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Family language policy: Choices in isiXhosa families and implications for multilingual education

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Background: This study explores how family language policies (FLPs) in multilingual homes where isiXhosa is the primary language influence caregiver choices regarding children's language development and education.

Objectives: The study aims to give insight on how non-nuclear family structures in a selected sample of Western Cape families are associated with FLPs that embrace multilingualism, even while English is the official language of education in the schools parents choose for their children. One objective is to amplify parent voices on their FLP and its role in making educational choices for their children. Another objective is to consider a 'constructively aligned' approach to early education that acknowledges the multilingual repertoires of learners.

Method: Interviews with seven isiXhosa-speaking families shed light on their language choices, exploring how parents justify language choices at home and their school choices for their children, drawing on existing definitions of FLP.

Results: By examining the perspectives of isiXhosa-heritage language families, the study sheds light on the complex family structures of the participants sample and their FLPs, which simultaneously perpetuate use of the family heritage language and navigate means of opening life chances for their children.

Conclusion: The findings highlight an interplay between vulnerability and resilience, offering insights into the enactment of FLP in multilingual Western Cape families who have roots in the Eastern Cape province (predominantly isiXhosa speakers).

Contribution: The study contributes to understanding the multilingual spaces in which language development and education take place, particularly within the context of multilingual families with FLPs that balance language maintenance with socio-economic opportunities in a linguistically diverse setting.

Keywords: family language policy; family multilingualism; language negotiation; non-nuclear family; constructive alignment.

Introduction

Family language policy (FLP), according to King, Fogle and Logan-Terry (2008), refers to explicitly stated and overtly defined planning and theorising about language use within the home and among family members. Representing the more recent findings of this scholarly field, Lanza and Lomeu Gomes (2020) have shown how FLP has developed in relation to new contexts in which research has been done, representing not only different language communities, but also different family structures. African families in South Africa have long had to decide on language policies in a context where their heritage languages are not used beyond year 3 in education. In isiXhosa families this is articulated in phrases such, *asikhumshi apha* [we don't speak English here], or *isiNgesi sithethwa esikolweni hayi apha kwam* [English is spoken at school not in my house]. These phrases can be viewed as policies and a form of language negotiation in the family and the home. King et al. (2008:907) indicate how FLPs 'shape children's developmental trajectories, connect in significant ways with children's formal school success, and collectively determine the maintenance and future status of minority languages'. The family values embedded in isiXhosa households include language policies which are vital as children transition from home to school. Within a multilingual, multicultural Western Cape context, where our study is situated, with vast socio-economic differences and challenges, families weigh various advantages and disadvantages

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when choosing schools for their children based on the FLP. Growing up in homes and areas where multiple languages are spoken, can significantly impact a child's language development, socialisation and education. This study focuses on FLP in a context of family multilingualism as developed by Molate and McKinney (2024) whose work explores the relationship between multilingual homes, multilingual children, and multilingual education. These scholars refer to how family multilingualism in Africa and South Africa organically extends to schools in ways that should be better supported than at present. Negotiations and reckoning of which languages to introduce when and where are important in FLP because they contribute to the development of children's literacy as they get to school, raising the possibility of effectively enhancing multilingualism, which cognitively benefits the learners (see, e.g. Bialystok 2018; EC 2024). As Christie and Derewianka (2008) explain, children arrive at school with their home languages and the job of a teacher is to help the learner to develop that language for abstract skills.

Our problem statement reflects on the explicit justification a sample of isiXhosa parents give regarding their choices of home and school languages in their families. Building on King and Fogle's (2020) definitions of FLP, as well as Lomeu Gomes (2018), Lanza and Lomeu Gomes (2020 2024) and Molate and McKinney (2024), this article reflects on seven isiXhosa language families' perspectives. We also refer to the constructive alignment theory of Biggs (2016) and how it can inform educational approaches to fostering multilingualism in communities as diverse as we find in South Africa. Based on the interview data we collected, we support the position of a number of educators that language teacher education and training needs to produce linguistically aware teachers with multilingual mindsets (Guzula, McKinney & Tyler 2016; Makoe & McKinney 2014; Van der Walt & Klapwijk 2015; Xeketwana 2021).

