

## Spacialising educational places: resistances in the daily life of early childhood

*Espacializando os lugares educativos:  
resistências no cotidiano da educação infantil*

*Espacializando los lugares educativos:  
resistencias en el cotidiano de la educación infantil*

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**Abstract:** This article addresses a reflection on the appropriations that children make of the institutions of early childhood education. With the theoretical reference Michel de Certeau, we approach the marks of children's practices as elements that evidence the movements of resistance on the ordering of places in the daily life of children. Based on a case study involving three institutions from the three largest municipalities of Santa Catarina, the issues presented here are a cut of some elements of this research collected through photographic records and analyzed using the space and place concepts of Certeau.

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**Keywords:** Child education. Spaces. Places.

**Resumo:** *Esse artigo aborda uma reflexão acerca das apropriações que as crianças fazem das instituições da educação infantil. Tendo por referencial teórico Michel de Certeau, abordamos as marcas das práticas infantis como elementos que evidenciam os movimentos de resistência sobre o ordenamento dos lugares no cotidiano das crianças. Partindo de um estudo de caso envolvendo três instituições dos três maiores municípios de Santa Catarina, as questões aqui apresentadas constituem um recorte de alguns elementos dessa pesquisa coletados por meio de registro fotográfico e analisadas a partir dos conceitos de espaço e lugar de Certeau.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Educação infantil. Espaços. Lugares.*

**Resumen:** *Este artículo aborda una reflexión acerca de las apropiaciones que los niños hacen de las instituciones de la educación infantil. Con referencial teórico Michel de Certeau, abordamos las marcas de las prácticas infantiles como elementos que evidencian los movimientos de resistencia sobre el ordenamiento de los lugares en el cotidiano de los niños. A partir de un estudio de caso involucrando tres instituciones de los tres mayores municipios de Santa Catarina, las cuestiones aquí presentadas constituyen un recorte de algunos elementos de esa investigación recogidos por medio de registro fotográfico y analizadas a partir de los conceptos de espacio y lugar de Certeau.*

**Palabras clave:** *Educación infantil. Espacios. Lugares.*

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## Introduction

Caminante, son tus huellas / el camino y nada más; / Caminante, no hay camino, / se hace camino al andar (Antonio Machado)<sup>1</sup>.

The debate that inaugurates a scientific writing, be it an article, a dissertation or a thesis, always deals with a double movement: thinking about the object of research and, at the same time, thinking about research itself. To reflect on the spaces and places in early childhood education is, in this sense, a look at the theme and at the same time about the openness that it finds or allows when dealing with childhood. As well as the poet's path, which takes place when walking and is made up of marks, according to our epigraph; it shows us a look at the processes and practices that configure our daily lives and not towards a static and determining structure. This perspective, however, reveals the difficult task (perhaps impossible) of capturing two movements: that of space, which with Certeau (1994) we understand as the dynamics of appropriation, and consequently, of the practices of the educational places in question; and that of conducting research on childhood, which implies less in the delimitation of the field, and more in the evidence of another brand that is part of it and that constitutes it. For this purpose, the research that serves as a basis for the reflections mentioned here takes as its object the spaces of early childhood education institutions.

As a methodological procedure, we chose to develop a Case Study, which according to Yin (2015, p. 17), it is “an empirical investigation that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and in its real-world context, especially when the limits between the phenomenon and the context may not be clearly evident”. The locus of the research were three early childhood education institutions, named as references in their respective cities, these being the three largest in *Santa Catarina*. Such research aimed to understand the possibilities that these institutions presented for the aesthetic experiences<sup>ii</sup> of babies (we consider children from 0 to 3 years old in this category, who make up the daycare center stage). Taking these places not only in their physical and structural dimensions, we seek to understand them as **places**, in particular, as Augé's “anthropological place” (2012, p. 76), in its “inscribed and symbolized sense”. Thus, different tools were used to capture the data, but it is the photographic record that we privilege in this article and that we use to verticalize a point that deserves our attention: the daily practices, verified from the presence or absence of the marks in some elements that were replicated in our three units of analysis, for example the park.

