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The Marginalisation of Heritage Languages, Heritage Language Education and Heritage Language Teachers in Italy: Results from a Case Study



BARBARA GROSS 

Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

Barbara Gross is Associate Professor at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (Italy). She is a Board Member of the PhD in Peace Studies at the Sapienza Università di Roma and of the International Association for Intercultural Education, as well as Managing Editor of the journal Intercultural Education

Abstract

This paper investigates the marginalisation of heritage languages (HLs), heritage language education (HLE) and heritage language teachers (HLTs) within the Italian educational system. The inclusive orientation of Italian schools has expanded since the 1970s, with respective efforts mainly addressing students with specific educational needs arising from learning difficulties and disabilities, while largely neglecting the specific resources and needs of students speaking HLs (i.e., languages other than the language(s) of instruction). Drawing from a migration pedagogical framework, the study analyses the qualifications, training opportunities and working conditions of HLTs within a multiple case study design. Fifteen in-depth semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with HLTs and other educational stakeholders. The data were examined via using a structured qualitative content analysis.

The paper highlights contrasting perspectives between educational stakeholders and national and regional guidelines. Despite national ministerial guidelines advocating for the inclusion and promotion of HLs, HLE is not systematically embedded in the curriculum and is typically initiated at the local level by municipalities or community organisations. Italy's approach to HLE is fragmented, and the results from the interviews with educational stakeholders reveal the marginalisation of HLs, HLE and its teaching staff. The findings point to a need for systematic, research-informed reforms to improve the status, conditions and professional development of HLTs and to integrate HLE more robustly into the Italian education system.

Keywords: Heritage language education, Italy, case study, migration pedagogy

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Introduction

Global migration trends have been transforming the everyday lives of children, adolescents, educators and teachers, contributing to continuously increasing diversity (Vertovec, 2006, 2023). The provision of heritage language education (HLE) in public educational institutions is one way to value diversity and to support individual psychosocial and cognitive development as well as educational equity. In this paper, HLE refers to institutionalised or private instruction in a learner's heritage language. A heritage language (HL) differs from the nationally recognised language(s) of the country of immigration. This language or these languages typically represent the majority language(s) and, consequently, the primary language(s) of instruction. The HL, on the other hand, is spoken to varying degrees by children, adolescents and adults with direct or indirect migration backgrounds (first-, second- or third-generation). These speakers either grow up acquiring two (or more) languages simultaneously or initially acquire only the HL, learning the language of instruction at a later stage (Gross, 2024; Mehlhorn, 2017; Woerfel et al., 2020).

Despite the inclusive orientation of the Italian education system since the 1970s, there remains a persistent educational gap between students with and without migration experience (Fiorucci, 2020; Gross, 2022; Malusà, 2020), for which limited competences in the language of instruction is partly responsible. In Italy, the valorisation, inclusion and promotion of HLs in public educational institutions is supported by national ministerial guidelines (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2014; Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2007). However, HLE is not mandatorily embedded in the national curriculum and is primarily initiated by municipalities, religious organisations or associations (Gross, 2020). In line with ministerial recommendations, regional education authorities and individual institutions implement supplementary curricular initiatives, including in the province of Bozen-Bolzano, where the data for the present study were collected. This paper, grounded in a migration pedagogical perspective (Mecheril, 2004; 2010; 2018), aims to examine, in one Italian province, the qualifications and training opportunities available to heritage language teachers (HLTs), the conditions under which they work, and the role of HLE and HLTs in promoting educational equity¹.

The following sections present an overview of theories and research on HL and HLE (2), HLE in the European context (3), provide an overview of linguistic diversity and HLE in Italy (4), explain the research methodology (5), and present (6) and discuss (7) the findings.

Theories and Research on HL and HLE

HLE remains a controversial issue among different educational stakeholders (i.e., all those involved in educational and pedagogical processes) partly because of differing value orientations and theoretical approaches to language acquisition. See, in this regard, the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1991; 2000) and the time-on-task hypothesis (Hopf, 2005). According to the interdependence hypothesis, skills – particularly in reading and writing – can be transferred across languages. Thus, the development of competences in the HL may also support the development of the majority language(s), and hence the primary language(s) of instruction. Another supporting argument is that systematic instruction in the academic registers of the HL cannot be achieved solely through communication in families (Mehlhorn, 2017). Nevertheless, we know from research (e.g., Lindner, 2022) that second (and further) language learning is highly complex and that no simple precursor skills can be identified as an

¹ The paper presented here has been published in a modified form (in German language) and focusing on the role of HLE in educational equity (see Gross, 2024).

