022 for the purposes of my PhD study and Tanvir expressed his willingness to collaborate. Other ethical aspects were considered at both the macro and micro levels (De Costa et al. 2019). The consent form and information sheet received approval from the university's ethics committee as well as from the legal advisor of my school. Tanvir was free to choose a pseudonym and his data were safely stored and protected by anonymization and careful attention to confidentiality. Moreover, the ethical dilemmas arising from my dual role as teacher and researcher (Hammack 1997) were limited in Tanvir's case, as he was not a former student of mine and his pathway at the CPIA had already been completed. Tanvir's participation in the study and the quality of the data were therefore not exposed to significant risks resulting from my position as a teacher.

4.1 Participant

Tanvir, a pseudonym, is a young man from Pakistan, who arrived in Italy in 2018 at the age of fifteen as an unaccompanied minor. In his home country, Tanvir went to school until the age of eight. He was forced to flee from Pakistan following the death of his parents. His journey of migration lasted about six years, crossing Turkey and Greece. During the journey across the Balkan Route, the so-called "game" (Minca and Collins 2021), he worked to support himself and his English skills turned out to be useful. In Greece, he also learned Albanian.

Once in Italy, he was entrusted to social services and went to live in a group home for minors until the age of 18. His tutors enrolled him in the local CPIA to attend middle school, from which he graduated in 2020. At the age of 16, he found a job as a waiter in a coffee shop and later as a barman. After he left the group home, he continued to work and decided to enroll in an evening catering high school but dropped out in 2022 following his marriage to a second-generation Pakistani woman in London. In 2023, he became a father. In London, he now lives in a Pakistani neighborhood and has recently opened his own business as a reseller of IT products together with his brother. He imagines living permanently in London but also returning to Italy regularly to spend time with his friends, help out in the coffee shop where he was working before moving, and open a coffee shop of his own in Italy.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

To gain emic, in-depth insights into his identity, investment, and perceived experiences, a case study approach was adopted. This is because case study research is ideally suited to understanding the unique and multifaceted lived realities of the participants from their perspective (Duff 2008). A lot of current case study research in applied linguistics for example focuses on multilingual literacies and multimodal practices learners engage in transnational and translocal lives (Duff 2020: 146).

Data was generated by means of three semi-structured, biographical interviews over the course of two and a half years (between October 2022 and May 2024). The aim was to capture Tanvir's school experience retrospectively while also gaining longitudinal insight into his trajectory in the years following his graduation from CPIA. The first interview protocol, based on general life story interview (McAdams 2001), was piloted during the first online interview, mainly with the intention of building a trusting relationship with the participant and getting to know each other. Questions concerned his attitudes towards the languages of his repertoire, his language learning experiences to date, and his projects for the future. The second and main interview was held online and focused on his Italian learning history. The third member checking interview was conducted in person. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participant and conducted in Italian in which Tanvir has an upper intermediate proficiency level. Altogether, the three interviews amounted to 149 minutes of recording and yielded a corpus of 19.233 words".

In line with the epistemological and methodological assumptions underpinning my doctoral thesis, the methodological design and type of data collection tool intended to consciously integrate the subjectivities of the participants with my own, as a teacher actively working within the CPIA context. This required ongoing reflection on the influence of my ideological positions and my privileged status in

relation to the participants. In practice, this involved making my assumptions and personal positions explicit during the interviews, as well as explicitly inviting participants to act as collaborators – encouraging them to feel free to deconstruct my hypotheses and to clarify or expand their own perspectives both during data collection and member checking (see excerpts provided in Section 5). Essential to this process was the creation of mutual trust, facilitated by my insider position within the research context (Consoli 2021).

Data were first transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020). This approach considers the researcher's reflections and subjective interpretations as an analytical asset and was particularly valuable in the "iterative process of theme development" (Braun and Clarke 2020: 7). Coding was first conducted line by line in MAXQDA, and progressively informed by the theoretical constructs described before, in a "continuum" between a deductive and inductive analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2020: 4). Codes were then collated into overarching themes. A strong draft of the analysis of Tanvir's case was submitted for member checking (Candela 2019) to get feedback on my subjective interpretations during the third interview. This process revealed a substantial agreement between my interpretations and Tanvir's reflections on his learning experience and was particularly precious to add further detail to his account.

