



**Research Topic**

**A Capability Approach to Understanding the Intersections between  
Language, Educational Opportunities, and Identity in South Africa: A  
Xhosa Speaking Youth Perspective.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The education system is a source of language discrimination and exclusion for many young people in South Africa. In South Africa, African languages are spoken by more than 70% of the population, while the colonial languages English and Afrikaans represent less than 25%. However, most South African schools use English or Afrikaans as the main language of instruction. Learners' transitioning to using and learning in a colonial language, and the role languages plays in youth education and development are the root cause of many challenges, including poor academic performance, unequal access to opportunity, social exclusion, and challenging identity formation.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the intersection between language, educational opportunities, and identity from an isiXhosa speaking youth perspective in Cape Town, Western Cape. In depth individual interviews were conducted with 12 black African Xhosa youth, between the ages of 18 and 29. The researcher sought to examine the effects of the language challenges faced by isiXhosa speaking youth during their education journey and to gauge the perspective of isiXhosa speaking youth regarding the role of language in their academic performance, opportunities, and social identity. The researcher adopted the following three concepts as a framework for analysis: Sen's capability approach (1999), social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979), and Soudien's work on language in post-apartheid education (2012). This study was important in order

The findings revealed that participants faced various challenges in relation to language use in education, specifically transitioning to English as the main medium of instruction. The participants' experiences differed depending on the age at which they transitioned to using English in the education system, but the outcomes of this transition were similar. Their academic performance was negatively impacted by needing to learn in a different language. They had unequal opportunities throughout their education compared with native English speakers, putting them at higher risk of social exclusion and impacting negatively their access to higher education and employment. The participants' advocated for the need to decolonise education, specifically in regard to perceptions and use of languages, because of the prejudices and judgments based on their ability to speak English rather than their actual skills and capabilities. Participants tended to compare languages and look down on isiXhosa, then facing identity crises when returning to their Xhosa families. They had to navigate multiple identities depending on the language and context in which they found themselves.

This study recommended reducing inequities by implementing inclusive language policies and measures to accommodate learners with non-colonial first languages, provide support through their transition to a new language, and not weighting incorrect English against them in non-English class. The recommendations also included the need to adapt national exams and grading systems to ensure all learners' have the opportunity to perform to their best ability. The government must also increase its investment in South African languages to promote their use in professional and public spaces. Finally, institutions must be encouraged to use multiple languages in schools, universities, and workplaces.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. INTRODUCTION**

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of the youth on language, educational opportunity, and identity. This chapter aims to contextualise the study and to provide a clear understanding of the need for this study in the field of social development. The research questions and objectives are stated, as well as the potential benefits of the findings. Finally, the main concepts are explained, and the ethical concerns are discussed.

### **1.2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

South Africa's current situation in the matter of language is deeply linked to its history of colonialism and migrations. Since 1994, the South African government recognises 11 official languages and states that they should all be considered as equal (Webb, 2002). The language spoken by most of the population in South Africa is isiZulu, followed by isiXhosa (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Applying the policy that considers all 11 official languages as equal, the education system and public sphere may have been expected to prevent any discrimination based on one's language. However, the South African education system is a source of language discrimination and exclusion for many learners. One example is demonstrated by not providing learners with the opportunity to attend school in their home language. Furthermore, from grade 4 and onward, more than 75% of the youth in South Africa must use a second language. It is mostly English or Afrikaans that is used as a main medium of learning (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 14).

Indeed, the majority of South African learners will, at some point during their education, have to use English or Afrikaans as a main language of learning (Taylor and Coetzee, 2013). This is problematic on various levels. First, the acquisition of a second language is a skill on its own that requires time. However, isiXhosa learners that transition to being taught in English or Afrikaans are not given sufficient time nor adequate resources to acquire these necessary language skills. As a result of learners having to focus so much on learning the language, their understanding of the subject, their capacity to communicate with the teachers and their opportunity to perform are threatened by the language barrier (Heugh, 2008).

This leads to a second challenge, which is the exclusion of isiXhosa learners from the South African education system. The language barrier is a source of inequality of opportunity for learners, and as Micklewright (2002) and Sen (1999) argue, inequality of opportunity is a major factor of exclusion. Looking at exclusion from education, South Africa shows high drop-out rates, and language is a factor that should not be undermined. According to Albertyn and Guzula (2020), the transition to English contributes to the high failure- and dropout rates. Language is also an exclusion factor from accessing higher education and employment, where English remains the dominant language (Mampane, Omidire and Aluka 2018). These institutionalised language norms are forms of capability deprivation as described by Sen (2000), where one is excluded from education and opportunities because their first language is different from the main medium of instruction.

Thirdly, the cultural and social meanings attached to a language is often undermined. Amberg and Vause (2010) declare that language reflects one's individualities, as well as his or her community's beliefs and practices. Moreover, the use of language in social interactions contributes to the building of one's identity and self-perception (Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012). For the learners, having to conform to the use of a former colonial language at school can impact their perception of languages and social groups (Lourdes, 2008). Most isiXhosa learners live between two or three different languages. However, it is mostly English or Afrikaans that is used as the norm, or is deemed to be more appropriate, professional or relevant. These judgments can affect learners' formation of social identity, relationship with their first language and understanding of power dynamics between cultures (Soudien, 2012).

In this study, the researcher examined the effects of the language challenges faced by isiXhosa speaking youth during their education journey. By investigating their performances, opportunities and access, as well as the construction of their social identity, the researcher sought to demonstrate how the intersection between language, education opportunities and identity in an unequal education system can lead to experiences of social exclusion and capability deprivation.

South Africa's legal framework recognises the need for equality and diversity in education and attempts to promote indigenous African languages in its institutions (Stein, 2016).

However, the gaps between the objectives of the policies and the reality that young people face in education cannot be ignored (Brock-Utne, 2007). These challenges show the perpetuation of an ideology of an English or Afrikaans education and assimilation similarly to the one present during colonisation and Apartheid (Ferreira-Meyers and Horne, 2017; Mkhize and Balfour, 2017).

### **1.3. PROBLEM CONTEXT**

This study took place in Cape Town, Western Cape. The Western Cape has a population of more than 5 million people, which are mostly situated in Cape Town. The home languages most spoken in the Western Cape are Afrikaans, spoken by 2.8 million speakers, and isiXhosa spoken by 1.4 million speakers (Stein, 2016: 208). This research is taking place in Cape Town, which is why the focus was set on isiXhosa speakers, isiXhosa being the most spoken African language in the province.

Xhosa people have been living in southern Africa for centuries and were established in the Eastern Cape when the first European arrived in the 17th century. The arrival of the Dutch and British led to several wars over territories and resources, which in turn led to the control of Xhosa territories by the Europeans (Thompson, 2001). After the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the institutionalisation of the Apartheid's government, the Xhosa population was deprived of its rights, land and means of subsistence. This led to more circulatory migration between Cape Town and the Eastern Cape in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, where Xhosa people living in rural areas began to migrate to Cape Town to seek employment (Bekker, 2001).

Cape Town is an urban area that is divided into different suburbs and townships. The spatial division is relevant in understanding access to different schools depending on one's home location. The plan was designed during Apartheid, but remains very similar in today's context. Most of the middle- and upper-class suburbs are located towards the city centre, where most of the job opportunities and well-resourced schools are, while townships and other low-income areas are located far on the outskirts of the city. Under the Apartheid government, coloureds and black people were displaced to townships, while the city centre and surroundings were for white people (Trail, 2006).

The education system is ruled by a national education department. However, each of the provinces have their own independent education department, which individually adapts their policies according to their population, environments and resources (RSA, 1996). The Western Cape provincial department of education provides a language policy that recognises Afrikaans, isiXhosa and English equally as the official languages to be used in the public sphere. It seeks to promote the concept of mother-tongue bilingual education. This aims to provide bilingual material learning in English-Afrikaans, English-isiXhosa and isiXhosa-Afrikaans combinations (WCED, 2006). However, English remains the most used medium of instruction, followed by Afrikaans, whereas only a few schools still have isiXhosa as a main medium of instruction (Department of Basic Education, 2010).

#### **1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is significant for both social development workers and policy makers. By exploring the interactions between language, opportunity, identity and education, this study aimed to bring attention to language challenges that young people face in South Africa. This study can inform policy, legislation and school governance in what young people perceive as challenging for them and what they believe can be changed to reduce inequalities. It can demonstrate the need for more inclusive and adaptative policies. Moreover, by raising awareness about the critical impact of languages in schools, this study also highlights the urgency for strategic efforts to promote African languages and inclusion in the education system. This study also provides insights into what kind of psychological and social support young people would require overcoming their language challenges in education and identity formation. Finally, this study can identify the need for further research on this particular topic, in order to provide a suitable and relevant response to this problem.

#### **1.5. AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The aim of the study was to use a capability approach to explore young people's perception of the impact of language on their education, opportunities and social identity.

#### **1.6. RESEARCH TOPIC**

A Capability Approach to Understanding the Intersections between Language, Educational Opportunities, and Identity in South Africa: A Xhosa Speaking Youth Perspective.

## **1.7. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What are the perceived language challenges faced by isiXhosa speaking youth as they navigate the education system?
- How do perceived language challenges affect isiXhosa speaking youths' educational journey?
- How do isiXhosa speaking youth perceive the relationships between language in education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion?
- How do the perceived language challenges in education affect isiXhosa speaking youths' sense of identity and cultural belonging?
- How do young people recommend addressing language challenges in education?

## **1.8. MAIN ASSUMPTIONS**

This study being qualitative and inductive in nature, the main assumptions of this study were that young people in South Africa face language-related challenges in education opportunity and that young people having a first-language other than English or Afrikaans experience challenges in education in the country

## **1.9. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

- To describe the perceived language challenges faced by isiXhosa speaking youth as they navigate the education system.
- To describe how the perceived language challenges affect isiXhosa speaking youths' educational journey.
- To explore how isiXhosa speaking youth perceive the relationships between language in education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion.
- To explore how the perceived language challenges in education affect isiXhosa speaking youths' sense of identity and cultural belonging.
- To explore how young people recommend addressing language challenges in education.

## **1.10. CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS**

### ***Youth***

Youth is defined as people from age 14 to 35 by the National Youth Commission Act of South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1996). This study focuses on young people from the age of 18 to 24. The terms “Youth” and “Young people” are used interchangeably.

### ***Identity***

Identity can be described as the integration of values, behaviours and goals that are built up by life decisions that one makes (Arnold, 2017). Identity changes through experiences and affects one’s self-perception and one’s relationships with others. Identity can also be seen as the label of belonging to certain groups and characteristic such as religions, race, cultures, social classes, nationalities, sexual orientation and genders (Lourdes, 2008; Hall, 2011).

### ***Language***

In this study, language is seen as a base in communication and identity formation, as pillar for societies and civilisations, culture and human interactions (Ramabrahmam, 2017). Because the use of language takes place within specific social environments, language is not only a way of communication, but it can also be interpreted as a sign of cultural belonging, a political statement or a socio-economic indicator (Amberg and Vause, 2010; Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012). Indeed, individuals use languages to construct their identity and their social roles (Hall, 2011).

### ***Education***

This study defines education as any form of schooling and formal learning. It focuses on the South African school system, understanding the Foundation phase from grade R to grade 3, the Intermediate phase from grade 4 to grade 6, the Senior phase from grade 7 to grade 9, and the Further Education and Training (FET) phase from grade 10 to grade 12, where learners pass their Matric Exams. Afterwards, tertiary level includes several undergraduate degrees and diplomas, postgraduate degrees and diplomas and PHDs (Department of Basic Education, 2010).

### ***Inequality of Opportunity***

In the study, inequality of opportunity is defined as a situation where individuals' personal characteristics such as gender, race, language, religion etc. negatively influence their opportunities in society (UN, 2015). According to Hertz, Jayasundera, Piraino et al. (2008), inequality of opportunity is attributed to factors such as the quality of education, the birthplace, the ethnicity and the overall level of inclusion in the country rather than direct discrimination towards individuals.

### ***Social Exclusion***

This study understands social exclusion as a process where certain groups of people are prevented from participating in the society because of an inherent characteristic. These characteristics vary, but can be for instance: one's race, language, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, ethnicity, health status, citizenship or location (McLean Hilker and Fraser, 2009).

## **1.11. MAIN ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In this study, the ethical considerations follow the guidelines of ethical considerations as suggested by De Vos et al. (2005).

The first consideration of the researcher was to avoid any physical and emotional harm for the participants. In order to protect them, the researcher informed the participants of the potential impacts of the study on their lives. They were also told that they can stop the interview and withdraw themselves from the study at any time without any consequences (De Vos et al., 2005).

This study required informed consent of the participants. The research objectives were explained to the participants, to ensure that they participate to the study consciously and voluntarily (De Vos et al., 2005). To cement their voluntary agreement, a consent form was given to each participant to sign before the interview.

Another concern for this study was the deception of the respondents. It is defined as a deliberate change or omission of facts to mislead the participants (De Vos et al., 2005).

The researcher therefore ensured that no information was withheld from the participants and that the objectives of the study were clearly explained to avoid misunderstandings and false hopes for the participants.

The respect of the participants' privacy, anonymity and confidentiality was a main concern in this study. First, the participants' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours remained private. In order to do so, the researcher interviewed them alone and in a closed space. Also, the identity of the participants remained anonymous, so that no one should be able to identify them while accessing the study. Finally, the information that were obtained from the participants were confidential, guarded and protected by the researcher (De Vos et al., 2005).

If the researcher considered that a debriefing session with the participants was necessary, they were given the opportunity to meet after the interviews. If the time allocated for this study did not allow it, the participants were given the opportunity to contact professionals or associations that can be supportive.

The corporation with contributors was clearly defined. The contribution of the research supervisor and eventual participation from colleagues were mentioned. The findings of this study are owned by the University of Cape Town's Social Development Department. Finally, the researcher contacted the participants to give them an opportunity to access to the final report if they wish to.

## **1.12. STUCTURE OF THE REPORT**

Chapter 1 contains the introduction to the challenges of languages in education, opportunity and identity through a capability approach perspective. It also states the main research objectives, the problem context and a brief explanation of the key concepts of the study.

Chapter 2 discusses existing literature in relation to language, education opportunity and identity globally and contextualised in South Africa. It also provides a theoretical framework to better understand language challenges faced by isiXhosa speaking youth throughout education and the legislation and policies consulted regarding the research topic.

Chapter 3 provides insights on the research design, how the researcher identified the study population, collected and analysed the data, as well as the limitation of this study.

Chapter 4 discusses the findings of this study. It explores the participants' experiences of language challenges in education and how they are facing a capacity deprivation. The participants' responses are also organised to answer the research objectives and analysed through the lens of the capability approach.

Chapter 5 outlines the main conclusions and recommendations from the key findings of this study. Conclusions of this study are presented in relation to the objectives of the study. It is followed by the recommendations directed to institutions, policy makers, researchers and individuals that could enhance language inclusion in education.

### **1.13. CONCLUSION**

In order to have a better understanding of this study, this chapter gave precisions about the research topic and the objectives of the study. The topic was contextualised to the environment of the study and the major challenges were explained. Finally, the main concepts were defined, and major ethical concerns were addressed.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents a review of literature on the interactions between language, education opportunities and identity formation among the youth. First, the main concepts of youth, identity, language and culture are defined. They are followed by a brief review of language history and evolution to the current situation in South Africa. Thereafter, literature on the challenges of language in education and identity formation is explored, in order to understand the deeper correlations between them. This chapter focuses on the diversity of South African youth, their education opportunities and the importance of decolonising education. A theoretical framework is drawn out of social identity, capability approach and language in education concepts. Finally, national and international policies as well as legislations that regulate language in education are explored.

### **2.2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **2.2.1. Youth, Social Identity, Language and Culture**

##### ***Youth***

Several definitions of youth coexist in the social sphere. The United Nations General Assembly provides a definition of youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (McLean Hilker and Fraser, 2009). Both the World Health Organisation and UNICEF agree with this definition of youth. They however add the term adolescent for those between 10 and 19 years old, and young people for those aged from 10 to 24 (McLean Hilker and Fraser, 2009). The South African government defines youth as people between the ages 14 and 35 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). It is then divided into two cohorts: individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 years old and individuals between the ages of 25 and 35 years old (Republic of South Africa, 2015).

##### ***Identity and Social Identity***

Identity is concept that is recurring in many fields such as psychology, sociology and other social sciences areas. It can be defined in many ways depending on what approach or discipline is used.

This study understands identity as a process continuously happening across one's lifespan, the state of being a certain person and as one's self-esteem and self-perception as the integration of values, behaviours and goals that are built up by life decisions that one makes (Lourdes, 2008; Arnold, 2017).

A major component of identity is social identity, where one builds an identity through belonging to certain groups and identifying with socially constructed characteristics like religions, race, cultures, social classes, nationalities, sexual orientation and genders (Lourdes, 2008; Hall, 2011). Being a member of particular groups impacts one's interactions with others. These interactions can happen within the same group or between people from different groups. The outcomes of these interactions contribute to shape one's self-perception, to construct social roles and to model one's identity (Lourdes, 2008; Hall, 2011; Arnold, 2017). If these interactions happen to bring challenges or negative outcomes, such as a rejection based on an identity characteristic like language or culture, one's identity and self-esteem can be negatively affected. It can lead to a feeling of shame related to this identity characteristic and lead to face more psycho-social problems, distorted feeling of belonging, poor peer relations and social isolation (Arnold, 2017).

### *Language*

In this paper, the major characteristic of social belonging and social identity that will be explored is language. Language is the foundation of communication, identity formation and knowledge. It is a pillar for societies and civilisations, culture and human interactions (Ramabrahmam, 2017). Colonisation and globalisation exported languages across the globe, and it is now estimated that the majority of the world's population fluently speaks two or more languages (Tucker, 2003).

