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The plural geographies of ECEC – Care arrangements from the vantage point of children

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The social construction of childhood and, related to it, the concrete lives of children have so far always been reflected in their spatial dimensions. This is due to the fact, that what we may call *modern childhood* could not be understood without considering the processes of spatial separation, which have produced *own places of childhood*: most notably, the “relegation” of children away from the streets and the labor market into schools and youth centers, but also into the sphere of ‘the home’, where the nuclear family (Foucault 2003) is centered around their children and obliged to create an intimate space of care and socialization. Therefore, Zeiher and Zeiher (1994: 17) concluded, that the places that children find for themselves in the spatial world show specifically which *position* a society assigns to them.

This perspective on the emplacement and displacement of ‘childhood’ has influenced childhood studies much and as the notion children as active agents of their life is highly valued in childhood studies, it raised questions about children’s own geographies. Those studies, showed, for instance how children actively create own places and spaces in their encounters with the public sphere. But, there are at least some remarkable restrictions in this field of research, as the human geographers Philo (2000) and Ansell (2009) have both noted. First of all, there is a significant tendency to investigate children’s geographies as “intimate geographies” bounded to the bodily and sensual perception of local places. Ethnographic research with its traditional focus on the local has surely made some own contributions to that conception of children as “colonizers of small spaces” (Ward 1978, cited in Ansell 2009: 191). However, this does not mean that there are no studies that focus on wider geographies of childhood.

In fact, there is more and more research that, for example, investigates how local and global activities of children merge, but these studies are mostly related to social phenomena like children’s labor, migration or the use of internet, and only rarely to the *educational spaces of childhood* like schools.

This is even the case for research in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care, in the following abbreviated as ECEC. There are indeed studies on the changing topographies, landscapes and geographies of care and education (e.g. Vanderbeck/Dunkley 2004, Holloway/Hubbard/Jöns/Pimlott-Wilson 2010, Milligan/Wiles 2010, Holloway/Jöns 2012). Those studies explore how ECEC-policies are bound to a ‘global educational space’ (Millei/Jones o.J.), or how national and municipal policies afford processes like the de-territorialization or, in contrast, the re-spatialization of the ‘governable

spaces of ECEC', as Gallagher (2012) calls it. But how children are involved in those policy-related spatial processes in their everyday lives has not been investigated so far.¹

In the following, I will explore how child-centred childhood studies in the field of ECEC could profit from the integration of those wider geographies. My interest in such spatial analyses arises from a research project that we started last year with the ECEC-research group at the University of Luxembourg. The project *CHILD* aims at exploring the Luxembourgian ECEC-system from the *vantage point* of children. With 'vantage point', we do not refer to the growing research on *children's perspectives*, but to the practical assumption that the daily accomplishment of ECEC-systems can only be observed from the children's position.

