

Krause-Alzaidi, Lara-Stephanie

About language and (e)quality in South African education. A short introduction

Hallitzky, Maria [Hrsg.]; Mulhanga, Félix [Hrsg.]; Spendrin, Karla [Hrsg.]; Yoshida, Nariakira [Hrsg.]: *Expanding horizons and local connectedness. Challenges for qualitative teaching research and development in intercultural contexts.* Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2025, S. 28-36



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Krause-Alzaidi, Lara-Stephanie: About language and (e)quality in South African education. A short introduction - In: Hallitzky, Maria [Hrsg.]; Mulhanga, Félix [Hrsg.]; Spendrin, Karla [Hrsg.]; Yoshida, Nariakira [Hrsg.]: *Expanding horizons and local connectedness. Challenges for qualitative teaching research and development in intercultural contexts.* Bad Heilbrunn : Verlag Julius Klinkhardt 2025, S. 28-36 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-341791 - DOI: 10.25656/01:34179; 10.35468/6193-02

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-341791>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:34179>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<http://www.klinkhardt.de>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen, solange Sie den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen und das Werk bzw. diesen Inhalt nicht bearbeiten, abwandeln oder in anderer Weise verändern.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy, distribute and transmit, adapt or exhibit the work in the public as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor. You are not allowed to alter or transform this work or its contents at all.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der:


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

About Language and (E)Quality in South African Education: A Short Introduction

Abstracts

EN

In this article, I provide a brief insight into South Africa's apartheid and post-apartheid education system, focusing specifically on Language in Education Policy (LiEP). Based on insights from my research in a Cape Town township school, I then argue that ideologies of language as divided into separate, bounded entities – as instantiated for example in the notion of 'mother tongue' – perpetuate rather than alleviate inequalities in (South) African education. Due to a misunderstanding with regard to what constitutes their 'mother tongue', many South African students and teachers are sent on senseless loops in a standard-language-obsessed system. Teachers in this system have developed creative and effective didactic strategies that tend not to be taken seriously by researchers and policy makers due to existing societal and academic stigma against township and rural schools. I call on qualitative and reconstructive teaching research to reconstruct, understand and make accessible the complex teaching strategies of teachers in such schools, because these strategies could help in working towards more (e)quality in South African education.

DE

In diesem Artikel gebe ich einen kurzen Einblick in das Apartheid- und Post-Apartheid-Bildungssystem Südafrikas und konzentriere mich dabei speziell auf Sprachpolitik. Auf der Grundlage von Erkenntnissen aus meiner Forschung in einer Township-Schule in Kapstadt argumentiere ich dann, dass Ideologien, die Sprache in separate, abgegrenzte Einheiten aufteilen – wie sie beispielsweise im Begriff der ‚Muttersprache‘ zum Ausdruck kommen – Ungleichheiten im (süd-)afrikanischen Bildungswesen eher aufrechterhalten als abbauen. Aufgrund eines Missverständnisses darüber, was ihre ‚Muttersprache‘ ausmacht, werden viele südafrikanische Schüler:innen und Lehrende in einem von Standardsprachen besessenen System auf sinnlose Umwege ge-

schickt. Die Lehrenden in diesem System haben kreative und effektive didaktische Strategien entwickelt, die von Forschenden und politischen Entscheidungsträger:innen aufgrund der bestehenden gesellschaftlichen und akademischen Stigmatisierung von Township-Schulen oft nicht ernst genommen werden. Ich rufe die qualitative und rekonstruktive Unterrichtsforschung auf, die komplexen Unterrichtsstrategien von Lehrenden in solchen Schulen zu rekonstruieren, zu verstehen und zugänglich zu machen, denn diese Strategien könnten zu mehr Chancengleichheit und höherer Bildungsqualität im südafrikanischen Schulsystem beitragen.