influencing factor for general second language acquisition. Moreover, the interdependence hypothesis is controversial and has been challenged by conservative assumptions, theories and hypotheses, such as the time-on-task hypothesis (Hopf, 2005), which enjoy broad support in both society and educational practice. The time-on-task hypothesis aims to demonstrate that learning is a function of the amount of time spent on a specific task. In relation to HLs, the hypothesis posits that the time invested in fostering the HL in formal education would lead to better achievements in this language but inevitably reduce the time available for developing the majority language(s) and thus, in most cases, the language(s) of instruction. However, this perspective is not without controversy: although studies generally show a positive link between the time spent on educational tasks and students' achievement, the actual strength of this correlation varies greatly from one study to another (Godwin et al., 2021).

In particular, because competencies and academic success – especially within the framework of (inter) national comparative studies – are measured in the language(s) of instruction and consequently play a decisive role in students' educational outcomes (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019), stakeholders in education policy and institutions predominantly focus on promoting this language or these languages.

Although researchers have been investigating the effects of bilingualism and multilingualism among children with migration backgrounds on educational achievement for decades (see the contributions of Allemann-Ghionda et al., 2010; Caprez-Krompæk, 2010; de Cillia, 2011, among others), research on HLE remains limited. Different studies in German-speaking countries have focused on the perspective of HLTs (e.g., Ayten, 2024; Ayten & Atanasoska, 2020; Flubacher & Hägi-Mead, 2024; Guldenschuh & Döll, 2024; Hawlik, 2021; Weichselbaum et al., 2024), which highlight not only the precarious working conditions of HLTs but also the marginalisation of HLs and HLE in educational institutions, and the limited collaboration among educational stakeholders. A study by Lengyel and Neumann (2017) shed light on parents' perspectives on HLE and revealed the parents' strong interest in such programmes, and a lack of information about the availability of HLE. Another study (David-Erb, 2024) focused on the perspectives of learners attending HLE, showing their perceived marginalisation and exclusion.

Similar to the limited research of the impact of HLs and HLE on academic success and on the perceptions of those involved is its relation to educational equity. Theories by Rawls (1975) and Dworkin (2000) emphasise individual freedom and equal access to resources as key principles of justice, but these apply mainly to adults, not children, whose development towards autonomy must be supported by education (Stojanov, 2008, 2011). The role of HLE in promoting educational equity is debated, as it often remains tied to neoliberal goals of improving academic performance in the dominant majority language(s). However, research shows that fostering HLs can enhance both first and second language skills (Caprez-Krompæk, 2010), offering broader educational benefits. A more holistic understanding of educational equity should move beyond measurable academic outcomes and economic utility to include psychosocial wellbeing, respect and the right to linguistic diversity. This calls for formal and public education to provide opportunities to learn HLs and to allocate the necessary resources as part of its responsibility to support all learners in achieving their life goals. However, there is no consensus on the (non-)provision of HLE in formal education in Europe, as discussed in the next section.

HLE in Europe

Today, European countries host diverse groups of migrants and refugees, speaking a wide range of HLs. Additionally, linguistic diversity is increased by certain regional minority languages being recognised. The provision of HLE for students speaking languages other than the language(s) of instruction varies significantly both within and between European countries, as do the political and academic

discourses surrounding HLE. Because of the extensive and sometimes highly emotionally laden public debate on migration, discourses on HLE have also become more polarised.

HLE differs substantially across and within European countries, ranging from privately organised courses by language communities to institutionally embedded instruction within the regular school system. Accordingly, there are also differences in the academic, societal and political discourses on HLs and HLE. Despite these differences, the implementation of HLE is a topic of general discussion.

Differences in handling HLs and providing HLE in Europe are a result of different political priorities, migration histories and developments. For instance, whereas Germany and the Netherlands have experienced various phases of immigration since World War II, Italy, Portugal and Spain were primarily emigration countries in the post-war period, with immigration increasing only around the turn of the century. Immigration patterns have been shaped by historical and political contexts, such as migrants moving to European countries from their former colonies, and by economic contexts (e.g., specific guest worker programmes) (Gross et al., 2021).