Adding to the work of scholars such as Molate and McKinney (2024), this article contributes empirically to FLP research and to the areas of family multilingualism studies in the global South. Our study particularly debunks the ideology that learners from one family speak one language and should be received in educational contexts as if this were true (Makalela 2015). Further, we align with McKinney and Molate (2022) who have criticised the position of some South African schools that expect new learners to be proficient in English, even though they come from multilingual families where English is a decided second language (L2). We intend our study to be a contribution from the global South, where communities typically represent a multiplicity of languages – a fact that has not been widely recognised and prioritised in the field of education. Against this backdrop, we relate to Biggs (2012; 2014; 2016) who offers a possibility of aligning family multilingualism with languages used in education in South African classrooms.

Literature review

The field of FLP emerged as a distinct area of study in the early 2000s when scholars such as King and Fogle (2006) and Lanza (2007) emphasised the importance of family language practices, which mostly were realised through explicit and implicit policies (even ideologies) that parents or families craft in making decisions about which languages to use in their multilingual families. They show how these choices influence the school choices they make for their children. Following scholars such as Fishman (1991), who in their arguments for heritage language and minority language maintenance emphasised the central role of the family, King and Fogle (2006) connect FLP to the choices families make regarding the language resources they have and which to prioritise in various social situations. An important contribution of this research field was the insight that planning how languages are managed, learned, and negotiated happens in families long before national or educational policies play a role in children's lives. The family, mostly, determines language acquisition strategies – deciding which languages will be used by whom and in which contexts.

Defining 'family' is of course key to understanding FLP. Lomeu Gomes (2018) draw attention to the fallacy of conceptualising 'family' as the nuclear family of two parents and their children, pointing to the multiple ways in which single-parent families, grandparent-headed families, and so on, have become ubiquitous. Regarding family structures in South Africa, and specifically in the isiXhosa communities, Siqwana-Ndulo (1998) as well as Molate and McKinney (2024) explain the diverse forms of households where single-parent (male and female) homes are at play, showing that members of such families need serious consideration when we refer to family multilingualism and FLPs. McKinney and Molate (2022) report on a diversifying FLP situation which they find to be impactful in recognising African multilingual families in education policies.

We start here with offering a perspective on existing studies that have put FLP in the research spotlight, showing how work on FLP has been undertaken in different national and linguistic contexts as well as in different domains of application (Berardi-Wiltshire 2017; Curdt-Christiansen & Wang 2018; Gharibi & Boers 2019; Lane 2024; Menezes de Souza 2024; Yeshalem, Milani & Rydenvald 2024).

Already in the early 2000s, Vivian de Klerk investigated why some communities achieved language maintenance while others experienced language shift, as when in some households isiXhosa was replaced by English (De Klerk 2000). Her findings indicated that shift happens when a linguistic community starts to use an L2 that seems to offer more practical and economic opportunities than their own. The practices that some families put in place to encourage each other to speak English were already a form of language negotiation, thus illustrative of FLP in action. Twenty-four years later, taking a slightly different stance, Hendricks and

Xeketwana (2024) found that many families have multilingual practices identified as translanguaging, where at least three languages are present. This article follows up on these findings in representing parent voices from families with these kinds of multilingualism in settings where isiXhosa has limited 'currency' in their children's formal schooling.

