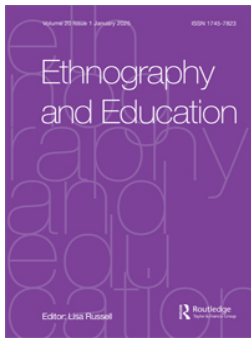




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Title	Language and education policies across scales: policy processes in the institutional order of German-language ECEC in South Tyrol, Italy
Author(s)	Platzgummer, Verena
Publication Date	2025-02-19
Publisher	Taylor and Francis Group
Repository DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2025.2464128">https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2025.2464128</a>



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To cite this article: Verena Platzgummer (19 Feb 2025): Language and education policies across scales: policy processes in the institutional order of German-language ECEC in South Tyrol, Italy, *Ethnography and Education*, DOI: [10.1080/17457823.2025.2464128](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2025.2464128)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2025.2464128>



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# Language and education policies across scales: policy processes in the institutional order of German-language ECEC in South Tyrol, Italy

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## ABSTRACT



Despite a long tradition of ethnographic research on language and education policy processes, these have remained underexplored in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This paper draws on a one-year sociolinguistic ethnography of a German-language kindergarten in the Italian province of South Tyrol to trace how language and education policies travel across spatiotemporal and institutional scales. It shows how educators set goals for their kindergarten, reflect on their practices in light of these goals, and make use of evaluation documents to negotiate policies with the District. The paper argues that institutionalised requirements of goal setting and evaluation bring policy texts into focus on the level of the individual kindergarten and create feedback loops with the district. By revealing how educators come to adopt framings that implicitly equate 'language' with 'Standard German', the paper contributes to elucidating the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies within educational institutions.

## KEYWORDS

Critical sociolinguistic ethnography; Early Childhood Education and Care; language policy; power; language ideologies

## Introduction

As the designation already indicates, institutions of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) combine the provision of *education* and *care* in early childhood. While the focus of these institutions differs according to national and regional contexts, there has been a general trend towards an emphasis on the education side of the equation. In most European countries, ECEC is now regarded as the first stage of (usually non-compulsory) education (Albon and Huf 2021; Platzgummer and Thoma 2023). In policy discourses, this has entailed a shift from discourses about childcare provision as a means for increasing the proportion of women in the workforce to discourses of quality in ECEC, linked to the educational attainment especially of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Albon and Huf 2021; Alexiadou and Stadler Altmann 2020). In various international contexts, such quality discourses are paired with institutional assessments and documentation,

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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therefore becoming steering instruments typical for a neoliberal mode of governance (Gustafsson Nyckel et al. 2024).

Concomitantly with these changes, societies throughout Europe have become more linguistically and culturally diverse over the last decades, which has its bearing on ECEC institutions. While ECEC policies tend to at least acknowledge this diversity, a focus is placed on the institutions' role in developing the majority language of the respective sociopolitical context (Palviainen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2022; Platzgummer and Thoma 2023). Empirical studies have shown that educators' normality assumptions about ethnic-cultural and linguistic differences contribute to exacerbating structures of social inequality especially in relation to children positioned as having a migration background (Thomauske 2017; Zettl 2019).

While these developments call for an increased attention to language and education policies and practices in ECEC, such research has been slow to get off the ground, especially in comparison to school contexts (Anzures Tapia 2020; Blaschitz et al. 2021; Thomauske 2017). However, there is now a growing body of ethnographically oriented research investigating language practices in ECEC published in recent years (e.g. Kirsch 2018; Knoll and Becker 2023; Knoll and Jaeger 2020; Rickert 2023; Zettl 2019, 2023), most of which at least partly attempts to link findings to wider institutional policies and sociopolitical discourses. Some of this research has also called for a joint consideration of language-in-education and education policies. These might at times stand in contrast to one another, in which case it is highly relevant to examine which policies take precedence in practice (Bergroth and Palviainen 2017; Jaspers and Rosiers 2022; Thoma and Platzgummer 2023).

While links between language and education policies and practices have been established in such research, this tends to be done by examining pedagogical practice in the light of policy texts (e.g. Bergroth and Palviainen 2017; Knoll and Jaeger 2020), sometimes with an additional analysis of educators' discourses *about* policies (Kirsch 2018; Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015; Thoma and Platzgummer 2023). In this manner, such research only captures how educators implement policies in practice, without addressing the *institutional* practices of (1) making regulatory policies come to bear on ECEC practice, (2) of modifying such policies in response to practice, (3) or of the creation of those policies in the first place. As Anzures Tapia (2020, 279) notes, 'ethnographies that follow the interactional pathways between schools, parents, teachers, policy and language and educational ideologies in early childhood settings are almost non-existent'. His own study detailing different stakeholders' responses to language and education policies in ECEC in an Indigenous community in Yucatan, Mexico, provides an exception in this regard. At the same time, research situated in the paradigm of the ethnography of language policy, or linguistic ethnography more generally, has made theoretical and methodological advances in the study of language policy processes in other levels of education, particularly in secondary schools (Hornberger et al. 2018; Martin-Jones and da Costa Cabral 2018; Pérez-Milans 2018), on which research on similar processes in ECEC can build.

