Revealing the Freedom of Movement of Youngsters in Residential Youth Care: Towards the Creation of a Socio-Spatial Citizenship Climate

Matthias Remmery, Laurine Bourgonjon, Rudi Roose and Griet Roets
Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

Abstract

Recent research shows the relevance of a socio-spatial citizenship climate in residential youth care to shift the focus from youngsters as objects of care due to their challenging behaviour to youngsters as citizens in their own right who give meaning to the various circumstances in their everyday lives. A socio-spatial citizenship climate acknowledges the synergy between residential youth care and the wider living environment, as residential youth care is embedded in a wider living environment in which youngsters practise and experience their freedom of movement by navigating socially and physically through different socio-spatial relationships, circumstances and pedagogical milieus. Based on a qualitative study in a residential youth care facility in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), we explore how residential youth care can create circumstances for youngsters to realise their freedom of movement as part of the development of a socio-spatial citizenship climate. This article discusses three key findings: (1) creating local coalitions and partnerships, (2) creating circumstances for spatial appropriation, and (3) creating space for complexity and convivial encounters. The findings show that creating circumstances for a socio-spatial citizenship climate requires a critical and reflexive social and pedagogical professional discretion and orientation on different levels of the organisation.

Key words

adolescents, residential care, socio-spatial perspective, lifeworld orientation

Introduction

In social policy, practice and research, residential youth care is often perceived as a safe and protected environment for youngsters to socialise and re-educate them as 'good citizens' in society (De Vos, 2015). Youngsters in residential youth care are mainly approached as objects of care due to their challenging behaviour, rather than as citizen subjects who give meaning

to the social, cultural, material and pedagogical circumstances in their everyday lives (Remmery et al., 2023; De Vos, 2015). In this regard, approaching youngsters in residential youth care as citizens in their own right entails a lived citizenship perspective (Kallio, Wood & Häkli, 2020; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017).

A lived citizenship perspective goes beyond a formal understanding of citizenship as a legal and political status of members of a nation state or national community (Dean, 2015; Lister, 2007). Lived citizenship entails an embodied performance of citizenship-in-practice with reference to how people negotiate rights, identities, responsibilities and a sense of belonging in everyday life social interactions (Lister, 2007). Lived citizenship research embodies the complex, dynamic and contextual practice of citizenship in the everyday lives of people who live in the margins of society and experience a form of second-class citizenship. This involves citizens who are formally recognised by their particular nation state, for example women, children and youth, elderly people, people in poverty and people with disabilities, but also citizens who are not (yet) considered the "proper subjects of politics" (Isin, 2012, p. 563), such as asylum seekers and transnational migrants (Bryant & Williams, 2020).

In the slipstream of lived citizenship scholarship, research in the discipline of social work and social pedagogy increasingly focuses on the socio-spatial dimension of lived citizenship, referring to the actual spaces in which people shape, practise and experience their citizenship in their everyday lives (Kallio et al., 2020; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). A socio-spatial perspective on lived citizenship implies that the ways in which people realise their citizenship in their everyday lives cannot be separated from the social, cultural and material circumstances that are part of their living environment (Fjetland, Gjermestad & Lid, 2022; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017).

With reference to the socio-spatial dimension of lived citizenship, recent research shows the relevance of a socio-spatial citizenship climate in residential youth care to embrace the ways in which youngsters practise their agency, imagine future aspirations and experience a sense of autonomy in their everyday lives, implying a continuous exploration of the synergy between residential youth care and the wider living environment (Remmery et al., 2023). Residential youth care is not an isolated island, but is embedded in a wider living environment in which

youngsters navigate socially and physically through socio-spatial relationships, circumstances and pedagogical milieus, such as school, home environment, leisure activities and the residential youth care facility (Remmery et al., 2023; Naert et al., 2019). A socio-spatial citizenship climate challenges social and pedagogical professionals to be aware of the synergy between residential youth care and the wider living environment, as pedagogical interventions unfold in socio-spatial circumstances that influence and determine the implementation of these pedagogical interventions (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022).

This article explores the key findings of a qualitative study that was carried out in a residential youth care facility in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) for youngsters from twelve to twenty-one years old with an intellectual disability in combination with a label of emotional and behavioural disorders. This label is used to refer to so-called problematic behaviour such as severe self-mutilation, aggressive behaviour towards others and sexually transgressive behaviour. The objective of this study is to explore how the youngsters shape and experience their freedom of movement, referring to the ways in which they navigate and appropriate space in their wider living environment, in interaction with the pedagogical conditions that hinder or enable them to realise their freedom of movement. In this regard, the central research question is as follows: how can residential youth care create circumstances for youngsters to shape and experience their freedom of movement as part of the development of a socio-spatial citizenship climate?

In what follows, we first elaborate on the German concept of Sozialraum as a theoretical lens to further explore the idea of freedom of movement in the vein of a socio-spatial citizenship climate. Second, we focus on the methodological framework. Third, we present the key findings. Finally, we discuss implications for research, social policy and social work practice developments in residential youth care.

