Answers to the Reviewers’ feedback

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their insightful comments. In response, I have made several revisions to the manuscript, and all the modified sections have been clearly highlighted **in yellow** to facilitate easier identification. These revisions are aimed at addressing the reviewers’ concerns and improving the manuscript overall.

The comments from the reviewers have been grouped into five main categories, and I have provided my responses to each point in the Table below.

I hope that the revisions address the reviewers’ suggestions effectively, and I am happy to make any further adjustments if needed.

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| Revision 1: Further reflection on the existing SLB literature | |
| Reviewer 1 **Conceptualization of discretion:**  The conceptualization of discretion is a bit on the short side. The concept has been much more extensively discussed in the literature. I would suggest providing a more comprehensive overview and explain why you want to focus on these two types of discretion you mention. Moreover, when reading your findings section, discretion does not appear again. I would suggest tailoring the literature review more closely to the analysis**.** | Reviewer 2 **Key insights from the SLB tradition**:  This paragraph, in my opinion, should be conceived as the theoretical framework, and the aim is to develop more of the research approach. Due to the research questions focusing on the implementation gap and the processing and mechanisms influencing practices, I suggest improving this paragraph by adding some considerations arising from the SLB literature that focus specifically on:   * + on implementation gaps and the influence of context (e.g., Peter Hupe & Aurélien Buffat (2014) *A Public Service Gap: Capturing contexts in a comparative approach of street-level bureaucracy,* Public Management Review, 16:4, 548-569, DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2013.854401; Anat Gofen (2013) *Mind the Gap: Dimensions and Influence of Street-Level Divergence Get access Arrow*, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Volume 24, Issue 2, April 2014, Pages 473–493, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mut037>).   + - the various (institutional, organizational, moral, and professional) pressures shaping SLBs’ discretionary practices and influencing policy implementation: Gofen, A., Sella, S., & Gassner, D. (2019).   + Additionally, I believe the article will benefit from an improvement of the literature review on SLB research about the school |
| **Answer to the reviewers’ comments**  I sincerely thank both reviewers for their insightful comments, which helped strengthen this aspect of the manuscript. I address the comments from both reviewers together, as they point to similar limitations in the manuscript. Specifically, both noted the overly limited and insufficiently developed engagement with the existing literature on street-level bureaucracy (SLB) and the notion of discretion.  In response, I expanded the literature review on SLB scholarly research to provide a more comprehensive overview of how and where discretion has been discussed. At the same time, following the reviewers’ suggestions, I selected and focused on findings in the literature that are most relevant to the aims of my analysis, i.e., those focused on teachers as SLBs. This allowed me to better align the literature review with the empirical sections of my manuscript.  Specifically, I revised the section as follows:   * **In the first paragraph, *The policy-practice gap in the Street-Level Bureaucracy framework* (pp.6-7)**, I provide an overview of the concept of discretion and the meaning of the ‘policy-practice’ gap, drawing on foundational works in Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) literature. * **In the subsequent paragraph, *Unpacking Teachers’ Discretion: Contextual Factors, Mechanisms, and Different Extents of Discretion in Daily Practices* (pp.7-8)**, I expanded the discussion on the sources of discretion, which had been overlooked in the previous version.   While the reviewers suggested referencing a broader variety of authors, I chose to primarily focus on the work of Gofen et al. (2019). I selected this reference because their systematic review synthesizes key findings from the suggested authors, along with additional relevant contributions, within a well-structured chapter. In other words, their framework enabled me to present the main relevant findings on the sources of discretion existing in the relevant literature, in a concise yet comprehensive manner. This approach also allows citing their review to indirectly capture the core insights and the most pertinent findings from the wider literature. **The key contribution of this work**, which is also relevant to my research, is its emphasis on the importance of context and specific differences in shaping discretionary practices. The relevance of context is reflected in my findings and is further explored in the Discussion section. Although Gofen’s work covers several types of SLBs—such as teachers, police officers, and social workers—I specifically focused on findings related to teachers, in line with the focus of the paper and with the specific suggestion by Reviewer 2. Additionally, I have created Table 1 (in Appendix 2) to provide a concise summary of the contextual factors that influence teachers, highlighting the associated challenges and pressures across different levels of analysis. This table was developed specifically for this study and is based on the systematic review by Gofen et al. (2019).   * In the same paragraph *Unpacking Teachers’ Discretion*, I also expanded the discussion on the **mechanisms of discretion**, with a focus on **coping discretion** and how it unfolds in practice. I discussed the main theoretical categories and coping strategies identified in the literature. In doing so, I drew primarily on Tummers et al. (2015), whose systematic review offers a clear and structured overview of this topic.   These revisions help align the literature review more closely with the study’s empirical focus. In the Discussion section, I also reflect on how my findings relate to and extend previous research on SLB in educational contexts. | |
| **Revision 2: Substantial restructuring of the findings section 🡪 better presenting the evidence in support of my final argument** | |
| Reviewer 1 **Data and analytical categories:**  It remains unclear how your data supports the arguments you make and how you got to the analytic categories (apart from the introductory statement in the findings section, which is yet not convincing, because it is still unclear how you could to these categories). It gets a bit better towards the middle of the findings section where you use interview material but especially the first sections need extensive revision.  **Discussion of discretion**  If you discuss discretion, then you should use it during the analysis, and discuss where you see the use of discretion during implementation, how and what may shape this use of discretion. | Reviewer 2 **General comment:**  The sections of findings and discussion can be improved in these two general directions: the findings can be improved by providing a different structure that must be organized to make the reader understand more easily how the author replies to the research questions (see comments below). Second, the author can improve the already developed connection between the findings and the theory, especially in the discussion.  **Specific on Findings:**  First, I suggest distinguishing between findings concerning context-related influences and pressures/challenges for teachers when implementing intercultural education policies and the actual practices they adopt.  I believe that the structure of the paragraph on findings can be improved by re-organizing it like that:   * Paragraph 1: these three topics/challenges/pressures (with three sub-paragraphs) where these three dynamics should be presented   + *Overcome linguistic barriers due to the lack of intercultural mediators*   + *Concretely apply the policy goals in their daily work due to policy inadequacy and policy vaguenes*s in response to the lack of specific training and the managers’ actions in fostering intercultural education policies.   + *Develop intercultural educational activities due to clients’ pressures* (opposition of parents) * Paragraph 2: findings concerning the practices can be inserted in one paragraph with three sub-paragraphs developing the three main strategies by teachers. |
| Answers to the reviewers’ comments | |
| **About lack of coherent narrative and analytical categories:**  I would like to warmly thank the reviewer for this valuable and insightful comment. I completely understand the concern regarding the clarity of how the final analytical categories were derived. I likewise agree that the explanation in the previous version may have appeared insufficiently clear to the reader.  This was largely due to the need to find a balance between providing a transparent account of the methodological process—which, in this case, was particularly long and detailed—and adhering to the journal’s word count constraints. In the earlier version, I attempted to resolve this by summarizing the analytic process briefly in the findings section and offering a more extended discussion in Appendix 1. However, as the reviewer has rightly noted, this solution may have compromised the overall coherence and readability of the manuscript.  In response to this helpful suggestion, I have now integrated a concise summary of the methodological explanation at the beginning of the findings section (highlighted in yellow), while retaining the more comprehensive description in Appendix 1. I sincerely hope this revision improves clarity for the reader without sacrificing necessary detail.  As outlined in the Appendix, the analysis was conducted through reflexive thematic analysis (building on Braun & Clarke, 2006), based on semi-structured interviews with teachers and headmasters in Trento. The initial, inductively-made coding phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006) yielded a large number of codes, each representing a distinct idea. In the subsequent phases of thematic analysis, I merged together similar codes (on an inductive and semantic basis) to create a number of provisional themes. In the definition and naming phase, I further refined and ‘theoretically redescribed’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the emerging provisional themes in light of the conceptual resources provided by the SLB literature.  