"The Imperative of Responsibility as a guideline in residential care"

What makes this thesis by the educationalist, Hartmut Marsch, extraordinary is the fact that the author bases his considerations on 30 years’ experience in residential care. The object of his critical reflections are situations in which he and his team reached the limits of their influence and moments of doubt when their involvement in the development of adolescents proved problematic.

Starting from the question of the ethical orientation of the child and youth care profession, Marsch first describes his subjective view of the history of education. He represents the conviction that in the course of carer training a fragmented picture of history is usually given and the emphasis on individual fragments has significant influence on the decisions in everyday educational life. Consequently, his thoughts on the history of education culminate in the portrayal of the concrete historical and social conditions under which his generation chose a career in education.

He focuses on the connection between the anti-authoritarian influence in the late 1960s and the question of responsibility in education. Referring to the central role of the idea of responsibility in revising the legal basis for the Children and Youth Welfare Services in Germany in the SGB VIII of 1990, he describes self-responsibility as the overriding educational goal.

In the second part of his work, Marsch presents the philosophical discourse on The Imperative of Responsibility published in 1979 by Hans Jonas. For his consideration of this discourse he draws the conclusion that talking about responsibility without regarding the different dimensions of this concept creates confusion rather than clarity.

In the third part of his treatise, Marsch examines the assumption that scientific debate on education could be particularly affected by this problem. For this purpose, he records a discussion among colleagues on the distribution of responsibility in their institutions and evaluates the statements according to different dimensions of responsibility. This clearly shows that even if the number of involved professional colleagues is very low, as in this case, associations inherent in the concept of responsibility result in serious contradictions.

In the fourth part, the practical part of the thesis, Marsch presents seven case histories. Referring to the youth welfare office reports, service diaries, minutes of team meetings, third party reports and personal memories, he describes how problems of young people in taking responsibility are seen from the perspective of the carer team and which typical refusal strategies were suspected of having been employed. In a summary, he shows those situations in which carers reached the limits of their influence. He analyses this in the light of his ideas on responsibility in education. In this way, Marsch manages to contrast two approaches to understanding cases. The first interpretation being based on an everyday understanding of responsibility, the second on a philosophical view. This dual perspective opens a surprisingly fresh look at the problems of adolescents, at the causes of these problems and at the way carers deal with young people.