

Title of Project:

Language Policy and Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): A Case Study of an English-French Bilingual Crèche in Strasbourg

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Final Report**Motivation for the Research**

Through the years, language policy has been conceptualized in different ways to respond to divergent concerns and has been researched in different contexts, focusing on a variety of different issues. At the macro-level, nations turn to education where it is easier to regulate the use of language to promote social, political, and economic agendas (Ager, 1996; Ricento, 2006; Shohamy, 2006). Meanwhile, the language practices of educational practitioners have also been the subject to language policy studies. These bottom-up language approaches are undoubtedly influencing how language policy processes are conceptualized (Garcia, 2009a; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Hornberger, 2006; Menken & Garcia, 2010; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Although there has been a growing body of research on language policy studies conducted in both macro and micro educational settings, one setting has remained under-researched: early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Over the past ten years, evidence of the beneficial effects of ECEC has flourished. For instance, Burger's (2010) findings indicate some positive short-term and long-term effects on the cognitive development of socially disadvantaged children (see Burger for more details on the study). Hence, the need to understand the language planning and policy (LPP) processes in a crèche is imperative. Children at this stage are acquiring language and understanding their place in society through their interactions with the people who care for them (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000).

In France, where ECEC is aimed at two main groups of children: older children, aged 3-6 years and younger children, aged 0-3 years, most of the research has looked into the older group, which is under the supervision of the National Education system. It is this research gap that I aim to address in this doctoral thesis by conducting a language policy study in the context of an early years setting for very young children, aged 0-3 years. By studying a bilingual English-French parental crèche, a deeper understanding of the motivations and intricate processes of language policymaking is feasible. An in-depth study conducted in a small-scale setting provides opportunities to gain a deeper and more



detailed understanding of the issues relating to cases of this nature. As this crèche was created within the context of a monolingual nation-state and in a region (Alsace) whose linguistic history is complex, looking into its socio-political context is not only interesting but also beneficial.

Research Questions

The main research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How does a bilingual educational structure for early childhood work from the point of view of language policies?
2. What are the implications of the choice of the one person, one language (OPOL) policy on the practices of educational actors and families within the crèche in question?
3. What is the link between the declared bilingualism of the structure and the multilingualism of families?
4. Does the study of language choices in a context such as early childhood bring a new understanding of the concept of language education policy?

Research Methodology

To have a thorough understanding of the dynamics of implementing OPOL in this crèche, I employed an ethnographic research approach (Gobo, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Heath & Street, 2008; Heller, 2006, 2009; Levon, 2013; McCarty, 2011; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999; Wolcott, 1999). As previously mentioned, ethnography, with its plurality of methods, provides the researcher flexibility to adapt to the rigors and constraints of the community being studied. This allows access into the linguistic practices and lived realities of the participants.

Physical site visits and observations were done at least twice a week from September 2013 to June 2014 for a total of 110 hours during the crèche's first year of operation. There were 24 audio-recorded interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes to one and a half hours each; 45 sessions were recorded. Field notes and photos were taken throughout the nine-month observation period.

To understand the choices of languages implemented in the crèche, I used Spolsky's language policy definition (2004, 2007). Spolsky's definition was expanded by Bonacina (2012) and is known as the *Three Conceptualizations of LP* (1) Declared language policy, which is a concept proposed by Shohamy (2006: 68) to refer to the LP found in the management decisions of a community; (2) Practiced language policy, which is LP found in language practice (Bonacina, 2012), specifically to language pattern and language choice patterns (Spolsky, 2007:4); and (3) Perceived language policy, which is used to refer to the LP found in beliefs and ideologies. To study the link between the different agents, we ascribed to Johnson's (2009, 2011) definition of language policy and planning, which he describes as is multi-layered. This means that there are language policy processes happening at different levels (Ricento, 2006; Hornberger, 2006). The agency aspects were also considered to have a much more holistic view of the entire LPP process.