5 Findings

5.1 RQ1: "But what are you?' 'Well, I'm not telling you!"

5.1.1 Awareness of being a multilingual human being

Tanvir's high awareness of his multilingual identity is rooted in his history, journey of migration and experience in Europe, where, on a daily basis, he uses the main languages of his repertoire: "I use all three languages [Italian, Albanian, English]. The only one that I don't use is mine, Pakistani [Urdu] (Tanvir interview 3, Pos 102)".

It is significant that he regards English as a "mother tongue": "English my mother tongue you don't forget it! (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 49), "because there [in Pakistan] they teach English first and then Pakistani language. (Interview 2 S., Pos. 51)". Urdu, which is described as "mine", within his current repertoire, seems to be in regression, compared to English: "English yes, but Pakistani [I speak] every now and then, because I don't know that much. It's not that I know 100 %, I don't even know 50 %. (Interview 2 S., Pos 306)". However, he is confident that "here [in London] I'll be able to catch it up again. (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 310)"

In addition, he learned Albanian in Greece and from his Albanian friends and girlfriend in Italy: "I speak very well Albanian! If I put myself in a group of Albanians, you won't be able to understand what I am. (Interview 2 S., Pos 186)".

In parallel to these languages, since Tanvir arrived in Italy, Italian has progressively gained a central position in his multilingual identity. He has developed a strong sense of belonging and ownership towards this language: "Like, I feel that I learned there [in Italy] and I, it feels like I grew up there. (Interview 2 S., Pos 322)". And he adds: "[…] I know many people like Pakistanis, Indians, but also Italians, telling me: 'How many years have you been in Italy that you speak so well?' I say: 'Look, I've only been here four years'. They don't believe me! (Interview 2 S., Pos 324)". That is because he speaks a variety of colloquial Italian with a near native-like pronunciation and a marked presence of regional traits, including the frequent use of swearing. In addition, he claims that he is often mistaken by strangers for a Southern Italian due to his physical appearance. Living and working in a multilingual urban setting, his ambiguity makes it difficult for some people to pigeonhole him. In this regard, however, it is noteworthy that he rejects any label imposed on his identity. Unlike the learners described in di Lucca et al. (2008), Tanvir shows a much stronger awareness of and pride for the complexities of his multilingual identity that transcends essentializing discourses:

> E: And do you feel somehow stranger in Italy?
> T: No, like most of the people who see me say I'm Calabrian, Apulian.
> E: Oh, about your physical appearance?
> T: Yes. Every now and then when I speak in [local language], enough of my customers say to me: Are you [local] or what? I really speak with a [local] accent. They tell me: 'But what are you?' 'Well, I'm not telling you! [laughs]'
> E: But what are you? What if I ask you?
> T: I'm human. (Interview 2 S., Pos. 178–183)

Moreover, his multilingual awareness is not particularly grounded in a strong sense of belonging to his L1 community or ethnic group, nor in external pressures for authenticity, which are central for the learners described in other studies on multilingual adolescents (Babino and Stewart 2019; Flores-Curley et al. 2025; Palm et al. 2019). This may be related to his specific family situation as an unaccompanied minor and to his looser, transnational family ties.

