



# Using vignettes to understand the social-emotional experiences of three-year-olds in diverse language contexts

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## Abstract

In this article, we report on the educational experiences of young Afrikaans mother tongue South African children who are exposed to multilingual learning environments during their preschool years. We carried out phenomenological research using a vignette research design that provided observational, co-experiential data of the lived experiences of three-year-old boys as they engaged with formal and informal learning. We controlled vignette data that had been collected through observations, written teacher validation, and face-to-face interviews against existing literature to provide in-depth insights into the participants' different experiences of and within their learning environments. Findings indicate specific areas in which young children may need additional support in multilingual learning environments, in terms of 1) social-emotional security experienced in the learning environment, 2) intentional development of empathy for peers, 3) independence and initiative taking in informal settings, and 4) interactive communication. Although we focused on a South African context, these findings may inform future interventions to support children in multilingual language environments in their early years.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, early learning, social-emotional experiences, vignette research

## Introduction

Multilingualism is often the norm rather than the exception in the African context because of children being exposed to different familial languages from birth and experiencing relocation to different towns or countries (Brock-Utne, 2017). Multilingualism is complex (Anderson et al., 2018; Mazari & Derraz, 2015) since factors such as language environments (Gullifer &

Titone, 2020; Ortega, 2020) fluency in speaking, reading, and writing, the use of area-bound dialects or mother tongue-based accents play a role in the use of second or third languages. Rich linguistic diversity can be viewed as a form of social capital and as a pathway to the betterment of society given that it can be leveraged to foster economic growth (Brock-Utne, 2017), to improve quality of life, and foster career adaptability at the individual level.

Much has been written about the various functions of language in society (Nikièma, 2016; Vuzo, 2018), especially in relation to multilingualism. Auer and Wei (2009) claimed that most of the world's population is at least bilingual. In Africa, millions of people speak more than two languages. The functions of language are associated mostly with (among other factors) identity, friendships, family life, church, education, and politics (Brock-Utne, 2017; Mazari & Derraz, 2015; Wei, 2020; Wolff, 1999). For the purpose of this study, however, multilingualism should not be confused with receiving education in a second or third language. In education, the debates on the functions of language across the African continent have been particularly pertinent for all the years of formal learning (Huddleston et al., 2019; Ng'asike, 2019).

In their reflections on education systems in Africa, and specifically its languages of instruction, Ouane and Glanz (2010) pointed out that it is the only continent where most children receive instruction in an unknown language when they start school. Providing quality education is challenging given linguistic diversity (Coleman, 2017). In most African countries, teachers are expected to teach children to read and write in languages that are unfamiliar to the children. Furthermore, the teachers themselves are frequently not fully proficient in these languages. Thus, foreign language education is not advantageous to these learners (Brock-Utne, 2017) and communication and learning problems are often common at the level of both teacher and child (Ouane & Glanz, 2010). It could be argued that although multilingualism should be embraced fully, the optimal departure point for the most favourable level of learning is mother tongue instruction being used as the platform from which further languages can then develop during the life cycle. This is what Wolff (2017, p. 1) calls "mother tongue-based multilingualism (MTBML)" and points out eloquently that

it remains somewhat paradoxical that African postcolonial governments copy from European models those features that are incompatible with sociolinguistic facts on the ground, like monolingual policies in the face of extensive multilingualism, but do not copy features that would be beneficial in Africa as well, like operating professional foreign language teaching and learning through a familiar medium of instruction.

Post 1948, Afrikaans and English were separated for educational purposes to protect Afrikaans and to promote it to the status of a business language. But, later in the 20th century Afrikaans started losing its status (Heugh, 2000) and English became the most used language in South Africa (Da Costa et al., 2013). Yet, despite the change in the South African language policy for schools in 1997 from an official model of Afrikaans-English dual medium instruction to the inclusion of all twelve official languages, the role of English became more prominent. Among other things, this was because of the cultural and socio-economic progress associated with the language (Heugh, 2009). White (2018, p.174 ), who conducted a study "to

investigate the development of English language skills and the underlying processes of language learning,” pointed out that South Africa has an extremely high number of non-English mother tongue children who are taught exclusively in English. In the Afrikaans-English context there are some Afrikaans pre-schoolers who receive mother tongue education, but dual medium and second language (English) instruction is highly conventional.