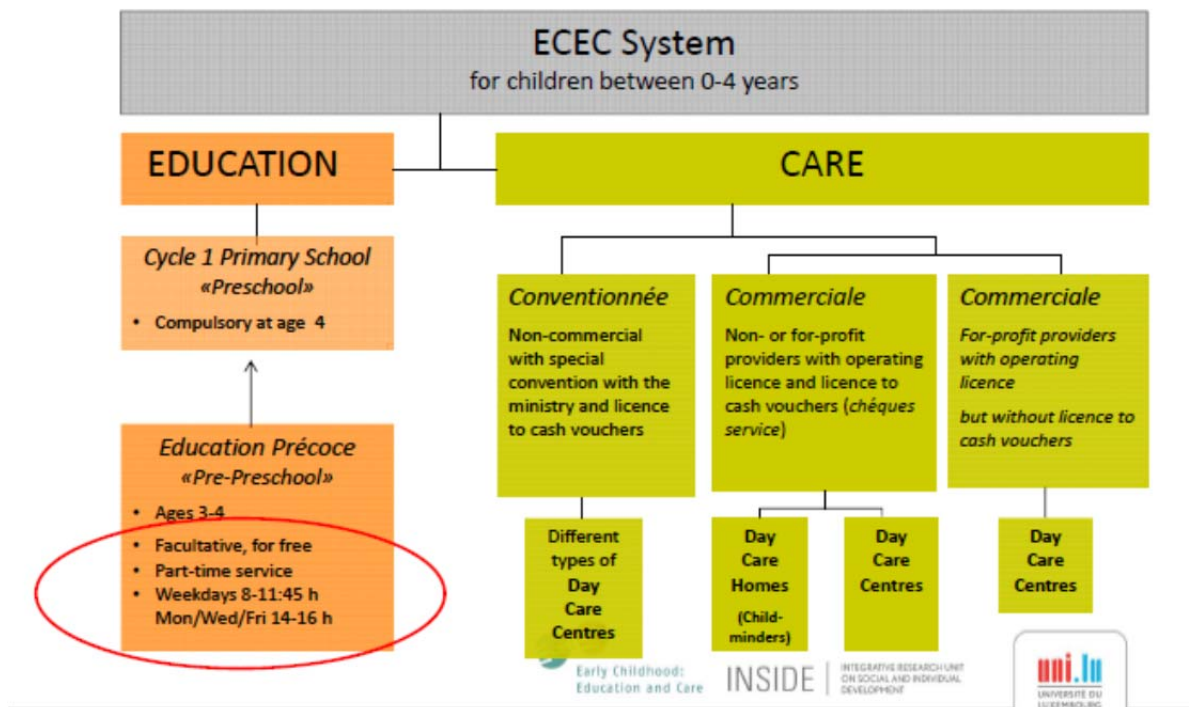
The reasons why this assumption makes sense especially with regard to ECEC in Luxembourg will be explored in the *first section* of my talk. The *second section* will show how our research questions are transformed into a research design that investigates children's spatial positioning on several 'geographical' levels. How these levels interrelate, is the question of the *third part* of my talk, where I refer to flat ontologies to highlight the manifold *spaces and places* that *assemble* in the production of distinct '*day care childhoods*'. How this conception informs our ethnographic analyses is illustrated in the *fourth section*. I will close with some brief final remarks.

1. Research Question - Why should the Luxembourgian day-care-system be analyzed from the 'vantage point' of the children?

Luxembourg never paid much attention to extra-familial childcare until the end of the last century. The last ten years, however, have brought an enormous increase of day-care facilities with very flexible structures – and ever since the implementation of childcare vouchers in 2009, the *mixed economy* of childcare has proliferated. Today more than half of the children in day care under the age of four go to *commercial day-care services*, such as professional child-minders (day-care homes) or for-profit day-care centres.

¹ The localism of such a child-centered approach to children's places and spaces is maybe one of the central reasons why the methodological discussion on spatiality in childhood has not proliferated in the same way as in the field of 'children's geographies'.