Therefore, education systems and HLE policies vary widely among European countries, ranging from different approaches within one country to more homogeneous or shifted approaches. For instance, in Austria and in Sweden, curriculum-embedded HLE is provided as an individual right of children speaking other home/first/heritage languages (e.g., Malandrino, 2021; Messina Dahlberg & Gross, 2024). In Germany, where education is the responsibility of individual federal states, provisions for HLE are inconsistent: some states offer HL classes within schools, whereas others leave them to community or consular initiatives. The Netherlands, on the contrary, has shifted from a multilingual and pluralistic to a more assimilationist approach: currently, HLE is not part of the regular curriculum and is only available through private providers or local initiatives, with limited options in secondary schools. In Portugal, HLE remains largely absent from public education; though some schools and research projects have piloted bilingual programmes involving HLs, these are not widespread. Spain shows a similar picture: most HLE is community-driven, with only a few official bilateral agreements supporting HLE. Overall, HLE is not a major policy concern in Spain. Generally speaking, HLE receives a marginal position in both formal and informal education. As the provision is often extracurricular, access is strongly linked to the effort of individual schools and families, with the result that HL skills are rarely officially recognised. Where HLs are embedded in formal education, HL teachers often feel isolated and inconsistently qualified. In addition, there is no consensus on the impact of HLE on language development or academic achievement, and research efforts vary by country; however, research has historically centred on regional and official languages and has only recently begun addressing HLs in the context of migration (Gross et al., 2021). Recent research has also shown that there is significant need for further research on HLE in the European context, where research on HL and HLE has grown in recent years (Guldenschuh et al., 2024). In Italy, specifically, the focus of research in this field has largely been on the valorisation of different linguistic repertoires and languages in formal education, as well as aspects related to the learners' (multiple) identity/ies, whereas HLE has, because of the lack of favourable framework conditions, legal foundations and resources in the education system, still received marginal attention in research². A Delphi study (Gross et al., 2021) has shown that the main priorities for research on HLE in the national Italian context are on the necessary teacher qualifications of HLTs and on ways of including students who speak other HLs.

² See, for instance, the contributions in the special issue on "Multilingualism and the welcoming of mother tongues of children of foreign origin in educational and school contexts" of the nationally highly ranked scientific journal *Educazione Interculturale*: <https://educazione-interculturale.unibo.it/issue/view/1016>

HLE in Italy from a Migration Pedagogy Perspective

Migration pedagogy is a pedagogical approach grounded in theories of power and society, first introduced by Paul Mecheril (2004, 2010) in Germany in the early 2000s. Its aim is to analyse how structures of belonging, confirmed and shaped by migration phenomena, are (re)produced within educational contexts and institutions, and to discuss how these structures can be problematised and shifted. Migration pedagogy can thus be understood as a critical analytical perspective on educational processes in societies shaped by migration. A particular focus lies on critically engaging with various forms of discrimination, especially those linked to Europe's (post)colonial legacy (Guldenschuh et al., 2024). The power-critical approach of migration pedagogy is used here for a deeper understanding and analysis of the role of HLs, HLE and HLTs.

Languages Recognised and Spoken in Italy

In Italy, 12 languages are officially recognised in specific territories (see Table 1); some of these also enjoy curricular inclusion (Gross, 2024; Gross & Mastellotto, 2021).

Table 1 *Officially recognised languages and Italian regions where these languages are spoken*

Language	Regions
Arbëresh	Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Apulia, Sicily
Catalan	Sardinia
German	Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Piedmont, Trentino-South Tyrol, Aosta Valley, Veneto
Greek	Calabria, Apulia, Sicily
Slovenian	Friuli Venezia Giulia
Croatian	Molise, Friuli Venezia Giulia
French	Piedmont, Aosta Valley
Franco-Provençal	Piedmont, Apulia, Aosta Valley
Friulian	Friuli Venezia Giulia, Veneto
Ladin	Trentino-South Tyrol, Veneto
Occitan	Calabria, Liguria, Piedmont
Sardinian	Sardinia

Languages that are not officially recognised are spoken by a considerable number of citizens, particularly Romanian (800,000 speakers), Arabic (475,000), Albanian (380,000) and Spanish (255,000; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2014). Within the education system, there is a strong orientation toward the national language and, to some extent, the abovementioned recognised languages, whereas HLs generally do not have curricular anchoring. Moreover, in Italy, research on HL mostly explores their roles in intercultural dialogue, identity development and support for learning Italian as the main language of instruction, whereas studies on HLE in formal instruction and respective practices remain limited.

Linguistic Standardisation and “Interculturality” as a Justification for Selective Support

This contribution examines the discourse on HLs from a migration pedagogy perspective (Mecheril, 2004, 2010), focusing on the Italian context; thus, the aim is to shed light on how language-related

diversity caused by migration, understood as a dimension that is used to differentiate, can become the object of the processes of domination and discrimination. This becomes relevant where international migration is observable, which challenges prevailing understandings of linguistic conventions and the legitimacy of “own” and “other” languages. In the sense of the symbolic unity of language and nation (Mecheril, 2018), language has the power to lead to the inclusion and belonging of individuals that are proficient in the majority language(s) on the one hand, and exclusion and nonbelonging of individuals who are not proficient in this language or these languages on the other hand.