PT

Neste artigo, apresento uma breve visão do sistema educativo sul-africano do apartheid e do pós-apartheid, centrando-me especificamente na política linguística. Com base nos resultados da minha investigação numa escola de um township na Cape Town, argumento que as ideologias que compartimentam a linguagem em unidades separadas e delineadas – tais como as expressas na noção de ‘língua materna’ – perpetuam, em vez de reduzirem, as desigualdades na educação (sul) africana. Devido a um mal-entendido sobre o que constitui a sua ‘língua materna’, muitos alunos e professores sul-africanos são enviados para desvios sem sentido num sistema obcecado com as línguas padronizadas. Os professores neste sistema desenvolveram estratégias didáticas criativas e eficazes que, muitas vezes, não são levadas a sério pelos investigadores e decisores políticos devido à estigmatização social e académica existente nas escolas das townships. Apelo à investigação qualitativa e reconstrutiva da sala de aula para reconstruir, compreender e tornar acessíveis as complexas estratégias de ensino dos professores destas escolas, uma vez que estas estratégias podem contribuir para uma maior igualdade de oportunidades e para uma educação de maior qualidade no sistema escolar sul-africano.

JA

本稿では、南アフリカのアパルトヘイト期、またアパルトヘイト後の教育制度について、教育政策のなかの言語(LiEP)に焦点を当てて概観する。著者がケープタウンの黒人居住区の学校でおこなった研究では、分離され境界で区切られた言語イデオロギーが(南)アフリカの教育における不平等の緩和よりむしろ維持に結びついていることを指摘している。言語による区分は、たとえば「母語」概念によるものである。なにが「母語」を形成するのかについて誤解があるために、多くの南アフリカの児童・生徒や教師は、標準とされる言語が抑圧的にはたらくシステムのなかで無意味な対応を受けることになる。この制度に抗して教師は独創的で効

果的な授業戦略を展開させてきたが、黒人居住区の学校や地方の学校に対する社会的・学術的なスティグマのために、多くの教師や政策立案者からはあまりまじめに受け取られていない。著者は、こういった学校での複雑な教授戦略を再構成し、理解し、内実を把握できるようにするために、質的・再構成的授業研究に取りくんではいる。これらの研究戦略によってこそ、南アフリカの教育における平等や質を高めることができると考えるからである。

Some history

What marks South Africa's history most prominently is the creation of boundaries – linguistic and otherwise. Under colonialism¹ and then even more so under the Apartheid regime, skin colour, languages and a vast array of societal attributes were systematically racialised and politicised. This separated some, and grouped together other, parts of the population in racially segregated residential areas and schools (amongst others Bowker & Star 1999; Posel 2001). These divide-and-rule strategies allowed a White minority to rule the vast majority of the population. Education was part and parcel of creating and controlling this divided society. The 'Bantu Education Act' of 1953 carved out a specific education system for Black people, at the time also referred to as 'Bantu'. Through this, the National Party (1948-1994) sought to satisfy its increasing demand for Black unskilled and semi-skilled labour. Bantu education was to prepare Black people for "a niche in a highly segregated, hierarchical and static society" (Smit cited in Bekker 2003: 70).

So called 'mother tongue' education, which had started as a vehicle for Christianisation during early colonialism (Dube 1985), was institutionalised under this Bantu Education Act. While providing basic literacy and education, it nevertheless kept Black people away from high levels of proficiency in English, which was to be reserved for the ruling elite. This sparked strong opposition and loud demands for access to (education in), English. After tensions culminated in the infamous Soweto Uprising (1976-1977), where Black people protested

1 What is today called South Africa had a complex colonial history beginning with the Portuguese exploring the Cape in the 15th century, the Dutch settling there in 1652 and the British taking over in 1805 – all continuously disturbed by local uprisings against colonial rule. 1910 South Africa became semi-independent as a British dominion. The Afrikaner-dominated National Party came to power in 1924, establishing the infamous system of Apartheid in 1948. This system of institutionalized racial segregation was only going to come to an end under enormous economic and social pressure from within South Africa and later from the international community, leading to the first democratic elections in 1994 (for a history of South Africa see Ross 2008). British influence is until today strongly visible in educational policy and school curricula.

against the Afrikaans Medium Decree² implemented in 1975 (Ndlovu 2004: 327), ‘mother tongue’ education was reduced from 6 to 4 years, followed by a switch to English – producing a so-called ‘early-transition’ language policy model (Ouane & Glanz 2011). Historically, therefore, ‘mother tongue’ education has been something to be fought against, not for, as it was used systematically to stifle the upward social mobility of Black people.

Until today, however, the early-transition model is still dominant across South Africa and has essentially remained the same since the late 1970s: in areas where a dominant African language can be identified, that language is used as Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) from Grade R (preschool grade) until the end of Grade 3, to then be replaced by English as LoLT in Grade 4.³ This model seems to offer a compromise between parents’ push for their children to be educated in English (Fataar 2009; Lombard 2007; Ndimande 2012) and international and domestic research that emphasises the importance of beginning schooling in ones ‘mother tongue’ to ensure equality of opportunity in education (Brock-Utne, Desai & Qorro 2003; UNESCO 2008).