Heterogeneous Luxembourgian ECEC System



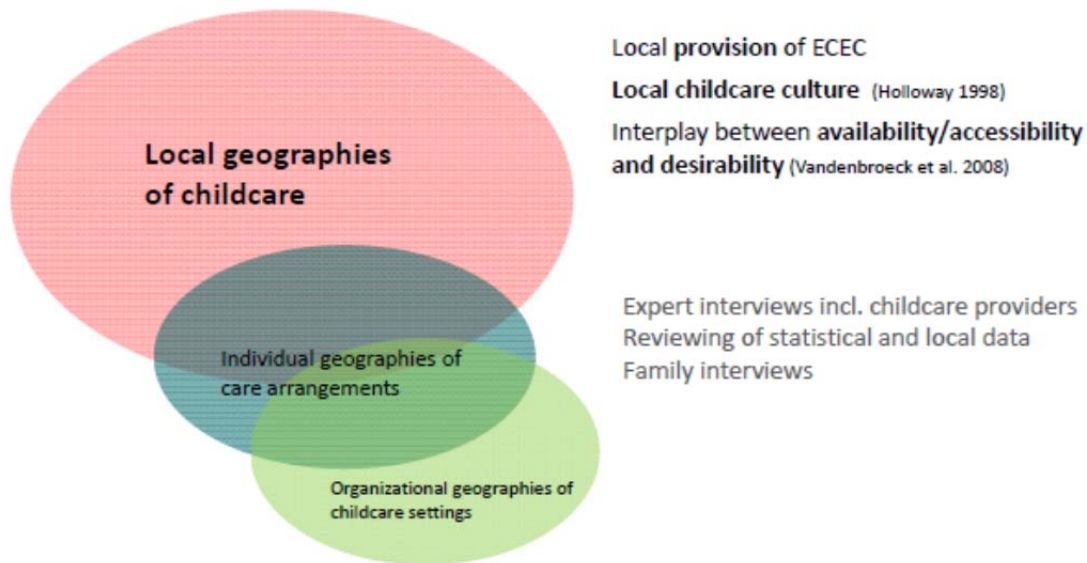
But the heterogeneity of the Luxembourgian ECEC arises not only from this plurality of day-care services. The ECEC-System in Luxembourg is additionally divided into separate sectors of education and care. Compulsory schooling starts at the age of four, but children can enter the so-called *éducation précoce* one year before. This kind of pre-pre-school was implemented in 1998 (nineteen ninety eight), mainly as an educational offer to compensate for migrant children's deficits in Luxembourgish. But, as the *éducation précoce* is free, it attracts parents' attention not only for educational purposes. The income-related childcare vouchers do not cover the whole expenses of day care, thus, *full-time day care* is still expensive. For that and other reasons, the *éducation précoce* is commonly used and attended by over seventy percent (71 %) of three-year-olds, although it is only a part-time solution. Thus, lot of day-care centres and most child-minders take over during the uncovered hours and, therefore, have to adapt their own schedules of those of each child.

Thus, 'day-care-childhood' in Luxembourg is characterized by the less or more complex chains of care settings, which parents combine. As these *care arrangements* often cause various horizontal cross-ings during the course of a child's day and week they create by themselves *distinct spaces of positioning and actorship*. In consequence, only the children actually experience the heterogeneity of all these places and spaces in between - and the question how the national ECEC-System is accomplished on a daily basis has to be explored *from the vantage point* of the children. Therefore, our project is realizing 12-15 ethnographic case studies, which use contrastive care-arrangements of individual children as the units of observation.

2. Research design: *The plural geographies of ECEC*

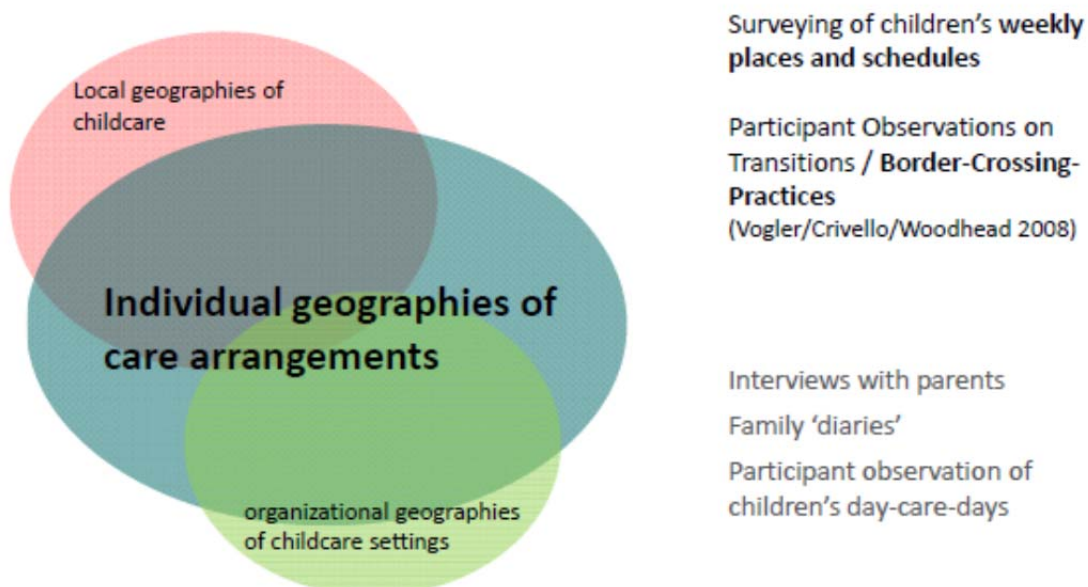
To capture in detail the genesis and daily enactment of such individual care arrangements, we chose a research design where three kinds of geographies are distinguished: At the level of 'local geographies of **day care**', we study the socio-spatial conditions that inform parents' choices and create the possibilities for shaping their children's care-arrangements. Socio-demographic factors are taken into account as well as the provision of childcare, enrolment-policies and the families' networks.