5.1.2 An open-minded personality

Another important characteristic of his multilingual identity has to do with his "open-minded mentality", developed through his socialization experiences in

Europe and his job as a barman in Italy, which put him in contact with different kinds of people:

> E: And what makes you different from the Pakistanis you know?
> T: To tell you… I'm: well, I don't know how to say it, but I've noticed that I have a different mentality from them.
> E: More similar to the Italian one, to the Western one?
> T: More like open-minded.
> E: Open-minded? Open to what?
> T: Open-minded, like, those things that I have done here, that you do here, when a Pakistani or an Indian sees them he says: "My goodness, what are they doing?!" Like, to tell you…
> E: You mean the way women behave?
> T: Yes, but also, like, gays kissing on the street.
> E: Mh.
> T: [They would say]: "What are they doing? Look at them!" That makes me just laugh. (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 459–468)

The use of the expressions "open-minded mentality" rather than "Western", suggested by myself, is particularly significant in giving evidence of his autonomy with respect to the external interference of ideological discourses. Tanvir's "mentality" is characterized by a strong pragmatism and individualism which does not seem to be connected with the desire to assimilate to values associated to particular communities or groups but stems from a personality that he describes as free from prejudices.

To conclude, Tanvir's experiences of using and learning various languages go beyond national boundaries and ideologies of linguistic and ethnic uniformity and contribute to his perceived open-minded and flexible personality (Dewaele and van Oudenhoven 2009). In Greece, he learned Albanian; in Italy, he kept using it to make friends; in London, he lives in a predominantly Pakistani neighborhood, where he mainly speaks English with his second-generation Pakistani wife and Albanian and Italian with his friends back in Italy or with those who also moved to London. Regular exchanges in public and private contexts, including social media, in different languages are seen as enriching and empowering symbolic tools. For instance, his frequent practices of code-switching and code-meshing are used naturally and allow him to proudly express his multilingual identity and his affiliation to different languages and groups: "[I speak] half Albanian, half Italian. When I'm on the phone for example, and I'm speaking, in general I speak in Italian, I then feel like speaking in Albanian, to exchange private words that the others can't understand. (Tanvir interview 3, Pos 133)". With an Instagram profile of more than 20,000 followers where he uses all the languages of his repertoire to make meaning and exercise his symbolic power he can claim: "I'm an influencer on the social media (Tanvir interview 3, Pos 480)".

5.2 RQ2: "You MUST speak many languages because they help YOU"

With regards to his positions on multilingualism, Tanvir mainly appreciates the instrumental usefulness of speaking different languages, in line with the ideology of linguistic entrepreneurship, which consists in "aligning with the moral imperative to strategically exploit language-related resources for enhancing one's worth in the world (De Costa et al. 2016a: 695)": "You MUST speak many languages because they help you, they are useful to you. […] if you are an entrepreneur, you get a customer who speaks neither English nor Italian, if by chance you also speak a little German… see, you have already earned money! [laughs] (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 59–61)". As shown above, his frequent practices of code switching and translanguaging (Garcìa and Wei 2014) are consistent with a flexible multilingualism ideology (Creese and Blackledge 2010 cited in Sung 2023): the "view of language as a social resource without clear boundaries, situating the speaker at the heart of the social interaction" (1169).

His life experience in Italy has modelled him and taught him to "[be] an entrepreneur (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 484)" and to "[*f*]*are schèi* [local language expression meaning 'making money']. (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 81)", in order to increase his material and symbolic capital: "If you know Italian, you can go too far in Italy! Otherwise, your place is dishwasher and *bicher* [local language expression meaning 'glasses']! (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 432)". His word choice is significant for showing his deep connection with the culture of the Northeast, where local languages are vital also among the younger generations (Berruto 2018: 501–520). Dialects are seen as a resource to increase his sense of competence and belonging to the local community:

> E: Why is useful for you to speak dialect?
> T: Well, if you want to make jokes, to speak. Now you HAVE TO know all languages of the places where you live. (Tanvir interview 3, Pos 125)

It should be noted that Tanvir often mentioned negative aspects of his working context, and the broader social context in Italy, where he often faces racial discrimination: "Yes, it has happened to me many times [to experience episodes of racism]. Like old people, […] One time someone told me: 'Go back to your country!' And I say: 'Old man, get out of here before I get angry! […] Or I call the security', because he was going too heavy… (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 121–125)". Tanvir copes with these situations by leveraging his own sense of human dignity and self-confidence before an "old man", which gives him the strength to actively resist xenophobic discourse. This quote shows how Tanvir is aware of his power and is capable of negotiating it by actively resisting discrimination. Moreover, he explains

that he has learned not to legitimize such an ideology, relying on his own open-minded mentality and transnational habitus (see Section 5.3): "But I don't care anymore, I say: 'I'll move forward. I don't care what they say!' […] Yes, because I have to worry, if I don't know someone etc. etc., but by now I know how it works. Listen and let it out. […] I learned that I don't have to listen, really. (Tanvir interview 3, Pos. 195–199)".