This article contributes to the study of language and education policy processes in ECEC by tracing how language policy discourses travel across different scales in institutionally German-language ECEC in South Tyrol. In the following sections, I contextualise my paper within research on language policies and elaborate on the place of power in

such research, as well as on the notion of scales as a way of overcoming a macro–micro binary in investigations of language policies, subsequently situating my empirical investigation within the tradition of critical sociolinguistic ethnography (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018). I will then turn to my analyses and close the article with a discussion of the kinds of insights that can be generated from a linguistic ethnographic approach to an analysis of language and education policy processes.

### Language policies, power and scales

The roots of language policy research can be traced to the 1960s, where it emerged as a response to a need for language planning in many newly independent, formerly colonial polities. Tollefson and Pérez-Milans (2018) note that a specific set of ontological and epistemological assumptions guided this early work: languages were seen as objectively existing independently from their speakers and as having clearly delimitable boundaries, and an inextricable link between language and identity was presupposed. While some of these assumptions still inform more interdisciplinary approaches to language (e.g. Gazzola et al. 2023), research within applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has privileged a view of language not as a system but a social practice, and of identities as multiple and dynamic and linked to language not in essentialist but in ideological terms (Tollefson and Pérez-Milans 2018). The critical and ethnographic turns in language policy research that followed need to be interpreted in this light. In the late 1980s, critical approaches to language policy still departed from the nation-state level but began to place a focus on how ‘language policymaking was bound up with asymmetries of power’ (Martin-Jones and da Costa Cabral 2018, 75). Beginning in the mid-1990s, an interest emerged in linking the interactional order in situated institutional settings, particularly within education, to wider socio-political and ideological processes in a historical context. This work is seen as constituting the beginnings of an ethnography of language policy (Hornberger et al. 2018; Martin-Jones and da Costa Cabral 2018).

In this long and varied tradition of language policy research in general, and language-in-education policy research in particular, no single definition or conceptualisation of language policy has emerged as universally accepted (Hornberger et al. 2018). Johnson (2013, 9) defines language policy as any ‘policy mechanism that impacts the structure, function, use, or acquisition of language’, and includes in this definition not only policy texts but all mechanisms ‘that have regulating power over language use and interaction within communities, workplaces, and schools’. Pennycook (2016, 137), on the other hand, describes language policies as ‘a form of governmentality concerned with educational, ideological, or cultural regulation’, whereas Bonacina-Pugh (2012), referring to the work of Spolsky (2009), proposes a notion of policy as *practice* in addition to the previously dominant notions of policy as *text* and/or policy as *discourse*. She refers to her addition as *practiced language policy* and notes that this underlines that language policies ‘can be interactionally constructed in practice’ (Bonacina-Pugh 2012, 217). The common denominator between these and other conceptualisations is the interest in how a certain degree of regularity in language is established in specific contexts – with differing emphases on whether this regularity is an outcome of regulation.

The focus on regulation points to the centrality that considerations of power have in language policy research, as well as in education policy research. As Ball, Maguire, and

Braun (2012, 140), note ‘what we take to be policies are power relations, practices and subjectivities which articulate forms of learning and forms of behaviour’. Thereby, power is not considered as only top-down but as situated and relational. This is very much in line with critical sociolinguistic work that aims not to presume ‘who occupies what position in a system of relations of inequality’ (Heller 2011, 11) but to describe and explain those relations and how they are intertwined with linguistic variation. Historically, language policies in education have contributed to marginalising and subjugating speakers of minoritised languages (Johnson 2013, 54) – in fact, such policies are part and parcel of this process of minoritisation (Patrick 2010). Consequently, it becomes an imperative to examine how language policies in education minoritise some students while privileging others, whose interests that serves, and with what consequences (Tollefson 2013).

Another tension in conceptualisations of language is the question of where to locate policy. In this paper, I adopt a notion of language policy as ‘a multilayered construct’ in which different actors, levels and processes ‘permeate and interact with each other in multiple and complex ways as they enact various types, approaches and goals’ (Ricento and Hornberger 1996, 419). While such a view is generally accepted, it has not always been born out in research designs, which have often focused on a specific level of policy activity, with researchers struggling to make connections across levels or layers (Hornberger et al. 2018). In fact, calls for moving beyond clear-cut distinctions between micro- and macro-levels of policy activity have often reified the very same binary understandings, as Pérez-Milans (2018) insightfully observed. A true departure from such notions, he notes, would entail ‘an epistemological take that pays closer attention to the participants’ trajectories of reflexive engagement with conventional/normative forms of social organisation brought about by policy transformations’ (Pérez-Milans 2018, 116). In the same vein, Heller (2011, 34) suggests a perspective of investigating ‘how the multiple heres and nows of our existence were shaped by, and shaped in turn, more durable arrangements, some of which ended up codified in laws’.

