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Frames within frames: Research, education and play in linguistic ethnographies of early childhood education and care

Marie Rickert^{a,*}, Verena Platzgummer^{b,c,1}^a Radboud University, the Netherlands^b Eurac Research, Italy^c University of Galway, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how teachers, children, and researchers jointly construct different definitions of a situation, i.e. establish different frames during fieldwork in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Drawing on two distinct linguistic ethnographies, one in Limburg/the Netherlands and one in South Tyrol/Italy, we zoom in on how we as ethnographers and our participants enact a variety of frames across situations, focusing on the frequently reoccurring research frames, educational frames and play frames. Our analysis shows that these different frames are constantly layered in our interactions in the field, and that dynamic researcher positionings emerge as a result. This insight challenges the common practice to break down researcher positionings into one static role in academic discourse. As a meaningful alternative, the paper suggests a detailed account of the interactional co-construction of frames with participants, accompanied with insights from the researchers' lived experience.

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) constitutes a relevant institutional site where children engage with peers and educators. Delving into children's and teachers' day-to-day interactions, ethnography has proven to be a fruitful methodological approach to get insights into situated social practice in ECEC (e.g., [Albon & Huf, 2021](#); [Corsaro & Molinari, 2008](#); [Tobin, 2005](#)). One of the core dimensions of this approach is to spend time and build relations with the research participants ([Hammersley, 2006](#)). Hence, the researchers become part of their field sites, requiring them to position themselves within the social relations they co-create. Ethnographers of education and of childhood have chosen different strategies in this process: While some have tried to reduce the distance from children by taking up a 'least-adult' role ([Mandell, 2003](#)), others became 'researcher-teachers' ([Hill & Wood, 2019](#)) or opted for underscoring their third-party positioning as an observer outside an imagined teacher-student binary ([van de Weerd, 2020](#)).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: marie.rickert@ru.nl (M. Rickert).

¹ These authors contributed equally.

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When we, the authors of this paper, embarked on our own ethnographic research projects in ECEC, we quickly noticed that our positionings were not as clearcut as frequently described in method sections of ethnographic papers about ECEC. We found ourselves attuned to a wide variety of aspects including children's play and learning, teachers' monitoring and our researcher integrity. At the same time, our interaction partners – children, teachers and parents – engaged with us in different, sometimes unexpected ways that also subverted how we wanted to position ourselves, e.g., when we were explaining research tools like notebooks and video cameras.

While reflection on research positionality has become somewhat commonplace in qualitative research, it is still often restricted to researchers "providing a 'shopping list' of characteristics and stating if these are shared or not with participants" (Folkes, 2023, p. 1301). Such positionality statements have been criticised for being highly performative and ultimately shallow in terms of actual researcher reflexivity (King, 2024). Therefore, recent work (Folkes, 2023; King, 2024; Rose, 2020) has called for accounts of the dynamicity of researcher positioning that also elaborate on the ways in which these positionings become relevant in the research process. These calls resonated with us as we were trying to describe how we positioned ourselves, and how we were positioned, within our research in ECEC sites.

In our understanding, Goffman's notion of *frames*, as discursively established "definitions of a situation" (Goffman, 1974, p. 11), can provide a useful heuristic for grasping our positionings in the field. In this paper, we respond to calls for deeper research reflexivity by interactionally examining how we co-produced frames in relation to the ECEC sites, our research participants, and our own socialization as researchers. While the notion of frames mainly relates to interactionally observable accounts of what people do in interaction, the present study also draws on ethnographic knowledge: Since we, the authors and researchers, are part of the described interactions, the analysis benefits from enriching what is interactionally observable with insights into the ethnographers' *lived experience* (Berry, 2011).

Recognizing ethnographic research in ECEC as a highly complex social process in which the researchers' learning about the ECEC institution entangles with situated social and cultural ECEC practice, this paper addresses the following question: *How are researcher positionings in ECEC created through the interactional establishment of different frames?* The paper aims to advance our understanding of how ethnographers' and other fieldworking researchers' dynamic positionalities can emerge in the field and contribute to a discussion of the ways in which they can conceptualise and analyse them. Thereby, we hope to pave the way for more ethnographers and researchers in social interaction to include such reflections throughout their analysis, which adds to transparency and trustworthiness of research, to more nuanced discussions of research ethics as well as to knowledge creation generally.

2. Mapping perspectives on education

2.1. Ethnography in education

Ethnography has been widely used to study education as cultural and social practice. At its core, ethnography is "studying at first-hand what people do and say in particular contexts", achieved through long term fieldwork with participant observation and an analytical dimension (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4). Accessing institutions and conducting research with children poses ethical challenges. Amongst others, researchers need to consider power relations when negotiating access, establish informed consent, and consider assent with children (Albon & Rosen, 2013). The reality of ethnographic fieldwork is often unpredictable, leading ethnographers to have to engage in ethical decision-making on the spot, in interrelation with the participants (Dennis, 2018). This research reality evokes a tension with regards to the thorough planning and considerations that are required not only for academic rigor but also for the approval of ethics boards (Busher & Fox, 2019).

Linguistic ethnography distinguishes itself from ethnography by the central tenet that social life and language, conceived as a social practice, reciprocally shape one another. The term comprises "a number of more specific traditions that share a commitment to putting linguistics and ethnography together to try to understand the social processes that we are involved in" (Rampton, 2007, p. 599). It does so by combining "close detail of local action and interaction as embedded in a wider social world" (Creese, 2010, p. 140).