Regarding the global status of English, he acknowledges its usefulness as a lingua franca: "Speaking English yes, has always helped me, because from Pakistan to here, it is the only language known everywhere in the World. (Interview 1 Tanvir, Pos 114)". However, this does not prevent him from investing in additional languages and dialects that do not enjoy the same global status.

His multilingual investment is therefore ruled by his *own* affective and instrumental "priorities" (Ushioda 2017: 474; Sung 2023: 1171). He regards himself and passes as a competent legitimate speaker of Albanian even though he has no written skills in this language, because he only uses it during his oral interactions with his friends.

Additionally, the fact that Urdu is experiencing attrition right now is not associated with a perceived lower status of its speakers, but with the fact that he has made more friends and significant others in the Italian-, Albanian- and English-speaking communities: "I don't know many people from my community, only 'hello, how are you?'. Because, to tell you, right now, I know more local people, or Italians. Because, working in a coffee shop, I developed a different mentality from them (Interview 1 Tanvir, Pos 90)".

This finding indicates that Italian currently holds a central place in his repertoire, though not as a result of a monolingual ideology. Unlike the learners described by di Lucca et al. (2008) or Palm et al. (2019), Tanvir moves fluidly between languages when interacting with his friends. Moreover, Italian and the local dialect are not linked to any particular prestige; rather, they serve primarily as tools for his own social and professional achievement in the area.

5.3 RQ3: "I took that middle path"

Studies on social class drawing on Bourdieu in relation to social identity construction, have pointed out its complexity (Block 2017: 137), resulting also from the role played by ideology, habitus, and capital (Darvin 2017: 294). In the next sections, the interaction of habitus and desire, and the role of capital will be explored to outline Tanvir's "position in the social space" (Darvin 2017: 294).

5.3.1 Habitus and desire

From the perspective of the Italian host society, Tanvir's migration process did not entail a particular change in social class. Tanvir came to Italy as an "unskilled" unaccompanied minor and still could be regarded as a member of the "working class". However, his account suggests a transformation from being an unaccompanied child starting "from scratch" or, as he puts it "from zero" and moving "to ten", (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 344), that is to a self-employed person, confident in his ability to climb the social ladder.

> E: And was there anything you learned in Italy that is useful to you now that you are abroad?
> T: Becoming an entrepreneur.
> E: The entrepreneurial mentality. And how did you learn it?
> T: By working.
> E: But did you take someone as an example, I don't know, your employers?
> T: But no. I'm becoming out better than them, for sure! (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 483–488)].

As he explains, his experience of being an orphan shaped his habitus and contributed to building his imagined identity as a father, who is able to support himself and his future family with his work: "Well, my goal, even now, has always been to make money and have a family. […] Earn money and think about the future, do those things that you have to, that a person would like to do with that money. (Interview 1 Tanvir, Pos. 48–50)". He explains: "Eh, I never had one, that's why I'm keeping my family now. (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 378)". As the quote above shows (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 483–488), his experience of working in Italy, and later in London, has contributed to creating a transnational habitus and imagined identity as a barman, a father and a self-employed person, empowered by his transnational ties and activities.

5.3.2 Capital

Regarding his capital, it is important to underline how crucial his multilingual awareness has been in fostering his sense of agency, enabling him to convert his linguistic resources into social and material capital. His account shows how he expressed his strong sense of agency through strategic decisions to actively participate or deliberately remain peripheral in different communities of practice. For example, regarding his participation in the life of his group home, he perceived and took advantage of the opportunities to improve his Italian and gain social capital inside and outside of it: "I was the only foreigner. Like, there were four Italian girls and two Italian guys. I was the only foreigner among them. I listened all day and didn't understand anything. Like, then, when I try to speak in Italian I kind of make a

mistake. They said it's not like that, it's like that. Like, I was taking an example, okay next time we'll fix it, next time. (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 360)".