This societal linguistic diversity is observable in educational institutions as well. Schools that are characterised by multilingual students are, however, often characterised by monolingual practices, understandings, expectations and assumptions. Gogolin (2008) illustrated, in her study in Germany, how nation-building and the school system’s associated task of linguistic homogenisation contribute to constituting belonging in educational institutions and how schools perpetuate a monolingual habitus (see also Busch, 2011). Despite different historical and social developments and despite a generally higher awareness of and sensitivity for diversity, this phenomenon can still be observed and also in other national contexts – such as Italy. In the Italian national context, the focus in education, intercultural discourse and the corresponding pedagogical efforts in the inclusive education system over the past decades has primarily been on the “integration”³ (understood especially as the valorisation of cultural diversity) of children who, because of direct or indirect migration experiences, have fewer resources.

Promotion of the language of instruction while disregarding the additional linguistic repertoires of learners reflects a hegemonic understanding of the educational mission of schools. In line with this, Dirim and Mecheril (2020) underline the educational disadvantages and inequalities arising from different speech patterns of students, when they write that in schools:

“The practice of teaching in the official – legitimate – language, to which legitimate identities are assigned, is linked from the outset with differential modes of address that affirm and reinforce existing differences in students’ speech patterns, transforming them into social inequalities or ratifying existing social inequalities. [...] For certain students who lack the linguistic, material, and social resources expected by schools – for example, some children from families with a migration background – these relations of mismatch or dissonance have serious consequences, as they result in disadvantages in both school and extracurricular spheres.” (Dirim & Mecheril, 2020, p. 240, translation by the author)

In Italy, in relation to HLs an assimilationist stance prevails, and although regions can offer HLE depending on demand, provision is often fragmented and informal.

Research Context and Questions

The Italian educational guidelines state that the individual multilingualism of children with migration backgrounds must be recognised, and thus recommend promoting HLs (Ministero dell’Istruzione, 2014) to better “integrate” these students (Ministero dell’Istruzione, 2007; 2022); however, there is no legal entitlement to HLE, which creates a field of tension from a migration pedagogy perspective. In

³ In contrast to international efforts to move from integration toward inclusion and, consequently, toward approaches of educational equity (Ainscow, 2016), Italy shows a division, partly arising from the specific structure of academic disciplines (Hofbauer et al., 2022), between *integrazione*, often used in relation to people with migration experiences, and *inclusione*, primarily associated with the inclusive school system for all students that has existed since the 1970s. In this article, the term “integration” is used only when the corresponding Italian term appears in national documents. From a migration pedagogical perspective, the relationship between the promotion of HLs and the “integration” of learners requires critical reflection.

some regions, in addition to private initiatives, HLE is offered in cooperation with educational institutions, though only to a very limited extent and mostly as extracurricular offerings (Favaro, 2018; Gross, 2020). HLE in public schools mainly depends on the financial resources of the region and the individual school (Gross, 2020, 2021).

In the Province of Bolzano, official documents on intercultural education and language promotion (Autonomous Province of Bolzano, 2007; 2012) emphasise the need to support HLE, though no comprehensive programme is in place. Educational institutions decide on the offering and implementation according to the needs and available resources. The Migration Office – Language Centres of the German Education Directorate in South Tyrol – where the promotion of autochthonous multilingualism is one of the guiding educational policy goals (for more on this, see Gross, 2019) organises and finances HLE for children and youths upon request from kindergartens and schools. Educational institutions are also free to initiate support programmes independently and decide on the duration and type of intervention.

This contribution includes only those initiatives supported by the Migration Office – Language Centres. These initiatives collaborate with local social cooperatives, which are responsible for assigning HLTs and ensuring their qualification and continuing education. HLTs often also work as intercultural mediators in educational institutions. In the Italian context, intercultural or linguistic-cultural mediators (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022) are trained professionals who work in educational institutions, among other settings, to help address the challenges that emerge from migration-related diversity. The tasks of intercultural or linguistic-cultural mediators include supporting schools in the integration of children and adolescents with direct migration experiences; facilitating relationships and communication among schools, families and students; providing school-based guidance and promoting “intercultural education”; and valuing students’ heritage languages and cultures (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, Circular No. 24/2006).

As a continuation of a previous study conducted in six European countries (Gross et al., 2021), which found that experts in intercultural education and multilingualism in Italy considered the investigation of required qualifications for HLTs to be of fundamental importance, the present study aimed to examine currently ongoing initiatives and the role of HLTs and HLE in public schools. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What qualifications and continuing education opportunities do HLTs have?
2. Under what conditions do HLTs work?
3. What role do HLE and HLTs play in promoting educational equity?