It is against this background that we undertook the current study since decisions about the language of instruction are taken during the early years of a child’s formal learning. Potentially, these decisions may have long-term social, emotional, behavioural, and learning consequences for the individual child. Since the so-called success of non-mother tongue instruction is often captured by anecdotal parental reports, teacher surveys, or large-scale quantitative studies (Ansre, 2017; Deng & Gopinathan, 2006; Harmse, 2014; Murphy, 2011; Phatudi & Moletsane, 2013), little is known about the social and emotional language-learning experiences of the children themselves. Social-emotional language can, for instance, point to the children’s emotional reaction to individual or social events (Jankowiak & Korpala, 2018), how they relate to the peer group, or experience the learning environment on an emotional level. Our study sought to contribute to an understanding of the language and social-emotional learning experiences of young children during their early years. To achieve this, we adopted a research strategy that could shrink the distance between the researchers and participants and thus provide more intimate, experientially descriptive accounts of their social-emotional development in diverse language environments. Our assumption is that an in-depth understanding of children’s experiences can better inform future planning processes for early childhood education during the early years.

## Rationale for the study

The rationale for the study was to provide in-depth insights into children’s social-emotional experiences in multilingual learning environments. Settings included mother tongue, dual medium, and second language learning contexts. The study contributes to the field of early childhood education by deepening understandings of the social and emotional wellbeing and learning of young children. The early childhood period is crucial for children’s intensive social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development and the preschool serves as the first step from home towards the wider social environment and the concomitant socialisation of children (Schwartz & Palviainen, 2016). Since children attend preschool for a large part of the day, language plays an extremely important role in their social and emotional development. The significance of healthy social and emotional interaction with adults and the peer group cannot be dismissed (Denham, 2006), because it affects children’s physical, emotional, and academic progress, the foundation of which is laid during the preschool years (Boon, 2021). Languishing social and emotional well-being during the early years may lead to long-term academic challenges well into the primary school years (Campbell et al., 2002). Appropriate social and emotional development at a young age has short- and long-term benefits for children (Park et al., 2020). It is intricately linked to the language environment in which young children find themselves. We used the importance of social-emotional learning

during the early years, an area that is often neglected in terms of language of instruction, as motivation for the focus on social and emotional development in this study. We acknowledge the high level of variables that impact on social-emotional learning, and recognise that various aspects regarding language of instruction, such as student-teacher interaction, the teachers' goals for the children in terms of social-emotional development, child temperament, and physical context are also at play. So, we sought to explore the personal experiences of some young learners to garner insights into how young learners in multilingual learning environments can be supported optimally in the future.

## Goals of the study

The goal of this study was to explore the social and emotional experiences of three-year-olds in multilingual learning environments. All participants received mother tongue, dual medium, or second language (Afrikaans and English) education. The primary research question was, "What are key areas of support for three-year-olds in multilingual learning environments, in terms of their social-emotional experiences?" The sub-questions were, "How do three-year-olds experience their learning environments on a social-emotional level?" and "How does the language of education influence three-year-olds' social-emotional experiences in the learning environment?" Furthermore, the study aimed to contribute to the knowledge base in early childhood education regarding early social and emotional development in relation to the language of instruction and interventions that support social and emotional wellbeing and learning among young children (see Boon, 2021).

## Method

### Participants and context

In this exploratory-descriptive vignette study, we explored the social-emotional experiences of three Afrikaans mother tongue three-year-olds. Mother tongue language was defined as the same language spoken at home by both parents. Although all the participants came from an Afrikaans mother tongue home, they received mother tongue, dual medium, or second language education at pre-primary school. Afrikaans is spoken as a mother tongue by approximately 12.2% of the South African population (Statista, 2019) and is also spoken in Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Argentina. It is a minority language and widely acknowledged as a language of diversity (Floor, 2022; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2016).

The following selection criteria for child participants applied:

- attendance at the relevant preschool between the ages of 18 months and 3 years;
- Afrikaans home language;
- residence, as well as preschool, situated in Gauteng province; and
- middle to high income family.

