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Narratives of Zimbabwean children and parents: language brokering in Johannesburg

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Abstract

Children often serve daily as language brokers for migrant families in the foreign context of host countries (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Although this is a reality for migrant families around the world, the phenomenon and migrant children continue to be invisible in research (Orellana, 2009). Dehumanization and subtle, daily xenophobic attitudes in the complex linguistic landscape of multilingual South Africa have created the need for children to interpret for parents and other family members even where the common lingua franca of English is shared and is the recognised official medium of communication. The perceived superiority of English and the arrogant dominance of English speakers (Achebe, 2006) have been associated with the new elite of black South Africans who speak fluent English and by extension, black migrant English speakers are similarly perceived as asserting dominance through their dependence on English. Analysing narratives of migrant families, this research project yields that the continual resistance to the English language and other non-South African vernaculars is interlinked with and seems to perpetuate xenophobic attitudes and dehumanization. The anxiety for adult migrants who do not speak local languages is often dealt with by child language brokers who mediate for their parents and other migrants in multiple spaces including informal (e.g. taxis, streets, shops etc.) to more formal spaces such as hospitals and schools. Playing this role suggests adult responsibility for the child, with a possible impact on family dynamics and relations. Although negative feelings of embarrassment are often experienced by parents, these were outweighed by a sense of pride for children being able to help their families, and the sense of security the family feels because of the children's linguistic capabilities. Traditional family dynamics and roles do not seem to be significantly altered or negatively impacted by children taking on

unconventionally ‘adult roles’. Having acculturated faster, understanding the language rules, politics and consequences of not speaking local languages, this research suggests that brokers function for the benefit of the family and use their skills to reduce anxiety related to xenophobic attitudes and dehumanization against parents and peers particularly when moving between spaces, for example, between home and school or work.