Method(ology) for Investigating the Migration Pedagogical Field of Tension

The underlying study was designed using the methodology of multiple case studies (Thomas, 2011; Tight, 2017) and was conducted in the province of Bozen-Bolzano during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. HLE took place either outside of regular school hours or as part of optional elective programmes, the latter being a rare exception. In one kindergarten, HL activities were integrated into the morning programme.

As part of the study, 15 in-depth semi structured individual interviews were conducted with various educational stakeholders in the Province of Bozen-Bolzano at eight educational institutions that offered HLE during the 2019–2020 school year. However, the learners attending these HLE programmes came from a wide range of different institutions associated with these locations. Because of the limited number of institutions providing HLE, all relevant institutions were contacted for the study.

Participants included:

- Six HLTs for Arabic ($N = 4$), Albanian ($N = 1$), and Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian ($N = 1$);
- Eight additional educational stakeholders associated with the abovementioned HLTs: inspectors from the education authority and coordinators from the organising cooperatives (abbreviation: O; $N=4$), coordinators at public schools (abbreviation: CO; $N = 2$), classroom teachers and early childhood educators (abbreviation: T; $N = 2$) and one school principal (abbreviation: L).

The semi structured interview guide focused on the following key areas:

- The origins and development of HLE;
- The organisational framework conditions;
- Perceptions and evaluations of the added value of HLE;
- The role of HLTs in the education system;
- Training and professional experience of HLTs;
- Working conditions, lesson planning and implementation;
- Collaboration with parents.

The interviews were conducted either in German or Italian and, because of the epidemiological emergency (COVID-19), were primarily held online and recorded via video. Transcription followed the rules of Dresing and Pehl (2018). The data were analysed using a structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2016) using the software MAXQDA. This procedure resulted in a detailed coding system with multiple main and subcategories. To ensure the quality of the coding process and the inductively and deductively generated codes, two independent researchers coded the transcripts of two interviews simultaneously. The codes were then discussed within the research team, when the overarching categories and subcategories were defined, anchor examples were identified and coding rules were established. An intercoder agreement analysis at the segment level was used to improve the coding instructions and specific codings (Kuckartz, 2016; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019). Collecting diverse yet complementary data from various educational stakeholders allowed for data triangulation and thus provided comprehensive insights into the phenomenon and well-founded information on the participants' experiences and perspectives (Mann, 2016).

Findings

Within educational contexts, linguistic uniformity is still the norm, which has the power to reinforce a monolingual mindset and shape a sense of belonging. On the one hand, educational stakeholders state that there may be positive effects of HLE on psychosocial and cognitive development, as HLs and HLE constitute a normatively shaped space for individual development and thus prove to be relevant for learners' experience of competence, personality development and self-esteem. On the other hand, the data also reveal a tension that reflects the marginal position of HL, HLE and HLTs within the education system. Knowledge of HL is regarded as an individual asset, but its added value for academic performance, as well as potential impacts on and connections with educational equity, receive little attention. The findings highlight the tension between the valorisation of individual multilingualism on the one hand and the marginalisation of HLs, HLE and HLTs in public educational institutions on the other hand. The following sections discuss and critically examine, from a diversity-sensitive and migration pedagogical perspective, the qualifications and professional development opportunities of HLTs, working conditions and the role of HLE and HLTs in promoting educational equity.

Qualifications and Professional Development Opportunities of HLTs

HLT, who, in the observed educational contexts, often also work as intercultural or linguistic-cultural mediators in kindergartens and schools and who have started working as HLTs through this role, are predominantly commissioned by social cooperatives that aim to promote interculturality and active citizenship. These cooperatives also provide the necessary qualifications and training for HLTs, although formal prerequisites and professionalisation pathways for HLTs are not established. Most HLTs' educational trajectories are shaped by their countries of origin, except for the acquisition of the officially recognised national languages and, where applicable, training as intercultural or linguistic-cultural mediators. This results in heterogeneous qualifications, even among those with pedagogical and/or subject didactic training, posing pedagogical and didactic challenges. However, heterogeneous qualifications could be utilised as an additional resource in educational institutions. Scientific international studies (for an overview, see Bellacicco & Gross, 2021) demonstrate that greater diversity within the teaching staff – and thus a higher number of teachers with migration or minority backgrounds – contributes to improved academic performance among marginalised students and thereby supports educational equity. It is assumed that teachers with migration or minority backgrounds have different performance expectations, heightened intercultural awareness and the ability to act as role models and advocates. From a migration pedagogical standpoint, however, the association between a migration background and intercultural awareness and competences must be critically questioned, as it can lead to the instrumentalisation of persons with direct or indirect migration experiences. Within this study, recruiting teachers with migration experience is also seen as an opportunity to deploy them in HLE, as noted by a coordinator:

“[T]here are now indeed some teachers who themselves have a migration background. If a school is lucky to have such a teacher and if this teacher has also received education in the first language, especially academic language. Because if they grew up here, they might not have that. Then, for me, those would be the ideal teachers” (O-3, Para. 47, translation by the author).