In addition to the child selection criteria, the mothers and teachers of the three-year-olds also had to be willing to complete a questionnaire. Three Afrikaans mother tongue children, for whom pseudonyms have been used, were purposefully selected from prior research questionnaires for vignette observations. All three participants for the vignette research were boys. All three preschools were 45 or fewer kilometres from each other. Further variables that were taken into account included birth order in the family, the child's age (in months), and any trauma having been experienced by the child. All three participating children in the final sample attended a class of between 20 to 24 children. They all lived with their biological parents, and the mother tongue and home language of both parents was Afrikaans. Participant 1, Ryan, attended an Afrikaans mother tongue preschool. Participant 2, Christopher, attended a dual medium Afrikaans-English preschool. Participant 3, Steven, attended an English second language preschool (see Boon, 2021).

### Mode of inquiry

We are both social science researchers with years of experience in supporting young children's learning in the African context. We declare a belief in nuanced research methodologies (such as, for example, vignette research) that capture granular moments of learning and interaction to deepen understandings of a specific phenomenon. For this reason, we used vignette research to gain insight into the social and emotional experiences of these three-year-olds across different language settings.

### Vignette research and phenomenology

Vignette research falls into the phenomenological tradition of research (Husserl, 1980) and is a highly suitable research strategy for researchers who wish to capture data at the experiential level. Vignette research has the potential to transcend sociological, historical, and political barriers in educational settings. It provides opportunities to capture the granularity of learning and nuances that may otherwise be inaccessible to the researcher.

Researchers have specifically been seeking ways to access the experiences (and voices) of pre-school children for decades (Cremin & Slatter, 2004; Keating et al., 2000). Phenomenology, according to Husserl (1980), determines the reality of human existence in a way that can be logically understood (Husserl & Findlay, 1970), even at the pre-school and early childhood education level (Yuksel-Arslan et al., 2016). A phenomenon is not reasoned out, but is, rather, an experience of reality (Vagle, 2018) at the personal level. As described by Schratz et al. (2014, p. 126), “[a]ttempting to capture (learning) experiences *in statu nascendi* means that both learners and researchers are affected by the experience in the midst of the event.” While children are learning and interacting, the experience is also happening to the researcher. The phenomenon of learning is thereby captured by decreasing the distance between the researcher and (in this instance) the child, positioning the researcher in the environment and engaging the corporal, relational, tactile, and spatial experiences of the phenomena under study. It is what Laing (1967, p. 17) described as the entangled nature of “inter-experience” or the relationship between my experience of you and your experience of me within a specific situatedness.

## Researcher-participants' lived experiences

Vignettes are a form of “literary non-fiction” that can be easily read and used for in-depth scientific, empirical purposes (Ammann, 2018; Westfall-Greiter & Schwarz, 2013, p. 123). Vignettes capture specific moments of experience to highlight the importance of this moment; vignettes might also capture what has not been seen before, is seen, or is seen in a new light (Westfall-Greiter & Schwarz, 2013). The vignette process thus provides insight into educational processes and learning in the school environment. Neither the child nor the vignette researcher remains unaffected by their experiences during the events. While the child learns and socialises, the vignette researcher co-experiences the child's experiences. Even though neither the teacher nor the child necessarily reflects on the learning moment in the moment when it happens (Schratz et al., 2014), both are simultaneously occupied by it. The vignette researcher empirically captures her own experiences of the child's experiences. The experimental information that becomes evident can then be examined with the aim of understanding the experience (Schratz et al., 2014). In vignette research, subjectivity such as the researcher's knowledge and understanding of social-emotional development and the preschool learning environment, is embraced to deepen the reporting of complex co-experiences. In this study, the vignette researcher lived (co-experienced) the child's experiences in the field and sought to capture the details, elements, and empirical data of the experience through in-depth observation and reflective notes. As a research strategy, co-experiences have been used across a wide array of scientific disciplines (Battarbee, 2004; Bhargave et al., 2018). Similarly, co-experiences have emerged within vignette methodologies that focus on educational phenomena specifically (Brinkmann, 2021; Krenn, 2021).

## Data-gathering strategy

The once-off observations lasted approximately two-and-a-half hours per participant. Consistent with Husserl's theory, we assumed that the three-year-olds' experience of their learning environment arose from their social and emotional interaction with peers and teachers. In this sense, the vignette researcher therefore became part of the three-year-olds' world of experience during the observations. Data was captured by means of extensive, detailed observation notes, as well as reflective notes made in the post-observation phase. The observation notes were used to write a narrative of these experiences, thereby creating a set of what we think of as raw vignettes for each participant. From these initial raw vignettes, we crafted the final vignettes.