Linguistic ethnographies have shown how conducting ethnography in educational settings includes the development of an understanding of the respective institutional culture, including language practices. For example, Blommaert and Jie (2010) observed that rules were especially enacted during Jie's linguistic ethnographic fieldwork in primary schools in Beijing when the principal was present as an additional observer, leading to performative behaviour both by students and teachers in class (described in Blommaert & Jie, 2010, fieldwork conducted by Jie). Jaspers (2014) observed regular sanctioning of multilingual language practices by teachers in a high school in Antwerp, with teachers admonishing the students to speak the medium of instruction, Dutch. Such an understanding of recurring practices is relevant for the analysis since they can provide contextualisation for specific observations. At the same time, the exploration of the institutional context matters for the generation of data: For example, Jie was initially often accompanied by the principal when doing participant observation in classes, leading to seemingly rehearsed classes (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Jaspers (2014) noticed how several pupils were uncomfortable with the idea of having interviews with him in Dutch, and he surprised students by speaking French on the playground.

Getting to know the institutional culture, thus, enables the ethnographer to make informed choices as to how to engage in interactions, e.g. to choose to align with language policies or to counter them. This process has consequences for the ways the ethnographer, who falls outside of the standard category of ‘student’ and ‘teacher’, becomes part of the field and co-creates relations. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) recommend that ethnographers position themselves as a ‘friend’ and refrain from engaging in authoritative practices like sanctioning to gain children’s trust. Many ethnographers have adopted different versions of a ‘friend’ role, while still acknowledging cognitive differences and differences in body size. William Corsaro, for example, became ‘Big Bill’ for the children during his fieldwork in the United States and took the position of an ‘incompetent adult’ during his fieldwork in Italy due to his lack of Italian skills (Corsaro, 2003). Also aiming to overcome differences between adults and children in institutional settings, Mandell (2003) defined the role of the ‘least-adult’ for herself. This role heavily relies on participating in shared activities and play with the children, going as far as to indicate to children that the ethnographer cannot perform adult tasks like tying shoelaces for them.

Besides building rapport with children, ethnographic researchers in ECEC are also dependent on building rapport with teachers, not the least because these are important mediators in researchers’ roles in educational settings. For example, teachers frequently control how ethnographers are introduced to the children as highlighted by Gansen (2017), who notes the varying introductions she received in different settings. These ranged from being labeled ‘a visitor’ to ‘Ms. Heidi,’ and sometimes not being explicitly introduced at all. Gansen noticed that a lack of explicit introduction to the children led to difficulties in building rapport with them. Throughout fieldwork, she established a ‘middle role’ for herself: Unlike Corsaro and Mandell, who foreground a friend role with children over one with adults, she positioned herself as a friend both to teachers and children. She did so through joint play with children but also informal chatting with teachers, e.g., about parents, and giving them a hand with non-authoritative adult tasks like zipping coats. This strategy is in line with more recent approaches from the posthumanist and new materialist field that highlight the malleable character of the researchers’ roles and suggest practices of *being with* children (Huf & Kluge, 2021). Such practices can take different forms throughout fieldwork where a continuous negotiation of interdependences emerge. This approach acknowledges that any research relationship takes shape in a relational space, never being merely dyadic (Albon & Rosen, 2013).

2.2. Frames in interaction

In this paper, we apply a notion of ‘frames’ in order to examine dynamic aspects in interactions between teachers, children and ourselves as ethnographers in ECEC. The interactional notion of ‘frame’ goes back to Bateson (Bateson, 1953, 2017), who distinguished between serious frames and play frames, achieved through talk-in-action. As shown by Coates (Coates, 2007), interaction partners co-create switches between serious and playful frames, for example to lighten tension. Language practices within such a playframe, she argues, often include overlapping speech, co-constructed utterances, repetition, laughter, and an increased use of metaphor. Goffman, who has later elaborated the concept of frames as discursively established “definitions of a situation” (Goffman, 1974, p.11), argued that different frames can operate simultaneously in a single interaction. He refers to this as ‘layered’ or ‘laminated’ frames, whereby he uses both terms as somewhat synonymously.

Gordon (2008) extends Goffman’s idea and distinguishes between ‘reframing’ and ‘blending’ of frames. Reframing intends the process by which interaction partners transform frames sequentially, whereas blending refers to the simultaneous creation of layered frames. By using this conceptual toolkit, she analyses family interaction and demonstrates how ‘play’ frames and ‘work’ frames (understood as parenting activities like dressing a child, reading etc.) are interwoven in different ways. Albeit without distinguishing between sequential and simultaneous layering of frames, Pursi (2019) showed that children and teachers co-construct layered institutional frames of play, care and education in teacher-child interaction in ECEC by jointly building on each other’s interactional orientations.

In ethnographic research in ECEC, ethnographers become part of their research fields, which might invoke new dynamics relevant for the co-construction of frames. Since the meaning of an utterance, an action, or an event is dependent on how they have been framed within the specific activity, framing can support the analyst in interpreting, understanding, and proceeding with the activity. Re-analysing data from our respective ethnographies in the light of this perspective, it is crucial to take into account how not only the researcher, but also the participants contribute to the establishment of the researcher’s positionings and the definition research situation within the scope of the action at hand. We will develop this aspect further within our own analysis.

3. Methodology: combining two ethnographies

The present study is based on two distinct ethnographies about language practices in ECEC centers (Table A).

Marie conducted 4.5 months of linguistic ethnographic fieldwork in a preschool in a small city in the south of the Netherlands between autumn 2020 and spring 2021. Her fieldwork encompassed participant observation as well as audio- and video-recordings of naturally-occurring interaction. During participant observations, Marie also engaged in informal chats with both the teachers and children. The preschool was attended by up to 16 children between two and four years old, who were taken care of by the two main teachers. The children were present between 8.30 h and 12.00 h and Marie made sure to arrive earlier and leave later to help the

Table A
Overview of combined ethnographies.

