DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CHILDCARE SYSTEM

Contents

Nº3 – Family Foster Care in Portugal – Opening doors for a deinstitutionalised childcare system?

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The excessive weight of residential care marks the Portuguese out-of-home care system. This undesirable feature is related to developing an institutionalisation policy that takes place simultaneously with the demotion of family placement. This trend leads to a general divergence from good international practice. Our case proves that deinstitutionalisation can be halted or delayed, even when social and cultural conditions would make this change possible. Portugal is an integrated country in the European Union, with an open economy and society and progressive social policies in many domains. The dominance of the Catholic Church in Portugal does not explain the change resistance since deinstitutionalisation was possible in Catholic countries, such as Spain or Ireland.

This presentation describes the evolution of the social policy adopted in the Portuguese child placement system, highlighting family placement in foster care, followed by an overview of the leading institutional actors in the protection system and the support provided to family carers. Our reflection is based on the analysis and interpretation of the legal framework of family placement care, political and institutional documents, and a body of research evidence, considering the research studies developed in Portugal since 2005 about foster care. Data collection focused on two published articles and three books, with author's participation, one thesis and three dissertations. We excluded manuscripts that were guidelines for practice and theoretical publications, publications identifying other types of out-of-home care, like kinship care, and articles only related with parents' and professionals' point of view. This approach reflects a portrait of the experiences lived by foster families and children placed in foster care, revealing children and carers' opinions about well-being and personal development, education and leaving care process, foster care versus residential care, and participation in decision-making.

Implications for policies and practice include the need for a shift from residential care to achieve a better balance in the system and move closer to good practice, the recruitment of

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new foster families, and expanding the legal framework to include Kinship care in the out-of-home care system. It is crucial to consider the feelings and opinions of children about their role in the protection system and the decision-making that influences their lives. Social justice and the principle of equal treatment require that these children not stay invisible and forgotten by the system but receive the necessary psychoeducational and social support to promote their well-being and development.

Key Words: Family placement; foster care; kinship care; deinstitutionalisation; Portugal.

Nº17 – Implementing the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee – Evidence-Based Recommendations for Foster Care

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In 2021, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee were published to enable children to have the best possible life in the EU and worldwide. Member states were invited to implement the directions of both documents into practice.

The present study analyses and showcases the evidence on how to progress implementation of the Strategy and the Guarantee regarding alternative care, especially foster care in Portugal. A literature review was conducted based on international literature, looking for state-of-the art evidence. The search was conducted in databases (e.g. Cochrane, PubMed, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Academic Search Complete, Scopus, Web of Science, and institutional repositories and libraries) considering the last decade, this option is justified namely by the publication of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children in 2010.

Evidence-based recommendations for the Portuguese transition process towards quality, family and community-based care are stated, focusing foster care. De-institutionalisation and strengthening foster care—are advocated.

To conclude, the revision and monitoring of the measures for children in need of alternative care are suggested as well as integrating and publishing data from the diverse services of the alternative care system.

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Nº33 – Preparation for independent adult life of youth in family and residential foster care

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Aims

The CALEAMI project (Care Leavers Moving to Independent Life) is a longitudinal study that collects data of the transition of Catalan foster care young people from the months before they reach the legal age (18 in Spain) to 26 years of age. This study is developed by the IARS group in collaboration with the Federation of entities with projects and supervised living resources and the Director General for Childhood and Adolescence Care. The aim of this project is to analyze the factors that hinder and facilitate their transition by different profiles. This data helps to obtain empirical evidence for the improvement of services and programs to support the transition.

In this presentation we analyze some of the project data from the first wave. Specifically, we analyzed the main differences in the preparation for independent adult life between youths in foster family care and residential care.

Method

The participants consisted of 50 male and 62 female foster youths in care who live in Catalonia. Non accompanied migrants were excluded from this analysis. 66 of these youths at some point lived with a foster family (45 with a kinship family and 23 a non-kinship family), and 47 who have always lived in a residential facility.

Data was collected through an interview with closed and open questions. The interview was designed with the support of an advisory board of educators, policy workers from the Government and non-profit organizations of the field, care leavers and researchers. This instrument was validated through cognitive interviews. The first interview collected information regarding the experience of youth in the protection system and with regards to different areas: education, employment, expectations about the future, preparation for independent living, etc.

Results

There are some differences in the profile that must be considered: Compared to youths in residential foster care, youths in family foster care entered the protection system long before; have experienced less placement changes and have run away less.

Even though there were no differences in the perception of the preparation for independent life, we find some differences. Youths in family foster care have higher levels of education, more opportunities to develop skills like cooking and buying food, social capital that can provide them with support, compared to youths in residential foster care. On the one hand there were fewer youths in family foster care than youth in residential care who were working when they were interviewed, and received a weekly stipend that let them learn how to manage their personal money. On the other hand, less of them know about transition living support resources and wanted to join these programs.

Conclusions

The data provides some support to the hypothesis that family foster care provides a better environment to prepare youths for adult life. However, it must also be considered that the two groups have different profiles that could be responsible for the differences (age of protection, reasons to be selected or not be selected for family foster care, etc.).

Nevertheless, more efforts must be made in this area. Youths in family foster care need more information with regards to support programs for transition and, although they have higher levels of education, they are still under the general population levels.

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Nº24 – SOS COVID FAMILIES: An innovative program for institutionalized children in Madrid (a resource during COVID-19 pandemic and an opportunity for the future)

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An innovative program in Madrid has tried to provide an interesting alternative to the difficult situation of institutionalized children during the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Family associations in collaboration with the public administration have provided temporary foster families as an adequate resource to deal with this circumstance. Although overall a shift from institutional to family-based care seems to be a priority, these transitions need to be carefully planned and managed, with effective and sustained family preparation, strengthening, monitoring, and other support provided to ensure the best interests of the child are maintained.

Keywords: Family foster care, foster family associations, COVID-19, deinstitutionalization.

Objectives

- to identify the experience lived by foster families during COVID-19 pandemic in Madrid.

- to describe the process followed in this program including success and challenges factors.

Method

A phenomenological multiple case study carried out with thirty foster families is presented to describe the components and the process followed in order to highlight the protective and the risk factors involved in its implementation. In addition, the experience lived by the families is described. Six group interview sessions were conducted, which were qualitatively analysed to establish links and associations between the data.

Results

The main findings obtained from foster families indicate an increase in the interaction between the different agents related to the child; identify good practices on how to deal with family relationships in a healthy way, but also examples of deficits that need to be actively managed. Rich descriptions of individual and group dynamics can be used to propose effective support. Carers reported that the arrival of the child has introduced new dynamics. They also describe the crucial role of the support available in order to manage different problems. They place high value on the role of the professionals of the residential institutions. It is also clear that the lack of acknowledgement of children´s life story makes it more difficult for the family. Finally, many foster parents reflected their wish that the children stay by them after the end of the program.

Conclusions

This program contributes to the promotion of foster care.

Good support and supervision results in foster carers´ feeling satisfied and let's go ahead successfully.

This information is crucial in order to prevent troubles and future failures in the next editions of this innovative program.

Recommendations

- A temporary non-parental foster family program allows children and foster families to know better the rich experience of fostering.

- Future case studies are encouraged in order to propose a collaborative model among the agents involved.

- Evidence about success and challenge factors could be transferred to similar contexts.

- Children's experience is an important area that must be explored in-depth.