Although the main movement of our research was the demarcation of these institutions as **educational places**, what worries us in this text is a complement to this reflection. By this we mean that, more than analyzing the stability of places, we are interested in the marks of the subjects who practice them and in their daily appropriations and spatialize them.

Thus, the text is divided into two moments: the first – **the places of childhood and childhood as a place** – seeks to address both the places built to receive children, small children and babies, and therefore understood as places of childhood, as well as the concept of childhood itself, something historically constituted, as an identity marker for this group,

which, in a way, becomes part of a different generational category (SARMENTO, 2001). In the second moment, we tried to reflect on – **space: a practiced place** – a moment that we supported in the discussions of the concept of space by Certeau, in conjunction with an excerpt from the research already exposed, proposing a reflection on the brands, specifically, the marks of babies, as evidence of an appropriation of educational places and at the same time of their inferences and transgressions about the stable, about the wages. Thus, we establish the doubt about how these movements also constitute a kind of resistance on the part of, on the certainties and controls (for better or worse), that the adult universe establishes on the children's world.

### **The places of childhood and childhood as a place**

If in the course of this text, we have associated the place with order and stability, talking about childhood as a place can sound somewhat deterministic. Without a doubt, this is not our intention, and we hope to make it clear later. However, if a deterministic spirit hovers around us, it is important that we look at this more closely. Currently, when we speak of a multidisciplinary field of children's studies, which is defined “by the mobilization of knowledge from different disciplinary sources around a specific object: the child and childhood” (SARMENTO, 2015, p. 33); we seek to understand and respect the numerous theoretical and methodological contributions that the disciplines, separately, brought to the field. However, we must remember that this movement did not happen (and in many cases, it still does not happen) easily. Knowing how complex these issues are, and that it would not be possible to even deepen them in the space of this text, we only need to realize that the refusal to certain biological conceptions and studies and the development of a sociological perspective made (or only accentuated) a refusal to a naturalistic determinism. However, this may not have meant turning away from the determinism that involved education and childhood. Many perspectives that address exclusively the reproductive character of educational institutions, still deal with social determinism. What interests us most here, would not be to take part in this discussion or clarify any position, but first, to emphasize that precisely the movement of disputes and the appearance, permanence and disappearance of explanations and questions about the same phenomenon, is what allows us to speak of childhood as a place. In other words, this historicity configures the stability of the very concept of childhood, which is constantly appropriated and re-signified by practices, whether in the academic field in its research or in the ordinary movement of our daily lives.

We do not speak of the child as a place, but of childhood. This means that we understand that children have always existed, but that childhood requires an institutionalization process, including the concept itself, which we understand with Sarmiento (2004, p. 3) as a modern creation, and arises “as a result of a complex process of producing social representations about children, structuring their daily lives and worlds of life and, especially, establishing social organizations for children”. Based on this logic, the school itself, which over time becomes a place of childhood, operates what we call “educational institutionalization of childhood”, which works:

by the formal and protected separation by the State of children from adults, for part of the day, and by the corresponding commitment of learning requirements and duties, which are also ways of inculcating epistemology (inherent to school culture), homogenized knowledge (that of normal science), that of ethics (that of effort) and that of mental and corporal discipline (Foucault, 1993) (SARMENTO, 2004, p. 4).

In this way, **the places of childhood and childhood as a place** are extremely articulated. With the “educational institutionalization of childhood”, what is evident is that the movement to create a place to shelter it, at the same time, creates its own childhood by the form and objectives linked to it, that is, by the way in which it approaches children – something that, in this sense, is not limited to the walls of educational centers and which can be better understood by what Sarmiento (2004, p. 5) calls “symbolic administration of childhood”, that is, “a number of norms, procedural attitudes and prescriptions not always taken expressly in writing or formalized, but which condition and constrain children's lives in society”.