Recently, tracing the development of FLP, Lanza and Lomeu Gomes (2024) point out that over time research has disclosed FLP as a more explicit and dynamic language practice than was formerly realised. The field increasingly focuses on how children's multilingual abilities have grown. These authors paint a picture of FLP having moved from the 'implicit grass-root language policy in the home' (Lanza & Lomeu Gomes 2024:170) to explicit socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes, that is, a policy that can influence children's language of education (LoE) and teaching practices in spaces beyond the family. Following this, there is the need to overtly and constructively align family multilingualism with the learning and teaching scenarios in this country. Further, and relatedly, Molate and McKinney (2024) demonstrate indigenous multilingualism in an ethnographic study of an isiXhosa family in the Western Cape. Additionally, Xeketwana (2024) in her work on FLP interviewed and observed an isiXhosa family in the Western Cape to expand on indigenous multilingualism. Both Molate and McKinney (2024) and Xeketwana (2024) refer to the ways families move back and forth between the Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces as they have family homes in both these spaces, referring to the home in the Eastern Cape as *ikhaya* [home].

This article reports on some family language positions and practices recorded in the Western Cape against the contradictory background of an overt, *de jure* national language policy that recognises equal rights for 12 South African languages, and a covert, *de facto* policy that privileges English, in the national education policy as well as in widespread public domain practices, such as in employment and courts of law (Docrat & Kaschula 2024).

Going beyond the 'monolingual habitus' that underpins many national language policies, Lanza and Wei (2016) turned attention to diverse transnational family types with multilingualism as a dominant cultural feature, and King (2016) refers to family dispensations that consider the diversity of globally distributed, transnational populations. Lomeu Gomez (2018) critically engaged with existing FLP studies to also recognise non-traditional families (e.g. single-parent families, grandparent-led or even sibling-led families) and how the different circumstances affected the FLP that developed. Lomeu Gomes focuses on 'vulnerability' and thereby adds an important dimension to the conditions that shape FLPs. This introduces resilience as a concept that captures the creativity of family members who imagine ways formerly non-existent to ensure protection of various interests. In an isiXhosa family, for instance, this would foresee how family interests can be incorporated into decisions on maintaining isiXhosa while also supporting L2-English development.

Focusing on South Africa, Molate and McKinney (2024) take us through the FLP as it is theorised in the South. They support disrupting the notion of the 'nuclear family' and further present the family as a multilingual space, where children move between home, community and school with their multilingual linguistic repertoires (McKinney & Molate 2022). Further, Xeketwana (2024) highlights translanguaging as a multilingual practice in certain families, indicating the need to reckon seriously with the reality of multilingual repertoires children develop in the home community in the language of learning and teaching, as well as in assessments. The following section discusses the uses of language in spaces beyond home and home community.

Aligning family language policy with educational policies and practices in multilingual education

The family values captured in FLPs cannot be ignored as the children move from their home, through the home community to school. The FLP impacts the literacy skills that children develop as they start their schooling around the age of 6 years. As Christie and Derewianka (2008) explain, children start school with languages developed at home; the teacher should support the learner to use such languages maximally in their education. In this section, we highlight some work done on language in education where the learners' linguistic repertoires have been considered.

Family multilingualism articulated in the FLP should, in pedagogic terms, be realised and linked to education to facilitate developing the learners' multilingual literacies. D'warte (2014) addressed issues of language and students' needs intersecting across multiple settings and contexts. In this work, D'warte highlights the positive effects observed when teachers allow the students' language abilities to be demonstrated. Further, Childs (2016) advocates for learners to be allowed to bring their home languages into their learning environment, thereby creating a humanising classroom experience. She finds that such an approach will curb the disconnect between the dominant languages of the classroom and the home languages in South Africa. Thus, she explores the use of translanguaging pedagogies that validate multilingual FLPs in the classroom, and finds that these enable a fluid manoeuvre between the learners' home languages and school languages while also doing away with traditional language practices that can be demeaning and thus impede learning (Childs 2016). Similar work on allowing translanguaging that pays attention to languages learners bring to classrooms has been done by scholars such as Kirsch (2018) and Flynn et al. (2019).

