Picking up pre-school children: an interface between monolingual policy and multilingual praxis

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More than 15% of all pre-school children in Sweden come from bi/multilingual families. The project this study is a part of studies the relationship between national, institutional and family language policy. Language policy is understood broadly as explicit policy and language ideologies, beliefs and attitudes of teachers, parents and children. This paper will present some early findings on the negotiation and enactment of language policy in this sense by children in a multilingual pre-school environment.

This work on has been carried out in an English-medium pre-school, where children aged 3-4 from a range of multilingual (and a few monolingual) backgrounds, spend the greater part of their waking hours. The school as a whole is bilingual (Swedish and English) but the pre-school’s policy puts English foremost. English is prescribed and used almost exclusively by the staff and also by many of the children. However, the staff does not interfere if the children use languages other than English at the pre-school.

In this paper, we will present results from the analysis of observations and video-recordings of children being picked up from pre-school by their caregivers. The pre-school’s monolingual English policy is explicitly intended to apply also to parents when they are in the school building. The analysis here will focus on parents who have Swedish as their strongest language and different ways they comply with the pre-school’s language policy. The children show their agency and language ideology in their use of language while being picked up. The interaction shows how the ideologies surrounding these two languages in the school as a whole and in the larger society are reflected, challenged, negotiated and developed when family and school language policies come in contact with each other.

Keywords: family language policy, small children, multilingualism.