Far from exhausting the discussion under a certain pessimism, we want to highlight that the institutionalization process that we have been talking about and that creates at the same time a social place, facing childhood as a distinct generational category, and physical places, to receive children, which we have called childhood places, always imply a generalization of the differences of the subjects, or social actors, that make up this group – the childhood group. That is,

In the globalized society in which we live, the “norm” of childhood tends to establish itself universally, due to the effect of public policies and international organizations, but also by the dissemination of dominant images that make childhood a distinct generational category (SARMENTO, 2001, p. 14, emphasis in the original).

This generalization process, the constitution of a global childhood, is what results in the erasing of the complex web of meanings that children operate on the meaning of childhood. We can explore this point a little more from Image 1, which is an excerpt from our research and which we present below:

**Image 1.** Park of institution A



Source: The author, field research.

Although the image presents an element of institution A, it is important to highlight that the park (or more specifically, this type of park) was found in the three institutions involved in our studies (something that we can follow in images 2 and 3). Some variations of sizes, colors and formats could be observed, but in all cases we find parks – which are strongly identified as “the” place of play – extremely formatted and designed **for** and not **with**, or **from** children. They are objects built by adults, aiming to please the children's universe, but a homogeneous and global universe, which excels in a type of experience, designed for a type of child, who will have a type of interaction that is already planned in the toy itself. In addition to these aspects, it is pertinent to note that they are external and collective environments, and because of that, they should be thought of for all children in the institutions, that is, even babies. What makes us look at the image again and ask ourselves: what can babies experience in these places?

**Image 2.** Park of institution B



Source: The author, field research.

**Image 3.** Park of institution C



Source: The author, field research.

We can see that although some identity issues permeate the construction of these spatial elements – such as the shape of a boat in one of the toys, something that does not happen by chance, but that is found especially in an institution located in a coastal city – the structure of these parks does not change profoundly. It also corresponds to challenges launched by having older children (3, 4 and 5 years old in focus) and proposing always equal interactions: climbing, sliding, swinging – which does not end the children's experience, that in their daily transgressions they transfigure these same objects from the interaction with them, even considering the rigidity of the materiality of these toys. Thus, what we see is a kind of formatted (and sometimes industrialized) park, something that is justified and evidenced by the encounter with these toys in a number of places, other than educational ones, such as shopping malls, squares, playgrounds etc.

These findings are not intended to deny the possibilities that even these fixed toys bring to the daily lives of educational institutions. We want more than that, to show that the replication of this element in these places challenges childhood and the very idea of a park becoming the privileged place and form of play, since this is often the main object of the daycare center's external space. However, we understand that the concept of a park should

include a series of other experiences, including babies, those that occur in other games and games of interaction with others and with the environment and that do not happen in such a deterministic way. This fact is also observed in guiding documents of the Ministry of Education, as for example, in the document “Toys and daycare games” which defines that “in the daycare, park projects must provide for this concept of playing in an environment that change and always offer new experiences to children. Traditional toys such as slides, seesaws and spinners are fixed and immobilize the space” (BRASIL, 2012, p. 118).

In this conception, the object usually called a park should appear in a mobile way, allied to the environment that surrounds it and dialoguing with it, presenting the possibility of different experiences and experiences, as well as several interactions between the different ages that make up the universe of the early childhood education institution. The same document also seeks to work under this logic, for example in its guidelines for the construction of environments, in which the park is articulated, the solarium and the sensory garden in a more direct way for children up to 1 year old, and more indirectly for the older ones (from 1 to 3 years old) proposing that the parks have elements that allow a sensorial exploration (like plants with different smells and flavors) as well as symbolic (hanging cloth that becomes a hut in make-believe). In other words, we understand that the park is not just a place for “free” activities, but rather a place to be specialized, and as such it must be thought and planned not in a unilateral way, disregarding the

existing dialectic between learning and remaining a child, seeing the child only from the biological point of view as a becoming, instead of seeing it also in its cultural dimension, that is, also with its childlike specificity, as a phase of life to be lived in its time: becoming a child, without having to turn into an adult quickly, shortening the childhood (FARIA, 1999, p. 62).

