

## CHILDREN AS SOCIAL BUTTERFLIES

### Navigating Belonging in a Diverse Swiss Kindergarten

*Ursina Jaeger. 2025. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.*

A child can belong to “all the girls,” to the “caterpillar” cohort, to the children who speak Turkish, to the ones who like to paint or to those who don’t eat pork. In kindergarten, new categories of belonging are established and existing ones renegotiated or maintained. These shifting forms of social belongings lead directly to the central concern of Ursina Jaeger’s monograph: The way kindergarten children from an ethnically diverse Swiss neighborhood navigate shifting configurations of social belonging across different socio-spatial orders. Jaeger illustrates how who the children are, where they belong, how they are positioned, and how they understand themselves changes when they leave kindergarten each noon and move into diverse spaces with varying social orders.

Guided by an interest in practices of differentiation the author explores how the familial and cultural background brought into kindergarten by the children intersects with practices and visions of a future Swiss society. Jaeger develops different figures of thought that support an analysis of social belonging within and beyond kindergarten. Prominently underlying her analysis is the notion of “multi-referentiality” (p. 8), which points to the fact that multiple social orders simultaneously exist and therefore mutually generate and constitute each other. It captures the contingency of social order and the simultaneous negotiation of different social orders in any given moment. Jaeger’s monograph contributes new insights to debates related to the anthropology of childhood, migration, schooling, and belonging.

The data on which *Children as Social Butterflies* is based stems from two and a half years of ethnographic research carried out between 2016 and 2019. The focus lies on the children of a kindergarten class in a culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged neighborhood on the outskirts of Zurich, Switzerland named “Mühlekon.” Jaeger observes the children in the kindergarten and follows them into afternoon day-care centers. In some cases, she visited the children’s homes and interviewed their parents, most of whom had migrated to Switzerland and were transnationally connected. She accompanied the families to social welfare offices, cultural celebrations, churches, temples, shopping malls, and even vacations in the parents’ birth countries.

The monograph is structured into a prologue, an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix entailing a detailed methodological reflection. Chapter One situates Jaeger’s research in academic literature and debates regarding childhood, migration, and schooling. The book contributes to ethnographic research on childhood by foregrounding children as social actors in their own right navigating diverse socio-spatial orders. At the same time, Jaeger seeks to destabilize and diversify the category of the child, arguing that anthropological research has too often produced children as primarily and only children, with insufficient attention to other social factors. Moreover, by focusing on transnational entanglements and boundary-making, Jaeger shows how the category of the migrant is done and undone constantly, highlighting the relationship between social attribution and its effect on the configuration of social belonging. Lastly, the author engages with the literature on schooling, especially the influence schooling has on the negotiation of social belonging.

Chapter two familiarizes the reader with life in “Mühlekon” kindergarten and introduces the many forms of social belonging available to the children. The analysis is centered on the differentiation between the age cohorts of “the caterpillars,” who are the new arrivals and the usually older, more experienced “butterflies,” who already know kindergarten life and are supposed to embody competent kindergarten pupils. Jaeger describes: “Children were addressed as butterflies and caterpillars, not as Albanian or Portuguese, as children that were born in spring, not as Muslims or Hindu” (p. 54). Distinctions along the lines of forces like religion or nationality were not promoted in the pedagogical order of the kindergarten. Rather, the kindergarten was kept a deliberately neutral space inhabited only by butterflies and caterpillars. Jaeger shows how belonging to the caterpillars or the butterflies is very distinctive initially but fades away as the school year progresses. With time, social belongings related to which day-care center children visited, nationality, language, or gender become more significant in the children’s interactions with one another.