However, this carries the risk of “exotic instrumentalisation” (Kalpaka and Mecheril, 2010, p. 81) of teachers with migration experiences in educational institutions dominated by majority members, thus potentially pressuring these educators into the roles of “living examples” and “local experts” (Elverich and Reindlmeier, 2009, p. 38), even if they may not want or be able to assume such roles. In supporting greater diversity in the teaching staff, such aspects of diversity-sensitive and migration pedagogical perspectives must not be neglected.

Not all HLTs possess a pedagogical university degree, yet they are employed where recruiting qualified personnel seems impossible, which entails corresponding impacts and difficulties linked to a lack of pedagogical and didactic professionalisation. Cooperative staff accompany teachers through classroom observations and support lesson planning, especially during the initial teaching phase or when problems arise in lesson delivery or group management. Some highly committed HLTs seek further training privately, sometimes even in their countries of origin, though temporal constraints and lack of public funding limit participation. Efforts to establish systematic, comprehensive and participatory training opportunities in cooperation with educational authorities exist but have not yet been implemented. The interviewees expressed a desire for additional qualifications and a clear professional profile for HLTs, considering other European educational contexts with stronger global orientations, and a corresponding legal framework anchoring HLTs within the school curricula, as well as a specific curriculum for HLE. However, like the prospect of opening HLE to all learners, these ambitions appear unlikely to be realised in the near future.

Working Conditions of HLTs

A marginalised position of HLE and the subalternity of HLTs within public educational institutions is becoming apparent. Research participants emphasise the lack of continuity in HLE and within the HL teaching staff; the sporadic nature of the offerings depends on the ideologies of individuals, resulting in precarious working conditions for HLTs. The absence of quality standards for HLE correspondingly affects cooperation with other teachers.

HLE can only be planned the short term and typically offers a low number of hours in limited time-frames. Stable employment for HLTs – even on a part-time basis – is not feasible. This precarity, along with the associated risk of (further) social decline and exclusion, particularly affects people with migration backgrounds who may have already faced multiple disadvantages caused by changes in residence or employment. Consequently, HLTs tend to accept these assignments only as secondary jobs and, despite high interest, often only temporarily. To improve the working conditions of HLTs, there would need to be

[...] employment as a teacher. That means a contract – even if only for a few hours – a teaching assignment, i.e., if I teach for four hours [...] then I get paid for those four hours. I have insurance, I have pension insurance, etc., so I also have those framework conditions [...]. Not some precarious allocation of hours (O-1, Par. 58, translation by the author).

Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the groups – classes are usually composed of students with multiple diversity characteristics, such as learners with heterogeneous language competencies and differing ages – poses a challenge for HLTs. Instruction generally takes place as an extracurricular activity – though within the school context, there is a desire for integration into elective or optional subjects – and both learners and HLTs often must accept long travel distances. A didactic organisational connection to the formal core education is usually lacking, which, in turn, limits cooperation between HLTs and other subject teachers. Cooperation often remains restricted to informal, incidental conversations with class teachers, as illustrated in an interview with a HLT:

There is no exchange with the principal, but with the teachers, when I am there waiting for the children [...] they do ask questions, and once a teacher came out of curiosity to see [...] how the children learn Arabic, how they accept it (HL-T-13, Par. 76, translation by the author).

CO-5 adds that cooperation would be very welcome because

they get the feeling that it is also wanted in school. Otherwise, it really is just the space that is simply school-like. Otherwise, the most they get to know is the janitor (CO-5, Par. 52, translation by the author).

The limited cooperation with educational institutions and their stakeholders, even with school leadership, is attributed to the lack of curricular inclusion and insufficient sensitisation to the issue:

This is, as it is said, an external, extracurricular activity that has very little to do with the school. Therefore, some teachers know that children attend the course and might even motivate the children. But many teachers do not know this at all because they are not interested (O-3, Par. 49, translation by the author).