The initial raw vignettes were taken to the participating teachers for validation. Teachers could respond to the vignettes verbally or in writing and detailed notes of their responses to the vignettes were made. The teachers said, without exception, that the raw vignettes were a clear portrayal of how they observed the children in the learning environment. In addition, three of the vignettes were selected and presented to an international vignette research group to have them reflect on how their work resonated with the vignettes. Taking vignettes to an unattached or independent audience is a well-established quality control strategy in vignette research. The co-analysis in this international group of vignette researchers accentuated the

intricacies of authentic language learning in the early years. The international vignette researcher group consisted of researchers from Austria, Singapore, South Africa, Liberia, and Italy. The feedback showed strong resonance with the vignettes and phrases such as “a clear image of what is going on,” were used. Other feedback was that pseudonyms need to be used for the children in the vignettes and that more descriptive or “colourful” words could be used to convey the atmosphere. Based on the feedback from this group, the vignettes were revised and crafted into the final ones that are presented here (Boon, 2021). The full set of vignettes were first written in Afrikaans and the 12 vignettes presented in this article were then translated into English.

## Data analysis

From the final vignettes, readings are drafted which then become the focus of a phenomenological analysis (Agostini, 2015). These readings give context to the text without analysing or explaining it (Agostini, 2015; Schratz et al., 2014). Vignette data analysis constitutes a process of simultaneous data collection and analysis. Crafting the raw vignettes initiated the process of data analysis. The vignette research involved a continued, iterative process of data collection and analysis until the final vignettes were completed. Data analysis in vignette research can even continue, at least potentially, during engagement with final vignettes when readers may find resonance with certain aspects of a vignette or respond to the reciprocal dynamics that a vignette may elicit: this is an implicit intention of this study.

This first phase of data analysis (writing the full set of vignettes) was then followed by a further iterative process of theme elicitation from the final vignettes. We asked, “What were the social-emotional experiences of three-year-old children in diverse language environments?” From this process, four key themes emerged, and these are discussed in the next section.

## Findings

This exploratory study, based on phenomenological principals, brought four key findings and themes to light. The themes were arrived at after a comprehensive analysis of all the vignettes that were generated during the course of the study. Twelve vignettes were subsequently extracted to illustrate the themes iteratively. The vignettes were captured in the distinct language and learning environments of each participant, but they purposefully did not seek to draw comparative conclusions. Rather, through the vignettes we attempt to offer authentic, individual glimpses into the life world of three-year-olds so as to inform the knowledge base for supporting young children in multilingual learning environments during their early years.

The four key findings in this study simultaneously relate to the social-emotional experiences of three-year-olds in multilingual environments, while also elucidating key areas of support.

- Social-emotional security experienced in the learning environment
- Intentional development of empathy for peers
- Independence and initiative taking in informal settings

- Interactive communication with peers.

In the next section the vignettes are presented sequentially in relation to the four themes listed above. Each vignette presents a co-experience that seeks to encapsulate micro-moments of social-emotional experience in a variety of learning contexts (Boon, 2021).

### Theme 1: Social-emotional security in the learning environment

#### *Participant 1 (Afrikaans mother tongue instruction)*

The participant in vignette 1 was 3 years, 0 to 2 months old during the course of the study. He attended a preschool with Afrikaans as the formal language of instruction. As indicated by his mother he was the first child in the family, has a younger sibling, had been hospitalized for one or more nights, and the family had moved house. He was exposed to one to five hours a week of Afrikaans and English storybooks and television programmes respectively.

#### *Vignette 1*

Miss Sarah calls Ryan, where he is sitting at a table playing with play dough. He gets up and happily joins Miss Sarah at the table where she is waiting patiently. “What colour paint do you want to use for your picture?” asks Miss Sarah caringly. Ryan points to the yellow and green paint. “I want yellow and green, please,” he says excitedly. Miss Sarah dips a brush in green paint and gently paints the palm of Ryan’s hand. He leans, relaxed, with his head against her arm. He becomes one with her movements. Miss Sarah lovingly takes Ryan’s hand in hers and together they make a print of his palm on a piece of white paper. Ryan slowly raises his head and leaves the table beaming with satisfaction.