In the past decade, the notion of *scales* has emerged as particularly promising for overcoming the macro–micro divide. Scales refer to hierarchically ordered space–time configurations of social organisation (Blommaert 2007). Such a concept can then be mobilised to understand how ideological linkages between forms of language and social personae are drawn upon as resources from different scales and move across scales, as proposed by Mortimer and Wortham (2015). Similarly, Pérez-Milans (2018) suggests a focus on trajectories instead of policy-related events, paired with a close attention to performative language use that is intertwined with actors’ social positions. For both these suggestions, ethnography remains the method of choice. The next section therefore addresses critical sociolinguistic ethnography as an approach to studying language policy in Early Childhood Education and situates the ethnographic work this paper is based on within this tradition.

### **A critical sociolinguistic ethnography of a German-language kindergarten in South Tyrol, Italy**

Ethnography is ‘crucially guided by an ontological and epistemological stance that views human life as created through people making sense of their own lives’ (Hornberger et al.

2018, 157). A *sociolinguistic* ethnography departs from the assumption that language is fundamentally ‘connected to how we construct social differences and how social and political life is organised around them’ (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018, 2). It sees language as a social practice and pays close attention to how variation in language is involved in (dis)alignments with social categories as well as in the (re)production and transformation of such categories. As such, it is not necessarily only applicable within the bounds of sociolinguistics as an academic discipline but can be drawn upon in ethnographic research within a variety of other disciplines, including education. In fact, educational contexts have been one of the primary settings of sociolinguistic and linguistic ethnographic work (Copland and Creese 2017; Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2014). *Critical* sociolinguistic ethnography, then, means addressing issues of power and inequality in this process. This entails asking ‘what resources are important to whom, and how the social processes we examine have consequences’ (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018, 2) and ‘shedding light on the ways in which language practices, discourses, and ideologies contribute to the reproduction of power asymmetries’ (Martin-Jones and da Costa Cabral 2018, 86). It also means applying this critical stance reflexively and examining how power relations are implicated in all the different activities of doing research (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018).

This body of research guided me as I set out to study how language contributes to (re)producing and social difference and inequality in German-language Early Childhood Education and Care in the Italian province of South Tyrol. Similarly to other sociopolitical spaces that recognise more than one official language, particularly in the European context (From et al. 2024; Garrido and Codó 2024; Jaspers and Rosiers 2022), education in South Tyrol is guided by a logic of language separation or, one might even say, segregation (Wand 2023). There are three separately administered tracks of education, following the general bounds of the Italian education system but each defining their own (language) educational policies within those limits (Platzgummer 2021), which also holds true for ECEC. Particularly in urban spaces in the province, two of these tracks – the Italian- and German-language track – coexist and in this manner create an element of choice for parents enrolling their children in ECEC (see Platzgummer, *forthcoming*). Moreover, the province has been characterised by an increase in diversity of the resident population over the last 35 years, with about 10% not possessing an Italian citizenship in 2022 (ASTAT 2024), and consequently about 13% of children enrolled in ECEC in South Tyrol for 2021/22 without Italian citizenship (ASTAT 2023). However, this percentage only represents an at best rudimentary indicator for the linguistic diversity in ECEC, and no statistics on children’s linguistic repertoires are available. Nevertheless, as Thoma (2022) has shown, in recent years there have repeatedly been mediated sociopolitical debates about children positioned as non-German-speaking attending German-language schools and ECEC. In the context of these debates, differential educational rights have been allocated to differentially positioned children and their families. Against this backdrop, a critical sociolinguistic ethnography of a linguistically diverse, but institutionally German-language kindergarten emerged as a timely research endeavour.

As detailed in a previous publication (Thoma and Platzgummer 2023), my ethnography was intertwined with the linguistic ethnographic work of my colleague Nadja Thoma, who was also conducting research on German-language ECEC in South Tyrol.

We conjointly negotiated access to our fieldsites and began our ethnographies in the same kindergarten in April 2021. Institutionally, German-language ECEC in the province is organised hierarchically, contrary to schools which are more autonomous: the single kindergartens are headed by a respective kindergarten leader, grouped into eight kindergarten districts headed by a respective district director, which in turn are headed by a provincial directorate. On this institutional scale, two major policy documents provide the basis for pedagogical practice in German-language ECEC throughout the province: the Framework Guidelines (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol 2008) and the Quality Framework (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol 2017).