Sozialraum

Since 1990, the German tradition of social work and social pedagogy focuses on the approach of Sozialraum as a reference point for theory and practice development (Spatscheck, 2019). The theoretical set of ideas of Sozialraum is underpinned by a broader juncture in human, social and cultural sciences, called the spatial turn (Reutlinger, 2020). In this regard, the spatial

turn not only emerged in social work and social pedagogy, but is rooted in a rich tradition of (inter)disciplinary approaches in architecture, urban planning, urban sociology and social geography (Reutlinger, 2020). The spatial turn refers to the belief that a spatial perspective leads to a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of social phenomena (Reutlinger, 2020). Over the years, Sozialraum became a leading paradigm in the German tradition of social work and social pedagogy (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022; Spatscheck, 2019).

Sozialraum is based on a relational perspective on space, symbolising space as "dynamic fabrics of social and material practises that are permanently (re)produced on different levels of (inter)action" (Spatscheck, 2019, p. 850). Space simultaneously produces and is produced by social and material practices and (inter)actions which leads to a systemic and structural understanding of space (Spatscheck, 2019; Schwerthelm, 2021). Kessl and Reutlinger (2022) theorise Sozialraum as a complex fabric of cultural, political and historical practices and developments that shape social and material (inter)actions which interfere with people's everyday lives. In this regard, Schwerthelm (2021) conceptualises Sozialraum as "ein subjektives Konstrukt einer Lebenswelt dar, in Form dessen die Frage nach dem Wie der Gestaltung subjektiver Lebenswelten und ihrer Strukturierung eingebettet ist" (*a subjective construction of a lifeworld (…) in which the question of how subjective lifeworlds are developed and structured is embedded, own translation*).

Sozialraum embodies a lifeworld orientation perspective (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022; Köngeter, 2022; Schwerthelm, 2021; Spatscheck, 2019). In relation to Sozialraum, lifeworld orientation refers to the complex interaction between individual lifeworlds, and systemic and structural socio-spatial circumstances (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Individual lifeworlds allude to "what people construct and experience in their own living environments (…) a web of choices, activities and relationships that is woven in the here and now" (Úcar, 2023, p. 10). Lifeworlds are shaped, practised and experienced through subjective actions that need to be interpreted in the context of systemic and structural socio-spatial circumstances (Spatscheck, 2012, 2016).

As people's lifeworlds unfold in different systemic and structural socio-spatial circumstances, a lifeworld orientation perspective challenges social and pedagogical professionals to support and understand the ways in which people's processes of meaning-making interfere with these

systemic and structural socio-spatial circumstances (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Kessl and Reutlinger (2022) describe this social and pedagogical professional orientation as a reflexiv-räumliche Haltung. A reflexiv-räumliche Haltung comprehends people's processes of meaning-making in relation to their systemic and structural socio-spatial circumstances as a lever to "support the creation of new possibilities" (Spatscheck, 2012, p. 5). Referring to Grunwald and Thiersch (2009), social justice and social equality are key in interpreting these processes of meaning-making, using "the issues, crises and experiences within (…) lifeworld situations" (p. 133) to question taken-for-granted attitudes and assumptions in social and pedagogical professions.

A lifeworld orientation perspective on Sozialraum is key in the concept of Aneignung (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022; Reutlinger & Deinet, 2022; Spatscheck, 2019). Aneignung refers to the idea that people actively appropriate, process and give meaning to the different socio-spatial circumstances that are part of their lifeworlds (Spatscheck, 2019). Aneignung does not only focus on the material use of space, but also on the practices and (inter)actions of people to relate to the social order in spaces (Deinet, 2009). Space is socially regulated, leading to power relationships and symbolic codes and rules that control the ways in which space is appropriated (Deinet & Reutlinger, 2014). In this regard, Daum (2011, p. 21) concludes that Aneignung focuses on "die Fähigkeit des Subjekts, sich Raum im Alltag so zu erschließen, dass eine Orientierung möglich wird (…) Mit einbegriffen ist das Umdeuten, Verändern und Umfunktionieren der Umwelt" (*the subject's ability to explore and experience space in such way that new circumstances become possible (…) This includes re-interpreting, changing and re-functioning spaces, own translation*).

Sozialraum, and its lifeworld orientation perspective, offers a vital theoretical lens to explore how youngsters in residential youth care shape and experience their freedom of movement, and navigate and appropriate space in their wider living environment, in interaction with the pedagogical circumstances and professional orientation that hinder or enable them to realise their freedom of movement.

Methodology

Research context

We conducted research in a residential youth care facility in Flanders for youngsters from twelve to twenty-one years old with an intellectual disability in combination with a label of emotional and behavioural disorders. This label is used to refer to so-called problematic behaviour such as self-mutilation, aggressive behaviour towards others and sexually transgressive behaviour. Due to their complex care needs, youngsters with an intellectual disability in combination with a label of emotional and behavioural disorders have historically been regarded as youngsters at risk, referring to their vulnerable life situation, as well as youngsters as a risk for society, for whom an open living environment is not considered as evident (Broadhurst et al., 2010).