Language is a system of communication based on words and sentences, as well as a rule-governed system that includes different meanings, different accents and different panels of vocabulary. The use of a language takes place within particular social environments and needs a contextualised understanding of the link between the language and the people who use it (Amberg and Vause, 2010; Ramabrahmam, 2017). Therefore, when outsiders learn the language of a group, they must not only learn the meanings of the words, but also the contextualised rules attributed to them.

These rules define when to use particular words, accents and attitudes, depending what population one is addressing, the environmental settings of the conversation and one's role in the society (Amberg and Vause, 2010). Understanding these links will for instance allow someone to use slang with friends but a formal language with elderlies or at work. Amberg and Vause (2010) explain that cultural and social settings drive one's language choices, for in the majority of societies the way one speaks is more important than what one actually says. The use of what is deemed to be an appropriate language to the situation plays a role in how one is perceived, such as the level of education, socioeconomic status, knowledge, intelligence, personality and numerous other characteristics.

### ***Language and Culture***

Considering language as an instrument of culture, it is crucial to understand the historical, political, social and economic processes that are attached to languages in a given context (Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012). These processes impact one's participation in a group and in society. Language is not only a way of communication, but it can also be interpreted as a sign of cultural belonging, a political statement or a socio-economic indicator. As a sign of cultural belonging, language shows that verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are mediated by cultural rules and that they are inherently tied to the expression of culture. Values, beliefs and behaviours are transmitted from generation to generation using language as the major way to transmit experiences and knowledge (Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012).

Language can also be seen as a political statement whereas one defies the dominant language in a given context, such as in education or in the workplace. A country's dominant language is usually defined by laws and policies as the language that should be used in education, the workplace and the release of official statements etc. While countries can have many official languages, it is often found that only one or two languages are recognised as dominant. Therefore, when one decides to speak a non-dominant language, it is often his/her mother tongue, in a space where it is explicitly or implicitly not accepted, or to make a political statement (Lourdes, 2008)

Finally, language can be considered as a socio-economic indicator of one's situation. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, most societies became culturally and linguistically heterogeneous.

Languages are associated with cultures and groups, which are also associated with socio-economic situations. For instance, when a language is mainly spoken by populations facing poverty, one speaking that language outside the community will often be associated with poverty. In addition to that, a similar observation can be seen with one's accent when speaking a language, where the accent is used as an indicator of one's community and one's socio-economic status (Lourdes, 2008).

### *Language and Identity*

Language is also an instrument in the formation of social identity (Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012). Hall (2011), Lourdes (2008) and Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton (2012) believe that social interactions continuously build individuals and affect their self-perception and the perception of others, for individuals constantly use a particular language to construct their identity and their social roles. In fact, when one uses language, one creates a sense of identity and embodies it. Language is therefore an interpretation of one's identity. The role of language in identity can be a positive and a negative experience, as a result of interactions with other languages and cultures. If people's experiences with languages is positive, when their language is accepted and embraced, it is more likely that they will have a positive perception of their identity and self. But, some people's experience with languages is negative. They cannot use their language in spaces such as education, employment and health care and consequently can reject a part of their identity or distance themselves from their home language. This why the role of language should not be underestimated when observing social interactions within society (Lourdes, 2008; Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012; Kiramba and Oloo, 2020)

### **2.2.2. Languages in a South African Context from the Precolonial to the Post-Apartheid era**

The linguistic context in Africa and South Africa is closely tied to its history of migration and colonisation. There is an estimated count of more than 1500 languages in Africa, which are divided in different groups. In Southern Africa, the main groups are the Niger-Saharan languages and the Khoisan languages. IsiXhosa is part of the Bantu languages, which belong to the Niger-Saharan languages (One World, 2017).

During colonisations, European languages were imposed to the African population, considering the indigenous languages as inferior (Brenzinger, 2017). In South Africa, the British and the Dutch fought for territories for decades. In 1909, when the “Union of South Africa” was declared independent from the Dutch, and English and Dutch were made the official languages. Afrikaans, the Dutch-derived language of the Afrikaners settlers, replaced Dutch as an official language in 1925.

Languages always played a role in Apartheid’s education. The education system was ruled by the “Bantu education Act”, introduced in 1953, which formally defined the division of the education department into four, each division being in charge of a “race category”. This allowed for the government to invest most of its resources for education for the white learners. Looking at estimated per capita expenditure, the government spent more than R1220 per white student and R165 per black student. White schools were mostly provided with trained teachers while only one third of the teachers in black African schools were trained. The ratio of teacher to learners was also drastically different, with 1:18 for whites and 1:43 for blacks. Moreover, many black African schools did not have electricity nor running water (Crapanzano, 1985). In 1974, the National Party that ruled during Apartheid, realised that English was more spoken than Afrikaans. In response, they introduced the Afrikaans medium decree of 1974, to force all black African schools to use both Afrikaans and English as means of instruction. The African Teachers Association of South Africa among many others, objected to the decree declaring that many learners would now have to learn and understand a new language while they are still trying to learn subject materials. This act led to the “Soweto uprising” in 1976, where learners from schools in Soweto organised a rally to protest being forced to use Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. The police opened fire and the violence escalated. The Soweto uprising lasted three days and hundreds, including many children, were killed. The first day of the uprising, the 16th of June 1976, is now the official Youth day in post-Apartheid South Africa (Boddy-Evans, 2020).

After their independence, many African governments remained influenced by colonisation and followed colonial language policies and kept colonial languages as their official languages instead of choosing indigenous languages that were spoken by the majority of their citizens (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017).

South Africa however took a different turn in at the end of Apartheid in 1994 when the new government recognised eleven languages as official languages (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017). According to Brenzinger (2017), giving an official status to a language plays a part in the way the language is perceived, recognised and considered. In facts, official language speakers often have more opportunities to enjoy political participation without linguistic barriers, to receive education in their mother tongue, to access to media and job applications, etc. Languages policies may unite or divide people within a nation, marginalise or include groups of its population.

In the case of South Africa, its history of policies and laws regarding languages prior to its independence played a critical role in the adoption of indigenous languages as official languages (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017). Indeed, the base of the Apartheid system was to segregate the population according to race. Languages spoken by different racial groups were used as a parameter for defining and excluding the “Bantu population”, as mentioned in the Bantu Self-Government Act (Act No.46 of 1959 in Union of South Africa, 1959). The “non-white” population was displaced and forced to live in separated “independent states” where language was a crucial characteristic to undermine and divide people. After 50 years of exclusion and separation, the recognition of indigenous languages as officials was a main point of the idea of a “Rainbow Nation”. The government recognised that indigenous languages were historically diminished and used as a mean of exclusion The South African Constitution of 1996 aimed to move from a bilingual nation, ruled by English and Afrikaans, to an inclusive nation where indigenous and colonial languages are equal (Brenzinger, 2017).

The eleven official languages that were adopted by the Republic of South Africa include the two languages of the Apartheid era, English and Afrikaans, as well as the nine African languages most spoken in the country. They are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu (Webb, 2002). In post-Apartheid South Africa, the most common first language is isiZulu, spoken by 22.7% of the population, followed by isiXhosa, spoken by 16%. Then come Afrikaans and English, spoken respectively by 13.5% and 9.6% of the population (Statistics South Africa. 2012: 26). In the Western Cape, the most spoken first language is Afrikaans, used by nearly half of the population (49.7%). Then isiXhosa, spoken by a quarter of the population (24.7%) and English spoken by 20.3% of the population (Statistics South Africa, 2012: 27).

In order to overcome the terrible consequences of Apartheid, the South African Constitution recognises the principle of linguistic diversity and aims to act on it. Therefore, it mentions that national and provincial governments will use at least two official languages considering the needs populations that they are addressing and the regional context. Moreover, it stipulates that the national government has to use not less than four languages for official work (Brenzinger, 2017).

### **2.2.3. The Role and Impact of Languages in Education**

In our current society, there are more children around the world that follow, or have followed, an education in a second language than children educated in their first language (Tucker, 2003; Obanya, 2004). Education models that deny learners the right to receive education in their first language are considered a violation of linguistic and cultural human rights (Lourdes, 2008). Obanya (2004) points at the fact that the under-utilisation of mother tongue or first language in education has failed a majority of African learners on the continent. The use of former colonial languages to the detriment of indigenous languages contributed to the high rates of drop-out and repeat as well as a learner's poor academic results (Obanya, 2004).

If the question of language in education is closely linked with social concerns, then Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton (2012) argue that the system of multilingual education is mostly shaped by political matters. Linguistic policies in education are often used as tools by the political sphere, bouncing between the attempt to improve results in education systems and the desire to reduce governmental expenses in the education field. In practice, language and language policies can become tools to reproduce power imbalances, as for instance when institutional powers have the ability to control and regulate the language of others. Indeed, language policies hold the power to exclude certain languages from the education sphere and to impose sanctions and regulations upon learners' communication and understanding (Cushing, 2020). Obanya (2004) states that not allowing learners to receive education in their first language is a linguistic genocide. Linguistic genocide was first defined by the United Nations as the prohibition of the use of a language of a group in society, education or publications (Lourdes, 2008). Lourdes (2008) revisited the concept of linguistic genocide by defining it as a forced linguistic and cultural assimilation in education, for instance when learners speaking indigenous languages are forced to speak a dominant language or former

colonial language in schools. The current unequal power relations in education systems inevitably lead to linguistic genocide and reproduces inequalities in treatment and opportunities. In contrast, more and more researches have shown that students that have or had access to education in the language which they feel most comfortable significantly increased their life opportunities (Obanya, 2004; Heugh, 2008; Lourdes, 2008).

Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton (2012) also state that the challenges of language in education is the responsibility of governments. Focusing on policies and offering an education system in learners' first languages should be promoted. For instance, multilingual education in Africa can be a way to develop a first language and later on adding a second language, in order to successfully learn both of them (Heugh, 2008; Lourdes, 2008). Unlike an education model that only favours former colonial languages, multilingual education benefits the learners that can learn from an education model based on their strengths, especially when it comes to language and communication. It has also been shown that offering access to a first language in the regular school curriculum allowed the learners to have more effective learnings and cognitive growth (Lee, 2001). Lastly, multilingual education is a crucial tool to transmit intergenerational cultural heritage (Obanya, 2004).

Another factor that should not be undermined is the interaction between cultural heritage and language that can influence one's formation of identity. Language in the field of education is a marker of group membership between learners, for it is understood that same language speakers can share common values and beliefs (Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012). When a specific language is used as dominant in schools, learners' sense of belonging, social identity and loyalty to a language group can be disturbed. In fact, the perception associated with languages can have an impact on their individual representations. These perceptions are shaped by positive or negative attitudes transmitted mostly through the position of the media, schools and politics regarding languages and cultures and influence one's self-esteem and perception of others (Della Chiesa, Scott and Hinton, 2012; Mahboob, 2017, Kiramba and Oloo, 2020).

#### **2.2.4. South African Youth and the Challenges in Education, Identity and Opportunities**

##### ***Education***

South Africa inherited the education system of its colonisers (Musitha and Mafukata, 2018). The gap in accessing quality education that was prominent during Apartheid is hard to reduce and language plays a crucial role in perpetuating or reducing the inequality and building an inclusive nation (Mampane, Omidire and Aluka, 2018). In 2016, there was almost 16 million people between the ages of 5 to 24 that were attending an educational institution (Statistics South Africa, 2016: 83). Among the South Africans aged 20 years and older (which represents more than 40 million people), 81% finished primary education, of which only half of them (43%) finished secondary education, and as little as 4% obtained a bachelor's degree. Lastly, 7% did not attend school (Statistics South Africa, 2016: 76).

In most schools with a majority of non-English and non-Afrikaans speakers, children use their home language until grade 3. Thereafter, some schools introduce English as a first additional language while others have English or Afrikaans as a home language for all learners (Taylor and Coetzee, 2013). In 2007, 25% of the learners considered isiZulu as their home language and 20% of learners considered isiXhosa as their home language. Only 10% and 7% of learners had Afrikaans and English respectively as their home language (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 12). However, after grade 3, most of the learners do not learn in their home language anymore (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 29). English is used by 65% of the learners and Afrikaans by 12% of the learners, which makes the two languages the major mediums of education at school levels. In contrast, isiZulu and isiXhosa are used by only 7% and 6% of learners as learning languages in the curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 14).

While the previous paragraphs demonstrated that only a minority of the population has English or Afrikaans as first language, these two former colonial languages are still seen as guarantees for academic and professional success (Heugh, 2008; Taylor and Coetzee, 2013). Access to education in a home language other than English and Afrikaans is not guaranteed. It depends on their place of residence and their opportunity to attend a school that offers their first language in the curriculum. For the learners and parents that have the opportunity to choose their school, a preference is given to a lot of top schools in the country that were previously “model C schools”.

These are the previously white-only schools during Apartheid which had access to considerably more resources and make use of English and Afrikaans as medium of learning. In cases where learners do not have education in their home language, the transition to English or Afrikaans can be very challenging. An early transition to English or Afrikaans shows poor learning outcomes for African language speakers (Ferreira-Meyers and Horne, 2017). A study showed that as the number of years that black learners study in their mother tongue decreased, the percentage of them passing their exams also decreased (Heugh, 2008).

Moreover, even when the learners have access to education in an African language throughout their primary and high-school, the final school-exiting examinations in subjects other than languages are still only offered in Afrikaans or English (Harmse and Evans, 2017).

At university level, prior to November 2016, some universities were using Afrikaans as a main language and English as a secondary language (Brenzinger, 2017). Nowadays, the main language of instruction in South African universities is English. Some universities like the University of KwaZulu-Natal decided to promote the use of an African language in the curriculum. However, many higher education institutions do not show much commitment to promote indigenous languages in their courses (Pillay and Yu, 2015). Wa Thiong'o (1993) explains the need to move away from the dominance of European language and history in higher education, to allow students to learn about themselves in their own languages, acquire local knowledge as much as global knowledge. Mkhize and Balfour (2017) as well as Kiramba and Oloo (2020) argue that promoting African languages as academic and implementing more multilingual opportunities in education can be a mean to reduce inequalities, bring social cohesion and challenge the current dynamics of power.

More than 15 years ago, Jansen (2004) explained that post-Apartheid education was desegregated but not yet integrated. Today, education in South Africa remains one of the biggest challenges, and the focus is not to integrate but to decolonise education. Mampane, Omidire and Aluka (2018) argue that language is a vital element to do so. They argue that language directly impact how we communicate, produce and transmit knowledge within the education system. Language policies and their application are therefore critical to mould the sphere of learning, from early grades to higher education (Cushing, 2020). The need to decolonise education can also be encouraged by the poor performances of South African learners on international assessments.

The extent of the contribution of language factors in the low performance of the children is not fully determined, but many believe that language policies and their implementation play a key role in education outcomes at a national level (Brock-Utne, 2007; Taylor and Coetzee, 2013).

### *Identity*

Another challenge of language in education is linked to social identity. Ferreira-Meyers and Horne (2017) argue that multilingual education needs to understand the impact of languages on youth's identity. Learning in an additional language requires an awareness of the beliefs and values, norms and status that are associated with each language. Learners must navigate and assimilate different cultures and codes between their home language and additional languages. This can affect their formation of identity and sense of belonging, having to fit in different worlds and behave appropriately according to the cultural rules (De Lannoy et al., 2015). In South Africa, the education system was designed to undermine and limit skills development of the indigenous population, especially the black African population and its African languages. The latter were considered as vernaculars that must not be used in schools. When looking at the education system 25 years post-Apartheid, one may argue that institutions are not rigorous enough to not perpetuate the notion that indigenous knowledge and languages are inferior. Learners must not only understand the codes and rules associated with English or Afrikaans, but build their identity facing a system that often still considers their African language as unacademic (Mampane, Omidire and Aluka, 2018).

### *Opportunities*

A final aspect of languages in education that is observed in literature is the access to opportunities in South Africa. The inequalities in education opportunities were discussed in the previous paragraphs. The access to post-education opportunities can be a challenge for non-English, and sometimes non-Afrikaans, native speakers. In South Africa business in the private and public sectors is dominated by English. However, less than 50% of the working age Africans are considered to be proficient in English, and black Africans have consistently experience higher unemployment rates compared to other races in the country. Furthermore, studies have shown that black Africans that are fluent in English can earn about 55% more than those which are not. This shows that English proficiency increases one's chance to access higher salary range jobs (McKenzie and Muller, 2015).

With education being the steppingstone to access employment, it brings another dimension to language policy. Indeed, students' results and achievements are important, but their employability is crucial to increase their chances to enter the labour market (Yeung, 2020). In the current context, acquiring proficiency in English seems vital for black African students, but doing it as a home language increases the drop-out rates (Heugh, 2008). This study aimed to explore this dilemma, in order to provide a better understanding of the complex relationships of languages, education, identity and opportunity.

### **2.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The role of language in education, opportunity and identity formation is explored through the lens of three theoretical concepts: Sen's capability approach (1999), the social identity theory as explored by Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Soudien's understanding of language in education from his book "Realising the Dream" (2012). These three concepts provide axes that interact with one another, which is illustrated in the theoretical framework diagram below (diagram 1). In this chapter, each model is explained in relation to the research topic. Finally, a description of how the models interplay is given.