The literature confirms that South African classrooms are multilingual in many ways, and that, more than before, the learning occurs in multiple languages (see also Mncwango & Makhathini 2021; Moloi & Mankayi 2024; Prinsloo & Krause 2019). That affirmation of family multilingualism in classrooms affects pedagogy needs to be recognised, and measures should be put in place to ensure that the FLPs of learners' families are supported. This article addresses the

gap in our insight on how FLPs relate to classroom practices, particularly in early literacy and learning development and adds to the burgeoning literature on multilingualism in South African classrooms. We investigate and report on the intersection of family multilingualism expressed in the FLP and education.

Biggs's constructive alignment as pedagogy

Constructive alignment, as conceptualised by Biggs (2014, 2016) is a pedagogical approach commonly employed in tertiary teaching and learning. Biggs (2012) explains this approach as designing teaching and learning activities that actively engage students, thereby maximising their opportunities to successfully achieve the desired learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

In this study, we use Biggs's concept of constructive alignment and principles that underpin it, transferring its ideas to early learning experiences of learners from multilingual families entering the school system with home languages (L1s) that do not fit the dominant LoE of the school. We draw parallels between the principles of constructive alignment and recognition of family multilingualism, to develop ideas on how FLPs can inform classroom practices and support the educational success of learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

We also pay attention to the kinds of vulnerability experienced in families that insist on mother tongue language maintenance in their FLP, raising issues of social integration and educational advancement. Choosing to enrol their children in schools that are either predominantly isiXhosa, English or Afrikaans in LoE and students' L1s, is based on reasoning within those families, thus on FLPs that seek good educational opportunities, while also maintaining the family's linguistic heritage.

Research methods and design

This qualitative research focuses on the kinds of indigenous multilingualism that position families in terms of bilingual and multilingual development possibilities. The study is based on data collected in semi-structured interviews. The interviewer designed a set of open-ended questions to elicit contributions from seven parents of primary level learners about their families' language choices and the reasons for them choosing a school with a distinct language policy and related practices. Such open-ended questions provided the freedom for participants to offer detailed information while also expressing their attitudes, reactions, opinions and the reasons for an FLP that determined the use of specific languages at home. The participants were encouraged to articulate how their FLP influenced the choices they made regarding their children's schooling. The interview participants were parents of young school-going children, who gave impressions of the overt as well as covert policies their families implemented, with attention to what had driven the choices they had made.

Participants were parents from families identified and invited to participate, in line with the ethical procedures institutionally agreed on in advance of the appointments to collect data. Through snowball invitations, an educator from the primary school had assisted in suggesting possible participants. The sites of data collection were School A, a primary school where isiXhosa is the dominant language (even if the official policy prescribes English as LoLT from Grade 4), and School B, a multiracial (ex-model C) school of which the LoLT is English and/or Afrikaans, and which historically had been one of the 'better resourced' schools. An open invitation was sent to at least 15 potential participants, of which seven (six mothers and one father) agreed to participate. The metadata was gathered through a questionnaire to survey various relevant features of the family setup and give the interviewing researcher insight into the linguistic and personal background of the families represented in the interviews. Having given informed consent as well as the required metadata, more fine-grained contributions were collected employing semi-structured interviews with each parent individually.

The first four interviews were done with parents whose children attended School A. This was followed by three interviews with parents from School B. With participants who all had L1-isiXhosa as their home language, it was important to get participants who had chosen to send their children to different schools as that gave insight into the kind of FLPs that underpin the implicit or explicit language choices they made at home and regarding their children's schooling.