a detailed explanation is provided in Appendix 1. For clarification, I specify some points here below:   * **Themes 2, 3, and 4** of the coding scheme (in Appendix 1) capture the various contextual factors that emerge to influence teachers’ experiences, based on teachers’ answers and accounts. These were initially inductively coded into a number of inductive codes, then the various codes were merged together into provisional themes, based on semantic similarities and inductive reasoning (as illustrated above). Eventually, in the definition and naming phase of thematic analysis, they were ‘theoretically redescribed’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006), i.e., re-conceptualized in light of the conceptual resources provided by the SLB literature, particularly the comprehensive framework by Gofen (2019) on the various contextual factors and influences that shape discretionary actions. * **Themes 5, 6, and 7** capture the various practices reported by participants, again using an inductive approach in the first phases and then interpreting them in light of the SLB literature, particularly studies on the various forms of coping practices (Tummers et al., 2015).   Due to the large volume and highly descriptive nature of the initial inductively made codes (in initial coding phase), I chose not to include them in the manuscript in order to preserve clarity and readability. Instead, I presented the refined themes as structured in the final stage of analysis, after I had ‘theoretically redescribed’ based on the concepts and findings in SLB literature.  Please note that, following the reviewers’ helpful suggestions, I have made some important changes to the initial coding scheme provided in Appendix 1, as well as to the structure and organization of the entire Findings section, in order to enhance coherence and accessibility.  In case this creates any disorientation when reading the manuscript, I provide the following brief clarification:  **In Appendix 1:**   * I have re-named Themes 2 and 4 as ‘Organizational Characteristics’ and ‘Policy Characteristics,’ respectively. While the way I have been conducting reflective analysis has remained unchanged, I decided to assign these themes new names. This is not unusual in reflexive thematic analysis (cfr Braun Clarck, 2006 and Maxwell, 2008: *Designing a Qualitative Study*), which allows the researcher to modify the names attributed to themes according to their evolving knowledge of the relevant literature (in this case, the SLB literature). In the previous version, I had named these themes differently because I was unaware of some important conceptual resources in SLB literature (especially the comprehensive framework provided by Gofen, 2019), which I have now included in this new version of the manuscript. This helped me to make sense of and interpret the codes emerging from the analysis of teachers’ responses.   **In the Findings Section:**   * The paragraph on F*amiliarity with and endorsement of intercultural education* (p.15) presents findings that emerged from participants’ responses and were inductively coded and subsequently grouped under Theme 1 (Familiarity and Endorsement of IC), in line with Braun & Clarke’s (2006) approach. * The paragraph on *Context-related influences and pressures*, and the relevant sub-paragraphs p 16-19), reflect findings coded under Themes 2, 3, and 4 of the coding scheme. * The paragraph on *practices and activities* (pp. 19-22) presents data grouped under Themes 5, 6, and 7.   I believe that the revised version, which incorporates the valuable feedback from both reviewers, provides a clearer explanation of how the analytical categories were developed, and improves the structure and presentation of the key findings.  That said, I would very much welcome any further suggestions or concerns—if the section still appears unclear or if further improvements are needed, I will be more than happy to address them in the next revision.  **About the notion of discretion:**  Upon reflection, I realized that the way I addressed the notion of discretion in the analysis may not have been sufficiently clear. However, it is indeed present, particularly in the section *‘Practices and activities carried out by teachers’*. Thank you very much for this comment, which helped me realize that my explanation was not written in a sufficiently clear way.  In the section *‘Practices and activities carried out by teachers’*, I observe the use of discretion especially in the schools within the Trento 3 Institute, notably in the shape of (different types of) coping-oriented discretionary practices. Indeed, we observe that teachers autonomously decide to adopt practices that diverge from official intercultural policy goals in order to tackle and cope with several challenges, pressures and dilemmas they face in their daily activities. That way, they thereby create tensions between the intercultural framework and actual classroom practices. This phenomenon aligns with the definition of discretion, and notably coping discretion, as presented in the literature review section, drawing on the traditional definition by Lipsky (1980) as well as more recent research on the different types of coping mechanisms and practices (especially Gofen et al., 2019; Bruquetas-Callejo, 2014; Tummers et al., 2015, all mentioned and illustrated in the Literature Section).  