



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following published research article: Funova Retzius, A., Haukås, Å., Ghimenton, A., Molway, L., & Brevik, L. M. (2025). Secondary school students' beliefs about multilingualism across contexts: England, France and Norway. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2571453>

Students value multilingualism - but many do not see themselves as multilingual

What is this research about and why is it important?

Students' beliefs about multilingualism matter because they can shape motivation for language learning, and affect whether young people see their languages as an asset and resource. This study presents findings from the large-scale European project called LANGUAGES. The study compares the views of 813 secondary school students in England, France and Norway. Students completed a survey about the possible benefits of knowing more than one language and whether they considered themselves multilingual. Across the three countries, students were most positive about potential benefits closely connected to language learning, such as finding it easier to learn an additional language. The study also found an important contrast: students in England held the most positive overall views about multilingualism but were least likely to describe themselves as multilingual.

What did we do?

- The study used responses collected in 2022–23 from 48 language classes in the LANGUAGES project: eight English classes and eight French classes in each of England, France and Norway.
- The participating schools were selected to reflect variation in socioeconomic status and language diversity. In total, 813 students (out of a possible 997) completed the survey used in this study.
- Students completed a context-adapted version of the Ungspråk (Young Languages) questionnaire, reporting which languages they knew or were learning, their beliefs about eight possible benefits of multilingualism, and whether they considered themselves multilingual.
- The researchers compared patterns across the three countries and also examined whether students' self-identification as multilingual was linked to their beliefs about the benefits of multilingualism.

What did we find?

- Students were most positive about possible benefits directly related to language learning. They particularly agreed that knowing more languages can make it easier to learn a new language and that being multilingual can help them better understand languages they already know.

- Students were less convinced by broader claims about multilingualism, such as being more creative, smarter, better at other school subjects, earning more money, or understanding other people's feelings better.
- As expected given their high level of exposure to English, students in Norway self-identified as multilingual more frequently than their counterparts in France and England. Students in France also embraced a multilingual identity significantly more frequently than their counterparts in England.
- England stood out: students there had the most positive overall beliefs about multilingualism, but only 36% identified themselves as multilingual. By comparison, 67% of students in France and 71.8% in Norway did so. A further 41.8% of students in England were unsure whether they were multilingual.
- Students' beliefs about multilingualism were not strongly linked to whether they personally identified as multilingual. The English findings therefore point to a gap between seeing multilingualism as valuable and seeing oneself as a multilingual person.

What does it all mean anyway?

- For teachers, an important message is that students may use a very narrow definition of "multilingual" - for example, assuming that only highly fluent speakers, people who grew up with another language, or people who speak several languages count. Helping students recognise developing and partial language knowledge as part of a multilingual repertoire may make multilingual identity feel more attainable and less exceptional.
- Classroom activities could make the benefits of multilingualism more concrete. The authors suggest creating opportunities for students to use their languages in authentic communication, including through digital exchanges or contact with other learners, and to reflect on the languages they already know or use outside school.
- The study also cautions against presenting every claimed benefit of multilingualism as settled fact. Some wider cognitive and social benefits remain debated in research. Teachers can use these claims as a starting point for critical discussion while focusing on benefits students can directly experience through language learning and language use. The study is comparative and did not connect beliefs to particular languages, so further research could explore how attitudes differ according to the languages students learn and use.

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