However, participation in the practices of the group home was mainly functional to the fulfillment of his working objectives outside to gain material capital and become self-reliant as quickly as possible: "[…] I was just waiting to turn 16. As soon as I turned [16], I immediately started working, and I started putting money away, because I knew that when I left here [the group home], I would have to fend for myself. (Interview 1 Tanvir, Pos 88)". The opportunity to easily connect with peers and make friends increased his investment in Italian and Albanian, but, at the same time, distracted him from active participation in the community activities organized by the educators and from his duty to attend classes at the CPIA: "I spent most of the time outside, like I came home EXACTLY at my right time. I went like: 'Goodnight, see you tomorrow!'. Enough. […] But I have always been like this. I went out, minded my own a***. I'd rather hang around than stay in there. Like, if they [his educators] then had a problem, they would say to me: 'But what about you?' That's why I said: 'Look, the sooner I finish [school] the better'. Because otherwise they'd keep annoying me… (Tanvir interview 3, Pos 368)".

He has the same stance towards school. During the first year at the CPIA, he played truant most of the time and at the end of the year he found out that: "I only failed due to my absences (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 206)". What further dissuaded Tanvir from attending school regularly, was also the conflictual relationship with his Italian teacher. Tanvir specified that he had not experienced discriminatory attitudes either from his classmates or from his teachers. His oppositional and disrespectful behavior stemmed from his notable awareness of his linguistic capital and ability to question the authority of this teacher: "[…] I was the only one who could understand what she said, and I was annoyed when she yelled at us and the others didn't understand her, and I answered back, I didn't care (Tanvir interview 3, Pos 402)".

His experiences outside of the classroom and the support of significant others like friends and his girlfriend were particularly meaningful for his maturation: "[…] in those years from 2018 to 2020 […] I met a lot of people you can't imagine. […] Then when I saw people I said: 'If I become like him, I'll end up there. If I become like this, *it takes time. You HAVE TO be somewhere in between. I took that middle path* [emphasis mine]. […] duty first and then pleasure.' (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos. 224–232)". This quote highlights Tanvir's perception of time and age as forms of capital. In fact, on the one hand, Tanvir's young age has helped him learn Italian and fulfil his professional identity as a barman relatively quickly: "When a person is not an adult, he typically has the mentality of a child, learn things quickly. (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 326)". On the other hand, his decision to work as a barman seems to be a pragmatic, compromise solution, dictated by the necessity to find a job as soon as possible and by the lack of long-term commitment to invest in more ambitious, academic projects.

The following year, determined to conclude the path he had started "the sooner, the better", Tanvir enrolled in another CPIA center where he had a friendlier relationship with his new teachers and he obtained the middle school diploma: "I remember well that at the end of the year, when I took the exam, I had written an essay and I only had one mistake. I just didn't put an [ac]cent on an e. This was the only mistake. (Interview 1 Tanvir, Pos 110)" He explains that, even in the new context, he continued to play truant, to have behavioral problems, ("Once I beat up one classmate for nothing (Interview 2 Tanvir, Pos 270"), and he never did his homework: "I had high grades. Higher than everyone. […] And every time I had an exam, like a test, I passed it. I don't even know how I did it. It was enough for me to just look at a question once. I already knew the answer. Like, I've never, even since I was little, ever done my homework, EVER. (Tanvir interview 3, Pos. 383–386)."

Starting work in summer of 2019 was pivotal for Tanvir, because he was finally able to achieve his goal of working as a waiter and later as a barman. This marked a turning point in his attitude towards school and he began to understand its usefulness for improving his language competence: "[S]chool and also work [were useful]. Because at school, you learn grammar. How to present, how to speak. Instead, at work you gain confidence with customers and colleagues and you learn faster and the longer you stay at work, the more you learn. So both. (Interview 1 Tanvir, Pos 174)".