The residential youth care facility has a special needs school and six living groups, accredited and subsidised by The Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities, in which youngsters live in groups of about ten. The special needs school and living groups are located on a campus just outside the centre of a small city. The residential youth care facility is part of an organisation that provides a range of services and facilities for adults and youngsters with disabilities across the city.

Each living group consists of a team of frontline practitioners, to whom we refer to as supervisors, who are responsible for the daily support of the youngsters. The supervisors are supported by social and pedagogical professionals who coach the supervisors in their daily work. This is carried out in alliance with the pedagogical director who is responsible for developing, executing and evaluating the internal (pedagogical) policies and procedures.

Strategies of data collection

We applied a multi-method qualitative research approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The ethical and methodological aspects of the study acquired ethical approval and were conducted according to the general ethical protocol of the authors' respective universities (2022-035).

Specifically, this study combined (i) ethnographic participant observations in two living groups of the residential youth care facility and (ii) semi-structured interviews with a variety of actors who implicitly or explicitly influence how the youngsters shape and experience their freedom

of movement. The aim of the combination of ethnographic participant observations and semi-structured interviews was to acquire an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the research topic. In what follows, we explain how the strategies of data collection were applied during this study.

Ethnographic participant observations

The first author conducted ethnographic participant observations in two living groups of the residential youth care facility to grasp the dynamics and processes of meaning-making of the youngsters in relation to how they shape and experience their freedom of movement (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The observations served as the umbrella methodology, meaning that the collected findings served as the basis for the semi-structured interviews.

The first author introduced himself and the study to the professionals during various meetings. He introduced himself and the study, and discussed the ethics of the study with the youngsters and supervisors during two group discussions. During these discussions, the youngsters and supervisors could ask questions regarding the study and boundaries were set up regarding the observations. However, the ethics of the study were constantly re-negotiated with them, for example by asking permission to attend or participate in specific meetings or activities, and to use the findings gathered during these moments.

In total, the first author carried out fifty-three observations from May 2022 to April 2023. The observations took place on different days (weekdays and weekends) and times (afternoon and evening). The observations lasted between four and six hours. The first author carried out the observations by participating in daytime activities, and activities outside the residential youth care facility with the youngsters and supervisors, participating in weekly meetings in which the supervisors discussed issues and concerns related to the well-being of the youngsters, and participating in meetings between the pedagogical director and the police department, youth welfare worker, representatives of the local government, and local actors regarding care and support. During these moments, the first author held informal conversations with the youngsters, professionals and local actors. The findings from the observations were collected in a notebook and written down in detail as field notes, structured in terms of observations and interpretations (Gray, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with local actors and professionals of the residential youth care facility who implicitly or explicitly influence how the youngsters shape and experience their freedom of movement. The aim of the interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of how the participants experience the dynamics and processes of meaning-making of the youngsters in relation to how they realise their freedom of movement.

In total, the first author carried out ten interviews from January 2023 to June 2023. He started with interviews with the pedagogical director, coordinator regarding inclusion and team coach (head supervisor of the two living groups), as they are crucial actors for the development of the pedagogical climate. Furthermore, the first author conducted interviews with the local police officer, youth welfare worker and youth worker of the General Welfare Centre, as they work and interact professionally with the youngsters of the city and residential youth care facility. The first author also conducted interview with three neighbours of the residential youth care facility who interact informally with the youngsters. One neighbour owns a convenience store where the youngsters often run errands. Finally, three local inhabitants were interviewed who are active in the city's community life and know the ins and outs of the city. They were found via a snowball search method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The first author contacted the participants by phone, e-mail or face to face. An information letter was written to inform the participants about the study, research ethics and setup of the interviews. The participants signed an informed consent before the start of the interview. The face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between forty and ninety minutes.

Strategies of data analysis

We implemented a qualitative content analysis to analyse the data through a systemic process of identifying, classifying and coding themes and patterns across the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). First, we reviewed the notes and the transcripts of the observations and the interviews to familiarise with the data. Secondly, we divided the data into fragments that encompass the same topics. We assigned the fragments one or more codes by implementing a conventional coding approach, meaning that the codes were identified inductively in the data during the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Finally, we carried out an overview analysis of the fragments

and codes to trace connections between the codes and to group the codes into overarching themes.

Findings

This study reveals three key findings of how residential youth care can develop conditions for youngsters to shape and experience their freedom of movement as part of the development of a socio-spatial citizenship climate: (1) creating local coalitions and partnerships, (2) creating circumstances for spatial appropriation, and (3) creating space for complexity and convivial encounters. In what follows, we elaborate on these key findings.

Creating local coalitions and partnerships

Investing in local coalitions and partnerships is crucial to develop conditions for a socio-spatial citizenship climate in residential youth care. A socio-spatial citizenship climate encompasses a systemic and structural understanding of space in which social, cultural and material circumstances are dynamically interwoven (Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). In this regard, investing in local coalitions and partnerships involves a variety of actors, ranging from friends and family of youngsters to local social policy makers, provisions and organisations, to architects and urban planners, implicitly or explicitly influencing the ways in which youngsters might realise their freedom of movement.

