



# Multilingualism and curriculum: A study of how multilingual learners in rural Kenya use their languages to express emotions

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## ABSTRACT

This study is part of a larger project related to multilingualism and education in rural Kenya. We examine how Grade 8 learners use their three languages (Nandi, Swahili, and English) when they discuss experiences elicited by two short video clips representing happiness and sadness as basic emotions. Previous research indicates that use of the mother tongue is preferred for expressing feelings; however, we find that learners neither prefer their indigenous language nor convey the most fluent emotional stories in this language. We problematise this finding, and further discuss the connection between school languages and intention within the national curriculum.

## 1. Introduction

In this study, we sought to understand how Kenyan multilingual learners use their languages to express emotions, and how we may understand their preferred language in the context of the school curriculum. Bilingualism has gained traction as area of scholarly inquiry not only because there are more bilingual than monolingual people in the world (Wierzbicka, 2004) but also because of an increasingly globalised world in which there is need to communicate in multiple languages. The development and outcomes of bi- and multilingual learners have been widely discussed (Adesope et al., 2010; Cummins, 2007; Krashen, 1985; Thomas and Collier, 1997), as well as the connection between multilingualism and education (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004; Heugh, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009).

Moreover, there is emerging scholarly interest in the relationship between language, cognition, and emotion labelling. Emotions, emotional experiences, and labels are culturally situated (Holodynski and Friedlmeier, 2006), and researchers have explored multilingualism in the context of culture, identity, and learners' self-esteem (Lunga, 2004; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Shiza, 2005). However, there is a paucity of research on language and emotions in rural African contexts and on how multilingual children verbally express their emotions in their different languages (Rajagopalan, 2004). This is despite the fact that 'emotions are central to human life' (Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 94), as well as to learners' lives and development in school. Thus, the objective of this

study was to explore how multilingual learners use their languages to express emotions. The research project was carried out in a deeply rural Kenyan context, where Swahili and English are official languages and Nandi is the indigenous language in the catchment area. (In Kenya, there are 44 indigenous languages, mainly spoken in rural areas.)

Because Kenya is a multilingual community with various languages and dialects, the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development., 2017) emphasises the value of languages specific to different districts:

Learning in a language the learners are familiar with will make it easier for them to construct their own understanding and look for meaning in their daily experiences, thus reinforcing their unique strengths (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development., 2017, p. 32).

This means that in a rural area where learners speak Nandi at home, the medium of instruction in lower primary school (Grades 1–3) should be Nandi. According to the curriculum, Nandi should also be studied as a subject in Grades 1–3. Even if the indigenous language is not a subject from Grade 4, the curriculum states that the 'Learners will be expected to advance their learning in the mother tongue' (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development., 2017, p. 37). The school curriculum requires that English be used as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. English as a subject also starts in Grade 1. Swahili is not a medium of instruction in school; however, it is a subject from Grade 1 onwards. Although the curriculum is clear when it comes to the medium of instruction in school, previous studies have shown that Nandi is neither a

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medium of instruction nor a subject, and Swahili is used as a medium of instruction in addition to English from Grade 1 onwards (Spernes, 2012; Spernes and Ruto-Korir, 2018).

The purpose of this case study was to examine how multilingual learners (who speak Nandi, Swahili, and English) express their emotions in their different languages. The study is part of a larger project related to multilingualism among Grade 8 learners in deep rural Kenya (see Spernes and Ruto-Korir, 2018). In the current study, learners were triggered to engage in a visually-elicited conversation using two short videos related to happiness and sadness. The learners' narratives enable us to understand how they express emotions in each of the three languages. Through a Vygotskian (2012 [1934]) lens that connects thought and language(s), and later language(s) and learning, as well as other research on language and emotions, we infer the preferred language of the multilingual learners in this study.

The semantic and vocabulary differences between two or more languages may be analysed rigorously and objectively; however, it is difficult comparing emotional experiences with words (Wierzbicka, 2004). In this paper, we are interested in how multilingual learners express their emotions verbally in their different languages. We consider not only the words they use and the meaning of the concepts but also how they use the languages among themselves to generate emotional cues as they connect a particular language to past, emotional events. We ask the following question: *how do multilingual learners' in rural Kenya express their emotions in their different languages?* We discuss our findings in relation to the intentions identified in the national curriculum and the school's implementation of these intentions.