The interviewer in all cases was the first author, fluently proficient in isiXhosa and English and with good L2 proficiency in Afrikaans, who could allow the participants to speak the languages of their choice. He is from L1-isiXhosa, and like the other authors, a proponent of heritage language maintenance of all South African language communities. The data were gathered between June and August 2022 using audio-recorded semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool. The participants chose the site where they wanted to be interviewed which was either the researcher's office or a fast-food restaurant. Most of the participants chose to use isiXhosa. Thus, at first, data analysis proceeded in the original language. In the sections below, the isiXhosa version is given with its translation. The recorded and transcribed interviews were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes that emerged are categorised as: (1) non-nuclear family structures; (2) multilingual family repertoire; and (3) language choices directing school choices.

Insights from the data

This research sought descriptions of the family multilingualism and associated FLPs which could give insight in how these relate to educational decisions parents make. Specifically, we were interested in the voices of parents of young school-going children.

Our study considers FLP in circumstances of indigenous multilingualism using an established scholarly distinction between overt and covert, *de jure* and *de facto*, formal and informal language policies (Schiffman 1998). A thematic analysis of the interview material brought insights which we categorised into three broad themes as presented below.

Disrupting nuclear families

In line with the perspectives introduced by Lomeo Gomes (2018), and as contextualised and defined for the local Western Cape and Eastern Cape context by Molate and McKinney (2024), none of the participants' families fit an idealised 'nuclear family' structure. Each household represented a different constellation of adults and children:

Extract 1: Different family constellations

> *Ndihlala nabantwana bam nodade wethu* [I live with my children and my sister.] (P1)
>
> *Ndihlala nomamazala wam nabantwana* [I live with my mother in-law and the children.] (P3)
>
> *Sihlala nabantwana bam, nomzukulwana* [We live with my children, and my grandchild.] (P5)
>
> *Umzukulwana wam umama wakhe likhaladi, uhlala nathi, nomama wakhe ezi kuthi ngamanye amaxesha* [My grandchild, their mother is coloured; they live with us and the mother comes to visit sometimes.] (P7)

P1's family has two adult women, the mother and her sister, with the children. P2 also represents a mother with her children and the grandmother who has recently moved to their house. P3 also represents a women-led household where the mother and her children share a home with their father's mother. P4 was the closest to a 'nuclear family' with the parents and three children. P5 represents a household with three generations in which the parents are caregivers of their children, as well as of a grandchild. P6 represents a mother with one daughter and the relatives of the mother. And P7 is the grandmother in a household with her son and her grandson, of whom the mother lives elsewhere but has contact through occasional visits.

All these families had isiXhosa as L1 in their linguistic repertoire. Even so, all could testify to knowledge of exposure to English. They could also add other South African languages to the home and home community repertoire. For example, P7 mentioned that through her grandchild's mother, Afrikaans was also an important language in their household. The nature of the family constellation prompted questions regarding the FLP they had (often implicitly) developed.

Multilingual repertoire

As English has become the *de facto lingua franca* in South Africa, even in L1-isiXhosa communities, English has a prominent position, not only as the most likely language in education, but also as the one language that can eventually guarantee employment opportunities and upward mobility (see, e.g. Alexander 1999; Anthonissen 2013; Chetty 2012).

Extract 2: Language status – obscuring vs showcasing languages

> *Ndiyasithetha isiNgesi* [I can speak English]. *Ndiyasiva isiNgesi kwaye ndiyathintiliza apha naphaya nokusibhala andimdanga* [I hear*(understand) English and at times I stumble, I can also write it, but limitedly.] (P7)
>
> *Ndiyatyibilika esiNgesini nasesiXhoseni, kwaye iAfrikansi ndibamba apha naphaya* [I am fluent in both English and isiXhosa and then some Afrikaans, just a little bit.] (P2)
>
> *Intombi yam idla ngokundwendwele umakhulu notamkhulu kwaye bathetha isiSotho* [My daughter visits her grandparents and they speak Sesotho.] (P5)

When asked about language repertoires in the family, some languages are 'obscured', which indicates language status. For example, all families have contact with Afrikaans, yet they rarely mention it, or they indicate it as one they know poorly. However, Sesotho – the language of paternal grandparents to which the child has limited exposure – is recognised. How much the families have contact with these different languages, was not immediately clear; however, it was clear that there were certain allegiances where some languages were rated more highly in status than others. Embedded in the multilingual repertoires were also language choices at home as Extract 3 demonstrates.

