



Linguistic Capital and Global Citizenship: How English Proficiency Shapes Pakistani Students' Civic Identity Construction

Rumana Anjum¹ Ammara Chaudhry² Dr. Sadia Rauf³ Dr. Yaar Muhammad⁴

¹ Primary School Teacher, School Education Department, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

² MS Scholar, Department of Education, Government College for Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan.

³ Senior Lecturer, Life and Living Department, Riphah University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

⁴ Associate Professor, Department of Education, Government College for Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Rumana Anjum, **Correspondence through:** rumana.anjum@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The current study is a Straussian grounded theory exploring the role of English language skills, in terms of linguistic capital, in the process of civic identity construction of Pakistani university students in the global context of citizenship education. This study asks questions regarding the interplay between language ability, position in society, and citizenship construction in Pakistan's highly differentiated educational system through an analysis of field notes from six months of observation and in-depth interviews with 24 students. Using an open, axial, and selective approach to coding from Corbin and Strauss's (2015) grounded theory, the study shows that the positioning of multiple identities (national, and cosmopolitan citizen) is a negotiated process flowing through the mechanism of the ability to speak English. The results show that language capital is an important factor in students' experience of civic agency, the presence of the notion of global citizenship, and their placement in learning and career spaces. The emergent core category "linguistic mediation of civic becoming" illustrates the ways in which English competence forms different routes to citizenship while simultaneously providing for cosmopolitan citizenship and regenerating inequalities in education. This study adds to the knowledge of how social, economic, and political power and the citizenship identity of the people are linked to language in a postcolonial society where English is hegemonic.

Keywords: *Linguistic Capital, Global Citizenship Education, Civic Identity Construction, English Proficiency, Straussian Grounded Theory, Pakistan.*

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1. Introduction

In the postcolonial context, especially in Asia, the condition of language skills and citizenship identity construction has been an important research field in the current study of education, as English enjoys a privileged status as a language of capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Rahman, 2010). Alongside the potential for ascendance and empowerment through English, English also becomes a language of exclusion in Pakistan, acting as a sieve that filters access to upward educational mobility, aspirational mobility to professions, and access to global citizenship discourse (Mahboob, 2017).

English is not only a language in Pakistan; it is a passport to everything: education, jobs, respect in society, and even the definition of intelligence. If a person cannot speak English fluently, he or she is considered “backward” while being educated in any other language, even if he is a learned man in that language. This creates a divide between those who are educated in English and those who are not. This stratification gives rise to fundamental questions about how linguistic competence reflects and impacts the positioning or construction of the civic identity of language learners as global citizens (Banks, 2017; Oxley & Morris, 2013).

Linguistic capital in the Pakistani education system exists in three forms—English-medium, Urdu-medium, and madrasa—that exist in separate operating spheres and create various types of linguistic capital, coded differently with different pathways to civic participation and global citizenship discourse (Rahman, 2010). English ability has developed into the kind of “embodied cultural capital” outlined by Bourdieu (1991), which can be transformed into economic and social capital in the contexts of education and employment. This hierarchy of languages leads to the formation of what is known as “hierarchical structures in society,” and this brings about educational inequalities as a result of class (Shamim, 2011). With the growing implications of frameworks on Global Citizenship in Pakistan’s national educational policies, gaining insights into the role that English proficiency plays in students’ civic engagement becomes essential.

The shift towards global competence and

citizenship in Pakistan’s education policies has been well documented in recent scholarship as part of the National Educational Policy 2017 and Punjab Education Sector Plan 2019. Yet, the role of language capital – English literacy – in shaping students’ lived experiences of producing civic identities within these policy frameworks has not been extensively studied. In this study, this gap will be filled by using grounded theory by Corbin and Strauss (2014) to explore the process through which Pakistani university students experience bilingualism in their journey of growing up into an economic class and socializing for civic identity formation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Linguistic Capital and Educational Inequality

Bourdieu’s (1991) distinction between linguistic capital and other forms of capital offers the foundation for the understanding of the role of English language proficiency in the creation of other types of capital, which in turn can become educational and economic gains. Recent studies on Pakistan and other South Asian countries have shown that mastery of the English language serves as a speaking capital used by higher education graduates to advance their careers, economic journey, and social status (Sultana, 2014). Research in Bangladesh indicates that English proficiency translates to employment opportunities and, therefore, economic wealth and social status as a desirable communication network (Hamid & Baldauf Jr, 2008; Rumnaz Imam, 2005).