In Africa, most people are multilingual (Kimizi, 2009), and according to Ouane (2009, p. 54) Africans (unlike most Europeans) 'are living their multilingualism on a daily basis'; therefore, it may be difficult to identify one of the languages as a mother tongue. When discussing the language of the catchment area, the Kenyan curriculum uses the concepts 'indigenous language' and 'mother tongue' equally. In this paper, we prefer to use the concept 'indigenous language' because it can be difficult to claim that Nandi is the mother tongue of the informants.

As stated, there is limited research related to multilingualism, emotions, and education in an African context. Rajagopalan (2004) criticised linguists for neglecting emotional aspects of language, asserting that Western thinking about languages occurs in a monolingual context, with little acknowledgement of how different multilingual contexts generate or relate to emotions. Wierzbicka (2004) examined how simultaneously-bilingual children express emotions in their fathers' and mothers' mother tongues. She claims that languages evoke different 'cultural scripts' (p. 98) and the way people express feelings changes when they use different languages. Wierzbicka further reasons that emotions expressed in a mother tongue and emotions expressed in a second language are acquired differently. Researchers also suggest that the language acquired from birth is endowed with the greatest emotional force (Dewaele, 2004; Harris, 2004; Pavlenko, 2004), while it was determined from a literature review by Panicacci and Dewaele (2017) that multilingual speakers feel more authentic when using their mother tongue, especially when expressing emotions.

Wierzbicka (2004) argues that a bilingual person may prefer to use a second language to create an emotional distance and that they 'travel [...] back and forth' between different emotional worlds or 'live with one foot in one emotional world, and the other, in another' (Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 102). Examining bilingual parent-child communication, Pavlenko (2004) also claims that bilingual speakers may codeswitch into their indigenous language to signal intimacy or to express emotion, switching to the second language to mark distance or an out-group attitude.

In this paper, we adopt a social constructionist perspective in which emotions are considered 'discursively constructed phenomena' (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 125). To understand emotions as culturally and linguistically constructed is reminiscent of the theory of spontaneous and academic concepts proposed by Vygotsky (2012). In the following

section, we present the study's analytical framework based on these perspectives.

## 2. Languages in different contexts

Vygotsky's theory provides a way of anchoring the connection between cognitive development, language, and emotions in a cultural context. Vygotsky claimed that children acquire their thinking (expressed in their language) from the surrounding culture. Because language(s) supports children in constructing reality, he noted that 'the relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought' (Vygotsky, 2012, p. 231). The meaning of words is established and re-established within a context and 'if one particular language prevails in the contexts for establishing meaning, that language becomes integral to the structure of meaning or to the processes of its use' (Anooshian and Hertel, 1994, p. 505).

The theory of spontaneous and academic concepts suggested by Vygotsky (2012) may be used to understand how multilingual learners use their different languages when expressing emotions. Spontaneous concepts are adequate for everyday life, and through experiences (in this case emotional experiences) a child assigns meaning to emotional concepts. The development of spontaneous concepts does not follow a systematic process; however, when a child experiences, for example, happiness or sadness, they will perceive the word used by others and the generalised concept will develop based on the child's reflection on the experience.

Academic concepts are learned in a structured and specialised manner, such as in a classroom. The learner acquires the concept through deliberate instructional activities, and the level of the learners' academic concepts depends on the level of their general ability to comprehend concepts. Learners do not come to school as 'empty boxes' and experiences acquired through the mother tongue become the raw materials for developing academic concepts. When the learner interacts with the teacher, they meet the teachers' academic concepts with knowledge developed through their spontaneous concepts acquired by using their mother tongue in 'a psychological "space"' (Kozulin, 2012, p. xviii). Consequently, although spontaneous and academic concepts emerge in different ways, they are connected (Vygotsky, 2012).

To express emotions in a second language, the child needs academic concepts. Vygotsky (2012) claimed that developing a native language and learning a second or a foreign language require different processes. He understood the development of a native language to be a spontaneous process, while learning a second language is a non-spontaneous (or academic) process. The native language is also improved by learning a second language because the acquired competence in the new language makes the learner more aware of how to use words to express thoughts.