In the context of the residential youth care facility, the city's police department is a key actor in developing conditions for a socio-spatial citizenship climate. The police department includes twelve local police officers and two police intervention teams. Where the local police officers operate as low-threshold points of contact in the different neighbourhoods of the city, the police intervention teams intervene when an aggressive incident occurs or when youngsters run away from the residential youth care facility. The coalition between the police department and the residential youth care facility is rooted in frequent meetings between the pedagogical director of the residential youth care facility and the police department. These meetings serve as a forum to discuss and improve their collaboration, especially in relation to complex cases of aggression or runaway behaviour that occur in the city.

During these meetings, the pedagogical vision and policies of the organisation are sometimes openly questioned and put under pressure by the police department. A member of the police intervention team argues that the pedagogical vision and policies of the organisation clash with the vision and policies of the police intervention team: *"You use a pedagogical approach to work with the youngsters and, quite frankly, that is just not in line with how we work" (observation April 2023)*. This difference in perspective at times hinders the implementation of the pedagogical vision and policies in the day-to-day-practice of the organisation, leading to conflicts between the police intervention teams and supervisors in the living groups.

> *We work with [the pedagogical framework of] new authority [meaning that] you only have control over your own behaviour, not the other person's behaviour (…) That is hard to achieve, complicated by police who insist on the responsibility of the supervisors. We encountered such a situation yesterday. A serious incident with three of our youngsters. An intervention by the police was necessary. Afterwards, the police claimed that they [supervisors] did not do their job properly. (interview pedagogical director)*

The supervisors indicate that it is difficult to find a balance in the day-to-day-practice between the expectations of the youngsters, the organisation and actors such as the police department. They constantly navigate fields of tension between care and control, and freedom and safety, in dealing with risks that are inherent in developing conditions for a socio-spatial citizenship climate, for example runaway behaviour, behaviour that gets out of control, hanging out with the 'wrong' crowd, and drug and alcohol abuse. Dealing with risks in relation to the different expectations of the different parties occasionally result in measures that restrict the freedom of movement of the youngsters.

> *During a team meeting, the planning for the coming school break is discussed. One of the planned activities is going for a swim. The supervisors discuss which youngsters are interested to participate in the activity. The question is raised whether a youngster with a label of sexually transgressive behaviour can participate. One-on-one supervision is necessary, but there are not enough supervisors available to guarantee this. They discuss whether they can take the risk to let the youngster participate. Eventually, they*

decide that the youngster cannot join, but can participate in an activity on the campus, as safety cannot be guaranteed. (observation March 2023)

Although the pedagogical vision and policies of the organisation are sometimes questioned by the police department, the pedagogical director notices a (subtle) change of mindset, realised by the frequent meetings between the two parties. Nevertheless, developing conditions for a socio-spatial citizenship climate implies a continuous re-negotiation of the different concerns that are at stake.

The meetings with the police intervention teams are crucial. Last time, they asked us why we do not confine the youngsters (…) That is somehow understandable. The number of interventions they have to do for our youngsters is incredibly high (…) This time, they at least did not use this word anymore, but they still ask why we allow leisure time to youngsters with runaway behaviour. (observation April 2023)

Furthermore, the pedagogical director invests in coalitions and partnerships with members of the local government and (youth) care and welfare services through frequent Youth Welfare Meetings. The goal of these meetings is to merge different perspectives to address and discuss issues and concerns that affect the youngsters in the city. This ranges from the development of low-threshold leisure activities to the provision of affordable housing for youngsters when they become youth care leavers and prefer to stay in the city, for example because they build a locally embedded network over the years. The pedagogical director states that the Youth Welfare Meetings are a vital platform to join forces on a local level and to strive for better conditions for the youngsters in the city.

We are co-founders of the Youth Welfare Meetings through which we already achieved great things (…) We came to the conclusion that there was a lot in [name city] for the youngsters, but that we were not aware of this. We organised a Youth Welfare Meeting and that was the starting point to develop new initiatives (…) with the local government, who is crucial to support these initiatives. (interview pedagogical director)

The Youth Welfare Meetings led to the appointment of a youth welfare worker, financed by the local government. The youth welfare worker develops low-threshold leisure activities for a diversity of youngsters in the city, and identifies and signals issues and concerns to members of the local government and the Youth Welfare Meetings. Despite the aim of the Youth Welfare Meetings to collaborate across professional fields to bridge the gap between the youngsters in the city, the pedagogical director often must insist on the collective nature of this aim, as the calls for separation of youngsters, based on their abilities, dare to undermine this.