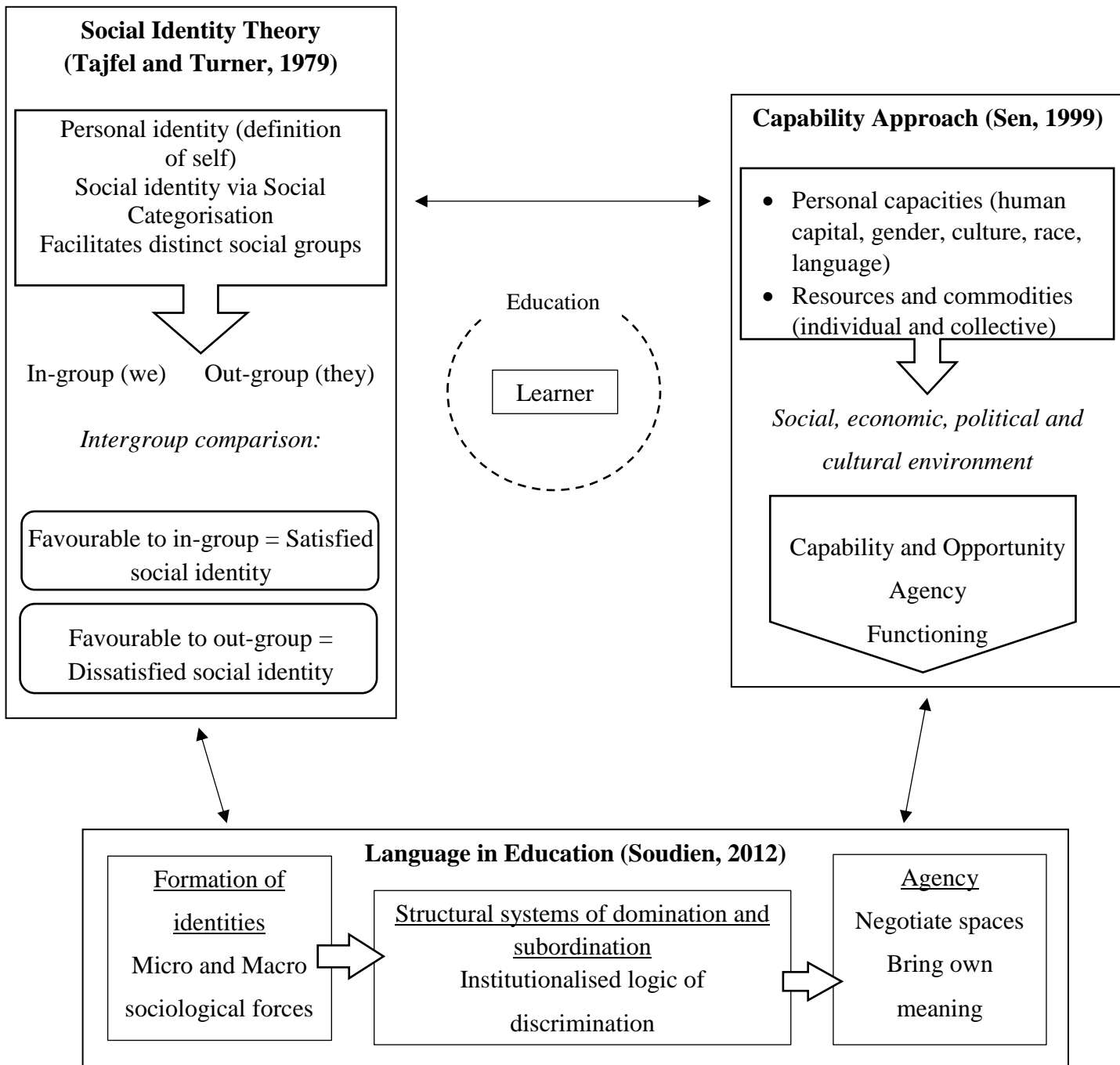


Diagram 1- Theoretical Framework

### **2.3.1. Language in Education**

The work of Soudien (2012) on language in education in a South African context provides useful insight into the complexity of the dynamics of power relations within the Post-Apartheid South Africa. His work reveals the interactions between identities, agency and the structural systems of dominance within the education system. It is relevant for the first two objectives of this study, for it provides an exploration of the challenges faced by young people, including language barriers and how they affect learning.

Soudien (2012) argues that the contexts which surrounds individuals impact their formation of identity. In South Africa, identities are shaped by complex forces such as language, race, social status, history, socioeconomic background and legacy, etc. Soudien (2012) explains how discrimination of any form aims to dehumanise individuals through processes of domination and subordination. He defends that the logic of race represents in fact a distortion of people's humanity where people are reduced to dominants or subordinates. In this logic of discriminations, especially when configured within the structural systems of societies and their institutions, everyone is placed on a spectrum where the subordinates face discrimination, oppression and marginalisation, whilst the dominants are made to believe in a form of superiority.

In the South African context, education is used as a means to reverse Apartheid's discriminations and exclusions through achieving higher education and enhancing social mobility. However, Soudien (2008; 2012) identifies several challenges regarding this statement. First, within the legacy of the Apartheid system is the perpetuation of racism and discrimination based on race and languages. The education system in particular is an example useful in showing the continued reproduction of such processes, for instance by keeping English and Afrikaans as the main medium of learning, like it was under Apartheid's "Bantu education system" (Soudien, 2012). The values perpetuated in the education system carry the message that African languages are not suitable for education, especially not higher education. These values can be transmitted by school policies, lecturers and other students, who discriminate against black students because of their language.

A second challenges mentioned by Soudien (2008) look at the desire for social mobility and the effect it has on student's social, cultural and racial identities. He explores how racism and the legacy of Apartheid depict success and social mobility in South Africa, which is often through the lens of assimilation of white culture and languages by black learners. These racist forces can encourage black students to move away from their home background, especially when these embody a life and financial situation that they are trying to obtain. This situation brings complex challenges to student's social and cultural identities, and how they navigate between spaces such as in education and at home (Soudien, 2008).

However, Soudien (2012) emphasises that, despite individuals' characteristics and environments, people always have opportunities to make their own choices and to make sense of the worlds they occupy in order to live a meaningful life for themselves. Despite constraints of race, language, gender, etc., people can negotiate their spaces to determine their fates. To overcome structural systems of domination and subordination, Soudien (2012) emphasises how the endless differences that form individuals can be used as resources rather than characteristics of discrimination.

### **2.3.2. Capability Approach and Opportunity**

The third objective of this study focuses on the relationship between language in education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion. According to the United Nations (2015), an inequality of opportunity occurs when individuals' personal characteristics such as gender, race, language, religion etc. influence their opportunities in society and affect their chances in life (Lucas, 1995). Inequality of opportunities describes the barriers commonly faced when accessing quality education, employment, and overall inclusion in society (Hertz et al., 2008).

Sen's capability approach is a core theory in understanding the relationships between human capabilities, social and economic opportunities and social exclusion (Sen, 1999). The capability approach explores human development and well-being by looking at factors like instrumental freedoms, inequality of opportunity, environmental factors and social justice. In order to do so, one's capacities such as human capital, race, gender, language, drive, ethnicity etc., as well as one's resources and commodities, either individual or collective are evaluated. Then, the social, economic, political, legal and cultural environment of the individual is analysed.

Sen (1999) argues that environmental factors like representations, discriminations, norms, laws, etc. play a crucial role in one's capability, which defines what is feasible for a person to achieve, considering one's opportunity (Sen, 1999). The environment either facilitates or prevents the conversion of people's capacities and resources into capabilities. Two other concepts, agency and functioning, complete the model of Sen's capability approach. Agency is described as the freedom of choice, what individuals desire doing or being. Functioning refers to what people actually do and become depending on their values and freedom.

Freedom is a large concept in Sen's approach to development (Sen, 1999). He considers many aspects of development for both their intrinsic and instrumental values simultaneously. When looking at education, it is on its own very valuable, but it can also contribute to the improvement of learners' health, nutrition as well as the education of the generations to come. Sen (1999) explains five instrumental freedoms that again have intrinsic and instrumental values. The five instrumental freedoms are political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security.

If all freedoms are crucial for development, social opportunities are the most relevant for this study. It refers to the ability of people to have access to health care, quality education and the ability to participate in society (Sen, 1999). Such access plays an important role in people's private lives, by enabling good health and education. However, they also affect people's ability to participate in society. For instance, the knowledge of the language that dominates the labour market and the political stage is crucial for people to succeed in the economic and political spheres.

### **2.3.3. Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory explores identity as derived from group membership and is built in interaction with the social groups to which one belongs. It provides a framework for the fourth objective, looking at language and people's sense of identity and cultural belonging. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that people's knowledge and the emotional meanings that they attach to their membership in a social group play a crucial role in their definition of self. They understand that individuals have multiple identities that are associated with their different affiliated groups, such as family, ethnicity, neighbourhood, religion, race, gender, etc.

In consequence, people can have different behaviours depending on the social contexts they're facing and the group that they identify with. Using the social identity theory helps to unpack the importance of language in learners' different social groups, such as family and school, and how it affects their perception of self and of their different social groups.

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), when individuals perceive themselves as part of a group, this group is considered the "in-group". The other groups where one does not identify with are the "out-groups". The authors mention three processes that facilitate the creation of social group distinction. Firstly, social categorisation, where people categorise others and themselves according to their characteristics such as race, profession, language, gender, etc. Secondly, social identification, which refers to people adopting the norms of the social groups that they belong to, in order to conform to them. Thirdly, social comparison, which is the process of individuals comparing their social group (in-group) to other groups (out-groups). This plays a crucial role in people's self-esteem and perception of their social identity, as well as the way they treat members of the out-group. The distinction between one's personal and social identity can be shown in the aspects of self that arise when one makes comparisons and judgments, either interpersonal (me versus not me) or intergroup (us versus them). To be satisfied by their perception of self, individuals wish for the comparisons to be favourable to them or the group that they belong to. This often leads to prejudice and discrimination towards the out-group, since people tend to view members of the outgroup negatively to increase their self-esteem. Moreover, members of the in-group will tend to maximise the differences with the other groups, to maintain a clear distinction between them.

It is also argued that individuals tend to embody identities that are most accessible or are the most accepted within a given context. According to this statement, social identity is deemed to be contextual and can be used, consciously or not, by people to adapt to situations. However, if this can allow people to fit in better, it can also cause disruptions in how people perceive themselves (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). For instance, when a group is oppressed or marginalised, some members will modify their behaviours and change characteristics in order to fit in the most favourable group in their environment. This can lead to the denial or judgment towards their initial social group and its characteristics.

#### **2.3.4. Interplay between the theories in the study**

This study examined the interactions between language, education opportunities and social identity from perspective of a select sample of isiXhosa speaking youth in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The concepts highlighted the impact and relevance of indigenous knowledge and languages to the education system and to African learners and students. The focus was set on isiXhosa, being the most widespread indigenous language in the Western Cape. The three theoretical concepts were used as a lens through which to unpack the intersection between language, social identity and education opportunities. The social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979) as well as Soudien's work (2008; 2012) show that language is a salient marker of social identity and group membership. The use of language in different spaces such as school can enhance social cohesion or, when certain languages are considered to be the norm and others not, it can enhance discrimination and exclusion. This phenomenon is emphasised when the languages are not considered equal in the structural systems of society, when certain languages are perceived as superior or more appropriate than others. This is shown in Soudien (2012), where the characteristic of language in education in South Africa is a crucial factor of discrimination inherited from the previous education system used during Apartheid. These environmental factors are important in understanding how people's capabilities, opportunities in their education and in society are affected (Sen, 1999). The challenges brought by language exclusion need to be considered to explore how young people navigate their education.

The works of Tajfel and Turner (1979), Soudien (2008; 2012) and Sen (1999) show that even when facing situations of exclusion and discrimination, individuals still have the agency to make choices for themselves and decide how to respond. Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that an individual from the out-group may adopt several strategies to reach a more positive social identity, like assimilating into the in-group by using the normative language. This strategy can allow learners to acquire a better social identity, however, it can also lead to language erosion and diffused identity, when they are not able to speak their first language fluently anymore or when they do not feel like they fully belong to any of their social groups. Another strategy provided by Soudien (2012) is to use differences as resources to overcome structural systems of domination and subordination, by acknowledging the legacy remaining in education and fighting institutionalised forms of discrimination. Similarly, Sen's capability approach (1999) encourages macro-changes through public institutions such as education.

For instance, by ensuring that learners all have the same opportunity to access education in the language that they are most comfortable with. In a South African context, where language was historically used as a characteristic to divide the population and emphasise inequalities, bringing equal opportunity for everyone seems crucial when wanting to move towards a united and just nation (Soudien, 2012).

## **2.4. POLICY AND LEGISLATION**

The legislative context of South Africa provides a framework to understand language in the field of education. Three major laws and policy of references can be understood. Firstly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the South African Constitution, that give general frameworks at international and national levels. Secondly, the South African School's Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP), that provides particular rules for language in education in South Africa. Thirdly, the National Youth Policy (2015-2020), which specifically addresses the current challenges faced by the South African youth.

### **2.4.1. International and National frameworks**

#### ***The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child***

At an international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a major legal framework that emphasises children's rights in several areas. Article 30 provides that children belonging to minorities such as ethnic, religious, linguistic groups, as well as indigenous children, should not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, practise their own religion and use their own language. It states that programmes and policies must recognise, promote and incorporate diversities in language and culture. Moreover, Article 29 declares that the education of the child should be aligned with the child's parents' cultural identity, language and values, even when they differ from the majority in the country which they live in (UN General Assembly, 1989).

#### ***The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996***

The South African Constitution describes language rights in the public sphere in the country. Section 6 states the official status of the national 11 languages, where 9 of which are African languages, and declares that the state has to "take practical and positive measures to elevate the

status and advance the use of these languages” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996: 4). Section 9 states that receiving education in the official language or the language that people are more comfortable with is a right to everyone, but emphasises that it should be considered in a context where that education is reasonably practicable (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996: 15).

#### **2.4.2. The South African School’s Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP)**

Due to the variety of first languages spoken by South Africans, several policies were formulated to apply the constitutional rights of all learners. The South African School’s Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) is a guideline for school management and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) was implemented to address the question of language in South African education (Harmse and Evans, 2017: 143). These policies recognise that the Home Language (HL) is the most appropriate for learning and it emphasises the right for learners to follow education in their Home Language, while having in addition a First Additional Language (FAL) (Ferreira-Meyers and Horne, 2017: 26).

The South African Schools Act (SASA) (Act 84 of 1996 in South Africa, Dept of Education, 1996: 11) has an objective to ensure that all learners have access to equal education and compulsory schooling for children aged 7 to 15. It applies to independent and public schools. The Act also states that no form of racial discrimination nor language discrimination may be practised in the implementation of the policy. The governing body of schools defines the school’s language policy according to the constitution and the SASA regulations. The home language and the first language must be offered on the same level (South Africa, Dept of Education, 1996: 11).

The LiEP aims to maintain and promote the use of home languages as the main medium of learning, while providing access to an additional language. It stipulates that learners should at least be offered instruction in their home language in Grades 1 and 2, if it is an official language. From Grade 3 onwards, the primary language of learning can still be children’s home language or become the first additional language. All language subject must receive equitable time and resource allocation. If there is no school in a district that offers the desired language, the learner can make a request to the Provincial Education Department (PED).

The PED shall keep register of the requests and provide ways to accommodate the learners if there are enough children requiring education in the given language in the same area. Schools usually have their own internal policies that aim to respect the LiEP whilst adapting to the environment of the school. For instance, a school that is situated in a mainly isiXhosa speaking area should be able to cater for Xhosa learners, but also cater for other learners if a significant number of them speak another first language.

The LiEP aims to respect the learners' rights to receive education in their first language while facilitating the bridging of culture, race, language and regional separation in the country. The LiEP attempts to enhance both the use of learner's home language in their education and the acquirement of an additional language of communication that will in most cases be English or Afrikaans (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 6).

At a university level, the Language Policy for Higher Education is a framework of reference (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017: 1). Universities have their own language policies, but they have to align with the national policy (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017: 8). Since 2016, the language of learning in South African universities is English, but some universities also offer courses in indigenous languages.

#### **2.4.3. National Youth Policy (2015-2020)**

The National Youth policy (NYP) 2015-2020 was conceptualised and implemented for the youth of South Africa (RSA, 2015). It is the recent version of the National Youth Policy 2009-2014 and aims to address current challenges that young people face in the country. One of the major aims of the policy is to promote youth development, young people's capabilities and social opportunities, in particular. The policy also aims to enable the youth to reach their full potential (RSA, 2015). In the South African context, this policy hopes to strengthen social institutions for the benefit of the youth, while emphasising the need for the inclusion of young people in society.

The policy understands that a lot of young people are excluded from social institutions like education and hopes to address the issue. It calls for the reintegration and inclusion of groups that have been previously excluded from social institutions, such as the indigenous groups of which language was not taught in schools in their areas (RSA, 2015).

If those legal frameworks provide guidance for schools and universities, statistics still show that most of the learners in South Africa do not have access to education in their first language after Grade 3 (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 29). It shows that from a very young age, learners that speak indigenous languages have to follow an instruction that disadvantages them as compared to English or Afrikaans first language speakers. The right for learners to preserve their cultural identity is also denied, when they have to navigate between different meanings and norms associated with these different languages (Ferreira-Meyers and Horne, 2017: 25). Finally, the equality of both home language and first additional language is not respected if final school-exiting examinations in subjects other than languages are still only offered in Afrikaans or English (Harmse and Evans, 2017: 143).

## **2.5. CONCLUSION**

This chapter reviewed the existing literature on language, identity and education in South Africa, looking at a capability approach perspective, as well as the inequality of opportunities and exclusion that can occur. Authors that were cited in this chapter pointed out the complexity of the language landscape in South Africa and the heterogeneity of social identities of the population. The review of literature gave different perspectives on linguistic challenges and brought a better understanding of the topic of study. A theoretical framework was proposed to explore the consequences that it can have on young people's lives. This study aims to bring further understanding of the challenges that occur on the topic of language, education and identity and how the inequalities that exist could be reduced or eradicated.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explains the method that was used to collect and analyse the data of this study. The data collected aimed to help the researcher understand the perceptions of young people on language in their education and identity formation. The research design is explained, as well as the population of the study and the sample for the study. The approaches and instruments that were used by the researcher are also defined in order to understand the process of data collection and analysis.