According to Izard (2009), language(s) facilitate a person's expression or outburst of an emotion verbally, as language is the most common method of expressing emotions between people and across cultures. Emotions are filtered through the language's cultural codes and when the language changes, the cultural codes also change (Panayiotou, 2004).

## 3. Research design and methodology

This study adopted a case study approach within an ethnographic paradigm. Central to this ethnographic case study were the language, communication styles, culture, and nuanced emotional construction in context. Yin (2003) and Creswell (2012) claim that cases can be documents, contexts, or any bounded system in which boundaries can be drawn. In this study, the three languages (Nandi, Swahili, and English) provide cases of linguistic output. The first researcher spoke English and some Swahili, while the second researcher and a research assistant both spoke all three languages. The second researcher's knowledge of both

Nandi culture and language was valuable at all stages of the project, and her knowledge of the context enhances the validity and reliability of the study (cf. Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).

Three primary schools were included in the study, and access to each together with consent from the informants was processed through the head teachers. All learners in Grade 8 consented to their participation. According to the head teachers, Swahili and English are the mediums of instruction from Grade 1, while Nandi is prohibited in the schools. Because the learners were required to speak Nandi as informants in our study, the head teachers gave permission for the learners to speak Nandi freely while participating in the project. It was also emphasised that the teachers would not have access to the data from the project.

The data were collected through researcher-led focus-group conversations (cf. Rio-Roberts, 2011) based on two, short, pre-existing video clips shown to the learners. The videos were obtained from YouTube and used on the premise of 're-purposing' videos for research (cf. Jewitt, 2012, p. 3). Video elicitation can be used alongside interviews or focus groups to prompt discussion, stimulate recall, or provide a basis for reflection (Jewitt, 2012).

The informants were 64 learners in Grade 8 (the final year of primary school). The learners were divided into teams of six-to-eight participants, according to the class size in each of the three schools. There were nine teams in total. Each team first watched a video clip for a duration of approximately 3 min, standing around the researcher's laptop. The learners were very motivated when they saw the video clips. (We should state that none of the informants in the study had a mobile device, and very few had seen a movie before.) The video clip showed children playing and laughing from which we characterised the mood 'happiness'. The language of the video was unknown to the learners and did not influence the language spoken by the learners. Each team was then further divided into three groups of two or three learners depending on the size of the team. The groups were then assigned to discuss the following questions: (1) What did you see? (2) How do you like the video? (3) Can you relate the video content to your personal experiences? These questions prompted the children to talk freely about how their construction of the emotions perceived in the video clip connected with their personal experiences. The learners were instructed to converse in Nandi. When the group activity stopped, the learners rotated their partners and were told to discuss the questions in Swahili. Then again, they rotated and discussed in English. Once data saturation was attained regarding discussion of the 'happy' video, the researcher played a video clip that we had characterised as 'sadness'. The language of this video was also unknown to the learners. The discussion related to the three questions then followed a similar sequence of steps as conducted for the 'happy' clip. At the end of the focus groups, learners were asked two questions regarding their opinion about the assignment and which language they preferred to use during discussions. Each focus group lasted for approximately 45 min.

The rotation was conducted to facilitate greater interaction between the learners and to generate more engaging conversations when they switched interlocutors. Another purpose for the rotation was to avoid a linear translation of past talk and to enable a novel conversation in all three languages. Due to this rotation, it was necessary to control the order in which languages were used by the learners; however, the order was chosen at random. We consider in retrospect that the order (first Nandi, then Swahili, and finally English) may have had an effect on the result. For greater reliability, we should have changed order of the languages when the learners conducted the conversation related to the two video clips. We could also have chosen a varied order of languages among the different teams.

As stated, the informants were divided into nine teams, each of which was then divided into three groups. Therefore, data was gathered from a total of 27 groups. Each group conducted six conversations, one in each language related to both the 'happy' and 'sad' video clips, which resulted in a total of 162 audio files.

The audio files (each lasting approximately 5 min) were rigorously

**Table 1**

Number of groups who told stories in three languages involving emotions related to happiness and sadness (for further detail, see Appendix A).