My colleague and I first got in touch with the provincial director, who selected our fieldsite in conversations with the respective district director and her team. As we came to understand later in the research process, continuity of personnel and the fact that there was enough space for two extra adults on the premises influenced their choice alongside our requirement for a linguistically diverse kindergarten as a research site. The kindergarten in question, pseudonymised as Flower-Street kindergarten, was located in an urban area in the province, in a linguistically diverse but Italian-dominant neighbourhood. It had two groups of 18–20 children between 2.5 and 6 years of age, accompanied by a team of 4–6 educators at a time. While some of these participants remained a constant throughout the year, there was some change in the composition of children and educators especially between summer and autumn, but also for various reasons throughout the year. In Flower-Street kindergarten, Nadja Thoma and I each focused on one of the two groups of the kindergarten. While she later moved on to different kindergartens for her fieldwork, I continued participant observation in the same kindergarten until April 2022, privileging a long-term engagement with the research participants and committing to an understanding of institutional processes over the course of a year. In this manner, I conducted participant observation before, during and shortly after the kindergarten hours as well as during educators' meetings, and later also audio-recorded specific situations in these different moments and collected textual and other artifacts from the kindergarten.

Since our institution did not have an ethical review board at the time, as is not uncommon outside of anglophone contexts (see Von Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016), the research did not undergo a formalised ethical review. Nevertheless, ethical considerations were central to my research practice. Adopting a perspective of ethical reflexivity (Von Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016), Nadja Thoma and I confronted ourselves regularly about ethical aspects throughout the research process. Before starting our fieldwork, we conjointly informed educators, parents and children of what participating would entail and continued to negotiate consent, and assent with children, throughout fieldwork. The latter also entailed explaining what I was doing at different stages of the process in a child-appropriate manner (see Rickert and Platzgummer 2025). All localities and people's names were pseudonymised to ensure the participants' privacy, and I carefully considered which information should remain confidential (Hammersley and Traianou 2012).

In our previous publication, Thoma and I (2023, 1331–1332) already pointed to the fact that educators interpret the institutionally mandated language policy as 'as much Standard German as possible' and connected this interpretation to institutional structures as well as to policy texts valuing multilingualism but emphasising the development of German language competence. We also showed how educators legitimated deviations



from Standard German in interaction with children, which involved either forms assigned to varying South Tyrolean varieties of German or to Italian, with recourse to their own beliefs and experiences as well as to education policies. Their predominant use of local German varieties in interaction with one another and with us researchers, instead, did not require any legitimisation. We also illustrated how a reference to a policy text served an argumentative function in interaction, whereby the educators' practiced language policies became indisputable through a reference to an authoritative source. However, much like previous research on language and education policy in ECEC, these elaborations do not provide any insight into institutional processes of policy implementation and adaptation. In this paper, I therefore adopt a process-perspective that seeks to trace policy trajectories. In the following sections, I will draw on fieldnotes, transcripts of audio recordings and textual artifacts from my sociolinguistic ethnographic fieldwork to investigate how language policies traverse spatiotemporal scales in institutionally German-language ECEC in South Tyrol.

### Entry point: an educators' meeting

The following fieldnote from the beginning of my participant observation at the kindergarten constituted my entry point into language policy processes at the fieldsite and represents the moment when I first became aware of how processes on other scales reached into Flower-Street kindergarten.

#### Fieldnote

It's the second day of fieldwork and I'm taking part in a team meeting. It is a *Großteamsitzung* [greater team meeting]. Sonja starts the meeting by reporting from the *Leiterinnensitzung* [leaders' meeting], during which they discussed how the *Eingewöhnungsphase* [acclimatisation phase] went this year, also in view of the changes brought about by Covid.

Having been written only on the second day of fieldwork, much about the social practices in kindergarten was still *strange* to me before I could make them familiar over time (Myers 2011). The terms in italics, represented in German since they were inextricably tied to the institutional organisation of the kindergarten, refer to principled pedagogical processes (*Eingewöhnungsphase*) and to specific communicative genres (*Großteamsitzung*, *Leiterinnensitzung*), some of which I had an intuition about and some of which were still elusive to me. Over time, I came to see these communicative genres as crucial for language policy processes. Pérez-Milans (2018, 119), drawing on work by Dell Hymes, describes them as 'models of social situations in which specific conventions (i.e. expectations) apply regarding how participants are supposed to interact'. While writing this fieldnote, I was finding myself in a *Großteamsitzung* of all educators of the kindergarten, differentiated from the *Kleinteamssitzung* [smaller team meeting] with only the educators assigned to one of the two groups in the kindergarten respectively. Greater team meetings took place every other week in Flower-Street kindergarten, in the afternoon after the children had left, and were about planning and reflecting on practices and administrative aspects relevant on the kindergarten scale. The *Leiterinnensitzung* mentioned in the fieldnote, in turn, is located on the district scale, consisting in a meeting of all the kindergarten leaders in the district. While I never participated in such a

meeting, the fieldnote shows how conversations happening on that scale are recontextualised by the kindergarten leader Sonja on the kindergarten scale – and I observed this routinely happening in kindergarten team meetings.