### **3.2. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design can be defined as the plan that explains how the data was collected and analysed by the researcher (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). For this study, an exploratory-descriptive qualitative research design was chosen. This study aimed to explore the meanings young people attach to their own experiences from an insider's perspective (De Vos et al., 2005). On the other hand, descriptive studies provide reliable descriptions of a phenomenon and attempt to understand actions and behaviours in a given context (Babbie and Mouton, 201). This study aimed to describe and explore the challenges of language in education and identity formation from a youth's perspective. Therefore, an exploratory-descriptive research design was most appropriate to understand young people's interpretations and descriptions of their experiences.

### **3.3. POPULATION AND SAMPLING**

#### **3.3.1. Study Population**

The study population is defined by Babbie and Mouton (2001) as the group of people from whom the researcher wants to explore the topic and draw conclusions. For this research, the study population was composed of young people, aged from 18 to 30 years old whose mother tongue is isiXhosa and who live in Cape Town. As stated in the previous chapters, native African-language speakers are most affected by language policies in the country.

### **3.3.2. Sampling technique**

In order to find participants for this study, non-probability sampling was chosen, using snowball sampling. It was decided to be best suitable for the study because language challenges in education is relatively unexplored and a broad phenomenon and there is not any existing organisations or official database to identify potential participants. De Vos et al. (2005) define snowball sampling as approaching a single person who matches the sample characteristics. In turn, this person is required to identify further people who also match the criteria and so on. The researcher selected participants who fit specific criteria as mentioned in the following paragraph (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; De Vos et al., 2005). A participant known by the researcher was interviewed and was asked to provide a list of three names of potential participants for the researcher to contact. Each participant then provided between three to five names of other potential participants, and so on. The researcher selected the participants that seemed to be the most relevant to answer the interview questions. This allowed the researcher to obtain relevant data for this study among people from random social status, education achievements etc. but still fitting the age, language and citizenship criteria.,

### **3.3.3. Sample characteristics**

This study aimed to interview 20 young respondents. However, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the researcher was not allowed to meet the participants for interviews, and the schools closed, which led to most of the potential participants not having access to Wi-Fi anymore. 12 respondents were interviewed before the outbreak. In order to participate in the study, the participants had to correspond to the following criteria:

- Male or Female, between the ages of 18 and 30
- Consider themselves black African and speak isiXhosa as a home language
- Be South African citizens
- Followed an education in South Africa only
- Having left high school (with or without graduating Matric)

### **3.3.4. Sampling procedure**

The researcher knew the first participant and contacted him. The latter gave the contact details of three potential participants, which were then contacted by the researcher and so on.

The researcher allowed for the participants to make the decision to participate in the research or not and did not disclaim their decision to other participants. The researcher ensured that the participants corresponded to the sample characteristics and then planned the interviews to collect the data.

### **3.4. DATA COLLECTION**

#### **3.4.1. Data Collection Method**

For this study, the researcher used the in depth-interview method as data collection approach. This method involves face-to-face semi-structured interviews where the participants are asked open-ended questions (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). While the questions were prepared ahead of the interviews (see chapter 3.5.), they still allowed the participants and the researcher to be flexible and discuss matters outside of the questions during the conversation. Interviews are the most used method of data collection in qualitative research, for they allow the researcher to collect people's experiences and understand the meaning that the participants give to their stories (De Vos et al., 2005). Since the researcher was exploring the perceptions and experiences of young people, this method seemed to be the most suitable one. It allowed the researcher to access to participants' opinions, emotions and significance of their experiences.

#### **3.4.2. Data Collection Instrument**

In order to respond to the research objectives of this study, a set of questions were prepared before the interviews. This is defined as a semi-structured interview guide. The questions were compiled in an instrument to engage with the respondents and to collect the necessary data for the study. The researcher compiled a set of five main questions and several probing questions to be asked depending on the participants' responses. The semi-structured interview guide defined the aims of the interviews and anticipated challenges due to sensitive questions or topics (De Vos et al., 2005). This instrument ensured that the collected data matched with the research objectives and the purpose of this study.

#### **3.4.3. Data Recording**

The researcher used her phone to record the data from the interviews. The data were then transcribed by the researcher in order to be analysed. The transcriptions remained anonymous and the names of the participants were never mentioned.

Only the researcher and her supervisor had access to the recordings and transcriptions of the interviews. The recordings were deleted after their transcription. The researcher also ensured that the participants' identity cannot be found in the final research paper.

### **3.5. DATA ANALYSIS**

The data collected for this study was analysed through an 8 steps process provided by Tesch (1990). This process was aimed at organising the data, structuring it and understanding its meaning for the study (De Vos et al., 2005).

The researcher transcribed each interviews shortly after they occurred and read them to have a global understanding of the data. However, after the 10<sup>th</sup> interview, the South African government implemented some social distancing guideline as the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic. The interviewer was able to interview two more participants who had access to Wi-Fi in their UCT residence. After transcribing the last interviews, the researcher deemed that data saturation was reached. The researcher picked an interview and used it as a guide to look for general topics and make notes of the general ideas. This step was then repeated for all the interviews. The researcher labelled the ideas that were common to many interviews, and then started to group them according to their similarities. These ideas were arranged and organised into themes and categories. The themes and categories were renamed and regrouped according to the research questions. The researcher decided which abbreviations to use in order to codify the text, with each category having its own particular code. The researcher drew a preliminary analysis using the codes and categories mentioned earlier. The researcher looked for connections between the data collected and the major ideas of the literature review and the theoretical framework. Finally, some parts of the data were recoded when necessary. This process allowed for a clear and organised data analysis which allowed the researcher to write the findings chapter in a systematic and precise manner.

### **3.6. DATA VERIFICATION**

To evaluate the trustworthiness of the research findings, four criteria were used by the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

### ***Credibility***

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), in qualitative research, credibility is used to demonstrate that the collected data matches the questions. In order to do so, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide. This ensured that the interviews remained focused on the topic of the study and limited misleading questions. In addition to that, the selection of the participants according to the specific criteria as well as the links made between the research questions and the findings enhance the credibility of the study.

### ***Transferability***

The transferability of the findings, in other words, how the findings can be generalised to the study population in another context, is not the end goal of a qualitative study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Indeed, the meanings given by the participants to their own stories cannot be generalised. However, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher referred to the theoretical framework as a way to generalise the study. Later on, further research could be done on a larger sample, but based on a similar theoretical framework.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability aims to show that if a different group of participants of the same study population, and with the same sampling criteria, were interviewed for the study, the findings would be similar (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). For this study, dependability was ensured by a step-by-step description of how the data were collected and analysed, which also includes how the participants were selected according to the criteria.

### ***Confirmability***

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability refers to the objectivity of the findings and how they can be confirmed. For this study, the findings were analysed and compared with the existing literature on the topic and evaluated by the researcher's supervisor.

## **3.7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Looking at the limitations of the study, the first element is the language of the interviews. They were conducted in English, which is a second or third language for the participants and the researcher. Both sides showed a good understanding of English, however, some experiences and meanings could have been lost in translation.

A second element is that the data collection of this study began just before the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher conducted 12 interviews before the outbreak, however two weeks later, a strict national lockdown was enforced, all students were asked to leave university residences and the population was asked to stay at home. Face-to-face interviews had to stop due to the risk of transmission of the virus and students had to go home. Most participants that were contacted expressed being overwhelmed by the fear and uncertainty created by the pandemic, feeling drained emotionally and facing financial challenges. Many preferred using their time and mobile data to address their own challenges or focus on their studies. Because data saturation seemed to be achieved, the researcher deemed it wiser to proceed with the data analysis.

### **3.8. REFLEXIVITY**

Reflexivity refers to the capacity to perceive and recognise one's perceptions, ideas and general cognitive worlds and how it influences interactions and relationships (De Vos et al., 2005). In this study, the researcher is in the same age group as the participants and English is also her second language. This helped the researcher to be more relatable and trustworthy for the participants. To remain as objective as possible, the researcher referred often to the literature review and the theoretical framework throughout the analysis of the data. Moreover, the researcher met and interviewed the participants in a place of their choice, where they were more comfortable. Finally, the good reputation of the researcher's university helped to build trust with the participants.

### **3.9. CONCLUSION**

This chapter described the methods and instruments that were used in this study. It provided further understanding of the researcher's decision to use particular approaches, as well as the population sample that the researcher focused on. This chapter also aimed to create a link between the aims of the study mentioned in the introduction chapter and the data collection process.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings from in depth face-to-face interviews conducted with 12 young people about their experiences and perspective on language in education, opportunity and identity. The demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table 1. It is followed by the major findings in a framework of analysis which are critically discussed according to the participants' responses, the literature review, and theoretical framework as well as the researcher's interpretation of the findings.

### 4.2. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

	<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Transition to English</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>1</b>	Asanda	M	25	Grade 3	Undergraduate	Honours student
<b>2</b>	Olwethu	F	23	Grade 9	Grade 11	Unemployed
<b>3</b>	Zimkhitha	F	19	Grade R	Grade 12	Unemployed
<b>4</b>	Bulelwa	F	24	Grade R	Honours	Masters student
<b>5</b>	Busi	F	29	Grade 9	Grade 11	Unemployed
<b>6</b>	Alupheli	F	23	Grade 1	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Undergraduate	Undergraduate student
<b>7</b>	Noluthi	F	18	Grade 1	Grade 12	Undergraduate student
<b>8</b>	Sima	F	21	University	Undergraduate	Unemployed
<b>9</b>	Amanda	F	26	Grade 5	Honours	Unemployed
<b>10</b>	Zandile	F	29	Grade R	Honours	Masters student
<b>11</b>	Lunga	M	25	University	Honours	Masters student
<b>12</b>	Sibahle	F	29	Grade R	Masters	Employed

Table 1 above presents the demographic profile of the participants of the study. The participants were aged between 18 and 29 years old, the majority of whom are females. All identified as black African and isiXhosa is their first language. Half of participants transitioned to English as a main medium of instruction in Grade R or Grade 1, 2 participants before Grade 5 and 4 participants transitioned after Grade 9. All the participants have left high school and the majority have completed matric.

This allowed them to reflect on language challenges that they faced throughout their primary and high school careers. Half of the participants were in tertiary education at the time of the interviews and were still facing some language challenges. The majority of the participants finished an undergraduate degree. Five participants were looking for employment, facing lack of opportunities which is partly due to the language barrier they face, and early school drop-out. One participant was employed in her field of study (biology).

### 4.3. FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS TABLE

Table 2: Framework of Analysis

<b>THEMES</b>	<b>CATEGORIES</b>	<b>SUBCATEGORIES</b>
<b>4.4.1. Perceived challenges of language in education</b>	<b>Transition to English</b>	Younger
		Older
	<b>Early transition (Grade R to 7)</b>	Lack of support
		Difficulties in understanding
		Perception of isiXhosa
		Relationships with others
	<b>Late transition (Grade 8 and above)</b>	Exams in English
		Transition in tougher years
		Opportunities post-education Lack of translation in some fields
	<b>4.4.2. Impact of perceived challenges on education journey</b>	<b>English as main medium of instruction</b>
Understanding		
Communication		
<b>isiXhosa as main medium of instruction</b>		Performances
		Understanding
		Communication
<b>Afrikaans as main medium of instruction</b>		Performances
		Communication
<b>4.4.3. Language in education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion</b>		<b>During schooling</b>
	Exclusion	
	<b>In the job market</b>	Opportunity
		Exclusion
	<b>In the current South African system</b>	Investment in African languages
		Beneficiaries of the system
		Choice and agency
<b>4.4.4. Effects of challenges on sense of identity and cultural belonging</b>	<b>Importance of language for identity and cultural belonging</b>	Identity and belonging
		Shared values
		Practice and expression of culture
		Perception

	<b>Identity and perception of isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans</b>	Family perception of language
		Perception from non-isiXhosa speakers
	<b>English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans in educational context</b>	Measure of intelligence and trust
		Assimilation
		Mental health
	<b>School's understanding of cultures</b>	Small improvements
Limited efforts to understand		
<b>4.4.5 Suggestions for overcoming language challenges in education</b>	<b>Enhancement of agency</b>	Choice of language
		Choice of school
	<b>Informed teachers</b>	Qualifications in language teaching
		Multilingual
	<b>Decolonising language in education</b>	Invest in African languages
		Inclusion of African languages in the curriculum

Table 2 above presents the major findings guiding the analysis in the form of themes, categories and subcategories that follow the research objectives. The aims of this study were to explore the perceived challenges of language in education, to understand the impact of the perceived challenges of language on young people's education journey as well as to analyse the link between language in education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion. Furthermore, this research set out to investigate the effects of these challenges on young people's sense of identity and cultural belonging. Finally, the suggestions given by the participants to overcome language challenges in education.

Each component of Table 2 will be discussed in the following section. The findings are presented according to the participants' responses, perceptions and experiences.

#### **4.4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

##### **4.4.1. Perceived challenges of language in education**

Participants were asked to share their experiences and perspectives on the challenges that they face regarding language, education, opportunity, and identity. They explained that transitioning from isiXhosa to English in primary school or in high-school and university brings similar challenges but in different contexts.

The main challenges that were mentioned include performance, opportunities, communication and understanding, social identity, and assimilation:

*We did not have separate classes to learn English. Sometime was difficult. Like the teacher asks a question, you don't understand the question you just answer it. (Olwethu, 23, female)*

*I think it's just it's just really difficult to keep switching your mind. You are in some ways behind because it's not your home language. You have to try and learn the subject and learn the language at the same time. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*It's basic stuff like access and just being able to find information, because I mean, education is being able to gain knowledge to share knowledge and to acquire knowledge and, and to create more of the knowledge that we're looking for. And if language is the thing that's stopping people from even being able to pass their first year (Zandile, 29, female).*

All the challenges mentioned by the participants are explored in the following chapters, within both contexts of English, isiXhosa or Afrikaans as a main medium of instruction. The South African context as well as its education system in general was also challenged by the participants.

#### **4.4.2. Impact of perceived challenges on young people's education journey**

When asked about their experiences of language challenges, the participants mentioned three main concepts: performance, understanding and communication abilities. These concepts are explored through the different language contexts, when English, isiXhosa or Afrikaans are the main mediums of instruction.

##### **4.4.2.1. English as main medium of instruction**

Most participants shared that when English was their medium of instruction, their marks and overall performance were lower. Regardless of the age at which they transitioned to English, the majority noted a drop in their results in relation to many subjects:

*I was struggling, I was struggling with a lot. I was struggling with maths; I was struggling with Afrikaans and with English. Yeah, because it was all in English, as if it was my first language, even if English is not my first language. (Busi, 29, female)*

*I would think I would have been thriving like from the get-go, because throughout my undergrad my marks were passing marks, not that good, but not that bad. They were just like average-ish. I think I would have been used the language I know well, isiXhosa, I would be passing with flying colours. So, I wouldn't go through that transition phase. I would have been straight up good. (Lunga, 25, male)*

These narratives show that having English as a main medium of instruction impacted the ability of isiXhosa-speaking youths to perform. Even if they had a good understanding of the topic itself, take maths or history as an example, having to write tests, assignments and exams in English affected their ability to show their knowledge.

Another major challenge mentioned by the participants was the lack of understanding of the teacher and the topic when transitioning to English. They perceived this to be the source of their exclusion from the class as they struggled to understand the teacher, the learning material, and the content itself:

*If you don't understand English well maybe you will be excluded, maybe you won't know anything in class, you won't be able to understand things. So like it's difficult for that person to be able to communicate even with a teacher. (Noluthi, 18, female)*

*It's an issue of expression, you won't even be able to understand small differences or nuances in languages or the subject. If you aren't able to get particular words, like, there's a lot of Xhosa words that you can't translate into English, and if I want you to say something to my teacher, I have to try and find a way to translate that but if there isn't an English word for this particular word that I'm trying to use then that message will be lost in translation. (Zandile, 29, female)*

*The dynamic started changing. I did not have that advantage of someone telling me what I have just heard in my own language first, so that I can understand. I had to do that on my own. It made me kind of like become slow in class, because we are being taught in English. I have to process that first, and then turn it into my own language and then I can only understand. Of which in the class environment that is very quick. You have 45 minutes to understand the English plus to understand the content. It took me a while to get used to it. (Lunga, 25, male)*

These statements communicate the difficulty experienced by the participants in understanding their teacher or lecturer. They explain that a translation process was necessary before reaching an approximate understanding of what was said. Moreover, they also express the challenge of losing content and nuances in translation as certain words in isiXhosa that are not translatable to English and vice-versa.

Finally, the last concept mentioned was that of communication. Unlike the challenges faced for performance and understanding, the participants saw English as an advantage when looking at communicating with others, locally and globally:

*I think it can reduce inequality if we have one language that connects people like English and that can breach barriers and bring people closer, we would have better understanding because we're not speaking two different languages but just one. I would suggest that people teach their kids English at a very young age, but not make it the main language that they speak, it shouldn't be the only language that people speak, but rather a language that they know and they can talk to other people with. (Asanda, 25, male)*

*No, it's positive because I think it's to communicate with other people who are white. To communicate with them. Because they don't speak our language. So we have to speak theirs. But then we can communicate with everyone (Olwethu, 23, female)*

The large majority of participants explained that despite all the challenges faced with English in their education journey, they believed that learning in English has improved their ability to connect with people outside of the Xhosa-speaking community. For instance, they expressed the need to know English when traveling and when interacting with the global community. They said that English can be used as a tool to communicate and provide better understanding of each other. However, they also stated that that English in South Africa is essentially a way to accommodate white people, because most of them do not speak any African languages.