Thus, analyzing the parks of our research that we evoke from images 1, 2 and 3, we understand that this sort of ordering of the adult world on such places is what configures them as places, because as stated by Certeau (1994, p. 201) “a place is the order (whatever) according to which elements are distributed in relations of coexistence. [...] A place is therefore an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability”.

However, if pessimism and determinism were two words that we have tried to remove until now, it is because we understand that it is the practices of children that significate these places and make them spatial. As said before, however hard and rigid the materiality of objects (already highlighted) seeks to determine the children's activities and time, their daily movements of appropriation go beyond the limits already thought for and in these places and generate marks that report the inference processes that occurred there. In this sense, these places are much closer to the sense of place proposed by Augé, because the **place** as the author defines it “is absolutely not the place that Certeau opposes space, as a geometric figure to the movement, the word silent to the spoken or the state to the path: it is the place of the inscribed and symbolized sense, the anthropological place” (AUGÉ, 2012, p. 76).

However, if we are interested in reflecting on the ordinary transgressions that children establish in their daily lives in educational institutions, and more than that, also think of them as a form of resistance, it is the concept of **space** by Certeau that seems more appropriate to

deepen such questions, since at this point, the author's view allows us to advance a little more about the act, the social practices – which are presented here not directly from the register of children in action, but from a look at the ephemeral, to the marks present in the stability of the places, which demonstrate the children's “doing with” about materiality – and finding from them a “practiced place” (CERTEAU, 1994, p. 202).

## Space: a practiced place

If we focus so far on childhood as a place and on the places of childhood, and if we find ourselves in such a position in a certain cast, perhaps in operations, or in other words, in the appropriations we make of these places, we will allow ourselves to escape such rigidity, or even to prevent any fixation. The first point that we can explore, in this sense, refers to the title of this work: **spatializing educational places**. Using the word space, conjugating it as a verb, allows us to approach the concept of space by Certeau (1994) by proposing a process, a path, an operation on something stable, because for the author,

Space is the effect produced by the operations that guide, circumstantialize, temporalize it and lead it to function in a multi-purpose unit of conflictual or contractual proximity programs. [...] Unlike the place, it has, therefore, neither the univocity nor the stability of an “own” (CERTEAU, 1994, p. 202).

Understanding the movement in which your conception of space implies requires that we also consider your idea of appropriation. Attentive to social practices, the author makes an analysis of the space observing it from the ordinary daily practitioners, and not from the structural and determining point of view often presented by different authors. This is not a refusal to order, to the stability that interferes with our actions on the world, more than that, the question we ask ourselves is: how do we appropriate these structures? What uses do we make of them? This “doing with” represents in itself the operationalization of places and their configuration in space.

In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urbanism is transformed into space by pedestrians. In the same way, reading is the space produced by the practice of the place constituted by a system of signs – a writing (CERTEAU, 1994, p. 202, emphasis in the original).

**Spatializing** a place means for us the frequent movement of transforming institutions into space, that is, in the “act of a present” (CERTEAU, 1994, p. 202) by children. Such an operation presents itself, for this reason, as a resistance movement, either against the certainties of the adult world, against the material limitations of a place, or against overly functional and safe goals that prevent the emergence of any kind of experience in the interaction of children **with** and **in** places. In appropriation, resignification, the transmutation of objects and places opens up to creation, a capacity that gives the subject the possibility of autonomy, understood here as

[...] ontological openness, possibility of overcoming the informational, cognitive and organizational enclosure that characterizes self-constituting, but heteronomous beings. Ontological openness, because overcoming this closure means changing the

existing cognitive and organizational “system”, therefore, constituting your world and yourself according to different laws and, therefore, creating a new ontological eidos, a different self in a different world. Such a possibility only appears, as far as I know, with the human being. It appears as a possibility to question – not randomly or blindly, but knowing what you do – your own laws, your own institution when it comes to society (CASTORIADIS, 1987, p. 420).