Extract 3: Language choices at home

> *Umntwana wam uyasiva iSeSotho kodwa akakwazi kusithetha yena kuba umakhulu notamkhulu wakhe kwicala likatata wakhe bathetha iSeSotho. Umakhulu notamkhulu wakhe bathetha iSeSotho nokuba ukhona kwaye abatshintshi yile nto esiva xa sithethwa.* [My child hears Sesotho but she can't speak it because her grandparents on the father's side speak Sesotho. Her grandmother and grandfather speak in Sesotho even when she is around.] (P4)
>
> *Bakhe bafikelele nje kwiAfrikaans kodwa abaqinanga kuyo. Abahlobo babo baseZimbambwe bathetha nabo bathetha nesiNgesi kuba befunda nabo.* [They do speak a little bit of Afrikaans but they're not strong in it. Their friends are also from Zimbabwe, and they speak English since they go to the same school.] (P6)
>
> *Kungoba bazalwa ndim, kwaye singamaXhosa sonke phaya endlini. Nezikolo abafunda kuzo zizikolo ezithetha ngesiXhosa. Ndiza kubakhulisa ngolwimi endingalaziyo kuba kutheni? Kaloku andikhe ndive abantu abathetha isiNgesi bekhulisa abantwana ngesiXhosa. Nokuba sidibana nosapho lwethu sisoloko sithetha isiXhosa kuba singamaXhosa nje sonke. Kodwa ke abantwana bam bayasithetha nabo isiLungu ukulingana naba bafunda emakhaladini nangona befunda ngesiXhosa nje.* [It is because they are born by me, and we are all amaXhosa in the house. Even the schools they attend are isiXhosa schools. Why will I raise them with a language that I do not know? I have never heard English speakers raising their children to speak in isiXhosa. Even when we meet the family members, we always speak isiXhosa because we are amaXhosa all of us. But also, my children do speak English just like those who attend coloured schools even though they are in isiXhosa schools.] (P7)
>
> *Isizathu sokufunda isiNgesi emntwaneni kukumenza akwazi ukuthetha nabanye abantu kwaye akwazi ukunxibelelana nabo. Angasithetha isiNgesi nabanye abantu kodwa ekhaya uthetha isiXhosa.* [The reason for learning English for a child is that it will enable her to communicate with other people. She can speak English with other people but at home she speaks isiXhosa.] (P3)

The above extracts indicate that the families deal with different kinds of linguistic diversity in their homes (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele 2016). This means that when the children start school, they have already been exposed to a variety of languages which the schools, if not sensitive to such language backgrounds, would ignore and obscure in the classrooms. Further, participants state that using the family's heritage language in the home is the most obvious aspect of the FLP. Although they negotiate the use of other languages – as in developing Sesotho proficiency in contact with the grandparents, the maintenance of the language and culture of the primary caregiver goes without saying (Berardi-Wiltshire 2017; Friedrich, Anderson & Morrison 2014). P7 explicates this position in emphasising that she is Xhosa, therefore her children will speak isiXhosa. Moving from the FLP developed in the home, we could ask about what role language and the FLP played in the parents' selection of a school for their offspring.

Language choices as a determinant of school choices

The participants were asked to give their reasons for taking their children to one school rather than another – where, for example, they had a choice between School A and School B. In their answers, while also referring to cost (school fees), location (proximity to the home, implications of extra transport costs), or perceived quality of the education, language came up as an important consideration. The cited words of participants given below resonate with the work of scholars such as De Klerk (2000) on language shift and language choices, and recently also Xeketwana (2024) on language maintenance at home.