These narratives show how the participants were expected to understand, perform and communicate in English and were compared to native English speakers. Most of them faced capability deprivation during their education. As mentioned by Sen (1999), one's capability depends on how the environment facilitates, or in this case prevents the conversion of one's capacities to capabilities. According to the participants, attending classes in English was an environment that did not allow them to show their abilities, which was then reflected in their poorer performance or in them having to work a lot harder to learn English faster. A consequence of capability deprivation is the risk of exclusion, for instance by having to repeat a year or dropping out of school because of low marks. This is supported by Albertyn and Guzula's study (2020) that found that the transition to English-language instruction contributes to high failure rates and dropouts, as well as Soudien's work (2012) who argues that the current education system perpetuates inequality and racism against African-language speakers by favouring native English speakers in the curriculum and in school policies.

#### **4.4.2.2. isiXhosa as main medium of instruction**

Most of the participants explained that having isiXhosa as a main medium of instruction allowed them to have better results in many subjects:

*I should have stayed at a Xhosa school. The only thing about it is that my English was not gonna be this good. I was gonna maybe have a poor English but I was gonna pass. I would have my matric now already. I think that was my biggest mistake. But I didn't know that time. (Busi, 29, female)*

As shown by the narratives, most participants believed that they would have had better marks and greater chances of passing had they continued their education in isiXhosa. Unlike learning in English, learning in their own language would have created an environment that facilitates their understanding, where they would have had the opportunity to show their capacities and knowledge more easily. However, one disadvantage that is noted by the participants is that their abilities to speak English would have been less developed than they currently are as they would have learned English as a second language.

The participants also mentioned the improvement in understanding when isiXhosa was used as the main language of instruction. This included understanding the teacher, the teaching material and the content itself:

*I can't say it was easier, but I used to understand more and better. Cause when they explain it was a language that you understand it in. But when you talk like in other big word, then you are like what does that word mean? You don't know. I used to understand and perform a lot more with Xhosa than with English. (Busi, 29, female)*

*Being taught in your own language bridges that gap of understanding and just learning for the sake of learning. I think being taught in your own language allows to go deeper in the content. (Lunga, 25, male)*

Most of the participants also explained that they had more support from the teacher, especially in the case where the learning and testing material was only available in English. In this case, the teacher could translate it into isiXhosa or into “simple” English:

*I think it was a great advantage because now the teacher can translate what was said, either in Xhosa or in simple English that you can easily understand. And ask the questions in Xhosa or simple English. (Sima, 21, female)*

These examples show how students' understanding is improved when they are taught in their home language. The participants explained that it gave them a better chance to understand the content of the course itself. They expressed that it allowed them to be more comfortable when interacting with the teacher and when asking questions. Furthermore, they stated that when learning in isiXhosa, they could deepen their understanding of the content being taught and truly process it, rather than learning work by heart or facing the challenge of having to translate and process it when taught in another language.

As Sen (1999) explains, a facilitating context enhances the transformation of capacities into capabilities. Having isiXhosa as a medium of instruction was a facilitating context for participants and they were able to perform and understand fully throughout their education. However, because of the national and provincial education systems, they still had to write their final examinations entirely in English, which resulted in an unequal situation that reflects Soudien's argument (2012): the education system continues to favour native English speakers.

Similarly, when looking at the communication aspect, the participants reflected on how it would have been if they always had isiXhosa as main medium of learning. The majority expressed the struggle to communicate as soon as they left their community or family and began working or studying in environments in which isiXhosa was not spoken. This is representative of many areas in Cape Town and in South Africa:

*And then if you do not know most use languages, it will have a negative impact on your self-growth because you will not understand what is said and it will be difficult for you to interact with people (Sima, 21, female)*

*Imagine I was living in a place where isiXhosa is the only language that is being spoken even at school, everywhere at home. Now, I come into this whole new world, I find out that there are other people like me who only know their own language. It becomes a whole new world. I had to understand English to communicate with others, otherwise I would be completely excluded. (Lunga, 25, male)*

The narratives show that communicating with others, particularly non-Xhosa speaking individuals was more challenging when having isiXhosa as a main medium of learning throughout their entire education.

Despite the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) clearly stating that all 11 official languages must be considered equally, English and Afrikaans remain the main languages used in the field of education. The participants explained that in order to access places where people do not speak isiXhosa, they needed to learn English as the common language. For instance, when coming from the Eastern Cape, which is mainly isiXhosa speaking, or coming from an isiXhosa-speaking township in Cape Town to university where English is the main language of communication. In both cases, the participants needed English to communicate and interact with other groups.

#### **4.4.2.3 Afrikaans as main medium of instruction**

Finally, when asking participants about their performance when Afrikaans was a main medium of instruction, the majority explained that their marks were low. This was not only because they could not fully express their knowledge, but also because the majority stated that they were not willing to learn it as a result of its colonial past in the country:

*I can try in English, but Afrikaans is the worst. The school that I went to was a coloured school. They only had English and Afrikaans. And, there a lot of Xhosa students in the school. But then, they would be like it's an English school, we had to learn Afrikaans too. English is now okay, but we don't want to speak Afrikaans. So, it was like, it's not okay man. Cause I was like if they can take that Afrikaans off and put Xhosa, maybe it was going to make a lot of difference (Busi, 29, female)*

As expressed in the narrative above, most of the participants did not choose to learn Afrikaans. It was imposed on them, even when they were attending an English school. Classes were in most cases a mix of English and Afrikaans. The majority of the participants explained that their marks were low and that it affected their chances to pass the year. In addition to the challenges brought about by the language itself, they explained that they had little motivation and will to learn Afrikaans because of what it represents in South Africa. Furthermore, knowing that they were already learning English, Afrikaans was less valuable to them as English would be enough to access higher education.

Participants emphasised their lack of motivation and interest in learning Afrikaans, by explaining that unlike English and isiXhosa, Afrikaans is not as useful to communicate with others:

*When it comes to having to speak Afrikaans, it was probably our third or fourth language, it is isiXhosa at home, and English as a second language. Then when I went out to meet my friends and other people in the community, they would be speaking Setswana, isiZulu, some people would be speaking Pedi, other people speaking Sesotho. So Afrikaans was only at school, never outside of it. (Zandile, 29, female)*

*Well, it's a lot of convincing you have to ask your parents to come to the school and tell the school that it can't just enforce that in kids, to just learn in Afrikaans when Afrikaans is not medium of instruction outside of school, internationally especially (Asanda, 25, male)*

These narratives show that Afrikaans was often a third or fourth language to the participants and that they never used it outside of school. Indeed, Afrikaans is not a medium of instruction in the majority of the tertiary education in the country and it is not spoken internationally. This was the biggest difference between English and Afrikaans. Though both were colonial languages enforced in the country, English showed to be useful as a common language in many contexts in the country and internationally.

#### **4.4.3. Language in education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion**

When exploring the link between education, inequality of opportunity and social exclusion, the participants mentioned two major contexts. The first one refers to opportunities and exclusion that occurs during schooling, from primary to tertiary education. The second one deals with the opportunities and exclusion that they face after education, when trying to enter the labour market. In this section, the questions of opportunity, exclusion and inequality will be addressed within the current South African system.

##### **4.4.3.1. During schooling**

According to the participants, the opportunities that they had throughout their education were impacted by the language in which they were taught. First, the majority of them stated that having English as a main medium of language increased their ability to compete later in their education, especially when reaching tertiary education:

*I think learning English particularly has advantaged me. Because majority of my field and people in my field are English speaking. So it put me up on a level to compete with, on a higher scale than if I was just learning in isiXhosa. In order for kids to be competitive, or to be able to progress, and since the medium format for education is English, I would suggest that kids probably learn English at a very young age. (Asanda, 25, male)*

Similarly, participants also mentioned that late transitions to English as main language are disadvantageous when compared to an early transition. They deemed it harder to adapt and it gave them less opportunities to succeed. When transitioning to English in high school or university, the competition was stronger and inequalities were exacerbated. Moreover, when considering that tertiary education is mainly offered in English, their English marks were important in order to be accepted at the institution of their choice:

*I think students have different strengths, but when you go to school in Xhosa and later transition to education in English, that's a lot worse. For example, some people are good at writing English, and are not good at speaking English. That is disadvantageous, when it comes to presentations is and then some people are good at speaking English and have bad grammar when it comes to writing English. That also can be disadvantages when it comes to writing tests. So in both, you have inequalities. (Sima, 21, female)*

*The institution has no one to explain things the way I need them to be explained, like in high school. So, I had to either understand or not. And, life goes on. So, it was hard. It was a kind of inequality in that way, because I'm already, as much as I am equal to everyone, I am kind of like at a disadvantage. (Lunga, 25, male)*

*Like if you pass English. You get an opportunity to get into university if you pass English, maybe like a 50% and above you get into university. But if you fail English, you can't. (Zimkhitha, 19, female)*

A second perception of the participants was that Xhosa youth had less resources and opportunities to succeed in their education. Two main reasons were given for this: they were forced to fit into an education system that valued English more than African languages, and, when learning in isiXhosa, the lack of resources, learning material and qualified teachers prevented them from having equal opportunities:

*I think we should place an emphasis on language, but also place an emphasis on the importance of knowing your language. And provide people with the resources to be able to learn in their language. Like teachers, books, everything that you need in education. I think those resources could help make it more even for the children that don't know English. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*And it's even worse if you go to a university or any kind of institution of learning where you're only being forced to learn in a particular language, where you would do so much better if you could learn in your own language. But the way our educational system is set up is that people are forced to fit into a box that was designed to always give them less opportunities, or they are forced into the box for them to shape themselves into something that they will never be. A lot of students and young people are able to do amazing things but language being a barrier and a challenge, and it's only a challenge because it's what*

*society has placed as what is important, and they've decided that English speaking people are somehow better than. (Zandile, 29, female)*

Another inequality mentioned by most of the participants was that young people attending school taught in isiXhosa still had to be assessed and write their exams in English. That enhances the gaps between the English and non-English speaking youth.

*If you examine people, assess them, teach them all in a language that they know well, that's already doing a lot. Compared to the kids who grow up speaking English can go into primary school and high school and already speak the language that they're examined in, I think it's not an even playing field. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

Finally, the participants expressed that a lot of opportunities were taken away from them based on their performance in English. Indeed, they explained that the current education system still considers English as a measure of one's intelligence and capabilities:

*Then when it comes to education. I can't say because language is not some measure of intelligence. Like you know, now they use a language to judge you and how you can do in class. But if English speakers were evaluated in Xhosa, their marks would also be low. (Sima, 21, female)*

Through different narratives, the participants explored the main aspects of opportunities within their education journey. The major reflections revolved around the transition to English as main medium of instruction. All of the participants expressed that early transition can provide more opportunities for young people to access quality education and to be able to perform at the best of their abilities. As explained in Sen's instrumental freedoms (1999), particularly the freedom of social opportunities, one's access to quality education affects one's capability and role in society. The education context as described by the participants did not give them access to the same quality education and opportunities as native English speakers. The participants did not have access to the freedom of social opportunities and they were deprived from their capability for several reasons: the lack of resources and teaching material in isiXhosa, the assessments and national exams that are only available in English or Afrikaans, and the forced transition to English when reaching secondary or tertiary education (Harmse and Evans, 2017).

Finally, the participants identified a crucial element prevalent in South African education, which is the biased notion that young people's intelligence is tied to their ability to show understanding and express themselves in English.

Their narratives are consistent with Soudien's (2012) analysis of the South African context, where he argues that African languages are still not considered suitable for education and African-language speakers are still facing language-based discrimination and racism. This creates a double-edged problematic: on one hand, it forces the participants to transition to English, which puts them at higher risk of failing or dropping out (Albertyn and Guzula, 2020). On the other hand, they need to learn English in order to access higher education and employment, where English remains the dominant language (Mampane, Omidire and Aluka, 2018).

The participants mentioned that when learning in a language different from their mother tongue, they felt deprived of the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities. This leads them to be constantly fearful of failing their subjects and eventually being forced to drop out of school due to poor performance:

*Well, it was negative when I left school, cause I was like, I'm failing I'm failing. It was like if you fail a language then you fail. If you fail Afrikaans, then you fail. Because they count Afrikaans as your second language in that school I went to. (Busi, 29, female)*

*I think for example, if I didn't learn English quickly, I would be excluded from because I would feel lonely and everything would be difficult for me. It will be difficult to adjust. So maybe I would have a negative mind that maybe education is not for me and all that stuff because I cannot understand the certain language, and everything would be hard for me and I would end up dropping out. English is the most used language and questions are asked in English meaning that if you do not understand English you don't understand questions and you will lose your patience and all that stuff and drop out of school. (Sima, 21, female)*

The participants explained that not being an English-first-language speaker leads to social exclusion in many schools and institutions in the country. Not speaking English as a first language meant that they did not understand the nuances of various expressions in the language which therefore was socially exclusionary because they missed out on sarcasm, slang, jokes and so on. This alienation from their classmates can lead to a weak support system at school, which can impact their performance and as well as their mental health:

*I think if you don't speak the language of communication, or if it's not your first language, you're always going to be missing out. In education, marks, exams, but also you miss out on jokes, you miss out on metaphors, you miss out on the poetry because you're not thinking in that language. You always have to keep translating your life basically. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

Finally, the majority of the participants mentioned that they could be excluded from several fields, for example biology and astronomy, because they cannot be studied in isiXhosa. When the content is not translated or not easily translatable, it forces young people that want to study in this field to have an advanced command of English.

*Also, I remember once speaking to my dad about biology or something. And I was asking him what's the Xhosa word for a cell. He couldn't think of it. And if I came from somewhere where I only spoke IsiXhosa and I have an interest in biology, I wouldn't be able to because I can't translate the one important thing which is a cell. I won't be able to imagine something that I can't speak, or, you know what I mean (Zandile, 29, female)*

As the narratives show, exclusion is a threat for the participants when navigating their way through their education. The risk of dropping out or failing must be acknowledged when looking at the impact of languages in education. As mentioned by Mampane (2018), youth that are not fluent in the medium of instruction are more vulnerable to dropping out and being excluded from school. Moreover, the participants explained that social exclusion is also a challenge faced by a lot of young Xhosa people when attending English or Afrikaans-speaking schools. As explained by Soudien (2012) the perpetuation of discrimination and exclusion of black students by teachers, school policies and other students affect their opportunities throughout their education.

To conclude, the school system itself is a challenge when students choose certain fields of study that are usually not accessible in and nor translated into isiXhosa. The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) states that learners have the right to be taught in their home language, especially in areas where the language is widely spoken (Department of Basic Education, 2010). However, many fields, especially at a high school level, are not made available in African languages. At university level, following the Language Policy for Higher Education, tertiary-education institutions have their own language policy and English is the major language of learning. Most fields remain unavailable for study in any African language (Mkhize and Balfour, 2017).

#### **4.4.3.2. In the Job Market**

When wanting to enter the job market, the majority of the participants mentioned the inequality of opportunities that they faced due to the language barriers.

First, the participants stated that in order to access quality jobs, a successful education is necessary for young people who are not white and/or not rich. This example emphasises the narratives of the previous paragraph that mention the inequalities within education and show that the consequences of these inequalities continue after schooling:

*English is the way to enter to success. Unless you are white or very rich and you don't need to be successful in your education. It's the ultimate methods to gain education and therefore to get a job, you need to speak English. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

Another major inequality put forward by the participants was that the job market in South Africa is mostly English-speaking. They explained that most business owners and leaders are white and either English or Afrikaans speakers. Many argued that employers are biased and that speaking an African language is a disadvantage because African languages are considered inferior within the job market. In addition to this, having an accent that “does not sound white” is also considered unfavourably according to the participants:

*If young people go into a job market that is English speaking, they're not gonna do well. I think having school in isiXhosa can help people go through an education system in South Africa, but it will not necessarily help them in the job market in South Africa, because businesses are not owned by indigenous speaking people. They're going to be employed by white people who don't speak Xhosa or Zulu or whatever. So if they can speak English, great, wonderful. I mean, it's not even just about speaking English. It's about how you speak English. Your accent, your vocabulary. If we could transform the whole system, then it would be amazing. It's all very desirable to have a South Africa that does not have the kind of colonial legacy that it has, in terms of rubbing people of the opportunity to be in their language in all spheres of life. I think that's what colonialism has done. What Apartheid has done is to rob people to have an opportunity to live as themselves. So they have to do this other language to have opportunities in life and if they don't, they're gonna suffer. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*If the workspace accepts the other African local vernacular languages as well I think it would open up room for everyone to have a foothold in the workspace. Learn an African language so that everyone can understand, so that when you go to work whether you send an email in an African language, English, or Afrikaans, everyone is on the same page. Everyone must know an African language, the whites, as well. So that, at least you know the basics. Because currently, if I read an email in Afrikaans I'll be able to grasp the essence of it, even if I don't understand fully because I haven't been practicing it ever since I left school. I will be able to pass. If a white person goes through a Xhosa email they won't know what's going on. Which means the system does not favour African languages at all. But if everyone knew African languages, you know wouldn't matter if you're proficient in English, or in Afrikaans, you can do your work well. (Sibahle, 29, female)*

Furthermore, the participants expressed frustration and noted the injustice they felt when applying for jobs in South Africa. They explained that because employers are mostly English speakers, they have to present themselves in English. As a result, they have less chance to showcase their skills during an interview. In addition to this, they also stated that they are considered less trustworthy if they do not speak English proficiently:

*Obviously in terms of career development you need English. So, if you don't have English, you don't have an opportunity to present yourself to employers or to present yourself as capable, therefore you don't have access. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*Well, the people who are employers are English speakers, so you need to appeal to them first to show you can provide the service that they need (Lunga, 25, male)*

*In terms of job it will be difficult for you to get a job because we all undergoing official interview, it's when you show your best skills and how they will help you grow the organization so if you do not understand English you cannot be easily trusted. (Sima, 21, female)*

These narratives show that language has a crucial impact on young people when seeking job opportunities. English being the main language used in the employment market in the country, applicants need to show proficiency in order to access quality jobs. This is an important factor to take into account when looking at languages within education. Indeed, the goal of education is to be employable and qualified for quality jobs. However, when the youth does not learn English to a level that allows them to show their skills and resources, they are disadvantaged and have less access to job opportunities. This concurs with the work of McKenzie and Muller (2015), which explains that black Africans who are fluent in English are more likely to access higher paid jobs. According to the participants, this situation is inherited from the Apartheid era, showing that most large businesses and companies are still owned by white people, who expect English and/or Afrikaans to be the main medium of communication. Students' opportunities to access the job market is therefore heavily influenced by their level of English, even when highly skilled in their field of experience.