Chapter three focuses on the kindergarten teachers and explores what Jaeger calls “rendering differentiation pedagogical” (p. 78ff). Given the kindergarten’s location in the heart of a diverse neighborhood and in light of current political and academic debates about equal opportunities for the children of migrants, the pupils’ assumed cultural backgrounds were central in pedagogical practice. Frequently, they served as allegedly contrasting counterpoints to the kindergarten’s (Swiss) pedagogically inclined social order. Building on the notion of “rendering technical” in Tanja Li’s ethnography *The will to improve* (2007) Jaeger proposes “rendering differentiation pedagogical” to capture how socially and culturally perceived problems were framed in pedagogical terms and addressed on pedagogically informed terrain. Examples include differing views on healthy snacks or appropriate leisure activities (reading vs. television), which were negotiated between kindergarten teachers and parents by reference to the pedagogical. In these negotiations, teachers balanced engagement with families and their cultural backgrounds against the need to maintain kindergarten as a space apart from children’s out-of-school environments marked by “television, smartphones, cigarettes, sex, or physical violence” and politics of class, religion, and nationality—forces they perceived as potentially threatening to a good childhood (p. 74).

Moreover, Jaeger explores how children are categorized in the Swiss educational system based on a certain understanding of which attributions of difference might hinder learning. The neighborhood’s school board allocated children to kindergarten classes with attention to gender, language, residential address, religion, and age, aiming to avoid, for instance, an overrepresentation of the same non-Christian religions or non-Swiss-German languages in a class. Jaeger sheds light on how these categorizations were guided by a vision of the children as future Swiss citizens. This is evident, for example, in the hierarchization of languages: speaking English, unlike Turkish or Albanian, was policed less by the kindergarten teachers because it was seen as a valuable skill for the future Swiss citizens and was not associated with ethnicity.

Chapter four explores what happens to the established social belonging when children leave kindergarten at noon to go to afternoon day-care centers. Jaeger contrasts the social order of the kindergarten with that of the day-care center, illustrating their ambivalent relationship and attempts at demarcation. This comparison depicts the kindergarten as a carefully curated pedagogical comfort zone that shelters the children from the supposedly harsh

reality outside. In contrast, the day-care centers are depicted, using a last figure of thought proposed by Jaeger, as “authentically normal” (p. 95ff). The author describes how in these institutions, the children’s everyday lives and the harsh world entered to a greater extent. Day-care staff addressed violence more directly and intervened more in family lives. Additionally, they emphasized their authenticity and normalness in comparison with the carefully created order of the kindergarten. This is illustrated by the fact that, unlike in kindergarten, in day-care the children themselves often formed groups along ethnic lines, with fewer attempts by the staff to counteract this. Through the portrayal of day-care, Jaeger illustrates how the children met each other under new conditions while simultaneously taking with them some of the kindergarten’s social order. She shows how in day-care butterflies play with caterpillars with whom they would not interact in kindergarten, but who in day-care are grouped together as the youngest children. She also illustrates how butterfly girls, very close in kindergarten, didn’t play together in day-care but instead spent time with other children with whom they shared other forms of belonging, such as ethnicity or family ties.

In Chapter Five, the author complicates the picture of her research field by situating the Mühlekon neighborhood nationally and within the families’ transnational networks. In Switzerland, it is classified as a rather deprived locality, while abroad it is constructed among relatives as part of “rich Switzerland,” from which, for instance, money flows to build schools in Sri Lanka or to support the education of relatives in Turkey. Finally, focusing on one kindergarten child and her mother, the appendix provides an in-depth reflection on the study’s methodological approach, the author’s positionality and the limits of the research.

This monograph offers a pleasant reading experience by balancing artfully written ethnographic interludes with theoretical insights. Jaeger excels at providing a nuanced account of how children navigate social belonging in ways that touch upon highly political topics such as migration and schooling, while avoiding the traps of simplistic explanations and stereotypes. The main contribution of *Children as Social Butterflies* lies in the examination of the constitution of social relations, revealing mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion and situated boundary-making of different scales and scopes. Jaeger highlights the changing configurations of social belonging as the children navigate different socio-spatial orders, emphasizing everyday multi-referentiality, conflicting social positions and divergent arenas of status negotiation. The book will appeal to a broader audience ranging from academics, kindergarten-, school-, and caregiving personnel, lay persons, and authorities concerned with migration and social welfare in Switzerland. Moreover, the monograph is an excellent read for those researching similar dynamics outside Switzerland.

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