Extract 4: isiXhosa or English (Afrikaans) medium

Ndasa umntwana wam kwezi zikolo kuba ndandingafuni afane nam. Ndafundiswa ngumXhosa, ngesiXhosa ngoku ndiyasokola ukuthetha nabelungu. [I had to take my child to these schools because I did not want him to be like me. I have been taught by umXhosa, in isiXhosa and now I am struggling in town when I communicate with white people.] (P1)

Abantwana bam bafunda kwisikolo sesiXhosa kwaye bafundiswa ngesiXhosa ixesha elininzi. Ewe bayasithetha isiNgesi ngokufanayo naba bashiya izikolo zaseKhumbulani baye eDolophini. Akukho mahluko xa ndijongile. [My children go to isiXhosa schools, and they learn through the medium of isiXhosa most of the time. Yes, they speak English just like those who leave Khumbulani schools and go to town. There is no difference when I'm looking.] (P3)

Saye sarhalela ukuba makayazi neAfrikaans le kuba ezilalini kufundwa isiXhosa qha. Lo una 15 years ufunda apha eKhumbulani. [We wanted him to speak Afrikaans because, from the rural areas, it's always isiXhosa being spoken. The 15-year-old goes here at Khumbulani.] (P6)

Babini omnye ufunda apha eKhumbulani. [There are two and the other one goes to Khumbulani.] (P6)

Ewe, lo una15, sagqiba ukuba simse eKhumbulani ngenxa yetransport eyayisokolisa kakhulu, so kwakunzima ukufumana itransport yokumsa esikolweni ngexesha. [Yes, the one who is 15 years old now, we decided to take him to Khumbulani because transport was a struggle for him, so it was just impossible for us to organise transport and get him to school on time.] (P6)

The parents offer a myriad of reasons for their school choices. P1 has sent her child to School B because she wants the child to end up with more English fluency than she herself has, thus she seeks better life chances. However, P3 finds that the school in the same vicinity as their home is not significantly different regarding the quality of education they give. She refers to how well they speak English and finds no remarkable difference. The issue of transport is highlighted as a reason for some families whose children go to schools within the township where they live. What is quite clear, regardless of their choice for School A or School B, is that the parents are aware of the variety of languages children encounter at home and at school, and they are sensitive to the languages and linguistic repertoires their children bring home.

Discussion

Our data show high levels of linguistic awareness in the various FLPs that parents discussed. None in this, admittedly small, sample was indifferent to the maintenance of isiXhosa in their families, and they envisaged the continued use of their heritage language at home. Even so, they were also aware of the status of other languages such as English, and even Afrikaans, in the spaces of education and employment. How their children would develop improved proficiencies in languages other than the L1 of the family played a determining role in choices about schools the children would attend. The majority of our participating families are non-nuclear, as Molate and McKinney (2024) already indicated. The family structures co-determine their linguistic repertoires and FLPs – as with L1-Sesotho grandparents, or an L1-Afrikaans mother. Effectively, the children in these, often vulnerable (financially and socially), families grow up exposed to more than one language and as they grow up in the community their multilingual proficiencies develop. Even if the practices in school classrooms such as in School B do not acknowledge and build learning practices on the multilingual repertoires that children from L1-isiXhosa homes bring to school, all testify to the development through social interaction with school friends from other language communities.

As the literature highlights, FLPs in L1-isiXhosa families testify to the linguistic diversity of learners who are entered in schools where the LoE is English. The need to care for such a multiplicity of languages is widely acclaimed. A variety of studies (Childs 2016; D'warte 2014; Flynn et al. 2019; Kirsch 2018) confirm that the education fraternity has slowly started endorsing and encouraging multilingual realities in the classrooms. This study calls for a clearer approach in this

regard and builds on the work of prominent South African scholars such as Probyn (2015), Guzula et al. (2016), and McKinney and Tyler (2018), who have propagated different bi/multilingual pedagogies.