This linguistic stratification is also more severe in higher education, where English introduces students to knowledge and perspectives and gives a sense of authority that is lacking in Urdu-medium students (Mahboob, 2017). When analysed from the lens of Bourdieu’s conceptual frameworks, Pakistani higher education proves to be a misplaced higher education system, where individuals with a variety of tiered linguistic and economic capitals have less confidence (Shamim, 2011). For Bourdieu (1991), English serves as “significant” as “linguistic capital which students can aspire to in efforts to attain social mobility,” and at the same time, as an instigator of “hierarchical structures in society” and “reproducer of “class cultural power.”

2.2 Global Citizenship Education and Identity Formation

The issue of global citizenship education has become an important term in discussions on the dimension of educational policy worldwide. UNESCO (2015) emphasises three elements of global competence—cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Over the last few years, global competence and global citizenship have been increasingly addressed in Pakistan's policy discourses, as reflected in global education goals, such as inclusion in global education assessments like TIMSS, and the use of global citizenship language in policy planning documents (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). However, in different language systems, the introduction of global citizenship education in different contexts has raised questions about accessibility and equity (Pashby et al., 2020).

From this view, thorough research suggests that one of the key roles of English Language Teaching is that it can become an influencing agent as a lingua franca to make English language learners in Pakistan negotiate and interact across cultures by dealing with cultural diversity, sensitivity, and getting to know global issues and trends. However, such frames require students to be fluent in English to be fully engaged in global citizenship discourse; this may marginalise students who lack a high level of English proficiency (Durrani & Dunne, 2010).

Research on citizenship identity construction shows that citizenship identities are formed by multiple discordant and concordant “influential identity markers” (culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, and the state) operating in particular educational settings. This implies that civic identity construction is a fundamental contextual and relational phenomenon, where several other factors, such as linguistic competence (Gaudelli, 2016; Myers, 2016), form a more or less mid-level layer of influence in negotiating civic identity.

2.3 Language, Identity, and Symbolic Interactionism

Current studies in L2 development have come to an agreement that L2 learning is not just a cognitive process, but also a social and identity construction process (Block, 2014; Norton, 2013). According to Norton (2013), investment focuses learners' attention on language learning through

the imagination of a developed self in the future that will benefit from the language capability. In Pakistan, code-switching between Urdu and English is “frequently associated with prestige” and modernity, peer group belonging, and cosmopolitan identity, which means that language use is used for identities as a sort of performance (Mahboob, 2017).

Through symbolic interactionism, exchange in social interaction, mediated by language, can be seen as a way for individuals to build meaning and identity (Blumer, 1986; Mead & Schubert, 2018). This view holds that meanings are not inherent but are developed through social interactions and are learned through the process of socialisation. When applied to the practice of language and civic identity, symbolic interactionism provides insights into how speaking English is given meaning through engagements within domains of education where English language competence has value, and how this in turn helps develop students' identities as civic agents. Studies on multilingual identity bear out how language experience, evaluation, and feelings interrelate as they potentially contribute to situating the language learner in social and civic communities in terms of their positioning (Kinger et al., 2004).

2.4 Research Gap

Literature has explored the role of linguistic capital in education and civic orientation or global citizenship education; however, few studies have investigated how skills in English contribute to civic identity construction by Pakistani students. Experiential aspects of language competence and the formation of civic identities are less discussed in most studies, which are predominantly quantitative or policy-oriented (Durrani & Dunne, 2010). This study fills this gap by applying the Straussian grounded theory method, and the analysis resulted in a substantive theory based on students' lived experiences in navigating linguistic capital in civic identity building.