> *Because of Corona, [name organisation] wanted to organise an initiative for youngsters to gather and talk with each other, during a time where a lot of youngsters felt lonely. The director of [name organisation] questioned whether we should organise a separate initiative for the youngsters of [name residential youth care facility]. I say: "I do not know. Why?" He said: "Won't it be difficult for them to…" I say: "Of course it will be difficult, but it is not the intention to…" (interview pedagogical director)*

Creating circumstances for spatial appropriation

The youngsters of the residential youth care facility navigate and appropriate spaces that align with their interests and aspirations. This includes various (skate) parks in the city to meet and hang out with friends, (youth) bars and the local youth centre to attend parties or watch sports on big-screen television, shops such as the local book store to browse the comics section and the thrift store to spend their pocket money on affordably priced CDs, DVDs, books and board games, and the local athletics track to play sports such as football and basketball. They often define these spaces related to their interests and aspirations as mainstays during their stay in the residential youth care facility. Some spaces, however, hold a temporary significance. For example, one of the youngsters regarded the local cemetery for a short time as an important space to reflect on and process the recent passing of a family member *(observation March 2023).*

Similarly, the campus, located outside the city centre, is considered an integral and meaningful part of the living environment of the youngsters during their stay in the residential youth care facility. This is evident in the ways they navigate and appropriate the campus as a space to

unwind, play sports, organise leisure activities and hang out with friends across the living groups.

> *It is a summery afternoon. There's a lot of activity on the campus. A group of youngsters is playing football, while others are playing kubb, basketball or table tennis, or are riding with a go-cart around the campus. Two youngsters are getting ready to go cycling with some volunteers. A few youngsters are sitting somewhat hidden away, resting on what seems to be an improvised bench made of wooden pallets. Another youngster made a stage out of wooden pallets to reenact 'The Voice Kids'. He asks if I want to be part of the jury, together with some of his friends. (observation September 2022)*

One youngster, who resides in one of the living groups but occasionally runs away, expresses that the campus still holds a symbolic value of safety and belonging, prompting him to shortly return to the residential youth care facility from time to time.

> *It is good to be back (…) to see my friends again, to catch up with them and do some fun stuff together while I am here (…) I missed that (…) also to get some sleep and do my laundry (…) I do not know if I will stay for long. It is possible that I will leave again soon. (observation March 2023)*

The symbolic value of the campus influences how some youngsters navigate and appropriate space in their living environment. Closeness to and connection with the campus in synergy with the places where they create their own spaces are hereby crucial.

> *[Name] asks if we can go for a walk. He says that he had a difficult day and wants to clear his head. The supervisor gives us permission to go for a walk. We stroll to the exit of the campus and take the main road that leads to the city centre. At the end of the main road, just before the city centre, he asks if we can turn right. A while later, we walk on a path, situated between the campus and meadows, surrounded by greenery. He says that he always walks down this path when he wants to get away from it all. At one point, in the middle of the path, he points to steps going down. He asks me to follow*

him. We arrive at a frog pond. He says: "It is so quiet here. I can unwind and relax here for a while. Sometimes I take my speakers with me and listen to some music (…) It is also not far from my friends and [name of supervisor]. When something is going on, I can always go to them too (…) Sometimes I ask if they want to go with me to this spot to just talk a bit." (observation September 2023)

Zooming in on the city, the city park, located in the city centre, is considered a vibrant public meeting space for youngsters, including the youngsters of the residential youth care facility. The city park is the main area where the youth welfare worker is active, proactively developing social, material and infrastructural circumstances to facilitate processes of appropriation and encounters between the youngsters in the city. Every Wednesday and Friday afternoon, the youth welfare worker organises leisure activities, ranging from beatbox and graffiti workshops to skate and football tournaments, to boxing lessons and open air movie screenings. The leisure activities aren't an end in itself, but a means to bridge the gap between the youngsters in the city, regardless of their background.

I do not want any differentiation between youngsters from an institution and youngsters who live at home (…) I am focused on organising leisure activities and facilitating material for sports and entertainment, and who you are or where you come from, that does not matter. (interview youth welfare worker)

The youth welfare worker argues that the central location of the city park and the routine approach regarding the organisation of the leisure activities benefit the aim to gather a diversity of youngsters.

I have tried to make this place vibrant, so that it does attract youngsters from all over the city. During the Easter holidays, I rode my bike to different neighbourhoods. There was nobody. I came here [city park] and there were seventy youngsters, I think. I do not want to pretend that I reach every youngster, but I do believe in the central position of the city park and the routine of being open every Wednesday and Friday. (interview youth welfare worker)

The youngsters of the residential youth care facility define the city park as the place to be to hang out with friends and participate in leisure activities, making it a common throughway or a frequent stop when they navigate in the city. For some youngsters, the city park conveys a sense of freedom to meet new people and explore new hobbies, but also a sense of freedom to just be there without the obligation of having to participate in it.

> *We leave with a group of youngsters to the city park. Once we arrive, [name] asks some youngsters if he can join them to play football. [Name] and [name] run towards the skate park to see what is going on, while [name] focuses on the boxing bag. [Name] takes a folding chair from the caravan and settles in the middle of the square. After a while, I take a folding chair and settle next to her. I ask her if she is doing okay and if she does not want to participate in an activity. She shakes her head no and says: "I am at ease here (…) I see everything that happens. I am cheering for [name youngster who plays football] (…) That is okay for [name youth welfare worker]." (observation March 2023)*

The supervisors stress the importance of the efforts of the youth welfare worker to connect with the lifeworlds of the youngsters and to create circumstances in which the youngsters are allowed to be present, as this is not always self-evident due to the complex and specific care needs of the youngsters.