Moreover, in both sections *Context-related challenges and pressures affecting intercultural education’s implementation* and *Practices and activities carried out by teachers*, I also engage in explaining which elements and characteristics shape teachers’ discretionary practices, and how, based on teachers’ own accounts (answers to the various interviews’ questions). It emerges that the interplay and changing configurations of three main elements significantly affects teachers’ actual capacity to carry out intercultural-oriented activities. Specifically, these elements are:   * 1. access to human resources (specifically linguistic facilitators)   2. intercultural policy framework’s characteristics, notably its vagueness unresponsiveness to actual situations in class, and   3. parental pressures.   It likewise emerges that the configuration of these elements and influences is highly context-dependent, changing across the different educational settings involved. Although these elements emerge inductively and spontaneously from teachers’ accounts, they closely align with existing street-level bureaucracy (SLB) literature, particularly within the education domain.  In the analysis section, I illustrate in detail how the various configurations and interplay of these contextual elements within the two institutes lead to different uses of discretion by teachers. Thereafter, in the Discussion Section I further discuss their relevance and delve deeper into specific aspects of this discussion, also providing a summary table (i.e., Table 3 in Appendix 2).  I hope this clarifies my approach, and I truly appreciated the opportunity to improve the clarity of the manuscript thanks to your insightful remarks. Please let me know if the analysis and discussion sections (notably the part highlighted in yellow) are clear in answering your concern, or if further clarification is needed. | **About General Comments and Findings:**  Thank you for the comments. I really like the revised structure proposed, as I think it improves the manuscript’s clarity. After careful reflection and reading, I have revised this section (see pp. 16-22) by introducing two essential innovations: a revised structure and presentation of findings (relying on the reviewer’s comments) and a new rewording of the key elements/characteristics affecting teachers’ practices across the two contexts.  This revision better conveys how the specificity and configuration of these elements are deeply embedded in the two distinct contexts of the two different institutes considered.  Specifically:   1. **Access to human resources:** shortage vs availability of **linguistic facilitators** 2. **Policy characteristics**: Vagueness and Unresponsiveness vs improved Clarity (through training 3. **Clients’ Pressures: Complaints and Pressures by Parents**   I have also revised the paragraph on teachers’ strategies, following the reviewer’s comments. Specifically, this is the revised version:   1. **Coping strategies deviating from the goals of intercultural education policies**   Here, I further specified and differentiated the types of coping strategies used by teachers, drawing from existing literature (especially Tummers et al., 2015).   * + extending the support of linguistic facilitators to pupils who are not officially entitled to it 🡪 rules bending coping strategy;   + volunteering extra hours 🡪 coping strategy of using teachers’ personal resources, notably their own time and availability;   + deliberately forgoing the implementation of inclusive activities targeting the entire student body 🡪 rule-breaking coping strategy.  1. Intercultural oriented practices 2. Practical Adaptations fostering Intercultural Goals   I also added a short section to clarify that my findings confirm a trend observed by Tummers et al. (2015, p. 12), namely the shift toward ‘moving towards clients’ strategies’ by teachers/SLBs.  In the analysis section, I illustrate in detail how the various configurations and interplay of these contextual elements within the two institutes lead to different uses of discretion and different strategies and practices by teachers. Thereafter, in the Discussion Section I further discuss their relevance and delve deeper into specific aspects of this discussion, also providing a summary table. |
| **Revision** 3: Better connecting the discussion section with themes and issues from the literature review and with theory | |
| Answers to the reviewers’ comments | |
| Reviewer 2 **Structure of the paragraph**:   * discussion can summarize the context-related characteristics of the two cases (already provided * insert a table summarizing the differences among the cases concerning practices, context-related influence and pressures, and the effects of the implementation gap * more direct link between data and theory 🡪 what intercultural education policies and Trento’s specific case study can add to the SLB literature and to the literature on SLB and policy innovation, which is mentioned in the discussion but can be deepened (see the comments below) 🡪 I believe more work should be done to connect these findings to the existing literature (see for instance Arnold, G. (2015). Street-level policy entrepreneurship. Public Management Review, 17(3), 307-327; Zhang, X., & He, Y. (2024). Bureaucratic Public Policy, 44(2), 411-435).   *Discussion*: The paragraph aims to structure the comparison among the cases more completely. The discussion is already well structured but can be improved by comparing themes and not only cases and to provide a more structured comparison**.** | |