#### *Participant 2 (Afrikaans-English dual medium instruction)*

The participant in vignette 2 was 3 years, 3 to 5 months old. He attended a preschool with Afrikaans and English as formal languages of instruction. Most of the lessons were presented in English since fewer than a quarter of the children’s mother tongue was Afrikaans. As indicated by his mother, he is the first child in the family and has a younger sibling who was born shortly before the study took place. He had been hospitalized for one or more nights. He had exposure to six to ten hours a week to Afrikaans storybooks and one to five hours a week of English storybooks and television programmes. The recent birth of the sibling was considered when conclusions were drawn since we were aware of the fact that such a life changing event can have an effect on a child’s behaviour.

#### *Vignette 2*

Sheltered under a large canopy are several benches and tables. Each table is neatly covered with a tablecloth. Christopher moves quickly and immediately sits down on a bench. He gets up and sits down on another bench closer to Mara, the assistant. Mara hands out cubes of watermelon to the waiting children. “I don’t want any,” says Christopher. He gets up. He wanders to the playground. Christopher climbs alone on a climbing frame. Mara calls him,



saying, "Come drink your juice." Slowly, he returns. "I am going to drink my juice," he says. He picks up his bottle and sits down carefully on the edge of a bench, not talking to anyone.

*Participant 3 (English second language instruction)*

The participant in vignette 3 was 3 years, 6 to 8 months old. He attended a preschool with English as the formal language of instruction. Lessons were presented in English and fewer than a quarter of the children in the class's mother tongue was Afrikaans. As indicated by his mother he was the second child in the family, had been hospitalized one or more nights, and the family had previously moved house. His mother also indicated that he had had no exposure to Afrikaans storybooks or television programmes but was exposed to approximately one to five hours a week of English storybooks and eleven to fifteen hours of English television programmes a week.

*Vignette 3*

It is a bright classroom with yellow square plastic chairs and tables. A television screen is mounted on the wall. Miss Helen puts on a music and dance video. Steven gets up. He stands motionless in one place. His eyes follow the movements on the screen and his lips move as he sings along to the music. The other children scream and jump around. Steven does not move. He focuses on the screen. A second song starts to play. Steven faithfully mimics the arm movements. He focuses on the screen, then on his teacher, then on the assistant and again on the screen without making excessive movements. He stands in one place. The third song requires more movements. Most of the children move in large spaces. Steven walks in one place. The two children next to him fight with each other. Steven stands still. His singular focus is on the screen.

The three vignettes depict a continuum of social-emotional security within the learning environment. In the first vignette Ryan lets his teacher paint the palm of his hand without any hesitation. He leans with his head comfortably against her arm. He allows her to touch him as they work together on the activity. In vignette two, Christopher seems unsettled. He keeps moving around, unable to settle down. He rejects an offer of a snack and does not take part in conversation with his peers. Steven, in vignette three, who focusses intensely on the screen, does not seem to participate fully in the learning activity. His awareness of his learning environment, in general, seems to be low.

**Theme 2: Empathy for peers**

*Vignette 1 (Afrikaans mother tongue instruction)*

It is a brightly coloured, cheerful classroom with bright green walls. There are square plastic tables and chairs in a variety of colours. Ryan looks excitedly at the food in his lunch box. He spontaneously shares a sausage with Mary, a little girl sitting next to him. To Tanya he says confidently, "There were only two." He takes a bite. Then he says, "Mary, there are not three, no. There are only two. Only you and I can get it." He excitedly tells Mrs Ellie, "I shared my food." Mrs Ellie encourages Mary in saying, "You must also share something with Ryan."

The children talk. Ryan gestures with his hands as he speaks. Mary has a packet of sweets. “Can I have two, please?” asks Ryan sincerely. He shares his naartjie (a fruit similar to a clementine or mandarin orange with a loose peel that is easy to remove) with Mary. He eats a piece of his naartjie. He shows Mary how to break off a piece. But Mary puts her half back into his lunch box. Ryan takes it out with disapproval, puts it on the table and looks at it with dissatisfaction. He puts a large piece of naartjie into his mouth. He talks to Tanya. He gets up. He puts his fingers in her lunch box. Mrs Ellie kindly remarks, “Fingers in your own lunch box.” He moves back to his seat without delay and spontaneously continues talking to Tanya.