Happiness			Sadness		
Nandi	Swahili	English	Nandi	Swahili	English
1	4	6	12	12	12

prepared and analysed through four steps. First, the data were transcribed verbatim. Then, translation into English was conducted for the first researcher to become actively involved in the analysis, and to make the paper more reader-friendly. Once transcribed and translated, the data were organised into files per school and into specific groups within the different schools and stored as both written and audio school-specific files. The researchers then noted the lengths of all the emotion-laden conversations to compare the length of the stories in the three languages.

In the second stage, descriptor nouns or verbs that captured the two broad categories of sadness and happiness were identified and generated as codes. Third, themes that represented the two broad categories were extracted from the data, using words that were subjected to a search using the 'find' function in the Windows 10 word-processing application. Therefore, we generated the words that the children used to express happiness or sadness in their stories. Using 'find' became an appropriate analysis method because this function is available for any word searched, regardless of the foundational language.

Finally, the words subjected to the search function were extracted into categorised tables (see the following data analysis tables). For each of the three languages used by the learners, we explored emerging codes under the categories of 'happiness' and 'sadness', searching for all the specific or related words that could either be verbs or nouns representing the emotion under consideration. These became the words that were counted to support the second level of analysis and the tabulation of results comparing the emotion-laden words in the three languages. The aim of this analysis was to understand how the learners generated words related to emotion cues, and the variety of emotion-laden words they could produce in relation to the video clips and their personal experiences.

#### 4. Multilingual learners' conversations

The focus of this study was to examine the ways that multilingual learners use their languages to express emotions. First, we present the length of the learners' stories in their three languages. Then, we show the different words they used to express happiness and sadness in Nandi, Swahili, and English. Furthermore, we compare two of the same stories told in two languages. Finally, we examine the conversation that followed the assigned discussion, the learners' opinions about the assignment, and the language they prefer to use when expressing emotions.

##### 4.1. Learners' stories about their own experiences

During the conversations, we observed a significant difference in the level of activity between the groups, from saying almost nothing to telling stories with empathy. As expected, the transcriptions also demonstrate that the way the first learner spoke about their personal experiences in the group steered the other learner(s) to a similar level of articulation. In Table 1, we show the number of groups who told stories about their own experiences related to happiness and sadness in the three different languages. These stories were coherent but of different lengths, and all included some level of detail.

As previously noted, the learners first narrated their experiences in Nandi, then in Swahili, and finally in English. Table 1 shows that only 1 group out of 27 told a story in Nandi related to their own experiences and to happiness. We may attribute this absence of stories in Nandi to the restrictions the learners normally face at school (where speaking

**Table 2a**  
Number of words related to happiness (for further detail, see Appendix B).

	Nandi	Swahili	English
Number of different words related to happiness	5	3	23
Number of times emotion-laden words related to happiness were used	72	69	126

**Table 2b**  
Words related to sadness (for further details, see Appendix B).

	Nandi	Swahili	English
Number of different words related to sadness	10	10	39
Number of times emotion-laden words related to sadness were used	95	103	176

Nandi is prohibited). Another explanation may be that the learners were less comfortable because it was the first discussion to take place and they were less relaxed. The learners narrated four stories about happiness in Swahili and six in English. The learners' stories involved clothes, food, or gifts that they were given by parents, family, or friends.

When the learners talked about sadness, the number of groups providing narration was the same in all three languages. As a result, most of the stories that the learners told involved experiences related to their basic needs, such as food or clothing, or to their wellbeing at school, such as being excluded from a school trip because their parents could not afford it.

Table 1 shows that there were more learners in all groups who told stories related to sadness than happiness, which may be due to a degree of familiarity that developed while talking and watching the first clip. In retrospect, we should have changed the order of the videos to determine whether this had any effect on the learners' activity.

#### 4.2. Emotive words in three languages

The learners used different emotion-laden words to describe emotions related to happiness and sadness, as shown in Table 2a.

As is evident from Table 2a, the learners used five different Nandi words and three different Swahili words related to happiness. This is significantly fewer than the 23 English words they used. The translated verbatim text also contained more English words than Nandi and Swahili. Moreover, the learners used approximately the same number of words related to happiness in Nandi and Swahili. In English, the learners used words related to happiness almost twice as many times as in the other two languages. However, in English, they also used a greater variety of words, which means that they did not repeat the same word as many times in English as they did in Nandi and Swahili.