Evidently, the difficult task of the research is to give visibility to the dynamics that constitute the **space** exposed by Certeau. As a movement, an act of a gift, space does not allow itself to be captured, and perhaps more problematic may seem to be the decision to use the photographic record for this, that is, to use a frozen image to speak of appropriation. However, the photograph produced here by the researcher allows a relationship between a resource and an object, or better said, between what you see and how you say what you see.

The use of photography helps to take possession of the transitory things that are entitled to a place in the archives of memory. Thus, there is a possibility to look at the frozen image, portrayed by the photo, countless times, a full exercise of seeing and reviewing the scene, the characters and the context. Such a possibility sharpens the memory, the imagination, the creation and the reconstruction of the lived history, by the images and in the images. The photograph always shows the past read in the eyes of the present, although it is no longer the same past, but its reframed reading. Given this, the reading of the images appears as an instrument to approach the socio-historical and cultural reality of the photographed group. Therefore, more than illustrating the sections of the text or giving it a “color”, photography reconstructs the researcher's own gaze, presenting itself as other possibilities of writing – other texts – of the studied reality (MARTINS FILHO; BARBOSA, 2010, p. 22).

This movement to reconstruct the researcher's gaze from the photographic record presented by Martins Filho and Barbosa (2010), allows us to perceive the very path of those who experience, investigate. Therefore, looking for more than just describing a place, the analyzes that we establish from **Image 4**, are also constructed as a kind of report and thus open up to the possible ones: something that is no longer (for as a narrative it speaks of a time left behind, which has therefore abandoned the stability of the place) and what may be (a becoming, a launching into the encounter with the listener, open to **doing with**). “Everyday accounts tell what, despite everything, can be made and done there. They are made of a space” (CERTEAU, 1994, p. 207).



**Image 4.** Institution B external area



Source: The author, field research.

At first glance, it is already possible to see that the image we selected does not bring a portrait of an action, but only a section of one of the institutions involved in our research. In this sense, it is important to remember that the objective of our investigation was not to observe the action, but to observe the marks and/or absences of action, of the interactions of the subjects who work there. Furthermore, even if we found babies and/or small children playing in this register, interacting with the place, we would not have the action itself, but only its past. In the same way, and now taking longer to look at the image, we come across the marks – terrains, excavations, trails, footprints on the ground – that also demonstrate the appropriation of this place by different subjects.

Just as the story that builds on the image seeks to resume past activities, it is possible to imagine so many other inventions about this part of institution B. It is a ravine about two meters high (in the higher regions). Something that, not infrequently, would make the adult world afraid of the actions of children and babies in this place. However, this risk (a kind of controlled danger, since action in this case occurs in a more monitored way by adults) is what makes the children's experiences there possible. Without great difficulties, we can imagine his coming and going, the challenge of going up a little bit each day as a trailblazer who savor the discovery little by little, who invents other things along the way, and that more than anything, shares these experiences with those who live there.

Unlike a formatted park, presented as “the” place of play, here we see the appropriation of the environment itself, assuming its peculiarities and challenges, producing varied meanings about it. By the different marks, in different parts and heights, of different depths, we find in our imagination a different and transgressive play: here the roads of a city for the cars; there a monster's hideout, or a hunter's haven; maybe a slide; or even a climber's mountain.

