Conflicting perspectives of power, identity, access and language choice in multilingual teachers’ voices.


Summary: Teachers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa teach mainly in English, which is not their home language. In order to elicit their inner voices about language conflicts and contradictions in their classrooms they were encouraged to write poetry about their perceptions of the impact of language in their lives. The most prevalent contradiction they expressed was the power and dominance of English juxtaposed against the subordination of their home languages. English gave them access to education and upward employment mobility, whereas they were excluded from various discourses when they used their home languages. Their home languages legitimised and defined their identities, but appeared to be negated in an educational and economic environment. Since the necessity for pupils to become fluent in English conflicted with the pupils’ difficulties in understanding content knowledge expressed in English, the teachers faced a choice between teaching in English (for access to social goods) or their home language (for epistemological access), or both. The use of poetry evoked feelings and emotions that may not have been as obvious, or as evocative, if other data-gathering methods had been used. It appears that the self-reflection embodied in the poetry gave the teachers a sense of empowerment, self-realisation and solidarity. Certain parts of this chapter have been reported elsewhere.

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