Collaboration with educational stakeholders, which is also not remunerated, thus requires a high level of commitment from HLTs and involves restrictions in their private and professional lives; for example, they could otherwise invest their time in building a stable social environment or in further professional development. The commitment of HLTs is also dampened by the perceived low appreciation of their work within schools and in society. There is still no professional profile for HLTs and they are not part of the teaching staff, and this contributes to their marginalisation, as well as that of their work and the languages they teach. A latent exclusion of persons with both direct and indirect migration experiences manifests, where language as a diversity characteristic serves as a criterion to define “us” and “others.” It articulates

[i]n the dispute over the language(s) regarded as legitimate language(s) and registers of the migration society, [...] a struggle for belonging, in which the preservation of a phantasmal identitarian “we” and the enabling of a functional context through disciplinary control over those deemed “other” play a prominent role (Dirim & Mecheril, 2020, p. 243, translation by the author).

By not granting HLE the status of an essential component of formal education, learners speaking an additional language as well as HLTs may be perceived as “others,” reinforcing the (re)production of nonbelonging. The precarious working conditions of HLTs, the insufficient cooperation with other teachers and the lack of involvement of HLTs in joint planning and professional development can be interpreted as the outcomes of a system governed by rigid power relations. In this regard, a power disparity between HLTs and other subject teachers emerges, legitimised by differences in qualifications; as a consequence, HLTs are not granted the same social space nor the same participation in school life. When asked whether HLTs are informed about the academic achievement of learners attending HLE, an Albanian teacher responded: “As an intercultural mediator [I am informed]. Being accepted as a teacher is very difficult” (HL-T-11, Par. 124, translation by the author).

According to Bourdieu (2010), the social world, of which educational institutions are a significant part, functions as a system of power relations and a symbolic system. By granting HLTs only limited scope for action, legitimised through a lack of qualifications, and restricting support to technical-spatial-material aspects, their influence is limited. Despite limited scope for action, expectations for HLTs and HLE are high and manifest as latent transfer of responsibility, particularly regarding the “cultural heritage” and “integration” of learners, as one HLT emphasises: “It is difficult to balance between educating the child, preserving the culture and simultaneously integrating” (HL-T-15, Par. 144, translation by the author).

The Role of HLE and HLTs in Promoting Educational Equity

Educational institutions do not support, include, or promote the linguistic diversity of all learners to the same extent, and languages that enjoy low social prestige receive less attention and support (Gross, 2019). Latent linguistic hierarchies can thus be observed in public institutions. Which languages are taught and curricularised in educational institutions continues to be determined by hegemonically shaped conceptions of territorially bounded social and symbolic spaces, and the social prestige attributed to them (Dirim, 2015). This confirms linguistic hierarchies and a linguistic market governed by social power relations (Bourdieu, 1990), as well as educational institutions that (re)produce a monolingual habitus in a multilingual society (Busch, 2011; Gogolin, 2008) and educational injustice. Educational equity encompasses, *inter alia*, equitable access to educational opportunities regardless of spoken languages and associated language competencies, socioeconomic resources, gender, migration background, other diversity characteristics, or health and cognitive conditions. Educational equity is

based on the premise that even learners' first languages that are not officially recognised should be promoted.

Comprehensive HLE is not guaranteed in the studied context, raising questions of educational equity. At the national level, promotion of HLs is framed within the approach of "intercultural education" and the ideology of "integration" understood as hospitality, serving the acquisition of the language of instruction and "social integration" and is subject to the discretion and available resources of individual regions and educational institutions (Messina Dahlberg & Gross, 2024). A lack of awareness manifests itself in the nonthematisation of the institutional promotion of HLs and HLE as a component of ensuring educational equity for all learners; HLE is regarded as an additional offering rather than a basis for educational equity and – if considered at all – occupies a marginal role. A school principal commented on the role of HLE as follows:

[HLE plays] a TOTAL/a secondary role. Insofar as [...] it takes place and [we as a school] provide a space [...] but it is not that we even took the INITIATIVE here [...] So far it has not gone. No one has yet been able to convince us to this point (L-7; Par. 37, translation by the author).

The lack of active support and the low attribution of relevance is also evident in the relatively few educational institutions offering HLE, which, alongside the minimum required number of participants, constitutes an additional barrier to educational equity. HLTs, however, act as promoters of HLs among children with direct or indirect migration experiences, and where collaboration with various stakeholders is successful, they also contribute significantly to an increased awareness of the heterogeneity in educational institutions and society. In this regard, the limited number of HL hours and the lack of integration of HLTs into the teaching staff pose challenges that constrain the success of HLTs in fostering tolerance, openness and diversity, as well as in combating prevailing ethnocentrism – efforts which are considered prerequisites for educational equity.