*Vignette 2 (Afrikaans-English dual medium instruction)*

Christopher and Sidney sit close together on the floor of the small square classroom. They are each engaged in building puzzles. “Christopher!” calls Sidney. Christopher keeps building. He does not react on Sidney’s call. Sidney turns Christopher’s puzzle pieces over to show their faces. Christopher still does not react. He finishes his puzzle. Sidney calls him again while struggling with his own puzzle. Christopher takes his puzzle apart and starts building it again. Holding a puzzle piece in the air, Christopher calls his teacher, saying, “Teacher, I don’t know where this piece belongs.” He laughs and put the puzzle piece in its place.

*Vignette 3 (English second language instruction)*

Yellow square plastic tables and chairs stand in the bright classroom. Steven quickly sits down on his chair. With his eyes he follows Miss Helen’s movements. He watches as she hands out the play dough. Steven gets yellow play dough. Three other children, Trevor, James, and Tony, are sitting at the same table, too. Steven forms a ball with the play dough in his hands. He rolls it back and forth, back and forth on the table. He presses hard with both his hands on the play dough. Miss Helen starts handing out shapes and cutters. Steven quickly grabs the first item that falls on the table. He flattens the clay with his hands and then squeezes out the mould. James has a red shape that Steven wants to use. Steven wants to borrow the form, but James does not want to give it to him. Steven picks up a white form from the table. He exchanges James’s for the white form. The class is noisy. Steven continues to play in silence. He does not make eye contact with Trevor, James, or Tony. His whole body moves as he presses hard with the moulds into the play dough. He leans over the table to get a cutter from James. James presses it to the table to prevent Steven from taking it. Steven takes another form to exchange with James. James shakes his head; he does not want to exchange. Steven continues to play.

The presence and absence of reciprocal empathy are portrayed in this set of vignettes. Ryan shows the ability to share with his peers and is aware of his own needs within the social group. He responds adaptively to rules in the social setting. Christopher, who is engaged in building a puzzle near Sidney, does not respond to Sidney’s efforts to talk to him. Although ignoring Sidney’s requests he does find the need to engage with his teacher. Steven, although focussed on the activity at hand, is mostly concerned about his immediate needs to exchange tools. In this scenario, he does not communicate or negotiate with his peers, and he plays alone in silence.

### Theme 3: Independence and initiative taking in informal settings

#### *Vignette 1 (Afrikaans mother tongue instruction)*

Miss Sarah has a small water spray bottle in her hand. The boys notice this and approach her enthusiastically. Miss Sarah sprays Ryan with water. He laughs out loud. He playfully runs away. Then he comes back cheerfully. This time Miss Sarah sprays his hair with water. She combs his hair upright with her hands. She says with a laugh, “Go and look in the mirror.” Ryan runs without hesitation to the classroom. He comes running back with big steps and a broad smile: “It does not stand upright!” He flattened his hair with his hands. Miss Sarah sprays him again. He laughs cheerfully.

#### *Vignette 2 (Afrikaans-English dual medium instruction)*

In a small, square room with a television, Christopher sits down on the carpet and looks straight at the television. Mara, the assistant, turns out a container with blocks among the children on the carpet. Christopher moves away quickly. Christopher looks uncomfortable and his facial expression is sombre. Mara adds more blocks that look slightly different from the ones already on the carpet. Christopher takes two blocks. He fits the blocks together effortlessly. He hammers playfully with the blocks on the carpet. Mara puts more blocks down in front of him. He desperately tries to put all the blocks together, but the blocks do not all fit together. Mara gives him blocks that do fit. He builds in silence. A little girl talks to him, but he does not respond.

#### *Vignette 3 (English second language instruction)*

There is a large sand pit with a climbing frame and three swings under a canopy. Steven walks over and sits on a swing. Thembi, the assistant, swings him. Steven watches her face. Sometimes he glances around, but he mostly focuses on Thembi’s facial expression. Thembi moves over to Cara’s swing to assist her. Steven continues to swing with the remainder of the momentum of the swing. He does not engage with anyone. When the swing has lost momentum, he climbs down.

The development of independence and the ability to take the initiative are key developmental tasks for three-year-olds. These vignettes illustrate diverse experiences for the participants in this study. Ryan takes part in a water activity with great enthusiasm. He does not seem reluctant to go to the classroom alone and independently. He returns with excitement. In the second vignette, while the assistant introduces an activity, Christopher moves away in avoidance. He plays with the minimum number of blocks and sometimes needs adult assistance to engage better in the activity. Steven also seemed dependent on an adult to take part in the swinging activity. When the assistant disengages, he seems to lose interest or give up on the activity.