Here, too, and this is perhaps one of the most important issues to be highlighted, the pedagogical proposal is presented between the lines of this place that in the children's “doing

with” is spatialized. The simple fact of assuming the clay's materiality, be it in its smell, plasticity, texture, and even in its contrasting character with the requirements present in the health surveillance regulations of the investigated cities, as well as, in the limitations and restrictions produced by the people responsible for cleaning the environments, according to the constant speech of teachers in different institutions, especially in the exclusive spaces for babies, it implies a firm positioning in relation to space as part of the pedagogical conception. We mean by that,

spaces are not simple physical arrangements, but also conceptual ones, they constitute semantic fields in which and with which those who inhabit them establish certain types of relationships, emotions, attitudes. Like any other language, space is a constitutive element of thought and, therefore, becomes an indirect pedagogical action that requires attention (OSTETTO, 2011, p. 33-34).

Thus, if in the course of these writings we seek to highlight the children's action on the places established for them as a way of escaping deterministic views, whether of a naturalistic or social nature, that is, if in the appropriation of educational places we perceive the resistance movement that children establish in their daily lives, inventing, displacing, resignifying the elements that make up early childhood education centers, it is worth adding an alert for us adults, especially those who work in these places: these movements, most likely will continue to exist, because as worldly beings, we will always be appropriating the things around us. However, without a doubt, the more attentive to the importance that space (as a practice) and places (as physical and symbolic structures in which practices are developed) the pedagogical proposals are more open to the interaction and the children's experiences will be.

## Considerations

Starting the text with the verses of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado reveals the intention to invert a way of looking at the world, which has shown itself to be increasingly prevalent: the concern with the results, with the finals. The walker, upon discovering that the path exists only because he himself invented it with his steps, realizes that the path is as important (or perhaps much more) than a final product. This is the first resistance that we operate against the conceptions of education focused solely and exclusively on serving the market, or on international assessment rates.

A training process, specifically in early childhood education, should consider children as subjects of rights and not just as future productive adults. They will not be someone, as they are already being. This implies perhaps understanding that in the walker's path we cannot even establish an end. With every act in the world, we constantly reinvent the endings. For this reason, a reflection on space helps us to find our actions, our social practices, because “space is existential”, as well as “existence is spatial” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1999, p. 394). Furthermore, from the marks, diving into the practices that children operate in educational places allowed us to perceive them as active subjects, who interfere in a world

that, however much, in its hegemonic adult conception, often do not be attentive to it, it houses its marks, its inferences, as movements of resistance in everyday life.

The two cuttings presented, explored quite different places: one (the park) previously thought for children, which we analyzed under the concept of place showing its stability, its “own” characteristic as a place to play; the other (the ravine), as a peculiar characteristic of the institution itself, and which did not have a pre-established function, but received different meanings from the children's practice of the place, and that for this reason allowed us to approach the concept of space by Certeau (1994, p. 202) as a “practiced place”. This is not a waiver of industrialized products. Children live in a consumerist world, and as subjects of rights, they must also be entitled to consumption. However, it is essential that all this cultural production designed for children respects them in their particularities and that it does not take them as a global and totalizing image, because they are also walkers who invent the way when walking, that is, inventors of childhood in their daily practices.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> The epigraph consists of a fragment of the text by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado “Proverbios y Cantares”, but it was also sung by the singer Joan Manuel Serrat in an album honoring the poet entitled “Dedicado a Antonio Machado, poeta” (“Dedicated to Antonio Machado, poet”) (1969).

<sup>ii</sup> The intention to talk about aesthetic experience in childhood arises from personal interests, from an affinity from the area of formation of the authors and from a concern with the theme, but also curriculum documents such as the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education that also address the “aesthetic principles” to be considered in the learning process. However, our theoretical framework around aesthetics is based on Rancière (2005), for whom aesthetics represents a way of sharing the sensitive and that “does not refer to a theory of sensitivity, taste or pleasure of art amateurs. It refers to the way of being specific to what belongs to art, to the way of being of its objects” (RANCIÈRE, 2005, p. 32).