The following is a continuation of the above fieldnote and shows the educators instantiating communicative practices of collegial reflection, which often featured discussions of children’s and educators’ language practices, following Sonja’s report.

### *Fieldnote continued*

- 1 Starting from this, the educators discuss this same question for Flower-Street kindergarten.
- 2 Among other things, Judith observes that the children are learning German better this year
- 3 because they are spending more time in their *Stammgruppe* [main group] since there is no
- 4 longer an *Öffnung* [opening]. Judith’s claim triggers a lively exchange of ideas, and almost all
- 5 the educators talk about their own experiences and agree with Judith. Someone also
- 6 mentions that Brigitte from the district was in the kindergarten and observed Sofia and
- 7 Ilesha, two of the younger children, and was amazed (at their German?). Sonja observes that
- 8 all the children now understand everyday language. Elisabeth interjects that Adrian doesn’t
- 9 speak much, and when he does, he speaks Italian or Romanian, but Ilesha and Kevin actively
- 10 use German and are already forming small sentences. Judith is delighted and enthusiastically
- 11 exclaims “That’s great!”. She then claims that *Öffnung* [opening] is not always good for a
- 12 kindergarten like theirs, with so many languages, where the children have to learn German.
- 13 Sonja concludes the topic by reminding them that these points should be included in the
- 14 *Reflexion* [reflection] at the end of the year, as that will then be read by the district director.

As Thoma and I (2023) have argued, reflective practices of this sort are somewhat institutionalised in German-language ECEC in South Tyrol, also being inscribed into the mentioned two major policy documents (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol 2008; 2017). The *Reflexion* introduced by Sonja (line 14) is a textual trace of such practices of collegial reflection to be submitted to the district director, and thereby is a mechanism for their institutionalisation. In referring to this text, Sonja simultaneously makes different spatiotemporal scales salient: a scale on the institutional level of the kindergarten at the end of the kindergarten year, and a scale on the institutional level of the district, at another more vaguely defined moment in the future. In the here-and-now, referring to these relevant future scales serves an interactional function of closing the educators’ reflections for the moment, knowing they will be taken up again later.

The continuation of the fieldnote also already provides some insights into how different forms of language are attributed differential value within the institutional order. Judith’s observation that ‘the children are learning German better’ (2) than in previous years and the contributions from the other educators that follow establish the children’s acquisition of German as a relevant outcome of their attendance of the kindergarten. They position the children as in the process of acquiring this resource, with Judith even noting they ‘have to learn German’ (12), implying a necessity or an institutional requirement for children to learn German. The teachers take highly affective stances (Jaffe 2009) towards these outcomes, with Judith being ‘delighted’ and ‘enthusiastic’ (10), and the member of the district team being described as ‘amazed’ (7). This ascription of value to a bounded notion of ‘German’ is stable to the point that it need not even be made explicit: The educators only speak of Brigitte’s amazement, leaving the ethnographer wondering about the source of this amazement ‘(at their German?)’ (7), and they refer to ‘everyday language’ (8), implying the forms of Standard German they employ in daily kindergarten routines.

Forms of language not classed as ‘German’ appear in relation to Adrian, another of the younger children, who ‘speaks Italian or Romanian’ (9) when he speaks. A low incidence of verbal communication, which furthermore is classed as ‘Italian’ or ‘Romanian’, is thus evaluated as less desirable than speaking ‘German’ within the institutional order. They also appear in relation to Judith’s argumentation about *Öffnung* not being ideal for ‘a kindergarten like theirs, with so many languages’ (12), whereby she identifies linguistic diversity as a characteristic of their kindergarten in opposition to implied, less linguistically diverse kindergartens, in which children might already know German. A difference is thus constructed between more and less linguistically diverse kindergartens, whereby the children’s ‘many languages’ do not appear as valuable in pedagogical practice, but only as a starting point for children’s German acquisition.