It is evident from Table 2b that the learners had more words to describe sadness than happiness in all three languages. Moreover, they had four times as many words to express emotions in English than in Nandi and Swahili, for which the same number of different words was used. While learners used 10 words (at most) to represent emotions for sadness in both Nandi and Swahili, they used 23 different words in English. The learners used words related to sadness slightly more in Swahili than in Nandi and almost twice as much in English. However, as with the happiness clip, because the learners used more words in English, they did not use the same word as many times in English as in Nandi and Swahili.

The observations related to both happiness and sadness appear to relate to the requirement that learners use English as the official language of communication at school.

#### 4.3. Stories told in two languages

While many of the stories included almost the same content in two or three languages, we find it difficult to compare these stories if there are

**Table 3a**  
Story about happiness in Swahili and Nandi.

In Nandi translated into English	For me, I was bought a school dress, and I was not expecting it. I was also bought a Christmas dress. I was so happy.
In Swahili translated into English	People bought me a school dress. My mother had gone to the market, and she had bought me my favourite cloth. I was <u>so happy indeed</u> . When arriving at home, it seemed nobody was there, but when we entered, the house was full of people. They had prepared food for us, and then we celebrated with them and we were <u>happy</u> . This was because it was December 2016.

**Table 3b**  
First story about sadness in Swahili and English.

In Swahili translated into English	The child reminded me that I have been beaten once, and I disliked it.
In English	When I saw that child crying, it reminded me of some days ago when I was beaten, and I <u>almost cried</u> , but I just assumed that it was not me. [whispers] It made <u>my heart to be in a sorrow</u> and <u>my heart is not happy</u> again because of that child. She feels <u>unhappy</u> , and I felt <u>pity</u> for that pupil.

**Table 3c**  
Second story about sadness in Swahili and English.

In Swahili translated into English	One day I was herding cows, and I left the cows to eat the maize plantation. In the evening, I was scolded and denied drinking milk. Then I cried— and after that I herded the cows carefully.
In English	Mmm, I remember last year when, when I was looking after the animals. I was, I was as playful as a kitten. I left the livestock to go to the, to eat the maize, they come and, and. When my mother arrived from church, she came and <u>bit me</u> , and then I was <u>sad</u> . In the evening, when it was the time of dinner, my mother refused to give me milk, and I <u>cried</u> .

**Table 3d**  
Third story about sadness in Swahili and English.

In Swahili translated into English	Me, one day we were told by my teacher that we would be visiting the wildlife. When I arrived home, I asked my parents if they have money for this tour, but they told me that there was no money at that moment. They told me to wait, then I will go next time. I cried. I was not happy.
In English	That day, there was a school tour going to Kisumu, and I told my father you will pay for me because I haven't gone to any tour. He told me that I would pay for you, then I was <u>very happy</u> . When it was the last time to pay, and tomorrow was the tour, I telephoned him to ask him if he will pay for me. He told me that the time is up, and I was <u>very unhappy</u> and started to <u>cry</u> . That was my <u>worst day in life</u> . I <u>didn't like</u> that day. At the same time I was <u>very happy</u> to see my fellow learners going when the bus arrived at the school compound at six.

no details that make us sure it is the same. This could mean that the learners not only translated a previously told story, but they told new stories or made such big changes that it is difficult to see that it is the same story. Thus, we do not identify the same story told in all languages, and we only find four stories told in two languages that we could compare with any certainty. These stories were all told in Swahili, with one told in both Swahili and Nandi and three told in both Swahili and English. We do not identify any learners who told the same story in both Nandi and English. One of these four stories was related to happiness while three were related to sadness. The words we relate to happiness and sadness are underlined in Tables 3a-d .

When the story was first told in Nandi, the learner only mentioned



**Table 4**  
Preferred language to use when telling stories related to happiness or sadness.

School, team	Language spoken	Preferred language	Explanation
School 1, team A	Nandi	Swahili	We understand Swahili better.
School 1, team B	English	Nandi	Nandi is easy.
School 1, team C	Nandi	Swahili	Swahili is the easiest in discussion.
School 1, team D	English	Swahili	No explanation.
School 2, team A	English	Nandi	We understand Nandi better.
School 2, team B	English	Swahili	We do not understand Nandi and English as well as Swahili.
School 3, team A	English	Swahili	We are used to using Swahili.
School 3, team B	English	Swahili	Swahili is an interesting language.
School 3, team C	English	Swahili	We always practise Swahili, and it is easy to learn.

that she received clothes; however, in Swahili, the learner said she was happy because of clothes, food, and celebration. Table 3a shows that the learner used more words and included more details when telling the story in Swahili than in Nandi; however, she did not use many different words to express happiness. This story is the only one that can be compared in two languages relating to happiness. The three stories in the following tables are related to sadness, which were all told in Swahili and English.