	Marie	Verena
Location	Pre-school in the province of Limburg, the Netherlands	German-language preschool in the province of South Tyrol, Italy
Participants	-in total 23 children between 2 and 4 y.o. (no more than 16 present at the same time) -two pre-school teachers	- in total 26 children between 2.5 and 6 y.o. (no more than 20 present at the same time) - 6 preschool teachers (all 6 present for teacher meetings, only 3 present at the same time with children)
Data generation	4.5 months of linguistic ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation, audio- and video recordings	9 months of linguistic ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation and audio recordings over a period of 12 months (mid April-mid April)
Data	-Observations: ± 170 h -Field notes: ± 50 pages -Audio Recordings: ± 100 h -Video recordings: ± 15 h	-Observations: ± 475 h -Field notes: ± 200 pages -Audio Recordings: ± 8 h of teacher meetings ± 46 h of interactions with children
Research focus	Children's participation in light of linguistic diversity	Language ideologies, policies and practices in linguistically diverse but institutionally German-language early childhood education

teachers prepare or tidy up the rooms and establish and maintain personal rapport with them. Marie's main research focus was participation in light of linguistic diversity (Rickert, 2024). The present study goes beyond a focus on children's participation and considers how the ethnographic researcher becomes part of the field mediated by, amongst other, language practices.

Verena, in turn, conducted a sociolinguistic ethnography of linguistic diversity in an institutionally German-speaking preschool in the Italian province of South Tyrol. Her fieldwork included participant observation over the course of one year (April 2021–April 2022) in one group of a preschool in an urban area in the province. The group consisted of 18–20 children, who were between two and a half and six years old. During a regular preschool day, one main teacher and one or two additional teachers were present. A typical fieldwork day started around 7:30 h, when parents or other relatives dropped off the children, and ended around 15:00 h when the children were picked up. In addition to recording participant observation in fieldnotes, Verena also made audio recordings of interactions in the preschool, held a group discussion with the teachers, and interviewed parents. Verena's ethnography aimed to uncover how tensions played out around the diverse linguistic repertoires of children and the institutional definition of the preschool as German-speaking. This language-ideological question has been discussed elsewhere (Thoma & Platzgummer, 2023) and is only relevant in the margins for this paper's exploration of frames as established in ethnographic research in ECEC.

Marie received ethical approval for the project by Maastricht University's Ethics Review Committee Inner City Faculties. Due to the lack of a similar board at Verena's institution, Verena's study did not undergo an institutional ethical review process. However, Verena carefully considered ethical aspects of the research and was in constant exchange with colleagues about these. In both ethnographies, parents of participating children were informed of the study in writing as well as in oral conversations ahead of time and were asked to provide their consent. Only the children whose parents have provided consent are included in the study. Consent was also sought from the teachers involved, and the anonymity of both children and teachers is ensured through the use of pseudonyms and through the omission of information such as the location of the respective early childhood education institution.

As always in ethnographic research, ethical questions can never be settled once and for all in the planning stages ahead of data generation, but will keep emerging during fieldwork, requiring us to practice 'situated ethics' (Simons & Usher, 2012). For us, this entailed aiming to make sure that children were comfortable with our presence and data generation. For this reason, we often asked children whether we could join their peer interactions and paid attention to any kind of discomfort on the side of the children, following which we, e.g., stopped recording or withdrew from the situation. Within our projects, consent can therefore not be understood as a formalized, single-moment event represented by an informed consent form, but it is made relevant throughout the course of the project (Huber & Imeri, 2021). Moreover, it cannot be neglected that certain power relations emerged between us as adult researchers and the children. Through constant reflections in fieldnotes and through exchange with colleagues, we aimed to stay aware of such ethical issues and to find ethically suitable ways of tackling them, e.g., excluding certain excerpts or adequately contextualizing them like we do in the present study.

Sharing linguistic ethnographic research interests, we, the two authors of this study, regularly exchanged experiences and discussed our data during and after the respective fieldwork phases. A reoccurring theme during these discussions was the topic of researcher positionality. We both noticed that the ways in which we engaged with children and teachers varied throughout a fieldwork day, depending on our and the children's and teachers' interactional orientations. During reflexive practices, we each identified 'key incidents' (Emerson, 2004) which made us aware of our shifting researcher positionalities. Key incidents are "a strategy that honors and grows out of field researchers' working sense that their analyses are touched off by and tied to particular in-the-field events or observations that stimulate or implicate original lines of inquiry and conceptualization" (Emerson, 2004, p. 427). Following Emerson,

key incidents do not need to be noteworthy to those that are involved, but they immediately capture the researchers' interest linked to "an intuitive sense of analytic possibility [rather] than an explicit theoretical proposition" (2004, p. 439). The identification of our own key incidents related to researcher positionality is thus closely tied to our own development of ethnographic sensitivities.

Joint analysis made clear that how we became part of the field in these situations pertained to a joint establishment of "definitions of a situation" (Goffman, 1974), i.e., frames. Through iterative discussion and analysis of a variety of such 'key incidents', three frames that commonly manifested throughout both of our ethnographic research projects and entangled with our processes of becoming part of the field, became clear: research frames, educational frames and play frames. These were present in different ways throughout several of the collected 'key incidents'. We subsequently selected those that we deemed most illustrative of these frames and of their common overlaps and laminations for discussion in the present paper.

4. Enacting different frames during ethnographic research in ECEC

4.1. Enacting research frames

During fieldwork, both ethnographers Marie and Verena noticed an interest in research tools such as notebooks and audio recorders on the side of the children. This observation aligns with the experiences of other ECEC ethnographers. For instance, Gansen's notebook acted as a conversation starter (2017), and children drew in it, which allowed the ethnographer and the children to build rapport. Similarly, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) emphasised that children took ownership of their notebooks by drawing in them and occasionally touching them with paint-covered hands. This resulted in researchers being unable to fully decipher their own notes, a demonstration of the children's agency.

During her fieldwork, Marie conducted audio- and video-recordings alongside writing fieldnotes. While her notebook was rarely commented on by the teachers and children, the small video-camera more frequently became the subject of negotiation. This was also the case in Extract 1, the first time that Marie set up the camera outside of circle time, namely in the so-called 'fruit break'. At the beginning of this extract, teacher Helena and the children sit on chairs and are eating fruit from boxes they brought from home, while Marie installs her camera and is standing beside the table.

