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A case study of the English language practices of six learners in a desegregated urban South African school.

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ABSTRACT

This research report explores the English language practices of six Grade 10 learners in a desegregated Johannesburg school as well as the ways in which the learners position themselves and others as users of English and other languages. The context of the study is desegregated schooling that is a consequence of the demise of apartheid with its policies of separation of people on racial and ethnic grounds.

I draw on post-structuralist theorizing of language and identity in thinking about the relationship between language and identity (Hall, 1992a; Weedon, 1997; Zegeye, 2001) with an emphasis on the productive force of language in constituting identity (Pennycook, 2004). Also significant in this research report are the hybridity theories of Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1992b) and their critiques as well as the post-structuralist concepts of 'positioning' (Davis and Harrè, 1990) and 'investment' (Norton (Pierce), 1995; 1997). A further important strand in this study are the politics of English as a global language and language of power.

The overall design of the project is qualitative, using ethnographic methods and drawing on the traditions of school ethnography. In analyzing the data, I argued that English constitutes and is experienced as a major part of the participants' identities. I also state that through learners' language practices and positioning of themselves and others as speakers of language, multiple and at times contradictory identities are continually being constructed and reconstructed. I also argue that the learners' desire to be proficient in English and use of prestigious accents and varieties of English is not about a simple process of assimilation into dominant discourses. Assimilation as I contend, takes place under complex processes of contestation and appropriation that involves constant crossing of borders and authorization of hybridities. I have also argued that the post-apartheid youth find themselves in a situation where internalised racialised categories of apartheid ideology continue to be relevant in their understanding of issues but that they are not constrained by them in their lived experience of boundary crossing and fashioning of hybrid identities.