

‘I Use My Mother Tongue at Home and with Friends – Not in School!’ Multilingualism and Identity in Rural Kenya

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Abstract

The present paper investigates students’ experiences of being multilingual. Qualitative data have been collected during observation, focus groups, interviews and text writing in a public primary school in rural Kenya. The informants are students in standards one, three and eight whose mother tongue is the indigenous language called Nandi, which all these students use at home and with friends. The school languages are Swahili and English, and the use of Nandi is forbidden in school except in mother tongue lessons in standards one to three. The aim of the study is to explore the students’ experiences of being multilingual, and to analyze how the prohibition against the use of the mother tongue in school may influence their identity. The data are interpreted in the light of research and theory concerned with the influence of the colonization of education in Africa and the effect of languages on identity. Results indicated that the students are proud of their vernacular language and culture, but also see the importance of being multilingual in a global world. The students agree with the prohibition against the use of their mother tongue in school, and understand that English and Swahili are important for education. The conclusion constitutes a critical contribution to add to earlier research about multilingualism and education in Africa.

Keywords: colonialism; culture; identity; indigenous language; Kenya; mother tongue; Multilingualism; Nandi; Swahili; vernacular language

Full text:

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