3 'Areas' of Childcare Geographies



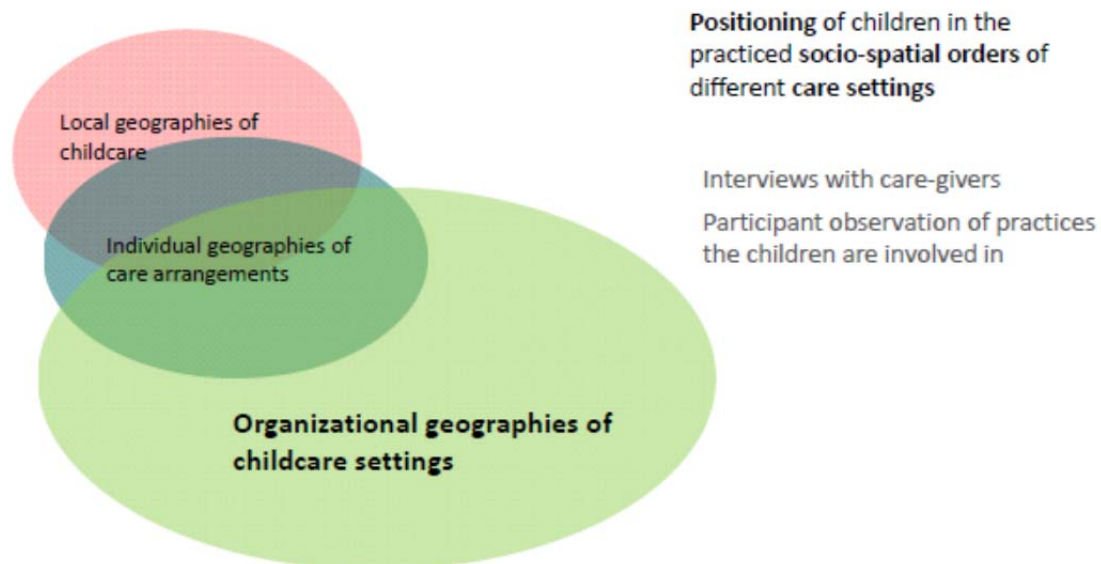
Second, we enquire about the 'individual geographies of **care-arrangements**'. Schedules, places and horizontal transitions are documented in interviews and through the participant observation of individual children throughout their entire days of care.

3 'Areas' of Childcare Geographies



Finally, we are also interested in the ‘organizational geographies of child-care settings’, for example, the time-space orders in care settings and children’s involvement in it.

3 ‘Areas’ of Childcare Geographies



Nevertheless, this research design does not only reflect how our different research methods are related to different objects of analysis, but it reveals above all our interest in the question of how these plural geographies of day care are interrelated. One main objective of our ethnographic research is therefore, to trace the pathways and practices in which these different geographies interact in the daily accomplishment of certain day-care-childhoods and ask if, and when what plural spaces of ECEC are produced by that.