Research increasingly shows, however, that it is in fact ideologies of language as separate, bounded entities – as instantiated in the notion of ‘mother tongue’ – that perpetuate rather than alleviate inequalities in (South) African education (Banda 2018; Dowling 2011, 2007; Krause 2021; Prinsloo and Krause 2019b; Sibanda 2019). In this view, the biggest potential for change and increasing (e)quality in South African education lies in questioning such ideologies and learning from teachers who have developed linguistically flexible didactic strategies. Here, I also see the role of qualitative reconstructive teaching research. It can help understand and build on teachers’ existing expertise regarding innovative linguistic and didactic strategies adapted to linguistically diverse settings.

They don’t say inye at home, they say one

A mother tongue is the language one is first socialised into – more or less literally the language one’s mother speaks, no? While this might be a fair enough approximation, there are usually other conceptual implications that come with the notion of ‘mother tongue’, for example that it is *one* language that has a

2 A particularly vicious language policy that introduced Afrikaans as a second medium of instruction next to English in secondary school. This resulted in Black people being instructed through their respective vernacular for the first six or seven years of schooling to then switch to two different foreign languages as media of instruction for different subjects, significantly reducing the use of English (Heugh 2013, p. 217)

3 The Grades R to 3 are referred to as Foundation Phase, Grades 4 to 6 as Intermediate Phase, and Grade 7 as the Senior Phase of primary schooling in South Africa.

name – a nomolanguage⁴ – like ‘Xhosa’, ‘Afrikaans’ or ‘English’. But if we look for example into Cape Town’s townships, people tell us that the language of the township is “mixed with ilanguage yama Coloured, amaXhosa and the White”⁵ (Grade 4 teacher quoted in Krause 2021: 1), rather than being a bounded nomolanguage. From Sibanda’s interviews with urban dwellers in Kagiso, a township in Gauteng, we also hear that when children grow up

“... they mix Zulu with other languages such as Setswana, Xhosa or Swati. They tend to throw in a lot of Xhosa and Swati words partly because they think it is cool and mainly because those languages resemble Zulu. Here in Kagiso they’ve their own Zulu dialect. Ngempela angazi ukuthi yini abayikhulumayo [Honestly, I don’t know what (language) they speak]” (female teacher quoted in Sibanda 2019: 5).

Such complex and fluid linguistic realities on the ground are not reflected in a Language in Education Policy (LiEP) that works with an idea of ‘mother tongue’ as being one standardised nomolanguage: a ‘standardised mother tongue’. In this light, the early-transition language policy model described earlier culminates in bizarre scenarios. For example, a foundation phase teacher in Khayelitsha, who teaches in the children’s so-called ‘mother tongue’ Xhosa, has to actually spend time teaching her students Xhosa numbers before she can teach them mathematics. In the interview I conducted with her for my Master’s research, she said that in maths “they have to write ‘inye’⁶ but when they talk they say ‘one’ because that is the language at home. They don’t say *inye* at home, they say *one*” (Interview Foundation Phase Teacher Khayelitsha Primary 2014).⁷ When the same students then transition to Grade 4, they can (or have to) forget all about the Xhosa numbers again because their LoLT then becomes English. Now they can go back to learning maths while counting with English words again, as they had been doing all along when speaking their ‘mother tongue’. Dowling draws on similar observations in her research and summarizes poignantly:

4 I use the prefix *nomo-*, inspired by ‘nominalis’ (as ‘pertaining to a name or names’), because we are used to distinguishing named language units from the phenomenon language only by an article (‘a’ or ‘the’ language) or an *-s* (languages). Commonsensically, language therefore appears closely tied to ‘a language’. The term ‘nomolanguage’ distinguishes separate, named languages from the phenomenon language more emphatically and thereby reminds us that nomolanguages are not primordial entities

5 When englished, this quote reads as follows: The language of the township is “mixed with the language of the Coloureds (Afrikaans), of the Xhosa people (Xhosa) and the White (English).” Afrikaans, Xhosa and English are three of South Africa’s eleven official languages. The others are: Zulu, Tsonga, Venda, Ndebele, Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tswana and Swati.