Summary of Findings

This research has yielded the following generalizations:

- The crèche is the result of a personal commitment by a group of families, wanting to create an educational structure that meets their needs (Caporal-Ebersold, 2018). Their choice of OPOL policy was to ensure continuity of their family language policies (Curdt-Christiansen 2013; King & Fogle 2013).
- Moreover, it should be emphasized that the language concerned, alongside French, is English, a dominant European language, which offers its speakers a certain linguistic and cultural capital. It is, therefore, clear that English has a very important place in this establishment. With French as the societal language, the founding members of the nursery emphasize a language policy that allows children to be adequately exposed to English.
- It should be noted that there are disproportionate claims between the perceptions of a language in relation to the generally accepted notions of OPOL policy. On the one hand, OPOL has been identified to ensure that parents' languages are maintained and passed on to their children; however, English and French are not the family languages in all cases. The linguistic reality of this ECEC setting is more complex and complicated than it was envisaged when it was created.
- It is impossible to rigidly apply the principle of language separation in an environment where multiple languages are spoken. The idea of having barriers between languages is not realistic but purely ideological. When individuals come in contact with another language or languages influences, changes in their linguistic patterns and practices are observed.
- In reality, language policies are negotiated (Menken & Garcia, 2010) in practice, which does not mean rejecting, challenging, resisting, or ignoring a linguistic policy originally identified, but rather means that actors reinterpret the policies to suit the situation of interaction. It is reflected in their practices to satisfy the needs of communication in a given situation.
- The extent through which professionals interpret, implement, and negotiate the language policies vary according to their knowledge and available resources—what they believe, their motives, their past experiences, and their agency.
- OPOL does not prevent and cannot prevent bi- or multilingual people from using their own way of living their multilingualism and thus from using their languages (languaging).
- Concrete examples of language interactions in the crèche show great fluidity in the use of languages, as well as many examples of phenomena described today in terms of "translanguaging."
- In practice, bi-or multilingual professionals use their language resources depending on whom they are speaking to. With monolinguals, they are intentional with their language choice. Moreover, because of their awareness of their linguistic mandate, they deliberately use only one language. On the other hand, with fellow bilinguals, they do not make choices all the time. The nature of the interaction, the interlocutors or the context make them use the other language and, therefore, language bilingually.
- "Translanguaging" needs further investigation in an ECEC context where children are acquiring language through multiples codes. Its pedagogical possibilities (Garcia, 2018) certainly should be exposed to professionals to prevent them from feeling guilty when they translanguag

themselves and more importantly to make sure they do not forbid such practices in young bi/plurilingual children.

- When the well-being of children is at stake, it is not uncommon for a declared language policy to no longer be meaningful.
- The decision to strictly adopt a language policy, such as the "one person, one language" reveals the underlying existence of a "persistent monolingual ideology," which permeates the whole of French society and the French education system. Although the nursery is outside the traditional school setting, widespread notions, such as language purity, language separation, and the need for "native speakers" as referents or language educators, are ubiquitous. These beliefs influence the linguistic policies of many institutions and of the crèche in question (Caporal-Ebersold & Young, 2016).

Implications

As the aim of my research is to comprehensively describe how a bilingual early years structure manages several languages (for in reality the setting is multilingual) potentially, the following stakeholders will benefit from it:

- For the scientific community, understanding language policies and practice at the level of ECEC will exemplify the complexity of language choices made by multilingual families and ask the question of how educational institutions can offer continuity or not to such family language policies and for the benefit of whom, the children, their families or the city or state institutions funding early childhood education.
- For policymakers seeking effective, creative and practical ways to deliver quality early childhood education and care, this research highlights the link between bilingualism and multilingualism. This crèche has chosen to be bilingual in English French while all families are multilingual and speak languages not represented by the language choices of this bilingual setting. We can, therefore, ask the question of how the language needs of all the children can be met and whether priority should be given to dominant languages of power, such as French and English, at the expense of less powerful languages.
- For early childhood service providers in general, this study should provide a better appreciation of the importance and complexity of implementing a language policy whose central purpose is the acquisition and harmonious development of plurilingualism in a multilingual context. It is crucial to understand that language policy is multi-layered and in practice can only be flexible if all languages are to be given the same status and value in an early education setting.
- For the parent association, which lies at the heart of this project, this research could be a vehicle for them to re-evaluate their initial objectives and goals as far as bilingualism and multilingualism are concerned and, thus, it could serve as a framework to discuss the extent to which they want their children to be exposed from the youngest age to two or more languages both in the family and in the ECEC setting. Regarding the OPOL policy, the parents could be made to understand the fact that there are always gaps between policy and practice whether at home or in an educational setting, and that children should be given bilingual models of interactions to develop a harmonious bilingual identity, rather than examples of language practices, which forbid one language or the other for the sake of avoiding translanguaging. The most recent research on bi/multilingualism today has shown on the contrary that translanguaging is regarded today as a legitimate practice for multilingual individuals.



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