As mentioned, these three stories were told first in Swahili and then in a new group in English. Table 3b shows that the learner used just one sentence in Swahili, while in English she told a short story. The story in English was fluent and the learner used more words and metaphors related to emotions than in Swahili. In the second example (Table 3c), the learner also told a longer story with more detail in English than in Swahili. In the last example (Table 3d), the learner recounted the story fluently in both Swahili and English. However, the English story was longer, containing more words related to emotions.

When comparing stories told in two languages, we find that the learners mainly used Swahili and English. It is evident that English is the learners' dominant language, with the English stories containing more elaborate sentences and multiple words to express emotions. However, it is worth noting that the second time the learner told the story, the story was longer, had more details, and contained more words related to emotions. This may mean that the learner remembered more of the story the second time. The same pattern occurred when the story was told in Nandi and Swahili, as well as for the three stories in Swahili and English.

#### 4.4. Learners' preferred language for expressing emotions

At the end of the focus group, the learners were asked questions regarding their opinion about the assignment and which language they preferred to use. When giving the instruction and asking these questions, the researcher (or the research assistant) varied the language they used. No teams were asked in Swahili, two teams received the questions in Nandi, and seven in English. The learners answered the questions in the same language as they were asked; however, as Table 4 shows, the languages appeared not to have any influence on the answers.

All the learners stated that they had positive experiences watching the video clips, talking about them, and sharing their own experiences related to happiness and sadness. The learners said they appreciated the opportunity to watch the clips because for most of them it was the first time to see a movie. This may have had a significant impact on their positive perception of the assignment. In the rural context in which the schools are located, the learners had not had the opportunity to watch a movie due to the absence of electricity and smartphones; therefore, they

felt doing so was a privilege.

When answering the question about their preferred language, most learners in the teams quickly agreed on and gave their answers. However, in three teams, the learners could not agree whether Nandi or Swahili was the preferred language. In one team, they discussed in Nandi, but they decided that Swahili is their preferred language. In the two other teams, their discussions were in English. One of these teams said Nandi is their preferred language, while the other team said Swahili.

Seven groups responded that Swahili is the language they prefer to use when talking about emotions. However, as previously mentioned, Swahili was neither the language used when asking the questions nor the language used in the following discussion. Two groups said they preferred Nandi, and no groups said English. This statement contradicts the findings related to the learners stories told in English and another language, where English was the dominant language. As Table 4 demonstrates, the learners' explanations for using Nandi are related to knowledge: Nandi is easy and the language they understand best. Unlike a study from the same rural area in which learners said they were proud of the Nandi language and culture (Spernes, 2012), no one in this study underlined Nandi as a mother tongue or emphasised its importance for preserving Nandi culture. The preference for Swahili was also explained in relation to knowledge; however, two groups said Swahili was the language they practiced most, while one group said it is an interesting language.

As part of the same project, the teachers said that learners demonstrated the best understanding, speaking, and reading competence in Swahili (see Spernes and Ruto-Korir, 2018).

## 5. Discussion

Examining how multilingual learners in Kenya use their languages when expressing emotions, we find that learners demonstrate almost the same level of activity when telling stories in Swahili and English, although it does appear there is some benefit using English. Both Swahili and English are languages mainly learned in school (academic concepts), while Nandi is the language acquired in the family from birth (spontaneous concepts). We expected that the learners would express their emotions (related to spontaneous concepts) in the most fluent stories with most details in Nandi, as we assume the language is acquired through emotional experiences (cf. Vygotsky, 2012). However, the learners' stories in Nandi were fewer and shorter. As previous research claims that children have the greatest emotional force in the language acquired from birth (Dewaele, 2004; Harris, 2004; Pavlenko, 2004), we are surprised to find that the learners did not demonstrate a preference for Nandi. Neither did we find that the learners express themselves more honestly in the indigenous language, as was indicated in a previous study (cf. Panicacci and Dewaele, 2017).