Extract 1.1:

- 1 Helena (filmpjes maken) om te kijken hoe goed wij kunnen eten. Juffrouw wil dadelijk ALLEEN maar lege bakjeszien! Hé juffrouw? ((gazes down into fruit box)) Dat is het toch hè?
(take videos) to see how well we can eat. Miss wants to see ONLY empty boxes in a bit! Right Miss? ((gazes down into fruit box)) That's what it is, right?
- 2 Author A
- 3 Author A Jullie mogen goed etenja (1) maar ik wil het ook nog later eens bekijken, ik wil een boekje schrijven,
You may eat well yes (1) but I also want to watch it again later, I want to write a book

While Marie sets up the camera, teacher Helena seemingly explains the purpose of the camera to the children. Instead of referring to the actual reason for recording, the teacher instrumentalizes both the recording device and the researcher to enforce a normative element of the fruit break, namely that the children finish the fruit from their containers: [Marie] "(take videos) to see how good we can eat. Miss wants to see only empty boxes in a bit!" (line 1). In so doing, she reframes the research frame of recording interaction as pertaining to the main educational frame of food socialization (see also Harte et al., 2019). While teacher Helena monitors the children's reaction to her statement through gaze, most children direct their attention to Marie and the camera (l. 2), requiring her to take the next turn. With the first part of her reaction "You may eat well, yes", she attempts to navigate a conflict of loyalty with the teacher to avoid sabotaging the teacher's normative aim. Indicating her being overwhelmed by the teachers' unexpected instrumentalization of the research tool, a 1 s break follows before Marie adds the actual reason for her recording: "but I also want to watch it again later. I want to write a book" (l. 3). In so doing, she aligns with the normative educational frame suggested by the teacher but re-establishes its layering with a frame oriented to research, aiming to maintain her research integrity. In her lived experience, she recalls the importance of adhering to ethical principles of transparency. What follows in the interaction (Extract 1.2) shows that Marie, now ambiguously supported by the teacher, tries to fully shift to an enactment of the research frame. While she aims to reclaim her positionality as a researcher, in contrast to that of an evaluative/educational actor, this positioning gets challenged by two children, Ilya and Felix:

Extract 1.2:

- 4 Helena .hhhh? Juffrouw gaat eenboekje schrijven, komen we allemaal
in te staan
.hhhh? Miss will write a book, we'll all be in it
- 5 Author A Hoe we spelen, en hoe we-
How we play, and how we-
- 6 Ilya °kan niet eten°
°cannot eat°
- 7 Author A [lezen en zingen]
[read and play]
- 8 Helena [praten]
[speak]
- 9 Author A ja
yes
- 10 Helena Wat wij hier allemaal doen
all the things we do here
- 11 Author A Vooral ja vooral hoe we praten en zingen ja
mainly, yes, mainly how we speak and sing, yes
- 12 Felix en ook en ook dat we niet goed eten
and also, and also that we don't eat well
- ((Author A sits down at the table, opposite of Felix))
- 13 Author A Nee: dat vind ik niet zo, ja:, dat vind ik niet zo erg
No: I don't find that so, ye:s, I don't find that so bad
- 14 Helena ((directed to child Alina)) vööl te vööl
Much too much
- 15 Author A daar let ik niet zo op
I am not paying much attention to that
- 16 Helena goad bieten
bite well
- 17 Author A Bij dit boekje let ik daar niet zo op, Felix
With the book, I don't pay much attention to that, Felix

Extract 1.2 shows that Helena goes along in the orientation to a research frame, with her and Marie jointly adding subjects and actions of interest for Marie's book, such as 'we' (l. 4), play (l. 5), read (l. 7), speak (l. 8) and generally 'all the things we do here' (l. 10). The children's contributions to the interaction, however, still indicate an orientation to the presumed normative function of the camera (control of food intake), and thereby, to the normative frame that had previously been suggested by teacher Helena: Child Ilya exclaims 'cannot eat' (l. 6) and later on, child Felix adds to the potential content of the book "and also that we don't eat well" (l. 12). In an effort to reframe the situation and negate the positioning of an evaluator imposed on her by the children, Marie sits down at the table and clarifies twice that she would not pay so much attention to the children's eating (l. 13, 17). The teachers themselves usually sit on different chairs than the children, so that Marie's sitting down on a 'children's chair' could be seen as another resource for her reframing and sign of her distinct positioning. There is no direct reaction from the children. At the same time, teacher Helena instructs child Alina about her food, which underscores the educational frame and normative dimension of the fruit break as a site of socialization. In her interaction with child Alina, teacher Helena switches to Limburgish, indicating the participation framework of a one-on-one conversation as commonly done through code choice of the regional minority language Limburgish in ECEC in Dutch Limburg (Rickert, 2023).

This example from Marie's fieldwork shows that the teacher, children and Marie contribute to the negotiation of Marie's positioning. Whereas Marie mainly enacts a research frame, her positioning remains ambiguous against the inclusion of herself and her research tool within the normative educational frame, as established by the teacher and maintained by Ilya and Felix. The research tool of the camera, later on represented by the 'book', became a central object of negotiation of different frames linked to Marie's positionality. This is also the case in the following extract from Verena's fieldwork.

Here, a different research tool – Verena's notebook – becomes an object that mediates the negotiation of different frames in the context of Verena's research in the ECEC institution. The extract stems from an audio recording during daily morning circle time from

Verena's last day of fieldwork. The fact that Verena will no longer visit the preschool is addressed by the teacher Elisabeth before the extract sets in. While all children attending the preschool are present during this extract, particularly 6-year-old Francesco and 5-year-old Iesha contribute to this conversation.