6 ‘inye’ = Standard Xhosa for ‘one’

7 This quote is part of the unpublished data from my MA research project at Khayelitsha Primary. It was recently discussed in an article on ‘The Conversation’: <https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-rethink-whats-meant-by-mother-tongue-education-96475> [accessed 13 August 2019].

"Teaching mathematics via Xhosa lexical items seldom heard at home or in the community is no less confusing to learners than introducing them to English terminology that they will have to learn later anyway, and may already have a better understanding of" (Dowling 2011: 349).

Due to a misunderstanding with regard to what constitutes their 'mother tongue' – namely a fixed nomolanguage instead of an actually flexible, heterogeneous linguistic repertoire – many South African students and teachers are sent on senseless loops in a standard-language-obsessed system. This makes it more difficult for everyone to focus on the content to be taught.

Deficit or potential?

As indicated above, the majority of (South)⁸ African students and teachers in urban areas are flexible languages, skilled at assembling linguistic resources with various different histories to make meaning (Banda 2018; Krause 2021; Sibanda 2019). As it stands, however, these skills are stigmatised in a system that only values competencies in 'standardised mother tongues' and Standard English. Students at township schools get a bad reputation for struggling in standardised reading and literacy tests like the famous PIRLS⁹. These tests examine them in a 'standardised mother tongue' in Grade 4 via texts that neither have anything to do with their lived realities (because they are translated from British or American model texts), nor reflect the fluid language practices that one might actually call their mother tongue (Prinsloo 2019; Prinsloo and Krause 2019a).

Teachers in turn are reprimanded by educational officials for code-switching in the classroom, as we can see when the department urges schools "to reduce the amount of code-switching and code mixing in order to ensure maximum exposure to the LoLT" (Western Cape Government 2017). But also parents criticise teachers in this regard:

"You also find teachers here in the township 'mixing' (switching back and forth) languages. That is the reason we take our children to formerly White-only schools because they will learn proper English there" (Parent interviewed in Ndimande 2012: 536).

Teachers' fluid language practices in the classroom – with which they accommodate the linguistic realities of their students and try to make a language policy work that relies on not one, but two standard languages (Bua-Lit Collective

8 This situation is not limited to South Africa. Research shows that in urban spaces across Africa children grow up with flexible and rich linguistic repertoires that do not conform to the boundaries of a nomolanguage (REFS).

9 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

2018; Krause 2021) – are therefore constructed as hindering the development of sought-after English skills and success in education in general. Such success is only to be achieved in “formerly [under Apartheid] White-only schools” in more affluent areas where English is the LoLT from the beginning and all the way through. However, voices of dissent have recently arisen amongst scholars, challenging these deficit-oriented accounts of so-called ‘marginal’ schools in South African townships. These voices call attention to potentials rather than deficiencies and skills rather than alleged inabilities of teachers and students in schooling spaces that are – via standardised tests – identified as amongst the worst-performing in the country (Bua-Lit Collective 2018; Canagarajah 2015; Krause 2021; Probyn 2015). Such research begins to make visible – mostly from an ethnographic and/or applied linguistics perspective – the efficient linguistic and didactic strategies that teachers and students develop in these linguistically complex schooling spaces.

It is exactly these so-called marginal schools that should be the central concern of qualitative and reconstructive teaching research. This is because we understand way too little about the complex strategies that teachers and students here have developed – not least because of the fact that language practices there do not fit the (essentially European and colonial) nomolanguage grid that still structures education in (South) Africa via ‘standardised mother tongues’ and Standard English. Qualitative and reconstructive teaching research could contribute to easing inequality in South African education by reconstructing, understanding and making accessible the complex teaching strategies of teachers from schools that have traditionally been banned to the periphery. There is indeed a lot to learn – for education in South Africa but also globally – from schooling spaces where teachers have had to be inventive and flexible to help their students through a schooling system that builds on ideas of separate nomolanguages that run counter to their students’ linguistic realities and skills. With migration and increasing linguistic diversity also at schools in the global North, we would do well by asking not what can be brought to, but what can be learned from teachers in South Africa’s linguistically diverse and complex classrooms.