Pavlenko (2004) claims that bilingual speakers prefer to use their mother tongue to express proximity and the second language to mark distance. Based on her argument, we might expect that the learners' experiences related to happiness would be most fluent in Nandi, while their negative experiences related to sadness would be recounted in Swahili or English. However, we did not find such an alignment in our study. Furthermore, we did not find that the multilingual learners have greater emotional involvement in their indigenous language (cf. Rajagopalan, 2004) or that they use Swahili or English to create an emotional distance (cf. Wierzbicka, 2004).

To understand these unexpected findings, it is necessary to consider them in light of the African context where all people are multilingual (cf. Kimizi, 2009). In the three schools where data were collected, the head teacher, all the teachers, and almost all the learners spoke the same three languages. The learners had spoken Swahili and English in school (both in the classroom and schoolyard) for almost 11 years (three years in nursery and eight years in primary). Therefore, learners are used to switching between Nandi, Swahili, and English, and the three languages

are part of the daily life of the learners (cf. Ouane, 2009). As stated, the learners were prohibited from using Nandi in school, and although the head teacher assured them that they could speak Nandi during the investigation, they may still have felt uncomfortable speaking Nandi.

We find discrepancies between the learners' language skills expressed in the group conversations related to the video clips and most learners' statements about which language they prefer to use. The transcriptions show that the most fluent stories and the greatest vocabulary were present among learners speaking English; however, most learners (seven of the nine groups) said they prefer to use Swahili, while the remaining two groups preferred Nandi. The findings also indicate that most learners explain their language preference in relation to their perceived linguistic knowledge. While English stands out in the conversations about the video clips, Swahili comes to the fore as the learners' preferred language. Again, we find a discrepancy with earlier research that emphasises the mother tongue as the language in which the speaker is most skilled and has a preference for use (Dewaele, 2004; Harris, 2004; Pavlenko, 2004).

Based on the understanding that children construct reality through the language acquired from their culture as well as the close connection between language and learning (Vygotsky, 2012), previous research has highlighted the mother tongue as the preferred medium of instruction in schools where the postcolonial language has been dominant (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). However, as our findings demonstrate, the learners in this study do not prefer Nandi when telling stories related to emotional experiences, and only two of the nine groups said they prefer to use Nandi.

## 6. Closing comments

In this paper, we enquire how multilingual learners in rural Kenya use their languages to express emotions. We find that when expressing emotions, the learners mostly used Swahili, English, and only some Nandi. Finally, we discuss how these findings align with emphasis on the indigenous language in the Kenyan National Curriculum.

The Kenyan school curriculum (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, 2017) states that the indigenous language should be the language of instruction and a subject in Grades 1–3. However, the head teachers in the schools in our study stated that Nandi is prohibited in school (see also Authors). We have no basis for suggesting that learners do not use Nandi to the same level as Swahili and English when telling stories related to emotions because of school policy and practice. However, the fact that Nandi is forbidden in school in addition to the fact that the learners do not develop their skills in Nandi may explain why their stories in Nandi are limited.

Furthermore, as previous research from Kenya also shows (Muthwii, 2004; Spernes, 2012; Spernes and Ruto-Korir, 2018), the intention expressed in the curriculum related to learners' mother tongue is only partially implemented in schools. Thus, we may therefore ask what the value is of this intention in the curriculum. If the Kenyan educational authorities intend for the indigenous language to survive, it should be implemented in schools. We suggest that schools (under the remit of the school authorities) are required to institute the indigenous language as a medium of instruction in lower primary school as outlined in the curriculum. Furthermore, the school should encourage learners to actively use their indigenous language.

The school curriculum requires English as the medium of instruction from Grade 4, while Swahili is not mentioned as a medium of instruction. As we found in a previous study from the same schools (see Spernes and Ruto-Korir, 2018), Swahili was a medium of instruction in addition to English from Grade 1 onwards. Learners in this previous study also said they preferred Swahili when telling stories. We suggest that Swahili—the national language spoken by most Kenyan people—should be mentioned in the curriculum as a medium of instruction in school.