Judith’s and the other educators’ discussion of *Öffnung* relates to a principled pedagogical practice described in the provincial policy documents (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol 2008, 2017). It refers to the practice of ‘opening’ the social and spatial organisation of kindergarten groups and allowing children to choose where, with what and with whom they want to engage. As such, it is to be interpreted as an instantiation of one of the core tenets of German-language ECEC policy, i.e. to consider ‘children as active learners with the right to co-shape educational experiences and processes’.<sup>1</sup> This tenet is graphically represented at the centre of the Quality Framework (2017, 1), indicating how the policy text follows the axiom of child-centredness that is deeply ingrained in the field of ECEC. As Huf and Kluge (2021, 250) note, child-centeredness ‘implies the ideal of children’s self-control and self-direction towards making the right choices’. Judith’s argumentation represented in the fieldnote runs counter to this logic: She claims that the suspension of this practice, due to safety arrangements in relation with the Covid-19 pandemic, has been beneficial to the children’s acquisition of (Standard) German. In this manner, *Öffnung* as mandated by education policy, and German acquisition as mandated by language-in-education policy appear in a dilemmatic relation – and Judith seems to argue for the latter to take precedence.

### Working forwards and backwards: institutionalised end-of-year reflection and goal setting

In this section, I will first work forwards and then backwards in time to examine how institutionalised practices, and the associated genres, of end-of-year reflection and goal setting function as highly relevant language and education policy mechanisms. Figure 1 shows a timeline of the production of two recurring policy documents on the kindergarten scale in connection with a timeline of my ethnography, and thus provides a temporal orientation.

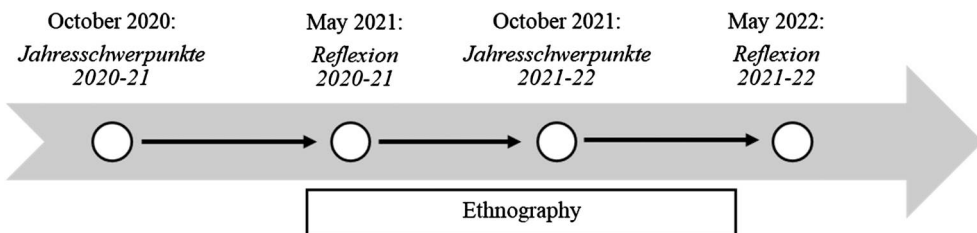


Figure 1. Timeline of policy documents on kindergarten level and ethnography.

As foreshadowed in the fieldnote in the previous section, the educators' conversation was taken up again some weeks later, when the writing of the *Reflexion* was on the agenda of another *Großteamsitzung* in mid-May, about a month before the end of the kindergarten year. Meanwhile, I had learned that this document was supposed to consist in a reflective evaluation of the educators' implementation of annual priority areas (*Jahresschwerpunkte*) for the development of pedagogical practice that had been set by the district directorate for all kindergartens in the district. Already a week prior to the meeting, the educators had decided that one of them, Elisabeth, would take notes of their discussion and later transpose these into a first draft. The other educators often described her as a skilled writer, and it was for this reason that she had been suggested for this task. It thus seemed that this kind of writing, meant to be read at the district scale, required more skill than other types of writing within the kindergarten.

The educators first discussed the first two of five annual priority areas, before moving on to the third entitled 'language and communication' in my fieldnotes, at which point we agreed that I would audio record the conversation. For about five minutes, the educators exchanged their impressions and observations in relation to this annual priority area. The excerpt below sets in when a structuring remark by the educator Barbara interrupts this exchange.

### **Großteamsitzung Transcript Excerpt**

- 
- 01 BAR jetz seimor do oftramol zan kriterium zwoa ghupft [gel] mitn morgenkreis und  
[so]  
**now we sometimes jumped to criterium two [right] with the morning circle and [such]**
- 02 SON [mhm]
- 03 ELI [jo]  
**[yes]**
- 04 BAR tuasch dus drnoch?  
**will you do it afterwards?**
- 05 ELI öh: (.) jo (-) i (wear) i (.) i glab des schoff i schun  
**Ehm (.) yes (.) I (will) I (.) I think I'll manage**
- 06 ELI na eigentlich do der der ding isch dor succus (.) dass ebn (.) huier durch  
wianiger öffnung äh oanfoch intensiver ä viele prozesse sein intensiviert  
[wordn]  
**no actually there the the thing is the essence (.) that this year because of less opening eh simply  
stronger eh many processes were [strengthened]**
- 07 BAR [genau]  
**[exactly]**
- 08 ELI und ebn öhm (.) spielprozesse ebn auf dor beziehungsebene  
**and ehm (.) play processes, you know, on the relationship dimension**
- 09 JUD mhm
- 10 ELI und donn a  
**and then also**
- 11 JUD auf dor sprochebene  
**on the language dimension**
- 12 ELI jo  
**yes**
- 13 JUL sprachlichen ebene a  
**language dimension, too**
-