> *They can be themselves here [city park]. That is not always the case. They are not always happy to welcome us (…) That is just the way it is (…) [Name youth welfare worker] puts a lot of time and effort in knowing the youngsters and what is on their minds. He regularly visits us, from living group to living group, to discuss possible leisure activities or to look for helping hands to organise an event. (observation May 2022)*

The youth welfare worker states that values such as equality and participation are an integral part of his role as youth welfare worker, the day-to-day running of events and projects, and the organisation of the city park as a meeting place for the youngsters in the city.

A lot of ideas emerge from the youngsters themselves, that they have a say in what is going on. I hand over as much as possible to the youngsters, that they have co-ownership over the place and come up with ideas themselves, that it is not always me who comes up with ideas (…) Anyone over eighteen can become a volunteer. It does not matter what your background is or if you have any issues. (interview youth welfare worker)

Creating space for complexity and convivial encounters

The findings show that a variety of actors hinder or enable the development of a socio-spatial citizenship climate in residential youth care. Despite the goal of the youth welfare worker, for example, to create circumstances for the youngsters to navigate and appropriate space in the city, he acknowledges that it is no easy feat to achieve this, as stigma and prejudice towards the youngsters of the residential youth care facility lead to a noticeable distance between the different youngsters in the city.

It happens that youngsters ask: "Are they from [name residential youth care facility?" (…) I also notice that they sometimes laugh at them (…) because they think they are different and behave different, that you can see that something is off (…) I always react to that: "Let them be, they are also just here to have fun." (interview youth welfare worker)

The youth welfare worker emphasises that the youngsters of the residential youth care facility are sensitive to dynamics and interactions in which notions of power, stigma and identity are dynamically interwoven, sometimes pressuring them to prove themselves through words and actions.

They [youngsters from the residential youth care facility] feel they have to prove themselves, that they have to make an extra effort to fit in. This ranges from lying about their age to smoking, to learning how to skate on short notice (…) Claiming they have a villa and four Ferrari's. (interview youth welfare worker)

Their urge to prove themselves often reflects itself in the ways they appropriate spaces in the city. Some strategies cause conflict and frictions with others, making it at times challenging to co-exist, leading to supervisors addressing the complexity of these strategies with the involved parties.

> *We leave with a group of youngsters to an outdoor playground. Once we arrive, the youngsters split up to explore the possibilities of the playground. Two youngsters are interested in a specific playground construction that is already occupied by some children. They walk towards the construction and turn on their speakers to play loud music. The children leave the construction, seemingly annoyed. One of the youngsters yells: "This is our spot now!" A supervisor addresses the incident with the children and youngsters involved. Afterwards, the supervisor comes to me to discuss the situation: "It is unbelievable, you need to have eyes in the back of your head (…) It happens that they throw with sticks to make clear that they are here (…) That is not pleasant for anyone: not for the children, their parents, our youngsters (…) People will say: "They are for sure from [name residential youth care facility]." (observation March 2023)*

Some respondents echo this sentiment, claiming that people with disabilities belong in a more closed environment due to their complex and specific care needs, or arguing that the mere presence of people with disabilities in the city puts the co-existence under pressure, motivated by the widespread embeddedness of the organisation in the city.

> *They're located in [name street], in [name street], in [name street] (…) spread across different houses and flats. It gets a bit too much sometimes. For example, if you go to the weekly market on Wednesday, it is hardly possible to walk in an aisle without running into some residents and their supervisors. Is this a problem? No, not per se, but if you walk down the street, you will run into them. (interview inhabitant)*

However, the youngsters of the residential youth care facility often experience light, fleeting and positive interactions with others in the city. Bigby and Wiesel (2011, 2019) refer to these interactions as convivial encounters, drawing on the work of Irving Goffman (1961) who conceptualises encounters as exchanges "where people effectively agree to sustain for a time

a single focus of cognitive and visual attention" (p. 298), focusing on how differences between people, such as race, class, gender or disability, are experienced and negotiated during these exchanges.

Bigby and colleagues examined the concept of convivial encounters in the context of social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, using this concept to specifically refer to friendly, informal and accessible daily interactions that occur in public or shared spaces between people with and without intellectual disabilities (Bigby & Anderson, 2021; Bigby & Wiesel, 2011, 2019). The authors express that convivial encounters, despite their often brief and superficial character, are relevant to foster a sense of belonging in society and provide a relevant lens to explore processes of inclusion and exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

Convivial encounters between the youngsters of the residential youth care facility and others are mainly examples of what authors detail as "moments of everyday recognition" (Bigby & Wiesel, 2019, p. 42; Bredewold et al., 2020, p. 2056) that not only acknowledge "the presence of people with intellectual disabilities, but [also] their right to use a public space in a way that might be different from others" (Bigby & Wiesel, 2019, p. 42). Some examples of moments of everyday recognition are youngsters nodding and waving to neighbours, youngsters engaging in brief conversations with shop owners, and youngsters approaching passers-by to pet and ask questions about their dog. Despite the brief and superficial character of these exchanges, they are vital for the youngsters to feel seen and cultivate a sense of belonging.

