

ABSTRACT

Language, schooling and self have always been inextricably intertwined in the life of high school adolescents. Yet, there has been a paucity of research that investigates the relationship between language, identity, and language-in-education policies that often contradict multiple and fluid identity expressions of young adolescents. The aim of this study project was to explore the relationship between multilingualism and identity construction among urban black youth in two heteroglossic schools of Soweto township and to understand identity of black urban youth in South Africa.

Two phases of data collection were carried out. First, a baseline survey of language patterns was administered to a total of 138 (n=138) grade 11 adolescent youth ranging from 15-19 years old. The second phase involved focus group discussions comprising 10 and 7 self-selected multilingual adolescents per school in order to approximate out of school multilingual spaces to explore a full range of language use, identity expressions and language attitudes.

The results of the study are two pronged. The survey revealed a high degree of multilingualism and multilayered identities among the participants as manifested in all spheres of their lives such as the school yard, home, and conversation with friends. However, this complex identity matrix is constrained by classroom practices that are torn between monolingual policy preferences and actual language mixing. Correspondingly, focus group-based language performance and metacognitive reflections on multilingual performance also revealed that a fluid, mobile and versatile communicative practice referred to as translanguaging, which goes a step further from traditional code-switching, is a norm among these urban youth adolescents.

The study concludes by highlighting tensions on identity constructions of highly multilingual urban youth. The pervasiveness of identity construction through the translanguaging phenomenon suggests cross-language boundaries and emergence of new urban identities that are expressed through hybrid varieties such as 'kasitaal'. Multilingually sensitive education approaches that are considerate of the inextricable relationship between age of identity construction, language and education as well as new areas for further research are recommended.