3. Theoretical Framework

In conducting this study, the authors base it on Straussian grounded theory, which is established on the philosophy of symbolic interactionism, in which knowledge is determined by social interaction and communication (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Although valid, Strauss and

Corbin's theory formation postulates that there is no absolute truth, and that researchers' interpretation shapes theory development and meaning making is subjective in nature (Charmaz, 2014). Such an approach resonates with how we might explore how civic identity is constructed dynamically and interactively within the context of linguistic capital.

The symbolic interactionist grounding of Straussian grounded theory states that there are three important premises for this research (Blumer, 1986; Mead & Schubert, 2018): First, people act with respect to objects and phenomena according to the meanings objects and phenomena have for them; in this research, it is the meaning of English proficiency that relates to civic agency and social positioning. Second, meanings are a product of social interaction; linguistic capital is significant only as a result of interaction in education contexts in which English skills are appreciated. Third, meanings are changed during interpretation; the students' sense of language competence in the ongoing dynamic of changing civic positions for self-concept is continually being reinterpreted.

Bourdieu's (1991, 2016) concepts of capital, field, and habitus offer complementary theoretical tools. Linguistic capital is an understanding of the same cultural capital that is acquired by students through their individual learning experiences and manifests itself in their L2 proficiency. The value and exchange of linguistic resources (in this case, the field of Pakistani higher education and civic discourse) are conditioned by the field in which they are situated. Students' social positioning leads to internalised dispositions, referred to as habitus, which are used to discern and make use of linguistic capital to construct civic self-presentation.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts systematic data collection and analysis of data using the grounded theory method proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2014) to link the data into cohesive and substantive theory to explain how English proficiency influences the construction of civic identity. Unlike the traditional Glaserian grounded theory, Straussian grounded theory places emphasis on conducting preliminary literature reviews to put the research

problem in perspective and utilises open coding, axial coding, and selective coding procedures to create theory-based explanations of the problem (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

4.2 Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted in the context of a public women's university in Punjab, Pakistan, where linguistic diversity and stratification of educational backgrounds were observed. The participants were selected using purposive theoretical sampling, as identified by Corbin and Strauss (2014), of students who had rich data to provide information based on the phenomenon under investigation. Twenty-four undergraduate and graduate female students majoring in Education, Social Sciences, and English were involved. In terms of language of education, nine participants had attended elite English medium schools, eight attended Urdu medium government schools, and seven attended semi-English medium schools.

4.3 Data Collection

24 in-depth semi-structured interviews (45–90 minutes) focused on participants' experiences of language learning in English, perceptions of language competence, experiences with citizenship education, and construction of civic identity (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Interview questions changed over the course of theoretical sampling, with the addition of emergent categories (Charmaz, 2014). One of the participants stated:

I had entered university and realised that my English-speaking skills were not up to the level of the class discussions on citizenship and social issues—my mind would understand in Urdu, but because of my inability to articulate it as required in English, I felt that my ideas couldn't be as relevant as other people in the class. They had been from English-medium schools, so they would speak in English with very beautiful vocabulary, so I wouldn't be able to speak; I felt my ideas were not as valuable. (P7)

4.4 Data Analysis

The analysis involved a three-stage Straussian coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). After analysing the interview transcriptions and field

notes, discrete incidents were identified and labelled using conceptual codes (line-by-line coding) (Charmaz, 2006). This process produced 127 preliminary codes, including English anxiety, linguistic gatekeeping, cosmopolitan aspiration, civic voice constraint, and language-mediated exclusion.

This phase encompassed the linking of codes with categories and subcategories, and in this phase, links between the categories are drawn to show how they relate to one another (Saldana, 2025). Analysis was done by using the coding paradigm of Corbin and Strauss (2014), which focused on the phenomena, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences. Through axial coding of relationships between categories, educational background (condition), engagement with English (phenomenon), approach to civic participation (action/interaction), and civic identity formation (consequences) emerged.

There was a final stage where the core category was determined in which all other categories fit (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). From the perspective of constant comparison and theoretical integration, “linguistic mediation of civic becoming” became the core category and enabled explanations of the central phenomenon of how English proficiency became a way of constructing civic identity.