The participants also explored the bias that employers have regarding African languages, accents and their capabilities as a result of these factors. They argued that African languages and accents that "do not sound white" are used, consciously or not, as indicators of one's capabilities, trustworthiness and performance at work.

As explained by Sen (1999), social norms and economic, political, legal, and cultural environments affect behaviours and perceptions of people. South Africa's history of colonialism and Apartheid, during which anything relating to blackness was discriminated against, is continuing to affect norms and perception of blackness, such as African languages or accent.

Following on from the lack of opportunities when entering the job market, the participants also mentioned the exclusion that young people can face. A major concern is the fact that some fields only employ in English. This leads to young people that are not proficient in the language being excluded from practicing in that area:

*Yes, if for instance you don't know English you might feel excluded from several fields and that might be inhering you from getting your dream job. Because you don't know the main language used in the field (Asanda, 25, male)*

This shows that young isiXhosa speakers have to consider the language aspect in relation to their education but also in relation to the fields in which they would like to work. Even with a quality education, if they do not speak the language that is used in the field, they are more inclined to be excluded from it.

#### **4.4.3.3. In the current South African system**

##### ***Investment in African languages***

Looking at South African society and institutions, a major realisation of the participants was that there was not enough investment in South African languages in the country. In academic and workplace settings, English or Afrikaans are often the predominant languages used. As a result, African language speakers have to learn a minimum of one, but often two, new languages for their education and workplace. Furthermore, due to centuries of oppression, African languages have less power in these contexts. These narratives illustrate the lack of investment in African languages:

*Only in the poor areas that they have the three languages. The rich never have to learn Xhosa. If we were to speak more Xhosa, I think a lot would be uncovered from the value that Xhosa young people would add to education, and just in society in general. When they are able to express themselves in the way that they are most comfortable, in the languages that they're most comfortable with. (Zandile, 29, female)*

*I also feel like our world is also changing and the Xhosa that was spoken before is not the same that is spoken today. But I wish that there was an investment into Xhosa because you know you have to create language. This is what it means to decolonize a language is to consistently create and include it so if there are new scientific words coming out you need to write them in Xhosa. And if that doesn't happen, then I think it's going to die out. But I think it's not on the nationalist agenda (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*English is a dominant language. It will advantage those like me that have had the opportunity to speak English. But it will disadvantage those that have not grown up speaking English, because unfortunately vernacular languages have no power or limited power, especially in economics or career development (Amanda, 26, female)*

The participants explored the causes and consequences of the lack of investment in African languages. Regarding the causes, participants explained that contrary to other languages, such as English, most African languages are not updated with new words that reflect the lexicon of today, particularly in professional and academic settings. Although slang in African languages has evolved over time, it would be beneficial if African languages officially and systematically developed in line with society's evolving context in workplace and academic settings. This would facilitate the integration of African languages in these more formal environments, promoting language decolonisation.

Moreover, the idea that South African languages do not have "power" refers to the lack of opportunities and access that African language speakers face in South Africa. Investing and bringing African languages into academic spaces can enhance their use and recognition in the economy and the labour market. The participants expressed that this could allow Xhosa youth to show their value, capabilities, and skills in their places of work. As aforementioned, African language speakers are required to learn several languages, often English and Afrikaans, in addition to their home language. This leads to more inequity on an educational and professional level, as well as social level, as African language speakers are forced to adapt to others rather than non-African language speakers accommodating them. As Mampane, Omidire and Aluka (2018) argued, languages are a vital element to decolonising education. Investing in African languages by creating adequate teaching material and having teachers encourage the idea that all languages are equal and valuable can support the integration of African languages in schools.

### ***Beneficiaries of the system***

Another element the participants mentioned was that South Africa's institutional systems were built to benefit certain groups and exclude others. The participants explained how language is related to these systems and how they still benefit white people, even if they are not proficient in English:

*The current system benefits white people, for whom the system was designed. I think the difficult thing with English in this country is that it is obviously a colonial language but it is also now a global language. So even if we critique English as a colonial oppressive language, it is so difficult to escape and just replaced with like, Xhosa or Zulu, because of its internationalness. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*Those that speak English really well, white people benefit. Because of Apartheid. And they have been for 45 years. Because we have inherited, especially people of colour, which is usually the people that don't speak English, being told that they are inferior. And so, the language provides false evidence of that. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*Obviously, it's like people who are from European descent. For example, there are a lot of people who are from Europe who can only speak one language, Italian, French or English or whatever and the rest of the world forgives them for not being able to speak another language. They can go around and, you know, butcher a second language and it's adorable and it's cute. But an African person who does the same thing, make the same mistakes in English is deemed to be stupid, or whatever. The way people judge you for not being able to speak a different language, like that's got something to do with your ability to think or your ability to learn, and they'll see you as less than smart, just because you don't speak English well. You are judged unfairly. (Zandile, 29, female)*

As demonstrated by the quotes, the participants believe that the institutional systems in South Africa, which were inherited from centuries of colonisation and Apartheid, remains exclusionary for people of colour, especially African black people. Several examples were given, all revolving around the discrimination and inequity that isiXhosa and other African language speakers face in education and post-education. Many of them were explored in previous chapters, such as the challenges in workplace performance, understanding and communicating to non-African speakers, as well as the lack of opportunities in education and professional environments, and societal exclusion.

However, these narratives highlight that discrimination and inequity is a national, systemic challenge, not merely isolated to certain schools and students. As Crapanzano (1985) explained, schools were racially segregated during Apartheid with white schools benefiting from more resources than schools for people of colour.

Resources such as infrastructure, materials, and funds ensured a higher quality of education for white learners, an inequity that persists today. This inequity extends to languages and access to educational and professional opportunities.

Moreover, as the participants explained, non-African languages not only favour white people in educational and professional settings but enforce a false sense of inferiority when black people have an accent or are not as articulate in English. When a white person has an accent, it is considered attractive. In comparison, a black person with an accent in English is mocked or undermined. This concurs with Lourdes's work, where they described how one's accent leads to prejudice and is used as an indicator of socio-economic status (Lourdes, 2008).

### ***Choice and agency***

An important component in understanding the intersections between language and education in South Africa is the lack of agency isiXhosa speakers face when navigating the educational system. Most of the participants recounted having few choices for schools given the area that they live in, the type of study they wish to pursue, and the quality of the education available in English and isiXhosa.

*Cause it was an art school and I wanted to do art. And, it's in Mitchell's Plain. I thought I will learn more English obviously. But, at the end it was like something else, I couldn't understand and I failed very quickly. (Busi, 29, female)*

*Well, I can tell you this in my township, there are no schools that teach in English. The English schools are always this side of town, Claremont, Mitchell's Plain. So, that on its own means you have to travel. So, it has its own costs. Plus you have to pay schools. It's not really inclusive enough. (Lunga, 25, male)*

The participants' narratives illustrate a larger societal concern. The education model that subsisted after the end of Apartheid continues to have a poorer quality of the education in townships and rural areas compared with areas that have what was previously known as model C schools. This is due to the lack of resources, a high student to teacher ratio, and low investment and funding for schools in townships and rural areas, a framework inherited from Apartheid (Crapanzano, 1985).

If an isiXhosa learner attended school in a township or rural area, the language of instruction was most likely isiXhosa or Afrikaans.

Even if a learner had the means or opportunity to attend a school with more resources outside their home community or a specialised school such as art school, most schools did not offer isiXhosa as the main medium of instruction or even as a second language, according to participants' experiences. As a result, learners have limited agency in the main language of instruction regardless of the school they attended.

As illustrated by the participants' narratives, there was an understanding that schools which teach in English have a higher quality of education than isiXhosa schools. This is reflected at all levels of the educational system, including universities. Previously white-only universities continue to have more resources than historically black universities. This forces the ultimatum: does a learner choose a quality education or a school where they can freely and more easily express themselves and learn in isiXhosa?

#### **4.4.4. Effects of challenges on young people's sense of identity and cultural belonging**

The fourth objective of this study was to explore participants' understanding of the impact of language in education on their social identity and cultural belonging. First, the role of language in identity and culture was identified. Then, the perception of isiXhosa, English, and Afrikaans and their respective importance on identity within education was analysed. Finally, the participants considered their understanding and inclusion of cultures and languages within South African schools today.

##### ***4.4.4.1. Importance of language for identity and cultural belonging***

###### ***Identity and belonging***

Language as a major contributor to the formation of identity and social belonging was often mentioned by the participants. They refer to their memories and experiences being mostly in isiXhosa, and the language giving them the ability to make connection with other Xhosa people:

*I think the language you speak as part of your identity. I think people make sense of identity through other people I don't think you can make sense of yourself outside of other people. There's a sense of belonging or connection when it's the same language, if you speak a similar language to other people you feel it more (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*It relates to my experiences, my culture, my home life. It's first thing that I interacted with in terms of words, so a lot of my memories, a lot of my culture a lot of my day to day experiences – a lot of what makes me is in my language (Amanda, 26, female)*

*It's basically who I am. Before anything you would want to ask about me, the first thing you would say is my name right? And surely if you are a person who does not speak my language you have to ask, what language is your name? And then that's where my identity. When I explain it I am also explaining part of myself because it will go back to I am Xhosa, I come from the household who originally comes from the Eastern Cape and that is who I identify as (Lunga, 25, male)*

The participants' narratives demonstrate the importance isiXhosa had in shaping their identity. For example, a person's name(s), their early memories, etc. are often closely aligned with their home language and highlight the importance of language in defining the sense of self and relative identity. Moreover, the participants expressed that the language affected their social identity and the social groups in which they belonged to, further impacting the formation of the self. These ideals concur with the work of Tajfel and Turner (1979), which explained how a membership to a social group plays a crucial role in the definition of the self.

### ***Shared values***

A second component are the values that isiXhosa speakers share. These values are expressed in the language, for example, how to address older adults. The values are core to maintaining social and cultural identity for generations:

*Because as I am Xhosa, I have to know that I am Xhosa. And, I deeply and I fully understand my values as a Xhosa speaking person (Alupheli, 23, female)*

*Language is part of my culture. It's because anyone who's a Xhosa speaking person uses or practices the same cultural values as mine (Sima, 21, female)*

*Because, I mean, Xhosa people in general just have such a rich culture. There's a lot about us, and the things we do, the way we live our lives, the way we speak to our elders, the way we speak to our friends. (Zandile, 29, female)*

The participants expressed language was a tool to share their values. From the names given to the way they address different groups of people, isiXhosa reflected values such as respect, morals, and faith; concepts central to identity and culture.

### ***Practice and expression of culture***

Lastly, the participants explained that language was at the centre of their culture, along with social traditions, food, etc. They explained that language was a crucial means to practice culture:

*Besides the communication factor, the tradition and the rituals that are performed. For example, I had to go for initiation in the mountains to now become a man according to the culture. And then the language you speak and the type of food you eat, the type of clothes we wear, the way we relate to one another. It is all under the umbrella which is culture and then the language is a part of it (Lunga, 25, male)*

*That's my home language, how my parents communicated to me. So, if anyone was going to celebrate or have a special moment, they would use the language to sing songs. So, there's almost nothing we do culturally that does not involve our language (Sibahle, 29, female)*

Most of the participants' interviews emphasised isiXhosa was at the core of Xhosa culture, because the rituals, practices, songs, food, and other traditions all involve the language. Many explained that it is difficult and “not the same” to practice their culture in language other than isiXhosa. In addition to being part of people's identity, the language is an expression of the culture itself. This concurs with the social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which stated that norms and practices are part of processes of social categorisation and social identification, which are needed for individuals to define and conform to a social group.

#### ***4.4.4.2. Identity and perception of isiXhosa, English, and Afrikaans***

##### ***Perception***

The participants were asked about their own perception of their home language, isiXhosa, as well as English and Afrikaans, and how their education has affected this perception. Most of them explained that after having English, sometimes Afrikaans, as a main medium of instruction, they tended to look down on isiXhosa:

*A lot of people that learn English, they tend to think of Xhosa as lesser. So it ends up being a problem because people end up looking down on their languages (Asanda, 25, male)*

*I think status. There is an assumption that you are better or there is an assumption that you think you're better. I had learned in school and in society in general that I am superior cause I can speak English well and I began to look down on my own language, and I had to unlearn that (Amanda, 26, female).*

When exploring how English is perceived by young isiXhosa speakers, participants mentioned its colonial history and the way it was enforced on people in the country. Additionally, participants expressed that English had become the common language for them when outside Xhosa communities:

*I guess it's different because the histories between a person whose first language is English and the person whose second language is English is the differences in how they learned, or how they got introduced to English. So I would speak it from a secondary language type of person and then they will obviously know a bit more than me, or speak much better than me (Asanda, 25, male)*

*It's strange... You come back with the language of the oppressor. You come up with a language that has so many meanings and you come with a certain kind of power (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*The way that people treat someone who has been at university and speaks better English is quite different. They treat you like you have unlocked the keys to the world or something (Lunga, 25, male)*

*We all grew up together in the same schools in the same systems. As friends, there wasn't any challenges in that way because if I'm speaking English then my friends would also be speaking English. The community is mostly Tswana, but I have a friend who speaks ShiVenda, or I have a friend who speaks SeSotho and all of that. So, we can't pretend like we're on TV you know how on TV everyone doesn't speak Zulu but they understand each other. Life doesn't work that way, we all end up speaking English. You know, so, that's how it's been (Zandile, 29, female)*

Finally, when asked about their perception of Afrikaans, the majority of the participants stated that the oppressive history of the language must be more acknowledged and its relevance in education should be reconsidered:

*Luckily I haven't had to do that. When I had to be taught in Afrikaans in high school, I refused to, and we as a group of students fought to be taught in English, rather than Afrikaans. Because Afrikaans is not a medium of instruction everywhere. And plus, it has history rooted in Apartheid, and that kind of forcefulness towards people to learn Afrikaans, as seen quite negatively. (Asanda, 25, male)*

*If Afrikaans is used in education as a medium of teaching, these schools are probably shit. Probably shouldn't go to them. They just speak their language that has a very oppressive history. That's it. Their language has a lot of legacy and that is hard to shake. And I think even as Afrikaans speakers they can and should acknowledge that whether or not it forms part of the identity, I think they can also recognize that it has a very oppressive history. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

From the previous narratives, it is evident that language in education affects young people's perception of their home language. The imperial and colonial background of English and Afrikaans and the authoritarian way isiXhosa speakers were introduced to them cannot be ignored. However, unlike English, the participants mentioned Afrikaans is not a language used internationally. They believe that the Apartheid history of Afrikaans should be further recognised and acknowledged, and it should not be forced upon young people. Therefore, most participants refused or wish they had refused to learn it in school.

In contrast, the participants all transitioned to English during their educational tenure and they expressed perceiving English as being the "better" language. Furthermore, when they received their education in English, the notion of it being "better" was often reinforced with the better treatment that they received from peers, teachers, communities, and employers compared with when they spoke isiXhosa. The power that is associated with English can be internalised and catalyse questions around identity and social interactions. The majority of the participants explained that it was not just simply a matter of communication, but the status that came with speaking a particular language.

This relates to social comparison processes, mentioned in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The comparisons of the in-group (isiXhosa speakers) and the out-group (English speakers) can lead to questions around identity, especially when the out-group is more favourable than the in-group in society. This is seen in the inherited idea that African languages are inferior to the language of colonisers, and the connection between English and higher quality education explored in chapter 4.4.3.3. Importantly, the link between isiXhosa and lower quality schools perpetuates prejudice towards African languages in South Africa. Considering the importance of language in youth identity, a conflict arises between the social and cultural importance of isiXhosa for them as individuals and their negative perception of it.

The participants explained that they used English as a common ground to communicate. Although useful internationally, being able to switch to English when interacting with others is only needed in South Africa because African languages are rarely taught to non-native African speakers in schools. If isiXhosa (and/or other African languages) was taught in schools to English or Afrikaans speakers, isiXhosa could also be used as a common language.

### *Family perception of language*

Looking at the opinion of the participants' families, the majority identified having challenges with their relatives after they began to attend school in English. First, their fluency and ability to communicate in isiXhosa with their families was challenged. Many participants explained that the negative reaction of their family and community towards their exposure to English had affected their feelings and sense of belonging:

*I think there is some sort of misunderstanding for sure. Although language is just a means of communication, you do speak a different culture to your family. In terms of belonging that can mess you up. It would mess it up in terms of I constantly feel misunderstood in my family. Because of the way in which I express myself. I think language can be perceived as a big thing. So, when you speak it, it makes me feel othered in my family. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*Sometimes you adapt too much into the English, you tend to forget your mother tongue. Some of the families are too strict right, they think you forgot your mother tongue now that you attended too much in English. like you're adapting too much. It makes me feel odd. Because, you sent me to an English school, what are we expecting? (Zimkhitha, 19, female)*

Second, most of the participants stated that since isiXhosa was crucial to practice culture, they became excluded or judged by their families and communities:

*I normally see like these kids that go to these English schools, you would say she is a white person, and when you see their faces you're like oh okay, it is actually a black person. But, it does also affect them like when they go to the Eastern Cape, they have to speak Xhosa. And then like people are looking at them like, hey this child they don't know Xhosa, like you don't know your culture. You can't be like Xhosa and doing your Xhosa traditional things and you speaking English. So you need to know both. (Busi, 29, female)*

Participants expressed that how they speak English or Afrikaans, including their fluency and accent, came with a lot of assumptions and ideas about their class and social status.