Discussion, Implications and Limitations

HLE and HLTs occupy a marginalised position within public educational institutions, which coincides with constraints on educational equity for young people who speak languages other than the officially recognised, prestigious majority language(s). HLTs are not part of the regular teaching staff and experience nonbelonging, compounded by precarious working conditions and limited opportunities for professional development – challenges that have also been observed in other studies across different countries (e.g., Ayten & Atanasoska, 2020; Hawlik, 2021) – placing them at risk of entering a downward spiral of social decline.

The insufficient provision of the necessary financial resources for hiring and training professional teaching staff also restricts the potential for collaboration between HLTs and other subject teachers, which is essential for fostering the linguistic repertoire of all learners. Awareness of the marginality of HLE and the limited professional development opportunities available to HLTs exists; however, further professional development is prevented for seemingly legitimate reasons of infeasibility, revealing a latent exercise of power.

Nonetheless, HLE and HLTs could play a crucial role in transforming educational institutions and, consequently, society. Curricular inclusion of HLE would provide the necessary space for the targeted development of language competences across the diverse linguistic repertoires of young learners, while HLTs would be more deeply involved in everyday school life. With appropriate educational policy measures and targeted governance, all those involved in education – students, parents, educators,

teachers, school principals, organisers and inspectors – could act as multipliers of an inclusive attitude within educational institutions and society, laying the foundation for increased educational equity. This would require the provision of the necessary resources so that all educational stakeholders could consciously and autonomously participate in developing an inclusive society according to their respective roles. In such a utopian society, the existing linguistic hierarchies, ethnocentrism and power relations would be dismantled (Bourdieu, 1990; 2010), and citizens would show sensitivity to and interest in migration-related linguistic diversity. The necessity for all educational stakeholders to engage with their embeddedness in power relations is also highlighted by Dirim and Mecheril (2020):

[...] school is the institution that differentially addresses, incorporates, or ignores children's and adolescents' diverse linguistic prerequisites. Ultimately, it transforms students' language practices into varying social, economic, and cultural positions. School can thereby reproduce societal inequalities through direct and indirect discrimination or – as is the aim of any pluralistic-democratic educational system – strive to problematise and contribute to their transformation (pp. 243, translation by the author).

Individual linguistic and cultural diversity continues to be only marginally considered in educational institutions, and promoting it remains the responsibility of all educational stakeholders. This study has revealed the views of those among them who, to varying degrees, support HLE. However, this group represents a minority, while the attitudes, initiatives and actions of the majority remain concealed. Minority and majority should, however, work together toward enhanced collaboration and diversity-sensitive educational practices, and all educational stakeholders should advocate for curricular anchoring of HLE.

For HLE to make a substantial contribution to educational equity, personnel, structural and organisational changes are necessary. The responsibility for promotion does not rest solely with HLTs but lies with all those involved in educational processes. Joint training should be based on cross-linguistic and inter- and transcultural reflections and critically examine belonging. The involvement of all stakeholders in discourses on linguistic-cultural diversity, raising awareness of diversity in the migration society, and collaboration with HLTs seem decisive in this regard.

The research findings therefore indicate that finding long-term solutions for promoting migration-related linguistic diversity in school curricula should be a priority on the educational policy agenda. As also Malandrino (2021) suggests, there remains significant ground for Italian policymakers to cover regarding HLE policy. To ensure that related educational services are accessible broadly and equitably, a shift is needed from reliance on the isolated efforts of individual schools or teachers. HLE cannot be entrusted solely to local initiatives; instead, comprehensive and cohesive policy action is required at the national level. It is, moreover, the responsibility of all involved in education, especially educational scientists, to address a broad audience, discuss research results and raise awareness of linguistic-cultural diversity. In researching the role of HLs, HLE and HLTs with respect to educational equity in heterogeneous, dynamic and hybrid societies, it is necessary to consider not only the variables that ostensibly indicate a migration history but also existing differences within the multidimensional phenomenon (e.g., gender differences in access to HLE and corresponding effects on educational equity). This aspect was not addressed by the participants in the present study and should be explored in follow-up studies using an intersectional approach.

The (non-)provision and organisation of HLE shape the educational and social space, as well as the dominant and (re)produced value orientations and worldviews therein. As long as linguistic diversity in educational institutions is perceived from a (latent) deficit perspective and linguistic assimilation is understood as the basis for social and institutional participation and inclusion, combating educational

deprivation will remain an illusory future prospect. Whether sufficient space is given to individual linguistic diversity, particularly with regard to socially less prestigious languages and in the interest of educational equity in educational institutions, thus remains questionable.

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