By noting that they ‘jumped to criterium two’ (utterance 1), Barbara displays an orientation to the criteria outlined in the kindergarten’s *Jahresschwerpunkte* document that she has lying on her lap in that moment. Sonja and Elisabeth align with this orientation by agreeing with her observation (2 and 3). This ‘jumping’ between criteria is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, but in relation to the activity of producing a textual trace of the educators’ reflections: addressing Elisabeth, Barbara asks if she can ‘do it afterwards’, meaning if she can order their ideas and assign them to the respective criteria at a later point (4). By the hesitation markers in her response (5), Elisabeth positions herself as challenged by this task and tentatively asserts that she believes she will manage. She proceeds to attempt a summary of what was previously discussed over her next utterances (6, 8, 10). Elisabeth’s hesitation markers, as well as her repair of ‘simply stronger’ to ‘many processes were strengthened’ (6) might thereby not only point to a difficulty in summarising the discussion, but to an orientation to the written text she will produce. She seems to pre-formulate a draft in this interaction, adopting a register that is typical for that text genre, identifiable from her use of passivisation (*intensiviert wordn*), the high noun density (*Öffnung, Prozesse, Spielprozesse, Beziehungsebene*) and an associated approaching of Standard German uncommon in other interactions between educators (see Thoma and Platzgummer 2023). Barbara and Judith align with Elisabeth’s formulations (7, 9). Judith then offers ‘*auf der sprochebene*’ [on the language dimension] as a suggestion for completing them (11), with which Elisabeth aligns (12). The excerpt ends with Julia providing an alternative formulation for Judith’s suggestion, transforming the compound into a noun phrase and changing the realisation of the vowel in the syllable *sproch* to *sprach* (13), approaching Standard German.

This excerpt shows how the institutional language and education policy mechanisms of annual priority areas set on the district scale, and of a required submission of a reflective text by the kindergarten, produces a specific genre of reflection-for-writing, during which educators orient to different texts already written and yet to be written, and in so doing orient to different scales. Barbara’s structuring remark at the beginning of the excerpt, as well as their jointly proposed and ratified formulations in the second half of the excerpt, point to multiple scales both forwards and backwards in time: forwards, to Elisabeth drafting the reflective text, but also to its submission to the district director and backwards, to when they defined their annual pedagogical priorities, as manifested in the associated document, but also to the definition of the general annual priority areas on the district level. As in the fieldnote in the previous section, a suspension of the practice of *Öffnung* is discussed as having had positive effects on practices, relationships and educational processes in the kindergarten, of which the ‘language dimension’ (11,13) is only one element. With the *Reflexion* the educators finally submit to the district, the educators share these perspectives and thus negotiate language and education policy on the district scale.

The seemingly generic reference to *language* in this transcript extract is thereby indicative for the specific genre of educators’ reflection-for-writing. While specific references to ‘German’ often occurred on other occasions of reflective practice, as in the fieldnote in the previous section, there was a clear preference for a generic reference to ‘language’ in reflection-for-writing, the outcome of which was intended to be shared with the district. This preference was even stronger for the actual written *Reflexion*, which does not contain a single reference to *Deutsch* [German] but 10 instances of

reference to *language* in generic terms.<sup>2</sup> However, these references are only generic on a surface level: the educators do not refer to a development of the entirety of children's linguistic repertoires, or their own use of their entire linguistic repertoire, but specifically imply the use and development of forms associated with Standard German. The extract thus shows how the communicative genre of the *Reflexion* to be submitted to the district shapes the educators' talk during reflection-for-writing to approach the kinds of discourses found in policy documents.

To uncover the processes by which this happens, it is necessary to work backwards in time to examine how the educators relate to policy documents during annual goal setting. Having entered the field in April (see Figure 1), I was not able to observe the process by which the educators wrote the *Jahresschwerpunkte* that I observed them reflecting on in May. Therefore, I can only resort to a textual analysis of this document. However, I assisted the educators' goal setting meetings at the beginning of the next kindergarten year, which directed my attention to the many intertextual references in the educators' conversations, eventually finding their way into their local policy document: This included the *Reflexion*, the district annual priorities, as well as the two previously mentioned policy documents (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol 2008, 2017). The following is an extract from the kindergarten's priority area *Kommunikationsfreudige und medienkompetente Kinder* [Communicative and media literate children], which appears in this exact wording as an 'educational vision' in the Framework Guidelines (2008, 32).

### ***Jahresschwerpunkte Excerpt***

**Die Stärkung der sprachlichen Kompetenz zielt darauf ab, dass Mädchen und Jungen Interesse an Sprache sowie Freude am Sprechen und am Dialog erwerben.**

Die sprachliche Kompetenz ist ein wichtiges Mittel für die Kommunikation und die menschliche Entwicklung. Sie unterstützt wesentlich den Zugang zur Welt. Kommunikation durchzieht kindliches Handeln jederzeit und überall, wenn es mittels Sprache, Gestik, Mimik und Laute in Dialog mit seinem Umfeld tritt. Sprachliche Bildungsprozesse zu initiieren und zu fördern ist daher eine umfassende Aufgabe der pädagogischen Arbeit im Kindergarten.