> *While walking in the city centre, [name] asks if we can stop at the bookstore. Once inside, he greets the shops assistant and goes straight to the comics section. He browses through the selection of comics, saying that reading comics is one of his favourite hobbies, especially because of the drawings. A while later, he takes a comic and walks towards a customer and the shop assistant. He says it is his favourite comic book series. The customer and the shop assistant join the conversation by asking who his favourite character is and if he enjoys any other comic book series. After our visit to the bookstore, we go to a bar for a drink. He talks about our stop at the bookstore: That was fun! Just talking about comics (…) Did you hear it? They asked about my favourite*

character. That was really cool! I like to talk about comics. I could do that all day long." (observation April 2023)

Despite the frequent occurrence of convivial encounters between the youngsters and others, professionals of the residential youth care facility regularly claim that working towards social inclusion is challenging, and difficult or impossible to achieve, motivated by the unpredictable behaviour of the youngsters and the question if society is ready to embrace youngsters with complex and specific care needs. However, the day-to-day practice shows that the supervisors often unknowingly contribute to developing convivial encounters, acknowledging the at times complicated exchanges, behaviour and care needs of the youngsters to develop circumstances for exchanges that accommodate diversity and differences.

[Name] wanted a donut, but someone took the last donut before her. She could not handle that. She started crying and shouting. An employee brought a donut from the warehouse. She did not want it (…) We discussed this incident in team and decided to go in dialogue about the incident with the employees of the supermarket (…) They know some of our youngsters now, chitchat with them at the checkout, keep an eye on this, … (observation April 2023)

Discussion and conclusion

Based on a multi-method qualitative research approach, we explored how residential youth care can create circumstances for youngsters to shape and experience their freedom of movement as part of the development of a socio-spatial citizenship climate. The findings show that creating these circumstances requires a critical and reflexive social and pedagogical professional discretion and orientation on different levels of the organisation, as "organizational and structural frames, conditions and resources of welfare policy and services (…) also affect the lives and lived citizenship of people receiving care and support" (Fjetland et al., 2022, p. 13). This includes board-level professionals as well as frontline practitioners (Evans, 2011), as they are crucial actors for the creation of pedagogical circumstances in the vein of a socio-spatial citizenship climate.

As a reflexiv-räumliche Haltung embodies a critical and reflexive professional discretion and orientation related to the social and material (inter)actions and power dynamics that continuously (re)produce space, a reflexiv-räumliche Haltung seems vital to understand the institutional influence of being placed in residential youth care, yet also of the constitutive dimension of the wider living environment in creating meaningful pedagogical circumstances in the vein of a socio-spatial citizenship climate (Remmery et al., 2023; Kessl & Reutlinger, 2022). The findings show that creating these circumstances requires a professional attitude and organisational policy that exceeds the walls of the organisation and also focuses on the wider living environment in which youngsters navigate and appropriate space, for example by proactively weighing in on local social policy.

This is further emphasised by the observation that creating circumstances for a socio-spatial citizenship climate in residential youth care clashes with logics of risk, safety, control and treatment that are currently dominant in social policy and practice (De Vos, 2015). The findings show that creating these circumstances requires social and pedagogical professionals who balance the fields of tension between care and control, and freedom and safety, in order to approach youngsters in residential youth care as subjects who give meaning to the social, cultural, material and pedagogical circumstances in their everyday lives, rather than as objects of care, treatment or intervention due to their challenging behaviour (Remmery et al., 2023; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). In a more radical way, the challenging behaviour of youngsters, for example runaway behaviour, should be reframed as an expression of youngsters' agency in responding to power relationships and pedagogical regimes in rather restrictive and controlling environments and circumstances (Remmery et al., 2023; De Vos, 2015).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Bigby, C. and Wiesel, I. (2011) 'Encounter as a dimension of social inclusion for people with intellectual disability: Between and beyond community presence and community participation', *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 36(4), pp. 259–263.

Bigby, C. and Wiesel, I. (2019) 'Using the concept of encounter to further the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities: What has been learned?', *Research and Practice in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 6(1), pp. 39–51.

Bigby, C. and Anderson, S. (2021) 'Creating opportunities for convivial encounters for people with intellectual disabilities: "It looks like an accident"', 46(1), pp. 45–57.

Bogdan, R. and Biklen, S. (2007) *Qualitative Research for Education: an Introduction to Theories and Methods*, Boston, Allyn & Bacon.

Bredewold, F., Haarsma, A., Tonkens, E. and Jager, M. (2020) 'Convivial encounters: Conditions for the urban social inclusion of people with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities', *Urban* Studies, 57(10), pp. 2047–2063.