Extract 2:

- 1 Elisabeth Author B (.) äh (-) was MACHST du dann jetzt (-) wenn du nicht mehr in den kindergarten kommst
Author B (.) ehm (-) what will you DO now (-) if you no longer come to kindergarten?
- 2 (1.3)
- 3 Author B .hhh also ich-
.hhh well I
- 4 Author B ihr kennt das ja ihr habt das ja alle gesehen oder dieses BUCH;
you know this right you have all seen this, right, this BOOK?
- 5 Francesco ja;
yes
- 6 Author B da hab ich immer GANZ viel geschrieben gell?
and there I always wrote a LOT right?
- 7 Author B (--) SCHAUT mal;
(--) LOOK!
- 8 Author B (1.2) DA da <<laughing> hat mal jemand etwas gezeichnet>,
(1.2) HERE here <<laughing> somebody drew something at some point>
- 9 (---)
- 10 Francesco die meli[ssa];
Meli[ssa]
- 11 Author B [und da hab] ich immer GANZ viel geschrieben (--) wenn ich hier war;
[and there I] always wrote a LOT when I was here
- 12 Author B (--) und jetzt (-) jetzt ist das BUCH (.) einfach (-) VOLL; (-)
-) and now, now the BOOK is simply FULL.
- 13 (1.3)
- 14 Author B schaut;
Look.
- 15 Author B (--) DA ist die letzte seite;
(-) THERE is the last page
- 16 Elisabeth O:: ((laughs))
- 17 Author B und jetzt ist das buch VOLL,
and now the book is FULL
- 18 Author B (--) und jetzt komm ich NICHT mehr,
(-) and now I WON'T be coming anymore
- 19 Author B (1.2) und gehe ins büRO und LEse das buch,
(1.2) and I will go to the OFfice and READ the book
- 20 Author B (1.1) und schaue,
(1.1) and I will look
- 21 Author B (.) was haben die kinder geMACHT im kindergarten,
(.) what did the children DO in kindergarten?
- 22 Author B (--) hm:::
- 23 Author B (--) und was hat die <<:-> elisabeth gemacht im kindergarten>,
(-) and what did Elisabeth do in kindergarten?
- 24 Iesha o [julia],
or [Julia]
- 25 Author B [hm:::]
- 26 Author B (---) oder die JULia,
(---) or Julia
- 27 ((several children propose other names, not comprehensible))

In line 1, Elisabeth asks Verena what she will do now that she will no longer come to kindergarten. This question is a performance, asked for the benefit of the children present. Verena subsequently does not reply directly but refers to an object that she constructs as familiar to her audience: "this book". This familiarity is confirmed by one of the children, Francesco (l. 5). Placing stress on the

intensifier ‘ganz’, Verena underlines her repeated activity of writing into this book, constructing this as shared knowledge with her use of the discourse marker ‘gell’ (Zifonun et al., 1997, p. 385) (l. 6). With the imperative ‘look’, she directs the children’s attention to the object (l. 7). In the longer break that follows, the turning of pages is audible, before Verena comments on drawings in the book (l. 8). Her laughter that accompanies this comment might signal that drawings would not be what one would expect in this book, or that they are not what she intended to demonstrate. In fact, Verena ignores Francesco’s suggestion of a child that could be the creator of the drawings (l. 10) and reiterates her activity of writing into the book at the preschool (l. 11). In the following lines (l. 12–17), Verena establishes the fact that the book’s pages are now filled as a consequence of her activity, again referring to the book and most specifically its last page as material proof (l. 15). When Verena states that she will no longer come to the preschool (l. 18), she implies a direct relation with her notebook being filled. Only then does she address Elisabeth’s original question (l. 19), underlining both a change in location and a change in activity – from the preschool to the office, from writing into the notebook to reading it. In the following lines, Verena describes this new activity: She will ask what the children did in kindergarten (l. 21) and what teacher Elisabeth did in the kindergarten (l. 23). By her non-lexical vocalisation ‘hm’ after each of these questions (l. 22; 25) she performs a certain pensiveness, showing that she will not merely find the answers to these questions in her notebook, but will have to think about them, too. The children seem to take up Verena’s questions as a sort of game, suggesting other teachers (l. 24; 27) or children (l. 27) as potential candidates about which Verena might ask the same questions.

The excerpt is a clear attempt on Verena’s end to make the process of doing ethnographic research accessible to the children who participated in it. Instead of merely replying that she will now spend her days in an office, Verena launches into a longer narrative designed to make the children relate to her research activities. In so doing, Verena works at discursively establishing a research frame in which the researcher would explain the research process to her participants. The notebook, in this excerpt, is deployed as the material trace of the research process, a tangible object that the children can experience and relate to. As Verena positions herself as a researcher and aims at establishing a research frame, however, she adopts the discursive style that is typical for teachers in morning circle time in this preschool and in ECEC institutions more generally (Heinzel, 2019). Her intonation phrases are short and almost theatrical, especially as she describes what she will be doing in her office. This orientation is also taken up by the children, who join in on her narrative. In doing so, they enact practices that are not only common for circle time interactions in this specific preschool but are also postulated by pedagogical concepts such as sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). As Verena prepares participants for the end of her fieldwork, educational frames thus blend with research frames.

4.2. Enacting educational frames

As resulted from the previous section, educational frames were simultaneously present as research frames were constructed by the two ethnographers, at times jointly with teachers and children. In this section, we will turn to instances in which we ourselves were not actively constructing research frames, but these were simultaneously present as we were enacting educational frames in the ECEC centres. The following vignette from Verena’s fieldnotes is a case in point.

Vignette 1:

It’s early morning, mid-June. Today is the last day of kindergarten before the summer break. Some children and parents are already there, waiting outside for the teacher to open the door and let the children (and myself) in at the first entrance time. As the teacher Elisabeth opens the door, the children run towards her, some already disappearing behind her into the kindergarten. Holding the door open, Elisabeth addresses the parents: “Heute singen die Kinder um 12:20 Uhr ein Ständchen” [At 12:20 today, the children will be singing a serenade (*translated from Standard German*)]. Not directed at anybody in particular, Daniel’s father asks: “Cos’ha detto?” [What did she say? (*translated from Standard Italian*)] I move closer to him and translate what Elisabeth said for him into Italian.