| Thank you for this comment. It helped me clarify how the manuscript contributes to the street-level bureaucracy (SLB) literature and better situates the findings within existing scholarship. Building on the reviewers’ feedback, I have modified the relevant sections of the manuscript to fully develop the article’s contribution to SLB studies and to strengthen the theoretical connections.  Specifically, I decided to articulate these improvements in two places: the Discussion and the Conclusion Sections.  **In the discussion (p.26)**:   * I illustrate what and how the analysis’ s findings illuminate with regard to the manuscript’s research questions. * I highlight how my findings relate to key scholarly frameworks on SLBs. I demonstrate how these frameworks help interpret the results. To be sure, in the findings and analysis section, I clarify the theoretical link with the literature by using the relevant terminology employed by previous scholars to illustrate the emerging contextual factors and teachers’ practices. In the Discussion, I expand upon these points and proceed as follows:   + When addressing RQ1: I refer to and read the analysis’s findings pertaining to this question in light of the concept of the policy-practice gap (especially Lipsky 1980; Bruquetas-Callejo 2014). Moreover, I interpret the types of divergent practices by teachers in light of the coping strategies commonly identified in the literature, particularly rule-bending (in Trento 3 schools), the use of teachers’ personal resources (both in Trento 3 and 4), and rule-breaking practices (in Trento 3 schools).   + When addressing RQ2: I refer to the notion of the ‘extent’ of the policy-practice gap, based primarily on the contribution by Evans and Harris (2004).   + When addressing RQ3: I make sense of the different types of practices and the extent and application of divergent vs. compliant (intercultural) practices by teachers, drawing on existing SLB literature that shows the relevance of context and contextual elements in shaping different implementations and discretion trajectories.   + I added a paragraph (p.27) titled *The role of context and contextual factors*, in which I discuss in greater detail the specific contextual elements that emerge as important in my analysis and their relevance in shaping different practices by teachers. I have already illustrated in detail these elements and their different configurations across the institutes in the findings section (as specified above, in the answers to the point on *Substantial restructuring of the findings section*); here I further deepen the reflection upon them.   + Finally, as suggested, I have inserted a table summarizing at-a-glance the key differences among the cases concerning practices, context-related influence and pressures, and the different extents of implementation gap (cfr. Table 3 in Appendix 2).   **In the conclusion (p.30):**  I explicitly position the article’s contributions at the intersection of SLB research and intercultural education literatures and I show how my findings extend both of them.  To this purpose, I have enriched the conclusion with a new paragraph titled *Understanding Intercultural Implementation Through Context: The Interplay of Micro, Meso, and Macro-Level Factors in Shaping Teachers’ Practices.* This section synthesizes my findings in relation to existing SLB literature and highlights the study’s original contribution.  The new paragraph confirms previous findings while also drawing attention to case-specific dynamics. In line with prior studies, the results confirm the central role of context in shaping policy implementation. Teachers’ own views and experiences underscore how contextual factors, and their interplay, shape not only whether they are compelled to adopt coping strategies or are instead enabled to engage in genuinely interculturally oriented practices, but also the degree to which they engage in divergent coping practices when such strategies are adopted (Lipsky, 1980; Gofen et al., 2019; Riccucci, 2005; Tummers et al., 2012; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003)  However, my study diverges in one key respect. Teachers’ individual characteristics—often considered critical for discretion—do not appear as decisive factors in this case. Instead, other forms of micro-level influence, such as parental pressure, emerge as more relevant. This finding may reflect the specificities of the case and the exploratory nature of the research. Future studies could expand this line of inquiry using mixed-method approaches to further explore the role of individual-level variables in shaping implementation across contexts.  In contrast, meso-level factors stand out as particularly influential. As discussed, ambiguity in the intercultural policy framework presents a challenge in both contexts. Yet in Trento 4, this ambiguity is mitigated by the availability of targeted training and additional professional support. These elements create more favorable conditions for enacting interculturally oriented practices. In Trento 3, their absence exacerbates the effects of policy vagueness and creates more space for coping strategies that may even contradict intercultural goals.  Finally, I reflect on macro-level contextual factors such as national and regional policies and broader sociocultural dynamics. These elements are not explicitly mentioned by interviewees. However, I argue that they exert an indirect influence, which becomes visible through patterns in the data and teachers’ implementation strategies. | |
