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How Children Are Cared for to Make Them Care About Something in Residential Child Care (CareAbout)

Background

This ongoing ethnographic study explores residential care homes and boarding schools across Germany, focusing on how children are cared for in ways that foster their capacity to care about something meaningful. Grounded in feminist care ethics, the concept of care offers a powerful framework for understanding both the relational and developmental dimensions of residential care. Research in other fields highlights the importance of the interplay between Heideggerian present-oriented "leaping-in" and future oriented "leaping-ahead" care, which is now to be analysed empirically for the first time in the context of residential care.

Aim

The study aims to develop a typology of care that reveals how care practices are negotiated and established within different institutional contexts. The research thus contributes to the quest for the professional organisation of residential care.

Method

Using close participant observation as the primary method, the study captures the lived realities of care in everyday life. Data, collected through field notes, are analysed using Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss) and Objective Hermeneutics (Oevermann), allowing for a nuanced understanding of care orientations.

Key Findings

Social workers are organizing everyday life

Living in a residential care facility (funded by child and youth welfare services)

- A housekeeper prepared meals, which were eaten together in the residential group.
- Kitchen duties were required despite homework.
- Sports were off campus and required a train ticket.
- On-campus leisure activities were limited.
- Residents arranged ticket payments with support from a social worker.

Care: Preparation for survival

Living in a boarding school (funded by child and youth welfare services, or parents)

- Meals were eaten together with housemates in the cafeteria.
- No kitchen duties were required.
- Residents had to balance schoolwork, sports, and organisational committee responsibilities.
- Sports and other activities were available on campus.
- Train-ticket payments were arranged through the secretary's office.

Care: Preparation for self-determined living

Implications

Residential care prepares youth for basic self-sufficiency – to survive in society after institutional care. Boarding schools prepare youth for excellence, leadership, and high achievement – to thrive in competitive academic and social environments. The goal of preparation is fundamentally different: RC reactive vs. BS proactive (aspirational). *Can residential care become more aspirational?*

References

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