Ultimately, his school success seems to be related to his process of maturation and greater awareness for the general usefulness of academic and literacy skills as well as to his imagined identity as a barman. It is telling, however, that he associates his sense of confidence in his Italian skills with his working experience and not with participation at school.

6 Discussion

The findings support Fisher et al. (2018) multitheoretical conceptualization of multilingual identity that is set at the intersection of a. a psychological/intramental dimension in response to the lived experience, b. a social/relational dimension, where semiotic practices take place, and c. a historical/contextual dimension.

Tanvir's case illustrates the importance of the interplay between these three dimensions and in particular of (1) his high sense of agency, (2) his social network and (3) the context where his multilingual learning has happened, mostly informally. His remarkable awareness of his multilingual identity is marked by a high sense of human dignity and open-mindedness. It shows a great confidence in his ability to operate effectively across different languages, rather than a "wish to attain linguistic authenticity", that often characterizes élite multilingualism (De Costa 2019: 454). His

sense of ownership towards the different languages of his repertoire is rooted in his life experience of learning and using different languages simultaneously since his childhood and also during his migration journey. Such an awareness has sustained his multilingual investment to acquire and strategically convert his capital to increase his social power.

6.1 Agency

Tanvir's agency is characterized by a strong *sens pratique* that "comes with knowing the various rules, genres, and discourses that inform learners' practices and help them make strategic decisions across diverse spaces" (Darvin 2019: 259). This pragmatic attitude has allowed him to create new spaces for action and integrate different values and ideologies in his transnational habitus, such as the sense of belonging to his family and community of origin and his individualistic, open-minded lifestyle. Tanvir's agency and practical sense are particularly visible in the strategies adopted, for example, at work, to counter and delegitimize racist behaviours, at school or in the group home in his strategic peripherality. This finding echoes a study by Xu (2024) exploring the investment of a 29-year-old Syrian refugee in using Chinese. As the present study, it is situated in a LOTE context in the Global South and involves the case of an adult with a migration background. Among others, findings highlight how he chose to strategically invest in relationships with locals to acquire more colloquial expressions, thereby strengthening his sense of belonging to the local Chinese community and building an identity as a competent speaker.

Previous studies have shown the importance of social class as a structural constraint to the ability to exercise agency and negotiate a transnational habitus (Darvin and Norton 2014; see also De Costa et al. 2016b). Tanvir's case points to his considerable autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2017) and agency (Driver et al. 2021) to acquire more powerful positions and "move forward" by increasing his human capital and climbing the social ladder. He also sees this vision of his future self as a motivator for learning languages and seizing opportunities to grow and learn. However, it is telling that his problematic experiences in school meant that only with maturation did he recognize what the school could do to help him achieve his ambitions and visions. If schools are to reach all their learners, it would be helpful to meet them where they are and find out what their ambitions and future visions are so they can help them see the relevance and utility value of what is on offer.

Despite his remarkable sense of agency, findings also highlight the role of time and material constraints in reducing equitable educational opportunities. For instance, age and time perception in relation to his possibilities for the future have been crucial in Tanvir's identity trajectory, who wanted to become self-reliant as

quickly as possible. This made him decide to invest mainly in the acquisition of material and social capital rather than in a possible academic career, which consequently could not have a symbolic value for him.

6.2 Social network

The second dimension has been also crucial in his multilingual investment. Tanvir's ability and conscious decision to create and cultivate his social capital in different communities has enriched his multilingual repertoire and contributed to create his own identity as a multilingual competent speaker. As he states, it is though the relationships with his customers at the coffee shop that he became more confident in Italian. This finding supports Li's et al. (2024) study showing the strong interdependence between social capital and multilingual investment. While Tanvir was able to build a large social network of friends and acquaintances outside the formal context, he had a rather conflictual relationship with his Italian teacher during the first year at the CPIA, which impacted on his investment and eventually on his decision to repeat the course in another center. This finding highlights the importance of establishing a supportive and collaborative classroom climate, especially for vulnerable learners to foster their social network inside and outside the classroom to enhance multilingual investment.