*When you are coming from another place. Like when you are coming from like Eastern Cape to Western Cape. They look like you don't know how to speak English, they take you for granted and they look down on you. We speak at home a lot to exercise our tongue to make it soft, to learn how to communicate like a white person because they only speak English or Afrikaans (Olwethu, 23, female).*

*I think the groups are changing, like it is just English speakers versus not. It's like white English speakers versus black English speakers, black middle-class English speakers versus poorly English speaking. Or they are people who are just completely bilingual and who can go in between worlds. And people are perceived differently. sometimes I also like to surprise with my boogy English. It's a game. People like, my mom, she was*

*speaking very extra. But it is because English is a performance. So even if I speak the booggiest English, it doesn't always have to say something about me other than the fact that I'm trying to get this person to hear me and the only the way that they hear me is if I speak this particular kind of English (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

These narratives are crucial examples to illustrate the impact of language in education on young people's social interactions and identity regarding their families and communities. While many participants were sent by their parents to an English school, they also often suffered backlash. Their fluency in isiXhosa was challenged, and the increased miscommunications as a result of exposure to more than one language and the cultural expectations from their families were issues, they faced. Many participants expressed the feeling of being othered by their family, which concurs with social identity theory that emphasised the complexity of having multiple social identities. When people adopt the norms of different groups, their different social identities might be perceived as incompatible, and they can feel excluded from certain groups where they previously belonged (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). For example, the participants explained how isiXhosa was needed to practice culture and therefore without fluency, they can be excluded. When participants attended English schools, they were sometimes referred to as "coconuts"; a slang term with a negative connotation that suggests a person of colour has completely embraced the cultural identity of white people and lost their own cultural heritage ("white on the inside, and brown on the outside").

The participants' narratives demonstrate the multifaceted nature of how English is perceived in South Africa. English is tied to the notion of class and status. Given English speaking schools were historically wealthier than isiXhosa schools (Crapanzano, 1985), someone speaking English is often seen as wealthier. Consequently, the participants explained that the way they speak English was a "performance", for which some practiced at home, with the aim of speaking a "bougie" (slang term for bourgeoisie or upper class) or "white" English. Moreover, most of the participants agreed with the fact that speaking "middle to upper-class English" allowed them to be more recognised and heard by others.

### ***Perception from non-isiXhosa speakers***

A final perception of isiXhosa that was explained by the participants is the perception of isiXhosa by non-isiXhosa speakers. The participants argued that in South Africa, isiXhosa is seen as a language that is "not serious" and "not suitable for education and academics".

*Because African languages are normally not the medium of instruction that everyone speaks, they're not used in the workplace, they're not used at university. People don't think they are serious languages. (Asanda, 25, male)*

*Other kids think your own language is shit. And that it's like not as good as theirs because English or Afrikaans is the one that is used at school, is the language of education, of like success and yours is just like a play play language like it's not one of the good ones, you know, not the ones that are necessary. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

How isiXhosa was perceived was impacted by the perception by non-isiXhosa speakers. The colonial and Apartheid mindset that African languages are not being suitable for academia, research, the labour market, or the economy affects young people in the country. As explained by Soudien's work (2012), the idea that African languages are not suitable for education are perpetuated by the education system itself. The participants' experiences of being discriminated or undermined because of their home language affected their self-esteem, sense of self, and perpetuated imposter syndrome. This is particularly true in school settings, where people are part of a social group and the larger educational system context, that is especially discriminatory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

#### **4.4.4.3. English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans in educational context**

##### ***Measure of intelligence and trust***

When asked about the role of languages within education, the majority of participants referred to the bias against isiXhosa and for English and Afrikaans, perpetuated by the educational system. The prejudice of English perceived as a measure of intelligence and trust was mentioned repeatedly:

*I went to high school that was 70% black learners and 90% maybe 98% white teachers and they constantly were like harassing us for not speaking English all the time. I think teachers are like prejudice to people who speak the language that they speak and then English becomes also a measure of intelligence (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*I think my, my lectures trust me with a lot. They trust me a lot more than they do other black people in my classroom. Maybe it's because I understand what they're saying, there isn't a lot of conflict because if I speak they get it if they speak I get it, which is something that I noticed was not the same with other with other students who are black, in the same class. It's always a challenge. (Zandile, 29, female)*

*And then, it shouldn't be based on how well you can articulate yourself in English, but if you can articulate yourself in your home language. You will not be judged according to how you can speak English, because sometimes that's mistaken for low IQ, which is very incorrect or inaccurate because someone can be very smart because I can communicate*

*my intelligence with you in your language doesn't mean I'm not smart at all (Sibahle, 29, female)*

*It's difficult to say, because, because the student is always forced to speak English. Yes. So, you can't, you can't blame the student for not trying. So, the only person who isn't trying is then the lecturer who can't even say two words in Xhosa. But even if the student is the one who isn't trying. You can't blame them (Alupheli, 23, female)*

The narratives illustrate how biased opinions and prejudice about languages influenced young people's education. The participants argued that while English was their second or third language, it was too often expected from them to be fluent and have a "white accent". The idea of isiXhosa speakers being less intelligence and less trustworthy depending on how articulate they were in English was and often still is perpetuated by teachers and school administrators. As mentioned earlier, the perceptions of language in South Africa showcase isiXhosa as having less value than English or Afrikaans.

However, in the educational setting, teachers and the school's policy can play an important role in how isiXhosa speakers are treated, which can influence their identity and self-esteem. The fact that certain schools have a large cohort of white teachers, whom most of the time do not speak isiXhosa, can also contribute to the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination. As Soudien (2012) explained, the education system in South Africa suffers from the legacy of Apartheid, where school policies and teachers are major actors in the reproduction of discrimination.

### ***Assimilation***

Another crucial factor of the role of languages in education in South Africa is assimilation. Assimilation refers to the process of adopting the values, behaviours, beliefs, and norms of another group, often the dominant group. The participants explained how their education was filled with the need to assimilate, often forced upon them by the school, and how it affected their idea of self and social identity:

*I didn't know when coming to boarding school. But they forced to speak English we were not allowed to speak our languages even at school. The less you sound "black", whatever that sounds like, to the white speaker, the better it is for you. So if you have to speak English not with the black accent, you can speak it in any other accent, like speaking with a French accent is sexy, an Italian accent is sexy, but just don't speak it with your black accent because that's not sexy, and that's not desirable. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

The participants also mentioned the difference in treatment between Afrikaans, English, and isiXhosa speakers within their schools:

*They will always be like ‘Please speak English’. It’s always like, obviously they will judge you, if you like speak your language with your friends or something like that. They will always be like “Please speak English, this is an English school”, but they were just speaking Afrikaans. Why would you want us not to speak Xhosa when other kids are speaking their language? And, like they are in an English class speaking Afrikaans, even if that’s not an Afrikaans class. And then they were like, “we don’t have Xhosa in this school so don’t speak Xhosa” (Busi, 29, female)*

*Also like in school, they impress upon us Africans to learn English and Afrikaans but, English speakers, and Afrikaans speakers, they don’t know Xhosa. I feel like it’s only a one way. The effort is not the same in teaching them, and it’s very important that they learn African languages as well (Sibahle, 29, female)*

Moreover, the values and cultural norms that have to be learnt and assimilated by the participants created a separation between them, and their families and isiXhosa speaking friends:

*It was just hard like cause English has a weight to it that can be attached to your values. Because with language comes culture. So, there are things that I have learnt in English but cannot automatically transfer it to my culture. I have had to assimilate that over time. Cause you develop a different culture. Okay for me personally, I developed a different culture cause I had to immersed myself in the culture that I was trying to learn in. And so, you become separate from your peers. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*I think it’s put me at an advantage but not the one that I’m proud of. Because of how people judge me because of my institutional history. So, if I go into a group of people who are predominantly white or English speaking, and they’ll ask me about my education history, where did I go to school and then if I tell them the name of my school then it’s like, oh, that’s a English speaking school, and then they’ll treat me differently. It’s almost as if I get a key to a different kind of door or a different section of the party that other people don’t get (Zandile, 29, female)*

These examples show how assimilation was forced upon Xhosa youth, negatively affecting their lives. As the participants described, assimilation can take several forms. The first negative experience the participants shared was being forced to constantly speak a different language in school, both in and outside of the classroom, and then being reprimanded when they spoke their home language. Having to deny isiXhosa throughout most of their childhood when it represented such an important part of their identity can have a profound impact on the development of youth’s social identity, including their perception of self and social interactions with different social groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Adding to this is the fact that their accent when speaking English had to be the “least black possible”, because it was deemed undesirable or unprofessional.

Another example of enforced assimilation described by the participants was the different treatment between isiXhosa and Afrikaans speakers in English schools. Afrikaans speakers were allowed to speak their home language whereas isiXhosa learners were not. This concurs with Soudien (2012), who argued that success and social mobility in South Africa is often tied with black learners being expected to assimilate with white culture, norms, and language. Moreover, the fact that most African language speakers have to learn English and Afrikaans, while English and Afrikaans speakers often do not need to learn an African language, demonstrates that language equity has not been achieved in South Africa as yet.

Finally, the participants referred to the impact assimilation had on their own cultural identity, and how they were then perceived by isiXhosa and non-isiXhosa speakers. Having to assimilate a language also led to assimilating the culture, values, and status attributed to that particular language. The non-isiXhosa language they learned was not transferable or compatible with their Xhosa cultural identity, especially during childhood and adolescence when self-identity is formed. Many young people found themselves not fitting in anywhere, having confused cultural identities and feeling separated or othered, relating to the identity challenges when navigating multiple social groups mentioned in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The way other people treat them and interact with them knowing that they attended an English school reinforces this otherness: “too English to be Xhosa, too Xhosa to be English”.

### ***Mental health***

When asked about the effect language in education had on their mental health, most of the participants expressed feeling insecure, overwhelmed, ashamed, and depressed:

*It definitely changes people's identities, from a very young age, if you grew up speaking Xhosa, and you go into school that has English or Afrikaans as a medium of instruction that changes your identity in a way to suit the context, that can be overwhelming and depressing on a long term (Asanda, 25, male).*

*Like at school like some people like make fun of them because they can't speak English or Afrikaans and that becomes like, it's depressing and some don't want to come to school anymore because they feel like they are not accepted at school and all of that (Noluthi, 18, female)*

The narratives demonstrated how youth's mental health was threatened by the current context of languages in education. They explained having to adapt and change their identities in order to fit the context, because their school didn't allow for their Xhosa identity to be recognised or be "good enough". Along with the insecurities that come with having to learn English or Afrikaans and being judged based on their fluency and accent, the issue of language in education placed a strain on young, Xhosa people's mental health. This follows Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory on the importance of social groups for people's well-being and identity formation. Thus, feeling excluded from one's in-group, or having one's in-group be discriminated against can compromise one's social identity and mental well-being.

#### **4.4.4.7. School's understanding of cultures**

When asked about the schools' understanding of the different cultures in South Africa, the participants argued that there has been an effort to be more inclusive and understanding during the past few years:

*I think it's changing. I think that the desire to be inclusive and all of the arguments that many people thought about including the fall of 2015 (referring to the fees must fall movement) all of those are like kind of making waves and I can only hope that the process is going to be seen through and that it's not gonna be just kind of left along the way. Yeah, I think it's good. when I grew up, it was very exclusive. I think there is a desire to be more inclusive. there's an investment in trying to be inclusive. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*I think the system in itself tries. I think each environment goes with whatever is dominant or with whatever is the majority, and in Cape Town the English culture is considered more important. (Amanda, 26, female)*

However, they explained that racism and discrimination were still deeply rooted in the education system, particularly in regard to language, and that schools could do more to be anti-racist and discriminatory:

*I don't think schools understand the impact they have. Cause you have to learn whatever. I don't know it is supposed to be easy to learn and to go to school. And, like you're different and people make you understand that you are different. But we are in South Africa; we are South Africans. So, I don't understand why we still have that problem. When you go to other countries, children have school in their own language. You know? (Busi, 29, female)*

*We still need to move towards integrating African languages into our educational system to learning schools, and the whole environment of education as a whole. It just needs to be normal, that people can walk into a lecture hall and get their lecture in Tsonga (Zandile, 29, female)*

*Some teachers were racist, so you'd go home and tell your parents, your parents wouldn't encourage confronting teachers because all they wanted was you to get the education that they never had (Sibahle, 29, female)*

These narratives highlight that education in South Africa is becoming more inclusive of African cultures and languages. This can be partly attributed to government efforts and school policy, as well as individuals, school administrators, and teachers who advocate and practice inclusion in education. The role of students in fighting discrimination should not be ignored. Young people that protested during the “Soweto Uprising” in 1976 or 40 years later in the “Fees Must Fall” movement, were advocating for justice and they contributed deeply to the progress that we see today. However, as the participants explained, many language barriers persist. In education, the system is still deeply rooted in a colonial mindset where what is considered academic or used as a measure of intelligence and success still excludes African-language speakers. The participants’ experiences are testimonies of how this can affect young people’s journey through their education, social identity, and post-education opportunities.

#### **4.4.5 How young people suggest overcoming language challenges in education in South Africa.**

The fifth and final objective of this research was to explore young people’s recommendations on how to overcome language barriers and challenges in the South African educational system. Their answers revolved around having agency regarding the main language of instruction, languages permitted to be spoken in schools, additional languages taught, the lack of language-skilled teachers, and the need to decolonise the curriculum and perception of African languages.

##### ***4.4.5.1. Enhancement of agency***

When asked about agency in the choice of languages in education, most of the participants expressed the need to create choices and options so children and their parents can choose the main language of learning. This means including isiXhosa and other African languages in more schools, as well as non-South African languages, such as French, Spanish, Mandarin, Swahili etc.

*It would be so great to choose. I want my boys to learn Xhosa. They like English so much, but we are Xhosa, we will always be Xhosa and it's not gonna change. So, I want them to learn Xhosa. (Busi, 29, female)*

*They mustn't choose for you. That's the problem. You have to choose yourself. You know which language you know best. (Olwethu, 23, female)*

*The other day, I was talking to young children who are like 10 years old and I asked them what class do they have in the morning, they said "my first lesson was Afrikaans". I'm like this is a black child in 2020. I don't understand why black children in 2020 still have to attend Afrikaans classes when Afrikaans children don't attend any African language class, ever. So, it's just, it's weird that we can't choose, it has to change. (Zandile, 29, female)*

*Having agency would add on to the number of languages people can speak, will broaden their horizons in terms of understanding more people in the context. And, yeah, we'll make more connections. (Asanda, 25, male)*

These narratives show the importance of having the right to choose the main language of instruction, and additional languages as well. Most of the participants explained how learning both English and isiXhosa was important for them; to keep their roots but also to have better opportunities later in life. They added that they would like African languages to be more visible in the curriculum and offered more often as an option in all schools in the country, for both black African and non-black African learners. Knowing both English or Afrikaans as well as an African language could enhance communication and understanding between black African and non-black African learners. Finally, participants advocated for the option to choose languages that are not South African, such as French, Swahili, Mandarin, Spanish, etc. to open international opportunities for them in the future.

#### **4.4.5.2. Informed teachers**

Other improvements suggested by the participants were for schools to have more teachers that are formally qualified to teach languages and who are multilingual themselves, and can therefore be empathetic to the challenges learners face when learning in another language:

*Introducing teachers who are multilingual, not just exclusively white, so that in their teaching process, they're able to accommodate people who don't speak the same language. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*I know we have to articulate ourselves well to be academically competitive, but to be more understanding in marking. Maybe like in the first years of marking be more lenient on non-English speakers, just to give them confidence. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*Inclusivity, inclusivity, inclusivity, especially in terms of language. Hence, I was saying maybe more native language speaking lecturers. I think people relate more to whom they understand or who understands them. I think the more we see the faces and the people we relate to in terms of language, it doesn't have to be race, I think that could play a huge role in the year end results of students, especially in first year. (Lunga, 25, male)*

These narratives show how important teachers are in overcoming language challenges in the educational system. The importance of having teachers that are informed and trained to teach languages, and specifically to teach to students who have a different first language, is deeply relevant to the current education system. Having teachers that had to learn different languages themselves can help them be more understanding and empathetic of the challenges that students face in communication, writing, understanding, identity, etc. Furthermore, having teachers that have basic communication skills in different languages, especially in African languages, can enhance communication and help bridge the language divide between English, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and other language speakers.

#### **4.5.3. Decolonising languages in education**

Finally, the participants emphasised the need to keep decolonising languages in education by fully incorporating African languages in the educational system, in order to be more inclusive and advance language equity in South Africa:

*I expect universities to decolonise languages. By that I mean to include languages in the processes of creation of the curriculum, as well as to develop African languages that exist in the country by investing in them. I want African languages to be as dominant in the country as European or foreign languages are. (Bulelwa, 24, female)*

*More research, more integration. I think university is a great place to shape minds and to highlight the importance of your own language and culture. People already know the importance of English, so it is time to show the importance and relevance of our indigenous languages. (Amanda, 26, female)*

*It is about more than just allowing black children to be free, because I think a lot of black people are not free to talk and living with such little freedom. Having to speak English in a country where it is your home, it doesn't make sense. In other places of the world nobody's forced to speak English in their own home. But here people are just expecting us to learn their languages. (Zandile, 29, female)*

*A solution could be to make use of the technology that is arising, you know there are lecture videos now. Maybe have subtitles in the language of your choice. Maybe that could help a lot (Lunga, 25, male)*

These narratives demonstrate the need to decolonise education and a potential strategy. Languages policies in education are still based on colonial and Apartheid laws, and readdressing this is necessary to advance language and cultural equity. The participants argued that investing and developing African languages are crucial to recognise their value in society and in academia. This would allow people to use their home language in the public sphere, education, and workplace, having the same freedom that English speakers have. A relevant tool to promote inclusion and communication is to have schools and universities use technology to provide students with subtitles, translations, and resources in non-colonial languages.