Finally, we find it necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the approach adopted in this study. The data were collected in three primary

**Table A1**  
The learners' stories about their experiences.

School/Group	Happiness			Sadness		
	Nandi	Swahili	English	Nandi	Swahili	English
School 2 Group A	0	0	0	0	0	0
School 2 Group B	0	2	1	3	3	3
School 3 Group A	0	0	3	3	3	3
School 3 Group B	1	2	2	3	3	3
School 3 Group C	0	0	0	3	3	3
<b>Totally</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>

**Table B2a**  
Words to express emotions related to happiness.

Nandi	Swahili	English
Abaibaitu/ Kabaibai/ Kaboiboi [happy/ happiness] (29)	Furaha/Wanafurahia/ Tufurahi [happy/happiness] (57)	Laugh (32)
Karorit [laughing] (10)	Kucheka/Wanacheka/ Wakicheka [laughing] (35)	Very happy (30)
Kakararan [nice] (1)	Naskia poa [feeling good] (1)	Happy (20)
		Very interesting (1)
		Excited(6)
		Enjoy (4)
		Very enjoyable (2)
		Enjoyable (2)
		Enjoying (1)
		Very good (3)
		Good (1)
		Very nice (2)
		Nice (2)
		With happiness (1)
Anacheka [laughing] (5) (codeswitching to Swahili)	Naskia vizuri [feeling good] (2)	Very exciting (1)
		Very well (1)
		Very smart (1)
		Lucky themselves (1)
		Playful as a kitten (1)
		Liked it (1) Proud (1)
		Always remind in our mind (1)
		Will live for a long time (1)

schools in the same rural district from a total of 64 learners. Therefore, we cannot claim to generalise these findings to all rural schools or to all Grade 8 learners, as this was not a representative sample. As stated, we also need to consider that the results could have been somewhat different if the order of languages during the conversations had been different. We may have identified other nuances if the learners had been given the opportunity to choose the order themselves; however, because the learners changed groups, this was not possible.

Interpreting discrepancies between previous research and this study, it would be interesting to examine which language is the learners' first language in any further research. Accordingly, it would also be necessary to observe the learners in their free time among family and friends due to the restrictions in school regarding the indigenous language.

## Author statement

We hope that these revisions will convince the editors that the paper

Table B2b

Words to express emotions related to sadness.

Nandi	Swahili	English
Karir/Karirei [cry] (60)	Kulia/Analia/Nililia	Cry (105)
Arir [cried] (7)	[crying] (64)	Cry so much (1)
Kawach [scream] (6)	Kasiriki/Kasirikia	Cry painfully (1)
	[angry] (20)	
Awach [cried/screamed] (3)	Konyoilidos [suffering]	Didn't like it (7)
	(3)	
Kianerech/Anerech [became angry] (6)	Teseka [suffering] (2)	Very unhappy (6)
Nerektos [angry] (3)	Hurumia [sympathise]	Unhappy (2)
	(2)	
Kamakocomei [didn't like] (7)		Very sad (6)
Koime kei [troubling] (6)		Sad (5)
Nekaim [disturbed] (2)		Very bad (3)
Komababaitu [not happy] (2)		Very hard (3)
Keimgei muguldonyu [felt sorry] (3)		Careful (3)
Kakas koya [felt bad] (1)		Very miserable (2)
Koimgei [worry] (1)		Not good (2)
Muguleldo [troubled my heart] (1)		Not make me happy (1)
		Not happy (3)
		Unhappy (4)
		Not at all happy (1)
		Not in a happy mood (1)
		Removing some tears (1)
		Very unenjoyable (1)
		Not very okay (1)
	Sikia mbaya [feel bad]	Very angry (1)
	(2)	Afraid (1)
		Feeling pain (1)
		Feeling bad (1)
		My heart to be in sorrow (1)
Akas takirir [felt like crying] (1)		My heart is not happy again (1)
		My heart was sad (1)
		Very difficult (1)
		Miss it (1)
		Didn't like (1)
		Problem (1)
		Quarrelling (1)
		Hate (1)
		Changes her facial appearance (1)
		Looked mistreated (1)
		Looked scary (1)
		Looking sad (1)
		Eyes were swollen (1)

now is worth publishing in the "International Journal of Educational Development".

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### Appendix A

#### Table A1

### Appendix B

#### Table B2a , Table B2b

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