Referring to Biggs's (2014) notion of constructive alignment, we find a compelling case for constructively aligning the family multilingualism (Molate & McKinney 2024), as it is articulated in the FLP, with education practices. We suggest using this model to encourage leveraging learners' multilingual skills in teaching and learning as this would properly reflect the South African linguistic realities. Figure 1 demonstrates this interplay and shows how learners from families that represent diverse languages engage with communities that endorse and value multilingualism. Considering the high status of English which is an L2 to which many have limited exposure before entering Grade R or Grade 1, we suggest that ideally schools should embrace linguistic diversity.

Educational institutions must move away from viewing children who do not enter their schools with fluent English or Afrikaans as learners with a language handicap (McKinney 2017) and instead recognise the richness and cultural significance of their multilingual backgrounds. By aligning family multilingualism with the principles of constructive alignment, schools can create an inclusive and supportive environment that not only respects linguistic diversity but also leverages learners' extant language capacities to nurture a sense of belonging and identity. This approach could not only enhance the educational experience for multilingual learners but can also contribute to the broader and widely acclaimed, yet minimally implemented, societal goal of promoting and preserving linguistic diversity (see DBE 2010).
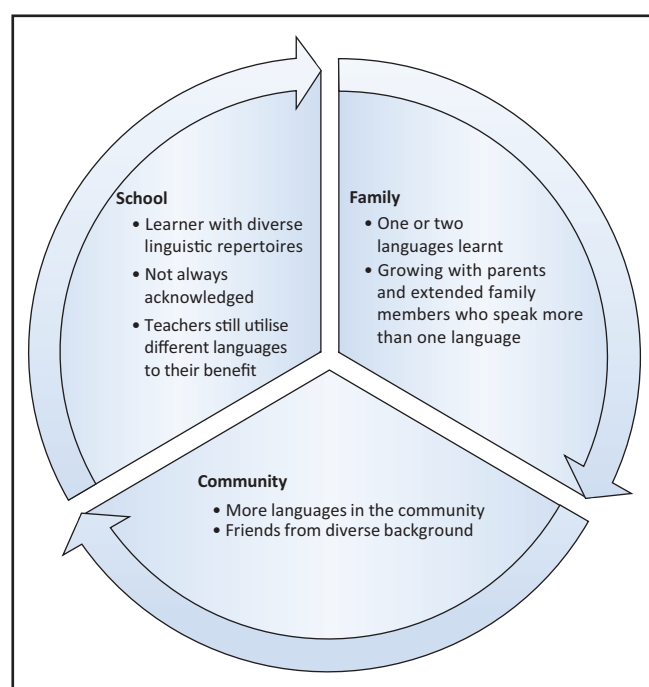

FIGURE 1: Constructively aligned model.

Conclusion

The participants' lived experiences demonstrate the juxtaposition of linguistic vulnerability and heritage language resilience, and the FLP-complexity these families manage, as well as how they reflect on the ways in which their children should find their way through an education system towards linguistic development that will also bring socio-economic security. This article adds empirical data to the field of FLP, relating family multilingualism to early education parental choices and schooling practices in the Western Cape, where aspirations are often modelled on ideals and ideologies developed in the global North. Thus, we have fulfilled this study's aims of defining FLP in seven multilingual L1-isiXhosa families and showing how these policies could be recognised in the pedagogy of early schooling, developing literacies and laying the foundations for success in learning.

In this article, even with a small data sample which precludes immediate generalisation, we highlight the reality of learners with local languages as L1s within multilingual families in South Africa. We further highlight that parents and caregivers (including those in vulnerable non-nuclear families) realise the multilingual diversity and differing status of various languages confronting their children in an education system that is biased towards English. As a practical contribution, we advise that Briggs's principles of 'constructive alignment' also be introduced in early schooling to thereby sensitively integrate learners from households that do not use English as their L1.

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Data availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, S.X., upon request.

Disclaimer

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