#### **4.5. CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented the main findings of this study. It reflected the perceptions and experiences of the participants regarding challenges of languages in education and gave an idea of the impact that they can have in young people's lives. The following chapter will discuss the main conclusions and will put forward recommendations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines the main conclusions of the study, based on the research objectives and study findings. It is followed by a series of recommendations regarding what can be done to support isiXhosa speakers' performance in educational settings, opportunities during and post educational training, and identity formation. The study aimed to understand the impact of language in education, in the multilingual environment that is Cape Town, South Africa. The legacy of colonisation and Apartheid on the perception of African languages persists and impacts young people navigating the educational system. It was crucial to gain insights from isiXhosa speaking youth reflecting on their complex experiences of languages throughout their educational journey. The conclusions and recommendations are drawn from the participants experiences linked with the theoretical framework of Sen's capability approach (1999), Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1979), and Soudien's understanding of language in education from his book "Realising the Dream" (2012).

### **5.2. MAIN CONCLUSIONS**

#### **5.2.1. Objective 1: explore the perceived language challenges faced by isiXhosa speaking youth as they navigate the educational system.**

Study findings indicated that the participants faced various language challenges, but that they differed depending on the age at which they transitioned to English as the main medium of instruction. When they had English as a main medium of instruction beginning in primary school, the main challenges were: the lack of support, difficulty in understanding the teacher and learning material, the negative perception of isiXhosa in the school, and navigating relationship and interactions with other learners. When they transitioned to English as the main medium of instruction only in high school or tertiary education after receiving an education in isiXhosa, the main challenges mentioned by the participants were: understanding the examination system in English, the lack of educational opportunities, and the impact on their academic performance. These challenges and their impact on learners' education, economic and social opportunities, and identity formation were further explored under objectives two, three, and four.

### **5.2.2. Objective 2: understand how the perceived language challenges affect isiXhosa speaking youths' educational journey.**

The chapter was divided into three sections based on the participants' main language of instruction. Participants that had English as a main medium of instruction saw their academic performance decline, mostly because learners struggled to understand the teacher and learning material. The process of translating the materials and teaching from English into their home language was tiring and time-consuming, which led to many of them falling behind in classwork. As a result, they were deprived of the opportunities to showcase their full capabilities and potential in comparison with native English speakers. However, participants argued that after a few years of learning in English, communication with non-isiXhosa speakers became easier, and highlighted the versatility given English is the common language used in the country and internationally.

Participants that had isiXhosa as the main medium of instruction felt that they had a better and deeper understanding of their studies because they could focus solely on the content and not additional translation. It was a supportive learning environment and language was a facilitating tool rather than a barrier. However, the final examinations in high school being only available in English placed the participants at a disadvantage, and their navigating mainly English-speaking spaces, especially tertiary education or the labour market, was challenging.

Participants that had Afrikaans as the main medium of instruction also faced language challenges with regards to understanding the educational material and academic performance. Similar to English, the isiXhosa speaking learners had to learn another language while still learning the content taught in class. However, participants explained that they had little motivation to learn Afrikaans because of its colonial history and the lack of use in their daily lives.

### **5.2.3. Objective 3: determine how isiXhosa speaking youth perceive the relationships between language in education, inequality of opportunity, and social exclusion.**

Looking at academic opportunities and social exclusion throughout the educational system, the participants identified clear inequalities and capability deprivations.

Participants mentioned that transitioning to using English at a younger schooling age was easier because the environment was less competitive than in high school or university, with more time and opportunity to become fluent in English. On the other hand, participants also struggled to communicate and therefore showcase their capabilities fully, which put their academic performance at risk.

The participants also explained that learning English gave them more opportunities after their education. They felt that English is seen as a key to success and is still used as a measure of one's intelligence and capability. Universities and most skilled positions in the job market require a degree of fluency in English, thus, they identified the need to be well versed in English as crucial to social and economic advancement. Without fluency in English, one risks being academically, financially, and socially excluded in South Africa.

They associated this realisation with how the current South African education system is built. They denounced the lack of investment from the government in African languages and the lack of learning material in isiXhosa. The language is not being updated and new words are not being translated, which forces the use of English or Afrikaans instead. Investing in African and indigenous languages is a must to decolonise education. The participants also highlighted that the educational system was created to benefit the white and wealthy populations. While the education system is desegregated through policy, it is not in practice. The system is inclusionary of black people who have assimilated with the English language and remains exclusionary to black people with African accents or who only speak African languages. Finally, the participants questioned the lack of choice in their education. Previously Model-C schools inherited Apartheid's privileges and remain the more equipped and resourceful schools but are still only English or Afrikaans speaking. Participants had to choose between education in their home language, with these schools often having less resources, teachers, and materials, or higher quality education but in another language.

#### **5.2.4. Objective 4: establish how the perceived language challenges in education affect isiXhosa speaking youths' sense of identity and cultural belonging.**

The participants emphasized the role of language in their social and cultural identity. IsiXhosa allowed them to connect with one another, share similar values and practices, and express their culture.

The impact of education on participants' perception of their home language was profound. Because historically colonial languages still hold power in the public sphere, like the economy or education, participants explained that their experiences in school made them think of isiXhosa as less valuable than English or Afrikaans. Moreover, they were often forbidden to speak isiXhosa with one another in class and during breaks by teachers and administrative schooling staff, the decline in their academic performance affected their self-esteem, and the teachers' lack of understanding made them feel excluded.

Speaking and learning in a non-isiXhosa language also affected the participants' relationships with their families and community. Many felt excluded or othered when returning home, because their isiXhosa was not as good as before and they learnt to speak colonial languages. They felt a lot of judgment and assumptions regarding their status, class, and character, based solely on language. Navigating both English and isiXhosa worlds disrupted their social identity and sense of cultural belonging, which forced them to balance multiple identities, accents, and behaviours depending on the language or their environment.

Finally, participants explained they felt that English and Afrikaans speakers see isiXhosa as a language not suitable for education, and the language was described as unprofessional and not serious. This contributed to how participants felt about their home language and their difference in treatment when they speak English, Afrikaans, or isiXhosa.

#### **5.2.5. Objective 5: explore how young people recommend addressing language challenges in education.**

The participants, reflecting on their experiences of language challenges when navigating the educational system, provided several recommendations to address the language challenges faced by isiXhosa and other African speaking learners. The first recommendation was to facilitate learners' agency by allowing them to choose their medium of instruction as well as their second language. For that, schools would be required to at least offer South African languages, and eventually add international languages to their curriculum. The second recommendation was to ensure that teachers are fully trained and equipped to teach languages. They emphasised the need to inform the teachers of language challenges non-English or Afrikaans youth face and how best to support them.

Finally, the participants argued that decolonising education is a critical process to reducing discrimination and promote inclusion within schools. They suggested to reform language policies to include African and indigenous languages, as well as ensure that the policies are practiced and enforced in schools. They also suggested the use of technology as a means to provide translations of the class content and resources in different languages, or subtitles under recorded lessons.

### **5.3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are suggested based on the conclusions above, focusing on the role that young people, schools, researchers, policymakers, and the government can play in acknowledging and overcoming the challenges youth face in regard to language barriers.

#### **5.3.1. Language challenges and academic performance**

Looking at academic performance, schools and governments must provide tools and resources to support learners' understanding, communication, and assessments, regardless of the main language of instruction. For instance, by creating learning material available in multiple languages, as well as providing tools to help with translation such as multilingual dictionaries or online translators. Schools can also offer extra lessons or language tutors for learners that are transitioning from isiXhosa to English or Afrikaans, to help them learning the language outside of their usual classes. The costs of these resources would be an investment in the young African language speaking generation and could considerably improve the current performance of learners in South Africa.

Government must commit to include language barriers awareness and resources in the teachers' training. This would help teachers to accommodate learners with different first languages, to give them support throughout their transition to a new language, and to assess them with an understanding of the language challenges that face. Universities could also enforce languages as part of the teachers' curriculum, ensuring that teachers have at least a basic level in a colonial language and an African language.

National exams and grading systems also must be updated to ensure equality amongst all learners. Schools and government must provide primary and secondary school exams in different languages, to offer the opportunity to learners to choose their language of assessment.

### **5.3.2. Language challenges and economic opportunities and social exclusion**

To address the inequality of economic opportunities and social exclusion, language requirements to access tertiary institutions and the labour market must be changed. English needs to be recognised as a tool for communication that can be improved rather than criteria for judging intelligence, abilities, or professional skills. The negative perceptions of African languages and accents must be shifted away from colonial beliefs. This process of transformation is long and on-going. Nevertheless, government and schools must set an example by using all official languages equally in their communication and daily activities: African languages must be allowed to be spoken in English and Afrikaans schools and governmental owned agencies must encourage the use of different languages in the workplace. Government must also support individual agency in choosing the language of instruction in institutions without having to sacrifice quality education by providing Xhosa schools with more resources and by encouraging schools to offer African language in their curriculum. Finally, investment in African languages needs to be prioritised on the national agenda, including updating and encouraging the use of African and indigenous languages in the country.

These constant efforts would contribute to the decolonisation of the education system and the labour force, while providing more opportunities to African-language speakers in South Africa.

### **5.3.3. Language challenges and identity formation**

When looking at recommendations regarding the impact language barriers have on identity formation, the negative assumptions and prejudice associated with African languages including isiXhosa must be addressed and deconstructed. This can be achieved by promoting African languages in the public sphere. For example, isiXhosa can be offered as an additional language in schools and teachers can learn basics isiXhosa to better communicate with learners. Finally, as this study demonstrated, language challenges impact heavily isiXhosa youth throughout their education and it pointed the need for deeper and larger research on this topic.

These recommendations can be achieved through governmental policies, provincial regulations, social development programmes, academic research, and information and advocacy for teachers, young people, communities, and the private sector.

#### **5.4. CONCLUSION**

This study used a capability approach to explore the interactions between languages and academic and professional opportunities, social exclusion, and identity formation among isiXhosa speaking youth in Cape Town, South Africa. It used existing literature and theoretical concepts as a framework to understand challenges youth face with regards to language in schools, and the consequences post-education. The research aimed to give a voice to the youth, acknowledge their experiences, and advocate for more language inclusion and justice in education in South Africa.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Schedule

#### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE:

#### A Capability Approach to Understanding the Intersections Between Language, Educational Opportunities, and Identity in South Africa: A Xhosa Speaking Youth Perspective.

#### INTRODUCTION

- My name is Océane Gonthier I am conducting research on the Intersections Between Language, Educational Opportunities, and Identity in South Africa: A Xhosa Speaking Youth Perspective.
- Thank the participant for participation
- Purpose of research
- Discussion on ethical considerations:
  - voluntary participation
  - audio recording of the interview
  - anonymity and confidentiality
  - Access to findings
  - Clarification on that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ responses
  - Estimated time frame of interview

#### FIRST SECTION

##### a) DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. What is the pseudo you would like to use?
2. How old are you?
3. How do you identify in terms of gender?
4. How do you identify in terms of race?
5. What do you consider as your first language/most comfortable one?
6. Where did you learn it?
7. What other languages do you speak and how fluent are you?
8. Where did you learn them?

##### b) HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

1. Where do you live?
2. Since when?
3. Who do you live with in your household?
4. How long have you lived with these people?
5. How many people work in the household?
6. How many people get an income? Do you get an income?
7. How many people in the household depend on you financially? (Mention their ages)
8. What is your role in the household?
9. What are the languages spoken in your current household? Why?

##### c) COMMUNITY BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Where did you grow up?
2. What are the main languages spoken in the community?

**d) EDUCATION INFORMATION**

1. Are you currently in education?
2. If yes, what do you study?
  - a. Where/at which school?
  - b. What is the current language of your study?
  - c. What were the primary languages in your previous schools?
3. If no, how far did you go in school?
  - a. What did you study?
  - b. Where/at which school?
  - c. What were the languages used in the school?
4. What stopped you from getting further education?
5. Has anything changed today to make it possible for you to continue with school?
  - a. If yes, what has changed?
  - b. If, No why not?
6. Would you like to continue with your education?
  - a. If yes, how far would you like to go?
  - b. Why is it important for you to continue with your education?
  - c. What has been your experience of trying to continue with your schooling?
7. If not interested in more schooling, why not?

**e) EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION**

1. Are you working?
  - a. If yes, Where?
  - b. What do you do?
  - c. Since when?
  - d. What is the language most spoken on your workplace?
2. If no, are you looking for a job?

**SECOND SECTION**

**1. What are the perceived challenges of language that young people face in education?**

- 1.1. Was your language of education different from your first language?
- 1.2. If yes, in/from which grades?
- 1.3. Was it also a second language for most of your classmates (part of the majority)?
- 1.4. When did you learn the main language used in school?
- 1.5. Did you have a separate class/course to learn it?
- 1.6. How did you find it?
- 1.7. What could be challenging regarding the language in education in your opinion?
- 1.8. What kind of challenges of language did you or your friends face (if any)?
- 1.9. Would you say that you learn languages easily?

**2. How do perceived linguistic challenges impact young people's education journey?**

- 2.1. How do you think that going to school in a different language has affected your education journey (results etc)?
- 2.2. How do you think that language has affected your education opportunities? How do you think it has advantaged/disadvantaged you in your education journey?
- 2.3. How do you think that languages can include or exclude someone from education?
- 2.4. What long term effects do you think can it have on young people?
- 2.5. Who does the current system benefit? and who doesn't it?
- 2.6. How do you think that having an education in your first language would have affected you and your peers?
- 2.7. What do you think about learners having the ability to choose their medium of learning?

**3. How do young people perceive the relationships between language in education, inequality of opportunity and exclusion?**

- 3.1. What do you understand when talking about exclusion and inequality of opportunity (give clarification if needed)?
- 3.2. Have you ever thought of a link between language, exclusion and opportunities?
  - If yes, what were your thoughts?
  - If no, now that we are halfway through the interview, do you think that there is a link?
- 3.3. How do you think that language in education impact young people's future, in education but also beyond it (expl. Employment, home)?
- 3.4. How do you think that language in education can reduce inequality?

**4. How do challenges of language in education affect young people's sense of social identity and cultural belonging?**

- 4.1. Do you think that the language you speak is part of your identity? And how?
- 4.2. How do you understand the link between language and culture?
- 4.3. How do you think that having to attend school in a different language affects young people's identity and relations with others?
  - With their peers
  - With their teachers/adults
  - At home/with family
- 4.4. How do you think that having to attend school in a different language affects young people's perception of their first language? And their ability to speak your first language (because not spoken all day)?
- 4.5. How do you feel when you have to speak English in an education context?
- 4.6. How do you feel when you interact with people that have English as a first language?
- 4.7. How do you feel when you have to speak Afrikaans in an education context?
- 4.8. How do you feel when you interact with people that have Afrikaans as a first language?
- 4.9. How do you think that the current South African education system is inclusive of different languages/cultures?
- 4.10. What is your opinion on teaching isiXhosa as a second or third language in schools?

**5. What are the strategies and solutions that young people recommend to overcome these challenges?**

- 5.1. Looking at your experience, what would you change in your education journey?
- 5.2. In your opinion, what kind of strategies and solutions could be put in place to improve the language situation in Cape Town?

- 5.2.1. From governments
- 5.2.2. From primary/junior/senior schools
- 5.2.3. From high schools
- 5.2.4. From universities
- 5.2.5. From communities/people
- 5.2.6. From NGOs and associations
- 5.3. Who you benefit from these changes?
- 5.4. How would the country benefit from these changes?
- 5.5. Would you like to add anything to this interview?

**Thank you for participating. Do you have any question?**

## Appendix B: Interview Consent Form



**University of Cape Town**  
**Department of Social Development**  
**<sup>1</sup>CONSENT FORM**

**TITLE OF PROJECT:**

A Capability Approach to Understanding the Intersections Between Language, Educational Opportunities, and Identity in South Africa: A Xhosa Speaking Youth Perspective.

**NAME OF PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER(S):**

Oceane Gonthier

**DEPARTMENT/RESEARCH GROUP:**

Social Development

**ADDRESS:**

University of Cape Town  
Private Bag  
Rondebosch  
7701

**TELEPHONE AND EMAIL:**

061 965 89 88 - oce.gonthier@hotmail.com

**PARTICIPANT'S INVOLVEMENT:**

- I agree to participate in this project.
- I have read this consent form and had the opportunity to ask questions about it.
- I agree to these results being used for education and research, on condition of my privacy being respected.
- I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project and that I can make the decision not to participate at any time.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

**Signature of person who sought consent:.....**

**Name of person who sought consent:**

**Date:.....**

<sup>1</sup>Based on the standard consent form of the British Patient database for research and training, [www.patsy.ac.uk/www/Consent.doc](http://www.patsy.ac.uk/www/Consent.doc).

## PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

**Name: Oceane Gonthier**

**Student Number: GNTOCE001**

**Course: SWK5001W**

I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and pretend that it is one's own.

I have used the ...*Harvard*...convention for citation and referencing. Each contribution to, and quotation in, this essay/report/project/...*minor dissertation*...from the work(s) of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

This essay/report/project/ ...*minor dissertation* ... is my own work.

I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.

**Signature:** \_\_\_ 

Signed by candidate
---------------------

**Date: 10.01.2021**