The vignette stems from another special day in the course of Verena’s fieldwork – not her last day, but the last day before the 3-month summer break of the preschool. To mark this special occasion, the teachers taught the children a song about friends parting, which they planned to have the children sing to their parents at the end of the preschool day. Announcing this serenade is crucial, as it will take place before the usual pick-up time, and so parents who do not know about it would miss the serenade. In line with the institutional language policy of German-language preschools (Thoma & Platzgummer, 2023), according to which all institutional communication with parents is done in Standard German irrespective of the parents’ linguistic repertoires, Elisabeth makes this essential announcement in German, the language of the institution. As a consequence, Daniel’s father, originally from Albania and fluent in Italian, does not understand it. Respecting the institutional language policy, he does not ask Elisabeth to explain in Italian, but rather asks directed at the other adults in the vicinity: “What did she say?” In the end, it is Verena who translates Elisabeth’s announcement for him. However, before she does so, she ‘move[s] closer to him’.

Overall, a clear institutional frame is established in this interaction, with the teacher making a public announcement to the parents present in front of the preschool. Within discourses of neoliberalisation and responsabilisation of parents, the teacher’s language choice in this instance can be argued to construct an educational frame in which it is not only children but also parents being treated as needing to be educated (Platzgummer, forthcoming). By not addressing the teacher with his question, Daniel’s father treats the public announcement as concluded and aims at defining a situation in which a non-institutional actor would explain the content of the announcement to him. Verena’s following actions, in turn, display a simultaneous orientation to the frame established by Daniel’s father, to the educational frame, as well as to a research frame. In this context, the tiny detail of her getting closer to Daniel’s father before responding to his request for information is important: It shows Verena’s orientation to the institutional language policy, seeking to avoid undermining the Standard German policy in public. In this way, Verena deals with the tension that is created in a

research frame of maintaining rapport both with the teachers and with the parents, who are equally relevant participants in the research. Interestingly, in her assessment of the situation, Verena also adopts the institutional logic according to which she translates 'for' Daniel's father, evaluating it as beneficial for him, when it might just as well be regarded as beneficial for Elisabeth and the institution she represents.² In this example, the educational frame of teachers socializing parents are thus blended with an information exchange frame established by the father and a research frame, with the latter being discernible only from Verena's lived experience.

Marie also found herself frequently co-creating educational frames during her fieldwork. While this sometimes happened in concert with teachers' remarks and for the sake of building or maintaining rapport with teachers as discussed in Section 4.1, Marie also situationally used an educational frame for her own interactional aims with children as well as for research aims. The following situation involving the children Felix and Leon is an example of this:

Vignette 2:

Felix and Leon play in the corridor. I sit in a corner of that corridor, trying to film their peer play and catch up on some notes. Some time goes by without me intervening in their pretty wild and loud play. At one point though, I mention that if they keep on shouting so much, the *juffrouw* ['Miss', used for teachers in the preschool] would come soon. I sense that the boys are enjoying the privilege of playing in the corridor, and don't want to jeopardize the opportunity to get some nice video data. Felix looks at me and says 'maar jij bent een juffrouw! [but you are a teacher!]' . I reply that I meant Lieke or Helena. The boys continue their play.

In the preschool, who may or may not play in the corridor and for how long depends on different dimensions, including the children's compliance with the rule not to cause a lot of noise there. In this vignette, Marie enacts an educational frame by using the teacher as a proxy when warning the children that the high noise level might lead to the teachers' intervening. By doing so, she aims to ensure that her data generation as well as the boys' play can continue. At the same time, Marie attempts to distance herself from the teachers through attributing the demand for compliance with the preschool rules to them and not to herself. This is a strategy that Marie used frequently in the preschool, hoping that it would be beneficial for her relationship with the children and, as a result, lead to the possibility of observing ordinary peer interactions despite her presence. In this manner, she blends a research and an educational frame. Here, however, it becomes clear that Marie does not manage to distinguish herself from the teachers in this case: Felix' reply assigns her a teacher positionality and reframes the situation as entirely educational. Marie's reaction, indicating that she meant Lieke or Helena (the main teachers), is focused on the positionality of the main teachers of the preschool and positions herself ambiguously, which remains a field of tension as the boys continue their play.

The examples in this section showed how the researchers' enactments of an educational frame played a part in establishing their positionalities. Besides educational rules and regulations, play is also an integral part of ECEC's institutional culture (Pursi, 2019) and thus, has affordances for researchers' displays of orientations in the field, as will be shown in the next section.

4.3. Enacting play frames

During Marie's fieldwork, the concrete form of her participant observation varied from observing and documenting to trying to fully immerse herself in play with the children. Through situationally engaging in the same activities as the children, she hoped to improve rapport and gain more insights into peer cultures. The following extract is an example of the ambiguity which Marie often experienced during play with the children, here with the girls Fang and Doris:

Vignette 3:

Free play with Fang and Doris. Doris had suggested pretend-play of going to sleep, waking up the next morning, doing an activity (like having breakfast or going to preschool), and repeating the cycle of sleeping, waking up, and activity in fast pace. I immerse myself in the game, taking turns in following Doris' or Fang's lead and giving instructions on enacting the activities of a day as well. When it is time for waking up, the children start to scream 'Opstaan! [Get up!]' and 'Goieimorgen! [Good morning!]'. With every iteration, their screams get louder and more excited while mine get quieter and more nervous. I am very aware that screaming is not allowed in the preschool and that the teachers would probably have intervened much earlier if I was not with the children. Trying to keep up the play, I ask the children multiple times if we can be a bit quieter in the morning, because I would still be very sleepy when waking up. Doris' reaction: "maar juist dan moet je OPSTAAN! [but exactly then you need to GET UP!]", with a loud emphasis on 'OPSTAAN [GET UP]'. After I urge Fang and Doris once more, saying that I would really need to wake up quietly, they seem to keep it a bit down for one iteration, but the next round is just as loud and excited. I feel a sense of relief when the teachers start to call for circle time, marking the end of free play.