References

- Banda, Felix (2018): Translanguaging and English-African language mother tongues as linguistic dispensation in teaching and learning in a black township school in Cape Town. In: *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 19(2), pp. 198-217.
- Bekker, Ian (2003): Using historical data to explain language attitudes. A South African case study. In: Makoni, Sinfree; Meinhof, Ulrike H. (Eds.): *Africa and Applied Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 62-77.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C.; Star, Susan L. (1999): *Sorting Things Out. Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press (Inside technology).
- Brock-Utne, Birgit; Desai, Zubeida; Qorro, Martha A. S. (2003): *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA)*. Dar es Salaam: E & D Limited.
- Bua-Lit Collective (2018): How are we failing our children? Reconceptualizing language and literacy education. URL: <https://bua-lit.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/bua-lit-FINAL051218-2.pdf> [accessed 07 June 2019].
- Canagarajah, Suresh (2015): Negotiating mobile codes and literacies at the contact zone. Another perspective on South African township schools. In: Stroud, Christopher; Prinsloo, Mastin (Eds.): *Language, Literacy and Diversity. Moving Words*. New York: Routledge, pp. 34-54.
- Dowling, Tessa (2011): 'Stressed and sexy'. Lexical borrowing in Cape Town Xhosa. In: *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 8 (4), pp. 345-366.
- Dube, Ernest (1985): The relationship between racism and education in South Africa. In: *Harvard Educational Review*, 55 (1), pp. 86-101.
- Fataar, Aslam (2009): Schooling subjectivities across the post-apartheid city. In: *Africa Education Review*, 6 (1), pp. 1-18.
- Heugh, Kathleen (2013): Multilingual education policy in South Africa constrained by theoretical and historical disconnections. In: *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 33, pp. 215-237.
- Krause, Lara-Stephanie (2021): *Relanguaging Language from Khayelitsha*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Lombard, Kobus (2007): Reasons why educator-parents based at township schools transfer their own children from township schools to former Model C schools. In: *Education as Change*, 11 (1), pp. 43-57.
- Makoni, Sinfree; Pennycook, Alastair (Eds.) (2007): *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Ndimande, Bekisizwe S. (2012): Race and resources. Black parents' perspectives on post-apartheid South African schools. In: *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15 (4), pp. 525-544.
- Ndlovu, Sifiso (2004): Soweto. In: South African Democracy Education Trust: *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Volume 2 [1970-1980]*. Pretoria: Unisa Press, pp. 317-350.
- Ouane, Adama; Glanz, Christine (Eds.) (2011): *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa. The language factor. A review and analysis of theory and practice in mother-tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. New York: Mark Batty Publisher. URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000212602>, [accessed 13 August 2019].
- Posel, Deborah (2001): What's in a name. Racial categorisations under apartheid and their afterlife. In: *Transformation* 47, pp. 59-82.
- Prinsloo, Mastin (2019): Seeing like a state. literacy and language standards in schools in South Africa.
- Prinsloo, Mastin; Krause, Lara-Stephanie (2019a): Testing practice in a Southern school. In: Bloome, David; Castanheira, Maria L.; Leung, Constant; Rowsell, Jennifer (Eds.): *Re-Theorizing Literacy Practices. Complex Social and Cultural Contexts*. New York: Routledge, pp. 154-167.
- Prinsloo, Mastin; Krause, Lara-Stephanie (2019b): Translanguaging, place and complexity. In: *Language and Education*, 33 (2), pp. 1-16.

- Probyn, Margie (2015): Pedagogical translanguaging: Bridging discourses in South African science classrooms. In: *Language and Education*, 29 (3), pp. 218-234.
- Ross, Robert (2008): *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sibanda, Rockie (2019): Mother-tongue education in a multilingual township: Possibilities for recognising lok'shin lingua in South Africa. In: *Reading & Writing*, 10 (1), pp. 1-10.
- UNESCO (2008): *Mother tongue matters. Local language as a key to effective learning*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
- Western Cape Government (2017): Curriculum FET minute. DCF 0016/2017 Retention of language compensation until 2022. Western Cape Government Education. URL: https://wcedonline.westerncape.gov.za/circulars/minutes17/CMminutes/edcf16_17.html, [accessed 25 June 2019].

The author

Krause-Alzaidi, Lara-Stephanie, (PhD) is Assistant Professor at the Chair of African Languages and Literatures, Institute of African Studies, Leipzig University, Germany.

Having completed her PhD in African Languages, focussed on multilingual English teaching, in Cape Town, she is now working at the intersection of African Studies and Applied Linguistics. She is interested in language and race and in studying ontologies of language.

ORCID: 0000-0002-9086-6785