4.5 Theoretical Saturation and Trustworthiness

Theoretical saturation occurred when no new information yielded fresh ideas, and when the categories were well developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). To ensure trustworthiness, prolonged engagement, member checking (asking participants to review the interview transcripts and preliminary findings), peer debriefing with colleagues who have expertise in qualitative methodology, and detailed audit trails documenting analytical decisions were undertaken (Lincoln, 1985).

5. Findings

Analysis identified five major categories that are the substantive theory on the English proficiency effect on the civic identity construction of Pakistani students. These categories are interdependent and revolve around the central category, that of “linguistic mediation of civic

becoming.”

5.1 Linguistic Capital as Civic Gatekeeping

Participants repeatedly expressed the view that the ability to articulate in English is a “gatekeeper” that affects one’s ability to engage in civic discussions and global citizenship education. Urdu-medium children faced language barriers that limited their civic participation:

During my citizenship class, the teacher always asks everyone to read articles from international sources that teach about democracy, human rights, and international issues; however, all these articles are in English, and I do not understand academic English well, so I miss out on some details and nuances. When the teacher asks me to discuss this topic with the rest of the class, I have ideas but cannot express them as well as the teacher and others, so I don’t participate as much as others during the important discussion that is evaluated. (P9)

This gatekeeping is done at a number of levels. Access to curricula materials on global citizenship is limited and is mainly provided in English based on the ability to communicate in English. This affects engagement with classroom discussions as English-medium students dominate the discussion. One participant commented,

English is creating an implicit hierarchy in the class: When people speak English well, they are the experts on global issues, but when we struggle with English, we are less knowledgeable about global issues, although we may be more knowledgeable about local civic issues. (P14)

5.2 Cosmopolitan Identity Construction Through Linguistic Performance

English language ability came to the fore as a means of building cosmopolitan identities that students related to world citizenship. English competence was said to be symbolic capital that represented modernity, sophistication, and orientation to the world. One participant who had English medium background explained:

Fluency in English makes me feel part of

a larger community—when I speak about climate change or gender equality in English, I feel like I'm engaging with international movements, with all the global discussions on social media, news and academic discussion. English is a way of thinking of myself not just as a Pakistani citizen—and I wear that with great pride—but as a global citizen who can speak with people around the world. (P24)

For these students, English became a way of generating a civic identity that went beyond instrumental communication. Thus, the occurrence of Urdu and English interlingual switching worked as an act of identity performance and acts as cosmopolitan positioning using English is indicated by such a form of switching. However, cosmopolitan identity construction was mainly available to students with a linguistic capital, which established different trajectories towards civic identity.

5.3 Linguistic Anxiety and Civic Self-Efficacy

A key finding was related to the answers of the participants on how English language anxiety was related to civic self-efficacy, that is, their self-perceptions of their ability to make civic changes. Students who spoke English with some difficulty found that they had decreased civic agency. One participant articulated,

Important civic platforms, NGOs, policy groups, and universities – most require English. When I think of trying to advocate on any issues that I care about (social issues in Pakistan – education inequality, women's rights, poverty, etc.), I feel handicapped by my English. Civic things written in English have greater visibility than civic things written in Urdu. I have good ideas—sometimes I think, what is the point of having good ideas if I cannot communicate them in the language that matters? (P17)

This linguistic anxiety was not only manifested in speaking but also found in students' experiences of writing English language civic advocacy articles or formal correspondence to authorities, as well as producing English language academic papers on social issues. The need to understand civic ideas and then translate those ideas into

English resulted in what participants called 'double work' - working hard to understand, then having to translate ideas, which many participants lost some of the meaning and clarity in during the translation process.

5.4 Educational Background and Differential Civic Access

Characteristically, the educational factors—namely, medium of instruction at school—stood out as a major contributor to the linguistic capital that in turn led to the construction of civic identity (Rahman, 2010). We draw inspiration from Bourdieu's concept of embodied linguistic capital and how it translated to confident civic engagement on the part of students from elite English-medium schools. These students reported experiences of smooth incorporation of both English ability and citizenship. One participant who had attended English language medium school said:

I write position papers, do Model UN, and debate social policies – everything is in English; it's the natural language to do that stuff. I never thought about English in relation to citizenship education; I was taught about democracy, rights and responsibilities; it was all in English in primary school. (P19)

Urdu-medium students, on the other hand, had a linguistic capital deficit and needed to make a conscious effort to remove that deficit. These students felt left out of civic conversations, self-conscious about their language performance, and that their civic efforts were diminished because they did not speak the language well. This resulted in what Bourdieu (1991) described as the dissonance of the habitus, in which the internal dispositions of the students did not match the dispositions of the field.