While Marie intends to play with the children in what has been suggested to be a 'least-adult' way in the literature (Mandell, 2003), the way in which she engages in the activity is clearly influenced by her reasoning as an adult in the preschool. She goes along in the construction of a play frame, engaging in the same embodied action as the children, i.e., repetitive lying down and getting up. However, her perceived responsibility for compliance with preschool rules as an adult in the preschool influences how she engages in

² In fact, this points to broader discourses of non-professional interpreting in institutional settings, in which the power differential between institutional and non-institutional actors leads to the latter being perceived as the ones' 'lacking' in language skills and thus interpreters as compensating their lack and not an institutional one Orellana, M. F., Dorner, L., & Pulido, L. (2003). Accessing assets: immigrant youth's work as family translators or "para-phrasers". *Social problems*, 50(4), 505–524.

the play: Orienting to an educational frame, she does not shout as loudly as the children. Further along in the play, she reworks elements from the play frame with an orientation to the educational frame: Marie suggests that the shouting of ‘opstaan [wake up]’ should be less loud as she would still be sleepy in the mornings. Children’s screams are a pervasive element of ECEC soundscapes and they frequently become subject to disciplining in favor of more ‘adult’ ways of producing voice qualities (Rosen, 2015). Marie’s attempts of regulating the children’s screaming also makes clear the relationality of positioning practices during ethnographic research in preschool: Even though the teachers are not a direct part of the interaction, Marie has a sense that the teachers would have intervened if she was not with the children, leaving her with a feeling of responsibility to facilitate play in a way that corresponds to ECEC norms. Consequently, while Marie aims to go along in the children’s play to gain embodied insights and ‘authentic’ data, she blends the play frame at stake with an orientation to an educational frame. The children accept Marie’s suggestions only temporarily and return to loud shouting after one iteration, leaving Marie with an uneasy feeling stemming from ambiguities in her positioning.

Like Marie, Verena also often explicitly aimed to establish play frames within her participant observation in interaction with the children, not without experiencing similar ambiguities. The following is an excerpt from an audio recording Verena made as she was playing table soccer with the two friends Florian and Kevin after lunch on the terrace. The excerpt is taken out towards the end of the recording, during the second game that the three of them were playing, and in which Verena was in a team with Kevin, playing against Florian. The excerpt sets in as Florian scores a goal, bringing the score to 8:5 for him.

Extract 3:

- 1 Verena schon WIEder (-) der florian;
Florian (-) aGAIN
- 2 Florian ma a me a me ma-
but to me to me but
- ((Kevin slides a bead on the scorekeeper for his and Verena’s team))
- 3 Florian N[O:];
N[O:]
- 4 Verena [na na] <<sliding the bead back>(-) na wir sind bei FÜNf
kevin>;
[no, no] <<sliding the bead back>(-) no we are at five Kevin
- ((Kevin moves away from the table sulking))
- 5 Verena JA: jetzt mache ICH das wieder (-) mit dem florian;
YES: now I do this again (-) with Florian
- 6 Verena mua ha ha ha ha ha: [((laughs))]
- 7 Florian [((laughs))]
- 8 Verena SO;
- ((Verena throws in the ball))
- 9 Florian woo boo a pew pew ba pew pew pew pew
- 10 Florian ah <<laughing> VEdi> <<:-)> quanto sei LENTa>;
ah <<laughing> SEE> <<:-)> how SLOW you are>
- ((table soccer sounds, Verena scores))
- 11 Verena HA (.) bin ich jetzt immer noch LENTa;
HA (.) am I still SLOW now?
- 12 Florian ma io sono (.) a <<pointing to the score keeper> qua>
but I am (.) at <<pointing to the score keeper> here>
- 13 Verena <<:-)> ja ja aber ich hole dich schon EIN>;
<<:-)> yes yes but I will catch UP eventually>

In line 1, Verena comments on Florian scoring, signaling with the stress on ‘again’ that Florian has been scoring repeatedly and displaying some annoyance at this within a play frame. Florian begins an utterance, possibly commenting on the fact that he only needs one more goal to win the game, but interrupts it and loudly voices his protest as he sees Kevin wrongly sliding a bead on the scorekeeper for his and Verena’s team. Verena reprimands Kevin, too, and corrects the score, which leads to Kevin refusing to continue playing. In line 5, Verena therefore comments on going on to play against Florian by herself and then voices an evil laugh, which results in shared laughter between her and Florian (l. 6, 7). As they continue the game, Florian vocalises as he keeps shooting the ball. He takes up Verena’s provocative stances and claims that she is ‘lenta’ [slow]. After scoring, Verena lets out a triumphant ‘ha’, and provocatively asks Florian if she is still slow – incorporating the Italian ‘lenta’ into her otherwise German statement. Pointing to the scorekeeper, Florian reminds Verena of the score, thus underlining that he is still two goals ahead of Verena and only one goal away from winning (l. 12). In response, Verena states that she will catch up with him nonetheless (l. 13, 14), characterizing this as misalignment with the reduplicated ‘ja ja’ (Barth-Weingarten, 2011) but mitigating this stance through smile voice.

In this excerpt, a play frame is clearly established and continuously constructed by the interacting participants, who all take the game of table soccer seriously. Verena displays annoyance at Florian's repeated scoring, later provokes Florian with her evil laugh, shows herself triumphant as she scores, and claps back at Florian who called her slow. Florian provokes Verena with this statement, displays a playful orientation to the game with his vocalizations and a sort of dominance in the game through his (probable) references to the scorekeeper in lines 2 and 12. The clearly established play frame allows Verena to build rapport with Florian and, like Marie, work towards occupying the 'least-adult' role in the preschool (Mandell, 2003) as well as to experience play in the preschool in a bodily manner and make this experience productive for later analysis (Okely, 2007).