Broadhurst, K., Hall, C., Wastell, D., White, S., & Pithouse, A. (2010) Risk, instrumentalism and the humane project in social work: Identifying the informal logics of risk management in children's statutory services, *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), pp. 1046–1064.

Bryant, L. and Williams, C. (2020) 'Place and space in social work', *Qualitative Social Work, 19* (3), pp. 321–336.

De Vos, K. (2015) *Voorstructurering In De Zorg: Een Sociaal-Pedagogisch Perspectief Op De Evolutie In De Omgang Tussen Opvoeders En Jongeren In De Bijzondere Jeugdzorg*, Ghent, Belgium, Universiteit Gent.

Dean, H. (2015) *Social Rights and Human Welfare*, London, Routledge.

Daum, E. (2011) 'Subjektive Kartographien und Subjektives Kartographieren – Ein Überblick', in Daum, E. and Hasse, J. (eds), *Subjektive Kartographie: Beispiele und sozialräumliche Praxis*, Oldenburg, Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg.

Deinet, U. (2009) 'Der offene Bereich als Aneignungs- und Bildungsraum', *Sozialraum.de*, (1)2/2009, https://www.sozialraum.de/der-offene-bereich-als-aneignungs-und-bildungsraum.php

Deinet, U. and Reutlinger, C. (eds) (2014). *Tätigkeit, Aneignung und Bildung*, Wiesbaden, Germany, Springer VS.

Evans, T. (2011) 'Professionals, managers and discretion: Critiquing street-level bureaucracy', *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(2), pp. 368–386.

Fjetland, K. J., Gjermestad, A. & Lid, I. M. (eds) (2022). *Lived citizenship for persons in vulnerable life situations: Theories and practices*, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press.

Goffman, E. (1961) *Encounters*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
Gray, D. (2018) *Doing Research in the Real World*, London, Sage.

Grunwald, K. and Thiersch, H. (2009) 'The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), pp. 131–46.

Hsieh, H. F. and Shannon, E. (2005) 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), pp. 1277–88.

Isin, E. F. (2012) *Citizens Without Frontiers*, New York, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Kallio, K. P., Wood, E. and Häkli, J. (2020) 'Lived citizenship: Conceptualising an emerging field', *Citizenship Studies*, 24(6), pp. 713–2

Kessl, F. and Reutlinger, C. (eds) (2022) *Sozialraum: Eine elementare Einführung*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS.

Köngeter, S. (2022) 'Lebenswelt', in Kessl, F. and Reutlinger, C. (eds), *Sozialraum: Eine elementare Einführung*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS.

Krisch, R. (2009) 'Sozialraumanalyse als Methodik der Jugendarbeit', *Sozialraum.de*, (1)2/2009, https://www.sozialraum.de/sozialraumanalyse-als-methodik-der-jugendarbeit.php

Lister, R. (2007) 'Inclusive citizenship: realizing the potential', *Citizenship Studies, 11* (1), pp. 49–61.

Naert, J., Roets, G., Roose, R. and Vanderplasschen, W. (2019) 'Youngsters' perspectives on continuity in their contacts with youth-care services', *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(5), pp. 1144–1161.

Remmery, M., Allemeersch, S., Roose, R. and Roets, G. (2023) 'Revisiting a positive living group climate as a citizenship climate: A socio-spatial perspective on residential youth care', *British Journal of Social Work*, pp. 1–18.

Reutlinger, C. (2020) 'Spatial Turn', *Socialnet.de*, https://www.socialnet.de/lexikon/Spatial-Turn

Reutlinger, C. and Deinet, U. (2022) ‘Sozialraum’, *Socialnet.de*, https://www.socialnet.de/lexikon/Sozialraum

Schwerthelm, A. (2021) ‘Sozialraum ist veränderlich, sein Verständnis sollte es ebenfalls sein’, *Sozialraum.de*, (13)2/2021, https://www.sozialraum.de/sozialraum-ist-veraenderlich-sein-verstaendnis-sollte-es-ebenfalls-sein.php

Spatscheck, C. (2012) ‘Socio-spatial approaches to social work’, *Social Work & Society*, 10(1), pp. 1–13.

Spatscheck, C. (2016) ‘Chapter 11: Lifeworlds, spaces and citizenship: Social pedagogy and youth work as mediating professions’, in Siurala, L., Coussée, F., Suurpaa, L. and Williamson, H. (eds), *The History of Youth Work in Europe (Volume 5): Autonomy through Dependency Histories of Co-Operation, Conflict and Innovation in Youth Work*, Brussels, Belgium, Council of Europe and the European Commission.

Spatscheck, C. (2019) ‘Spatial approaches to social work: theoretical foundations and implications for practice and research’, *European Journal of Social Work*, 22(5), pp. 845–859.

Úcar, X. (2023) ‘Ideas for mapping lifeworld and everyday life in practical social pedagogy’, *Educational Theory*, 73(4), pp. 593–614.

Warming, H. and Fahnøe, C. (eds) (2017) *Lived Citizenship on the Edge of Society: Rights, Belonging, Intimate Life and Spatiality*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.