5.5 Linguistic Mediation of Civic Becoming (Core Category)

Selective coding resulted in the emergence of 'linguistic mediation of civic becoming' as the primary category that grouped all the other categories together (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This idea gets at how English language fluency does not just facilitate or impede civic action but rather engenders civic identity. The construction of civic identity of Pakistani students depends on three

aspects of linguistic capital, which mediate it:

Epistemic mediation: Educational resources are mainly in English, which influences access to information about citizenship and democracy, human rights, and global issues through English proficiency.

Performative mediation: Civic identity is (being) performed through language (Butler, 2022); English competence brings about some civic actions or performances (formal advocacy, academic analysis, connecting globally), and Urdu competence brings about others (organising in the communities, participating in local movements).

Identificatory mediation: Students develop a disposition to learn English by internalising linguistic competence as part of civic identity, and proficiency is accepted as an important indicator of being a capable, modern, and globally oriented citizen (Norton, 2013).

This central category shows not only who can join civic discourses, but also how students construct their own identities as civic citizens, the roles they think they can and should play, and how they think about their location, citizenship, and global citizenship identities.

6. Discussion

6.1 Linguistic Capital and Civic Stratification

The findings of this study shed light on the understanding of linguistic capital as one of the mechanisms in stratifying citizens based on civic status in post-colonial settings (Bourdieu, 1991; Rahman, 2007). As Pakistan's educational policies move forward towards global citizenship, it should be implemented in an education system that is also linguistically segregated with an uneven distribution of the English language in the society (Mahboob, 2017). An emerging theory, "linguistic mediation of civic becoming," further explores Bourdieu's (2016) idea of "linguistic capital" and specifically shows how linguistic competence influences not only economic status but also key aspects of civic identity and civic agency.

The ability of English to be converted to economic benefits has been documented in previous studies in the South Asian context, as English is used as linguistic capital (Coleman & Capstick, 2012;

Sultana, 2014). The findings from this study suggest that linguistic capital also translates into civic capital—how one occupies a civic frame in the civic conversation or demonstrates their ability to be a legitimate civic actor (Banks, 2017; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The concept of a "civic gatekeeping" of English proficiency resonates with evidence of language requirements that lead to "hierarchical structures in society" that reinforce class-based inequality (Shamim, 2011). This research, however, provides new insights into the psychological and identificatory aspects of linguistic gatekeeping and how language barriers decrease civic self-efficacy and have implications for civic identity development.

6.2 Cosmopolitan Identity and Linguistic Imperialism

This notion of English needed to construct a cosmopolitan identity is underpinned by wider issues of global citizenship education (Pashby et al., 2020). The participants' ascription of English to modernity, globality, and sophisticated civic involvement is in line with the study of the association of English with modernity, globality, and sophisticated civic involvement in postcolonial societies (Phillipson, 1996). The role that English plays as the world's international language provides an opportunity for trans-cultural communication and collaboration, but likewise causes problems related to linguistic imperialism, as Pennycook (2017) stated that the practice of English as the international language encourages trans-cultural communication and collaboration but raises development issues relating to linguistic imperialism. On the level of identity formation, this study shows how linguistic imperialism works: English proficiency becoming a necessary condition for valid citizenship on a global scale.

The English-proficient students' cosmopolitan identities were similar to those of "investment" identities that Norton (2013) described, in which a learner invests in language learning to obtain an imagined community and future identities. Students who were interested in learning English saw themselves as citizens who could be involved in world issues, connect to global networks, and engage in a cosmopolitan conversation (Banks, 2017). This investment was made in a context of power structures that benefit English, which may

also impact students' abilities to exercise citizenship in local languages and their own citizenship know-how.