6.3 Context

Tanvir's experience in Italy shows that his condition as an unaccompanied minor afforded him the opportunity to quickly fulfill his imagined identity, unlike what unfortunately happens to some other foreign citizens with forced migration journeys. At the same time, the opportunity to learn Italian in a formal context and obtain the Italian middle school diploma in a CPIA was not regarded as a perceived benefit to justify his full participation. While legitimizing the linguistic capital acquired outside, his school practices did not contribute to critically foster his multilingual identity or to further cultivate an academic pathway. The fact that Tanvir feels fulfilled according to his transnational habitus is certainly positive, especially when compared to other foreign citizens with journeys of migration. At the same time, to ensure better inclusion and social justice (Ortega 2019), cases like the one of Tanvir are thought provoking. In fact, in light of his story we should ask if the realization of his instrumental objectives also represents that of Tanvir's enormous potential and fulfils the right of equal education guaranteed by the Italian Constitution. His statements on the superficiality with which he approached the courses at the CPIA

described as overall easy and not very motivating compared to the external reality, should push us to reflect whether the decision to enroll in middle school in a CPIA and not in a secondary program, i.e. a catering high school, was the most appropriate for him. As the CESPI report (2020) points out, these kinds of choices are often dictated by the urge unaccompanied minors experience to become economically self-reliant as soon as possible. However, they sometimes risk endorsing inclusion practices based on deficit ideologies that do not instill enough confidence and imagination to pursue long-term academic goals.

7 Conclusions

The present study has traced the multilingual learning experience of Tanvir, a young adult with a migration journey who came to Italy in 2018 and who now lives between Italy and the UK. Since arriving in Italy in 2018, Tanvir has developed an identity that has gone from "classical immigrant" to "transmigrant" (Block 2007: 30–33). His original intention to settle down in Italy to support himself and accumulate economic capital, gave rise, over time, to a more complex life project in which Tanvir has learned to "inhabit transnational spaces" (Block 2007: 30–33) and live across different nations and ethnic communities, thus building a rich multilingual repertoire.

His history describes an example of popular multilingualism (De Costa 2019) that highlights some important implications for LOTE learning in a formal setting. Tanvir's awareness of his symbolic multilingual resources emerged as an unanticipated yet significant finding. While most research on the identities of grassroots multilinguals tends to highlight the structural constraints limiting their agency, this study suggests the need for a more integrative theoretical framework – one that considers both psychological and sociocultural dimensions.

Such an approach can offer deeper insight into individual capacities, such as agency and multilingual awareness developed though naturalistic "engagement with language diversity" (Ushioda 2017, 471), which were found essential for resisting discrimination and marginalization. Unlike the teenage students described in the literature review, Tanvir's agency is not rooted in an ideal multilingual self, associated with one's heritage language or additional languages but with a necessity to "know all the languages of the places where you live". This core pragmatic identification with a multilingual human being makes him free to pursue his own goals and makes him less exposed to external language ideologies associated with the L1 or L2.

The findings further indicate that the development of his multilingual awareness, which is central to the exercise of agency, occurred predominantly outside the formal educational contexts. This underscores the need for formal education not only to support the cultivation of multilingual identities but also to recognize and

validate the linguistic and cultural capital that many multilingual learners already possess. Current class-based identity research with teenagers, for example, focuses on the use of digital story telling (Kendrick et al. 2022) to support identity affirmation and investment.

Another way to include foreign youth, especially unaccompanied minors, is granting them the right to participate in ordinary secondary classrooms with the additional support of qualified curricular Italian L2 teachers (Santagati et al. 2024; see recent Decreto Legge 71/2024), able to place them at the center of a participative multilingual democratic education program (Fisher et al. 2018) that takes into account their past, present and future experiences beyond school and that could open new pathways for their personal fulfilment.

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