4. Practice-theoretical approach: The spatiality of practices and the practical production of space

To explore how human activities are bound to the complexity of such different kinds of geographies, human geographers have developed the so-called theories of scale. Contrary to the notion of scales in quantitative research, where they are used to specify the sizes of samples, these theories of scales aim at differentiating “spatial levels at which a presumed effect of location is operative” (Agnew 1993 cited in Marston/Jones/Woodway 2005). In a definition of Brenner, scales are therefore conceptualized as “a vertical differentiation in which social relations are embedded within a hierarchical scaffolding of nested territorial units stretching from the global, the supranational, and the national downwards to the regional, the metropolitan, the urban, the local, and the body” (Brenner 2005 cited in Marston/Jones/Woodward 2005). But, this hierarchical understanding of scales has been strongly criticized. Firstly, because these definitions operate as if the scales have a pre-existing ontological status. In contrast, it is argued that all these spaces have to be considered as socially produced

and each scale does only exist in relation to another. This is also encompassed in a critique regarding the sizes and relations of scales, which denies the assumption that there are larger scales, like the national, which contain all the smaller scales, like the regional and the body. Rather, it is argued that larger scales are at the same time contained within the smaller scales and that analyses of spatialized human activities have to take into account the multi-directional and simultaneous relations between scales, where activities both, are located and do produce the space in and between these scales.

As Martons/Jones and Woodward (2005) conclude, these latter considerations refer to hybrid models of scale that integrate vertical and horizontal understandings of socio-spatial practices, but are still bound to distinctions like macro/micro, global/local and agency/structure. Theyd therefore, are not able to explore how in a flow of situated activities some spatial relations come to matter and others not. Therefore, they opt for a rejection of these scale models in favor of theories of “flat ontologies”, like Bruno Latours ANT, Deleuze’s Theory of Assemblage or Schatzki’s social site ontology².

Theodore Schatzki’s practice-theory in particular is instructive here, because he combines a theory of practice with a theory of arrangements or assemblages, where the latter seeks to shed light on the ways in which things and events are connected within complex networks of entities. To summarize in just a few words: these practice-theories are underpinned by a conception of space, where practices are not only bound to the local socio-material environments where they occur, but also to the dynamic contexts that “allow various inhabitants to hang together in event-relations by virtue of their activities”. (Marston/Jones/Woodward 2005: 425). Therefore, space has an inherent part of what Schatzki calls the “site of the social”. These sites are the contexts of practices with which they evolve at the same time. Sites are therefore, materially bounded and localized through practices but also entangled to a mesh of practices and orders, occurring elsewhere. Therefore, as Schatzki (2011: 4) notes, “it follows, pace the widespread assignment of practice theory to ‘local’ or ‘micro’ phenomena, that the above ontology grants no priority to the **local situation**. The activities, entities, rules, understandings, and teleologies that are **at work in** any local situation are elements of phenomena – practices, arrangements, and bundles thereof – that stretch out over time and space beyond such situations. Indeed, these items come to be at work in local situations because they are components of practice-arrangement bundles”. That is why, as Martons et al conclude, “we can talk about the existence of a given site only insofar as we can follow interactive practices through their **localized connections**.”

Analyzing the distinct spatiality of children’s care arrangements, therefore, means – conceptually – that the children’s practical positioning in their day-care practices has to be recognized **as the nodes**, where different bundles of practice-arrangements are linked together. Empirically, this implies following the enactment of care-arrangements through their **localized connections**, and to the own spaces of ECEC which are produced by that.

² All three theories are seen as radical post-structural approaches, even to spatiality.

3. Two empirical examples – children's practices as the localized interconnections of the different spaces of childcare

Transitional Spaces

Now I like to give you two brief examples on how such own spaces of care-arrangements evolve in the localized interconnections of the care-arrangements in two of our currently conducted case studies. The first example is related to a care-arrangement which includes a day-care centre that has well organized schedules, where special activities, such as literacy programs, sports and walks take place during the entire day. To make sure that these activities actually take place, children can only be brought and fetched at specific times. These times in the morning and in the afternoon are conceptualized as 'free play', when the children can play with their peers as it pleases them, and child after child drops in or out.