| Revision 4: Additional points about Conclusions | |
| Reviewer 1 I would also suggest revising the conclusion - I do not think you can claim any generalization from the analysis you present. A qualitative study as yours is very much a situated one which is context-driven, which needs to be acknowledged. | |
| **Answers to the reviewers’ comments** | |
| Thank you very much for this valuable comment. It has prompted me to reflect more carefully on the nature and scope of the claims made in the conclusion, particularly with regard to the issue of generalizability, which I had previously overlooked.  As this is a qualitative and interpretivist study, my aim is not to generalize findings, nor to find causal explanations (as previously explained); but rather to interpret and foreground the individual experiences and meaning-making processes of participants, and to explore what these narratives reveal about how intercultural education policy is implemented in practice and which contextual elements influence discretionary practices, based on teachers’ own accounts.  I have therefore revised the Conclusions and the Introduction to clarify that the insights offered are situated and context-specific (parts in yellow at the beginning of Conclusion Section and at the end of the Introduction Section). | |
| Revision 5: Additional general points about the Manuscript | |
| Reviewer 1 **Language of causality**  I found the language of causality in a qualitive study (re methodological section approach) rather confusing. You rightly say it is about uncovering mechanisms and processes, and most likely, in your case, about policy in practice, or local level practices during implementation but I would encourage you to rethink why and how you would like to demonstrate causality, that A really leads to B with the help of interviews. What you do is asking teacher about how they make sense of their actions post-hoc but can really claim causality? | Reviewer 2 **Intercultural education: an innovative paradigm**  I found this paragraph partially a repetition of what was already well discussed in the introduction**.** In my opinion, this paragraph can be deleted, and the discussion about the innovative paradigm of intercultural education can be slightly extended at the beginning of the introduction.  **Revisiting Intercultural Education**:  Exploring the Policy-Practice Gap and Implementation Process: The paragraph is very clear and explains the research gap well. **However, in a few points (e.g., p.5, lines 47-50 or p.6, lines 29-32), there are some repetitions with sentences in the introduction, and the paragraph can sound redundant in a few passages.** I suggest improving the writing in these passages to avoid these few repetitions. |
| Thank you very much for this insightful and thought-provoking comment. It helped me realize a conceptual imprecision in how I initially framed the methodological approach, particularly in relation to the notion of causality. I now recognize—thanks to Reviewer 1’s helpful observation—that I may have overstated the causal potential of my findings.  After careful reflection, I now see very clearly that the intention of the manuscript is, in fact, different. Specifically, this is interpretivist research, which was already clear to me in the previous version, but I had not explicitly specified it at that time and mistakenly suggested that I could also claim some causal explanations.  Accordingly, the purpose of this research is not to identify objective, causal, and generalizable explanations, but rather to interpret and highlight the individual experiences and meaning-making processes of participants, and to explore what these accounts reveal about how intercultural education policies are implemented in practice—through the lived experiences of frontline school practitioners such as teachers and headmasters. In other words, the focus is on teachers’ own understandings and meaning making of the practices they implement, as well as on how they perceive the factors and underlying mechanisms that influence their decisions within the broader policy context, taking into consideration the specificities of the case-study (Trento) and the complexity and variations of human experiences.  Teachers’ experiences and understandings, initially explored inductively, are then theoretically redescribed in light of the conceptual resources provided by the SLB literature (more detailed explanation in the methods section).  I have revised following this logic the Introduction and the methodology Sections (all the parts in yellow). | About the paragraph on *Intercultural education*: Thanks for this comment. I deleted the paragraph and put into the introduction, summarizing in a clear way.  **About the paragraph *Revisiting Intercultural Education*:**  Thanks for this helpful comment. It is true that there are repetitions and redundancies with the introduction. On the other hand, I believe that some redundancy is inevitable because the introduction needs to clearly state the main objective and contribution of the paper. In the paragraphs, and notably in *Revisiting Intercultural Education,* however, I delve deeper into these aspects, providing more detail and explanation. I have addressed this issue by slightly synthesizing the introductory paragraph and rephrasing it to convey the same concepts in a slightly different manner (part grey intro). |