Im Kindergarten Blumenstraße treffen Kinder mit unterschiedlichen sprachlichen Vorerfahrungen und verschiedenen Erst- und Zweitsprachen zusammen.

***[The strengthening of language competence aims for girls and boys to develop an interest in language and an enjoyment of speaking and dialogue.***

*Linguistic competence is an important tool for communication and human development. It significantly supports access to the world. Communication permeates children's actions always and everywhere when they enter into dialogue with their surroundings using language, gestures, facial expressions and sounds. Initiating and promoting language education processes is therefore a wide-ranging task of pedagogical practice in kindergarten.*

*At Flower-Street kindergarten, children with different language backgrounds and different first and second languages come together].*

*(translation by the author)*

Intertextual traces are easily identified in this extract: The boldened introductory statement strongly resembles similar statements within both the Framework Guidelines (2008, 33) and the Quality Framework (2017, 11), whereas the following paragraph summarises and recycles selected passages from the description of the corresponding educational vision in the Framework Guidelines (2008, 32–33). The last sentence, a

contextualisation within the concrete sociolinguistic make-up of Flower-Street kindergarten, cannot recycle policy texts from different scales. It does however adopt the term *Erstsprache* [first language] that repeatedly appears in the Framework Guidelines (Autonome Provinz Bozen – Südtirol 2008, 32–33), but is otherwise almost non-existent in the educators' discourse.

As Johnson (2011, 270) notes, 'copying and pasting, from one policy text to the next, is an essential aspect of the language policy genre', and the intertextual links that can be identified in analysis are especially productive in tracing policy processes. The extract above shows how the educators adopted the provincial policy documents' terminology and recycled some of their wordings to piece together their own kindergarten policy text that is not only meant for Flower-Street but also for the kindergarten district it is part of. By recycling elements from the two provincial policy texts, the educators make sure that the *Jahresschwerpunkte* document they produce conforms to the expectations of the district director and, more broadly, to institutional language and education policy. In this manner, they also appropriate policy discourses about 'language' that are generic on a surface level but implicitly refer to forms of Standard German when it comes to language education.

## Conclusion

This paper drew on a one-year sociolinguistic ethnography of a German-language kindergarten in the Italian province of South Tyrol to trace how language and education policies travel across spatiotemporal and institutional scales. The paper showed how institutionalised practices of goal setting, collegial reflection, and reflective and evaluative writing create feedback loops between the kindergarten and its corresponding district, bring provincial policy texts into focus on the level of the individual kindergarten and structure educators' discourses about their practice. Through a close attention to linguistic forms situated within a wider framework of social action, as is typical for (socio)linguistic ethnography (Copland and Creese 2017; Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018; Martin-Jones and da Costa Cabral 2018), the paper revealed that educators' discourses about language change depending on the scale they orient to. While they refer specifically to 'German' in reflective practices on the kindergarten scale, such references diminish in reflection-for-writing and are almost exclusively replaced by seemingly generic references to 'language' in documents submitted to the kindergarten district.

While it has already been observed that policy discourses about 'language' in ECEC are really about 'German' in German-dominant contexts (Blaschitz et al. 2021; Thomauske 2017; Zettl 2019), this paper reveals the processes by which such framings find their way into educators' discourses on the ground. Considering policies as 'constitut[ing] normative/moral frameworks that shape the discursive arrangement of daily routines' (Pérez-Milans 2018, 120), it becomes clear that educators can position themselves as 'good' educators by appropriating policy discourses in their goal-setting and reflective-evaluative texts. The institutionalisation of these goal-setting and evaluative practices thereby embeds neoliberal discourses of quality in ECEC into local ECEC practices (Gustafsson Nyckel et al. 2024). Ultimately, this paper underscores how language policies in ECEC reproduce hegemonic norms by implicitly equating 'language' with Standard German

and by considering the latter as the only legitimate language educational aim, marginalising other linguistic resources even in a regional context that is officially trilingual.

## Transcription conventions

(.)	micropause
(-)	short pause
(1)	pause of 1 s
UTterance	stressed utterance
[utterance]	overlapping utterances
U:tterance	lengthened syllable
((comment))	transcriber's comment
(utterance)	not clearly understandable utterance

## Notes

1. Author's translation of '*Kinder als aktiv Lernende mit dem Recht auf Mitgestaltung*', whereby the more concrete description of *Mitgestaltung* is based on the Framework Guidelines (2008).
2. E.g. Sprachanlässe [language opportunities], Sprachfortschritte [progress in language development] Sprachmomente [language moments], Sprachverhalten [language behaviour], sprachliche Interaktion [linguistic interaction].

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Andrea Leone-Pizzighella for her valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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