

## **ABSTRACT**

This research report engages with the concern that African learners attending English medium, multiracial schools are losing their proficiency in African languages. In so doing, the report explores the language practices of four multilingual Grade 9 learners at a desegregated private high school in Gauteng. In a school environment that does not overtly support the use of African languages, I explore the extent to which multilingual learners use African languages in the school context, to position themselves and others, as an identity building resource, and the extent to which the use of African languages is implicated in their identities. I also explore the possible influence of the learners' cultural and ethnic backgrounds on their language practices, and related to this, the expression of their identities. I look at how their language practices help them shift identities with space and purpose, and the contradictions therein.

The study draws on poststructuralist theories of language and identity (Weedon, 1997; Zegeye, 2001), in considering how language constitutes identity (Pennycook, 2004) and self and other 'positioning' (Davies and Harre`, 1990) It also draws on Bourdieu's (1991) theorizing of language and power and language as a form of cultural capital.

I draw on two traditions in qualitative research: case study and ethnography. In my analysis of the data, I argue that both African languages and English are important in learners' identities. I indicate that through their language practices, the learners continue to position themselves in multiple and contradictory identities that continue to shift with context. I also argue that the learners' proficiency in English has not led to them losing proficiency in their home languages, which are retained and used as a primary marker of ethnic identities and for ideas of ethnic purity. This purity is in turn not constructed in a staidly 'traditional' manner, but negotiated through joking and verbal competition. Notions of ethnic purity are also often discursively constructed through the use of English, illustrating the contradictory nature of identities. I also point out that some learners protected apartheid constructed ethnic compartmentalization by setting boundaries of belonging. I point to language being a site of struggle for power and contestation in an effort by the learners to resist linguistic assimilation.