#### Theme 4: Interactive communication with peers

##### *Vignette 1 (Afrikaans mother tongue instruction)*

The children's school bags are neatly stored in a shelf against the classroom wall. It is snack time and the children flock together to take their lunch boxes from their bags. Then they sit around several round and square tables. Ryan has his lunchbox and cooldrink bottle in front of him. "What is next to your bag?" he asks Peter on the opposite side of the table. He does not get a response from Peter. Ryan eats a grape. Then he asks again. "Is it a helicopter?" Peter explains. "Can it fly?" Ryan picks up a grape and pretends it is a helicopter flying through the air towards Daniel on his right. He starts a conversation with Daniel about toy cars. He picks up his muffin and start talking to Tina on his left, saying, "I like spiced cookies."

##### *Vignette 2 (Afrikaans-English dual medium instruction)*

It is a small, square room with soft yellow walls. The floor is tiled. There is a carpet in the middle of the floor. Four yellow, square plastic tables are stacked in a corner. In another corner there are two stacks of crates. Against the wall is a dark blue billboard presenting pictures related to the theme of the week. Some of the children are sitting on the carpet. Others stand comfortably against the back wall. The class is noisy. Christopher sits motionless. He mostly stares silently at his teacher. He says nothing. He also does not respond to the questions she asks. He looks at his teacher in front of him. Mrs Hayley browses through a book, looking for a picture. Christopher watches her closely. Mrs Hayley continues with the lesson. He leans supportively on his one hand. Mrs Hayley reprimands another child. Christopher sits cross-legged, uncertain, and he puts his hands safely in his lap. The children are noisy. They shout out participatory responses. Mrs Hayley speaks loudly and audibly above the noise. Christopher looks at a plaster on his leg. Mrs Hayley flips through a book again. Christopher looks around uncertainly and then at his teacher. She finds her place in the book and points to a picture of a shark. Everyone is screaming and shouting excitedly. Christopher tries to get Mrs Hayley's attention. "Teacher!" he shouts shyly. She does not hear him. He shouts again, a little louder, "Teacher!" She looks at him with interest. "I have a hole in my tooth." "Are you going to the dentist?" she asks, interested. He nods.

##### *Vignette 3 (English second language instruction)*

It is a sunny morning. There is a jumping castle standing alone on the lawn the size of a rugbyfield. There is no shade to hide from the summer sun. The children are invited onto the colourful jumping castle. While the children jump in excitement, Steven carefully jumps at its entrance. He avoids the crowd of children. He gets off, take a walk and gets back on the jumping castle, only to get off again. He walks over to the side. Through the side bars of the jumping castle that forms a barrier between him and Amy, he talks briefly to her before walking away.

Ryan, who received mother tongue instruction, showed the ability to engage in different conversations with a variety of his peers. Christopher, who received dual medium instruction,

started an off-topic conversation with the teacher that seemed disengaged from the rhythm of the lesson. Steven, who received second language instruction, played mostly in isolation from his peers and when he engaged in conversation, it was done from a safe distance with an object between himself and his peers.

## Data analysis

The goal of this study was to explore the social and emotional experiences of three-year-olds in multilingual learning environments, to identify key areas of support. The vignettes constitute a first level of analysis, in that they depict the poignancy of the distinct social-emotional experiences of the three-year-olds in the multilingual environments. The subsequent themes provide an additional level of analysis in highlighting key areas in which young children in multilingual learning environments may benefit from additional support.

## Discussion

The vignettes presented here depict micro-moments of the social-emotional experiences of three-year-olds in diverse language environments. The vignettes do not claim contrasts among participants, nor do they seek comparative validity between their sets. Rather, the vignettes seek to foreground the intricacies of the learning experiences of these participants to highlight the individuality of the experiences of each participant. They are, in essence, descriptive. Each vignette also captures moments that emerged as consistent themes for each participant.

The individuality of the learning experiences emerged along four themes (or key findings) when the comprehensive set of vignettes was analysed: 1) social-emotional security in the learning environment; 2) empathy for peers; 3) independence and taking initiative in informal settings; and 4) interactive communication with peers.