At the same time, however, some ambiguities become visible in the recorded interaction as well as in Verena's experiences of it. Firstly, as she changed back the scorekeeper to uphold the fairness of the game, Verena blended the play frame with an educational frame, which presumably also precluded any rebellion against this action on the part of Kevin. Verena draws authority from educational frames, in which she is an adult that is often teacher-like in other situations (see Section 4.1), enabling her to exert a power in the game that makes her different from the boys with whom she is playing. Secondly, the interaction is at least somewhat dilemmatic in orientation to the wider research strategies, as Verena's upholding of the correct score and exertion of authority stands in conflict not only with the aim of adopting a 'least-adult' role (Mandell, 2003) but also with the aim of building rapport with Kevin, too, in this interaction. Thirdly, similar to Marie, Verena also has the distinct sensation of being observed in her play by the teachers also present on the terrace and needs to override a feeling of potentially being judged for playing the game too seriously and provoking Florian in ways that they might not deem appropriate.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored how we, the authors of this paper, have constructed different definitions of situations jointly with teachers, children, and parents as we were doing linguistic ethnographic fieldwork in two distinct ECEC institutions, one in South Tyrol/Italy and one in Limburg/the Netherlands. We have drawn on Goffman's concept of *frames* (Goffman, 1974, p.11) as well as Gordon's (2008) notions of *reframing* and *blending* of frames to better understand how our participants and we as ethnographers enacted a variety of orientations to situations, focusing on the frequently reoccurring broad frames of research, education and play, each of them linked to specific modes of interaction, social roles and power relations.

Our analysis showed that we rarely oriented to a single frame in interaction, and that at least two of the three mentioned frames were usually laminated onto one another. Research frames and educational frames were laminated in three of the examples we presented in this paper: Firstly, when a preschool teacher instrumentalised Marie's presence and interactional salience of her research tools to reinforce the educational frame of the fruit break, and children continued to orient to this frame despite Marie's attempts to reframe the situation as a neutral observation for research. Secondly, when Verena explained her prospective research process after completing fieldwork to children in a circle-time setting in a mode of interaction that simultaneously established an educational frame. And thirdly, when Verena blended a research frame of rapport-building, by translating a teacher's announcement to a parent, with an educational frame, by doing so in a semi-public manner and thus not thwarting the teachers' efforts to socialize parents into the use of the language of instruction. Educational frames were blended with play frames when Marie was playing 'family' with a group of children and drew on elements from the play in orientation to the educational frame, and when Verena played table soccer with two children but still exerted authority over one of them due to educational norms, keeping them from unfairly changing the scoreboard. In one of the examples we discussed, a simultaneous orientation to all three broader frames can be observed: As two children were playing in the corridor, having established a play frame between them, Marie blended this frame with an educational frame outside of which she placed herself ('don't be too loud or the teacher will come') in orientation to a research frame. The children, however, clearly signal that they interpret Marie as within the educational framework, explicitly designating her as a teacher.

While our analysis of these interactional processes of reframing and blending frames is relevant for research on social interaction in ECEC in its own right, we argue that it has more wide-ranging methodological implications. Taken together, the examples we presented empirically demonstrate that ethnographer's positionings as they conduct fieldwork cannot be understood as static and pre-determined, but instead are highly dynamic and develop in interaction with participants. This suggests that when ethnographers describe their position in the field as 'least-adult' (Mandell, 2003) or as that of a 'researcher-teacher' (Hill & Wood, 2019), they likely distill into one static role what actually are shifting and layered positions within continuously constructed and renegotiated frames in interaction. In our fieldwork, we not only oscillated between positioning ourselves as researchers, teachers and somewhat-peers to the children, but those positionings were often simultaneously present and drawn upon by us and our interaction partners as we jointly established frames of research, education and play. This laminating of frames and thus of our positionings as researchers often led to ambiguities or, at least in our lived experience, even to tensions. The fact that precisely these three main positions were available to us was grounded in the specific institutional structure and participation frameworks afforded by ECEC. Other ethnographers, both within and outside of educational settings, will therefore very likely co-create different sorts of frames with the participants of their research, take up different kinds of positions and navigate different ambiguities.

Following our empirical study, we plea for ethnographic researchers to thoroughly reflect on such emerging ambiguities and include them in their analysis process to do justice to the complexity of ethnographic data, and to not only do so privately but incorporate ambiguities and tensions into their writing. At a time when ethnographic work is internationally highlighted in terms of practice-centred approaches aiming to improve the quality of educational research and to bring it closer to the needs of the field, e.g.,

through participatory approaches or Action Research, it is especially relevant to be conscious of the impossibility of fully achieving goals of equal and symmetrical participation and collaboration between researchers and participants. In practice, framings and relational positionalities dynamically evolve and will always be linked to certain asymmetries pointing to the different responsibilities, rights, and obligations that participants have within a context.

To sum up, in this article, in line with recent work (Folkes, 2023; King, 2024; Rose, 2020), we challenged static notions of positionality and provided an empirically grounded account of our dynamic positionings in the field. We showed how close attention to the interactional co-construction of frames with participants, accompanied with insights from the researchers' lived experience, can be a valuable heuristic for a meaningful engagement with researcher positionings. We believe that such an engagement is not an end in itself but is crucial to producing insightful findings and powerful theories and to increasing readers' trust by giving them all the necessary elements to evaluate the research for themselves. For this reason, accounts of researcher positioning should not find their way into siloed-off positionality statements but should be interwoven into the entire empirical account of the research. We hope to have demonstrated what this can look like and encourage ethnographers within and beyond the field of education to follow this call and closely investigate their dynamic and ambiguous positionings in their interactions in the field.

Transcription conventions

(.)	micropause
(-)	short pause
(1)	pause of 1 s
UTterance	stressed utterance
[utterance]	overlapping utterances
.	falling intonation
!	strongly falling intonation
,	slightly rising intonation
?	strongly rising intonation
((comment))	transcriber's comment
(utterance)	not clearly understandable utterance
°utterance°	quieter than surrounding speech
.hhh	outbreath
<<:->	utterance> utterance spoken with smilevoice
<<laughing>	utterance> utterance spoken while laughing
u:utterance	lengthened syllable

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marie Rickert: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Verena Platzgummer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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