6.3 Symbolic Interactionism and Civic Identity Construction

The use of symbolic interactionism in theory, as was foundational in this study, in keeping with Straussian grounded theory, was useful in understanding civic identity as processual (Blumer, 1969) and interactional (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This discovery of the civic identity that students build in language performances within the educational context aligns with symbolic interactionist assumptions that meanings are not intrinsic but are created within social interactions. English proficiency was deemed important through student interactions, which formed students' civic identities and how they saw themselves as civic agents.

The idea of "linguistic mediation of civic becoming" fit together with symbolic interactionist ideas about the 'looking glass self' (Cooley, 1902), through which people develop their conceptions of self in relation to the way they perceive others reflect the self on them. Based on the students' perceptions, seemingly others estimate their civic competence based on their language performance, so that they internalise their limited civic agency. This underscores the important role language plays not only for communication but also as a symbol that serves as a gauge for assessing one's civic value and negotiating one's civic identities (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2013).

6.4 Implications for Educational Policy

The results have important implications and applications for educational policies, especially as they relate to the implementation of global citizenship education in linguistically diverse settings (Pashby et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2015). In incorporating global citizenship frameworks into their educational policies, the consideration of language should not be overlooked in the case of Pakistan. Thus, global citizenship education in a monolingual system in which the multilingual abilities of students are not supported can potentially exacerbate existing inequalities in education.

Policy suggestions involve forming curricula for

global citizenship in several languages; making multilingual materials and tools on citizenship available; and training teachers on how to accept diverse language systems in citizenship education and critically question the use of English as a privileged language in assessing citizenship competence (Andreotti, 2006; Gaudelli, 2016). Following Rahman (1996), it could be stated that the language-in-education policies should provide a high level of ideological uniformity, consistency and goal setting for English, Urdu and local/indigenous languages that all matches, captures and promotes the linguistic diversity in Pakistan.

6.5 Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study is that it was conducted with female students at one university, meaning that it may not be applicable to male students and perhaps, other university settings. Future studies can examine the similarities and differences in the civic identity construction of linguistic capital in other educational contexts, such as male universities, rural settings, and religious institutions, as Straussian is more interested in substantive theories which are relevant in a certain context instead of statistical generalisation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Longitudinal studies could investigate how civic identity changes as students' English grows more proficient, whether the growth of English language capital translates into changes in civic identity, or whether patterns in civic identity already set up in the initial educational contexts remain consistent.

7. Conclusion

This Straussian grounded theory study found that English proficiency is a symbolic resource instrumental to the construction of civic identity among Pakistani university students. With the emergent core category of "linguistic mediation of civic becoming," linguistic competence is revealed as a vital part of civic becoming, not only as an instrument of civic engagement but also as an integral part of civic identity. Epistemically, this knowledge about citizenship is mediated by English, performatively, by how students perform their civic roles, by how students conceptualise themselves as civic actors.

This points to the within-conflict dynamics of putting GCE in place in linguistically divided

postcolonial societies. Even though English is important as a language that allows for transnational civic discourse and may play a role in cosmopolitan identity construction, citizenship education that privileges English can also reproduce class-based inequalities and may come to devalue indigenous civic knowledge traditions. The research highlights how linguistic capital influences who can engage in civic life and the nature of civic identities that students with varying educational backgrounds have access to.

To achieve true global citizenship education in Pakistan, the education system needs to implement policies to tackle linguistic stratification in the field of education. This involves making the transition from instrumental understandings of language as a neutral communication tool to seeing language as a symbolic resource with power that forms identity, agency, and belonging. Effective civic education is equity-focused and requires critically assessing

the ways in which language proficiency policies steward access to civic participation, developing citizenship curricula in more than one language, and recognising the validity of multiple language repertoires.

Finally, this study adds to the studies that explore the intricate links between language, power and citizenship in a globalised educational landscape. However, with global citizenship integration in educational systems globally, it is necessary to focus on linguistic capital as a means of ensuring citizenship education can facilitate all citizens to engage in an inclusive democracy. The theory of linguistic mediation of civic becoming offers conceptual lenses to inform the analysis and action in the development of citizenship education that respects a diverse linguistic landscape while cultivating students' potential for engaging meaningfully as citizens in local, national, and global spheres.

Conflict of Interest

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