One child, Ryan (vignette 1) experienced social-emotional security in his learning environment and exhibited self-confident, highly interactive, and empathetic interactions with adults as well as peers in his environment. The social-emotional experiences of another child, Christopher (vignette 2), reflect more complexity, solitary play activities, and suppressed interactivity with his peers. This participant predominantly directed his communication towards his teacher or an assistant, i.e., the adults in the room. The experiences of the third participant, Steven (vignette 3), showed frequent use of non-verbal communication and a preference for solitary play activities.

As mentioned earlier, multilingualism plays an important role in education as well as social and economic development at the systemic level (Heugh, 2006). The way in which multilingualism is pursued and achieved at the individual level is, however, pertinent. The findings in this study indicate that individual children might have social-emotional experiences that need to be noted in learning environments during the early years. Lourenço and Andrade (2015) suggested that multilingualism and multicultural societies pose new

challenges to education systems that require the development of more flexible, appropriate, and inclusive forms of education. The findings from this study imply that there may be additional layers of social-emotional dynamics that also need to be considered in terms of the language of instruction during the early years of learning.

## Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest that additional measures could be introduced for young children in multilingual, and specifically dual language and second language learning environments, to support social-emotional security, to advance independence and initiative taking, and to develop interactive communication. In other contexts (Dan, 2014), the complexities of multilingual learning for young children, given multilingual spaces that may be characterized by adversity and disparities, have been shown. In addition, the need to understand the interactions between social-emotional learning, learning, and school effectiveness has also been presented (Fitzgerald, 2020; Fricke et al., 2021). Although some researchers (Restad & Mølstad, 2021) have cautioned against formalised assessment of social-emotional learning, the importance of the acknowledgment of social-emotional learning nevertheless enjoys wide recognition (Fitzgerald, 2020; Fricke et al., 2021).

In addition to the above-mentioned recommendations, a focus on supportive relationships and age-appropriate empathy skills for all children in multilingual environments could be considered. Furthermore, based on this study, we suggest that the long-term effects of early social-emotional experiences, as they pertain to language environments, need to be traced. In a study on bilingualism, third language acquisition, and language learner strategies, Grenfell and Harris (2015) discussed the positively amplified reading and listening comprehension of bilingual adolescent students. It seems, then, that follow-up studies with the same participants, at later developmental phases such as on entering the primary school, may, potentially, be beneficial to strengthen the recommendations. To replicate this study with participants with diverse mother tongues may also provide more insight into social-emotional dynamics and personal learning experiences.

## Limitations

Vignette research necessitates an intrinsically singular focus, thereby providing in-depth experiential insights that may not be captured through other research methodologies. However, within this singular focus is also its limitation. Vignette research and its findings cannot be generalized. This study was conducted with three participants in only one indigenous language—Afrikaans—in an African context. There are more than 2000 languages in Africa and the overall ethnolinguistic and cultural plurality and diversity in Africa surpasses even that of Europe by far (Wolff, 2017). Studies with participants from many indigenous languages, as well as follow-up studies with the existing participants, might therefore be beneficial.

## Conclusion

Social-emotional learning is crucial for children during the initial years of schooling and language is of the essence in terms of children's experiences of their learning environment. Tondi and Fredericks (2020, p. 15004) described language as "a carrier of culture and as a means through which people generate knowledge and design the means that will sustain them in time and space", even at the age of three. In South Africa, the marginalisation of languages often results in the alienation of indigenous cultures, norms, values, and of the languages themselves. In zooming into and co-experiencing the children's social-emotional experience of their learning environment, we give insight into the context in which this language is learned and used in the preschool environment. In the study, we elucidate the diversity of social and emotional experiences in mother tongue, dual, and second language environments for three young children. We acknowledge that a variety of factors could have influenced these highly varying experiences. However, the vignette research does allow us to observe the complexities of social emotional learning for young children that invites deeper exploration. By using vignettes, we explored the primary and sub-research questions and considered key areas of support for three-year-olds in multilingual learning environments, in identifying their social-emotional experiences. Besides the identification of areas of support, we also suggest deeper reflection on specific aspects of the language of instruction and social-emotional security in the learning environment, such as, for example, empathy for peers, qualitative depth in relationships, independence, and initiative taking in informal play settings and interactive communication for young children in diverse language settings.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Ethical issues

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the university where the study was conducted (reference: EC 19/03/02). The study was conducted confidentially, and care was taken to protect the identity of the participants.

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## Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the first author, upon reasonable request. The data is not publicly available given several ethical restrictions,

including the fact that it contains information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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