But, in practice, schedules tend to be more individual. Take, for instance, the case of Ann-Sophie, who attended the centre over the last year from 9 to 5 for three days and part-time for two days a week. These were the only times the centre could offer to Ann-Sophie's single-parent mum, because that specific schedule was the counterpart of an arrangement with another child, who was also enrolled in the *éducation précoce*. Normally Anne-Sophie's grandparents brought and fetched her and also cared for her during the uncovered afternoons, when they picked her up midday. Those days she didn't eat with the other children in the centre and was therefore separated from the group to be placed alone in the play area by the educators. Ann-Sophie normally accepted that it was *not* her turn then to sit down with the group, instead she sometimes played a bit, but mostly just strolled around while orbiting the eating area and the door waiting for the doorbell to ring.

We call these activities 'pure stand-by' practices, which create 'individual transitional spaces': in the same room as the other children, but separated and given individual waiting tasks. These 'transitional spaces' emerge in practices where individual and organizational time-orders create frictions, and in consequence, children like Ann-Sophie are positioned much earlier into that transitional spaces than the pick-up actually occur. But these kinds of stretched transitional spaces also occur during the collective waiting routines in the afternoon, where 'playing time and space' and 'waiting time and space' converge for all children. We then observe how children are engaged in waiting for getting picked up as well as getting involved in playing with other children in the meanwhile. We call these practices 'permeable stand-by-practices', characterised by occasional playing, strolling around or playing pick-up-games, like collectively running to the door when the bell rings and competing in shouting the name of the child whose parents arrive loudest.

As this certain kinds of stand-by-practices work out the interplay between the individual and organizational geographies of day care we conceptualize them as the localized connections which produce own spaces of individual care-arrangements.

Private/Public Spaces Care-Arrangements

Another example of such evolvments of own spaces of day care can be observed in the care-arrangement of Maik, an almost four-year-old boy who gets cared for by a professional child-minder. His day-care mum cares at her home for at least 6 children with individual schedules. Maik had been cared for in a day-care centre before. But, because his parents had been displeased with that service, they enrolled Maik with the day-care mum, who they knew by sight, because she is so often outside

with the children. This public life of the day-care mum evolves from the situation that these care-providers are somewhat the flip-side of the split ECEC-System, because they mostly offer to accompany children between preschool and day care when required. This can be several times a day, especially if parents work full-time. In consequence, and even if Maiks parents decided not to enrol him in the *éducation précoce*, he is nonetheless very familiar with it, because he accompanies the children who have to be brought and fetched from it every day.

The daily schedules at the day-care home are therefore not structured by the division of activities and free play, as in Ann-Sophies day care center, but by the schedules of the *éducation précoce*, which divides the day in serial inside and outside phases. Because Maik is so often outside in his neighbourhood, a lot of his daily day-care-practices involves – what we call – ‘roaming his hood’, like wandering the sideways, playing playgrounds, petting the dogs they usually meet, strolling through the preschool and greeting school kids and educators. This daily practices of his care-arrangement implies therefore a ‘public spaced’-day-care-childhood, where Maiks particular positioning in the interplay between the local, the individual and the organizational geographies, is worked out in those roaming practices. The spaces of Maiks care-arrangement are therefore, remarkably different to the more private and inner-organizational spaces that for instance, Ann-Sophie, is involved in.

5. Conclusion

Even if these two examples don’t display very complex care-arrangements, they already show the plurality and differentially of spaces that evolve in the daily enactment of individual care-arrangements. Our ongoing-research therefore aims on mapping these kinds of spaces which evolve from the interplay of the plural geographies of ECEC, to answer the question on how divers’ children are positioned in the Luxembourgian ECEC system. The impact, that such a kind of analysing could have to childhood studies in general and especially to childhood-sociological approaches in ECEC-research is therefore, to bring welfare and social policy research together with actor- or practice-centred research and by that to overcome the conception of “children as colonizers of small spaces” and the restricted places that especially ethnographic childhood studies mostly assign to them.

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