

Symposium Foster care structures and accompaniment – effects and obstacles in support

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Abstract of the symposium

The Swiss Palatin Foundation is funding three research projects as part of its "Pflegekinder - Next generation" program about child foster care in Switzerland. Those three studies are conducted at national level and each focuses on a different and complementary aspect of the child foster care system: 1. The participation of children in foster care; 2. A proper support of foster relationships; 3. A comparison of the cantonal child foster care structures. The four submitted papers present the first results of two of these three ongoing studies (focus on number 2 & 3 themes).

Comparison of the cantonal child foster care structures

Switzerland is a federalist country composed of 26 cantons. As far as the study of cantonal structures is concerned (3), it aims to identify the success factors of child foster care systems in order to point out the best practices systems. The specific purpose of the research is to characterize and compare different dimensions such as structural characteristics, organisational models and key procedures of the different swiss cantonal childcare systems.

The research holds two parts. The first one focuses on the description of the various cantonal childcare systems (on the basis of the different dimensions described above) in order to identify key aspects for establishing a typology of child foster care systems. The second part of the research aims to analyse, by selected representative cantons of child foster care systems, to what extent key characteristics of cantonal foster care systems can influence the conditions for successful fostering relationships. To this end, various focus groups are set up with foster children, foster parents, parents of foster children and professionals.

A proper support of foster relationships

The study theme about "proper support of foster relationships" (2) aims to generate knowledge about the current Swiss support supervision practice and, based on this knowledge, to define "proper" support of foster care and how this can be attained as well as develop recommendations for an improvement and further development of the Swiss foster care system for foster families, foster children and their relatives. The

study includes four Swiss cantons in the three main language regions (German, French, Italian). Through a multi-perspective case approach, the perspectives of foster children, foster family members, family of origin members and the involved professionals are studied. A total of 24 cases (including 72 one-to-one qualitative, narrative interviews) have been surveyed and are currently analyzed in order to gain a better understanding of foster care support.

The aim of the symposium is to highlight and discuss how professionals, foster carers – especially foster mothers - and families of origin perceive, shape and / or hinder social support in foster care on different levels: in their professional role, on a personal level and on a structural level as well as in interdependence of professional, personal and structural levels.

1. The impact of cantonal child placement structures on professionals' roles (social workers)

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Presentation	Chantal Guex, Béatrice Lambert, Frédérique Leresche

The specific purpose of the first part of the research identifies and compares different dimensions such as structural characteristics, organisational models and key procedures of the different swiss cantonal childcare systems. As Switzerland is a federalist country, each canton (26) is competent for the implementation of the federal framework legislation and therefore has a large degree of autonomy in the implementation of child protection and child foster care. Thus, with regard to the different models uncovered, it will be a question of discussing what the various existing institutional configurations and legal frameworks show about the ambivalence roles (help, support, advice and supervision) of the multiple professionals involved in the child placement process in Switzerland.

2. Foster care support: social representations of professionals

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Our presentation will show the challenges for foster families and families of children in care to deal with the diversity of professionals they meet throughout the placement process and to understand the role of each of these professionals in these different procedures. Indeed, in a placement process, the parents meet in principle the child and adult protection authority, which is a judge. His decision is based on the report of the social worker who investigates to see whether the placement measure is adequate. How are foster care measures experienced by the child's family? How do professionals assess the need to place the child in foster care? In parallel, a social worker assesses the living conditions in the foster family. If the family meets the criteria, it will wait for a proposal for a child to be fostered or it will already be fostering a child. When a placement is requested, the social worker will proceed with the matching and the placement can begin. How to choose the right foster family for the child? The social worker will then regularly check that the placement conditions meet the requirements.

The focus group methodology allows us to understand how individuals perceive the legal framework and how they have experienced the placement procedures. The presentation will focus on the different professional's points of view. How do they understand and explain the foster care process in their canton and how do they talk about their role in the system? How does the choice between foster care and institutional care come about? What are the criteria for assessing the ability of foster families? How is foster care prepared and initiated? According to the professionals, what do foster families need in order for everything to do their best? How is supervision carried out if the child is placed with a family to which he or she is related? What should be done when the relationship between the foster family and the child in care does not work well?

3. Foster Family Support - Foster Mothers and their important role in accompaniment practice

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In our presentation, we focus on one main topic that emerged as particularly important in the study on foster care support: the role of foster mothers in support and supervision. We will show from the empirical material that for many foster mothers, taking in a foster child is a substitute for employment and an additional income for the family. Many of the foster mothers are employed by a foster care organizations, they receive a salary and thus take on the main tasks of caring for the foster child. The expectations arising from the employment create a certain pressure to perform the foster mothering task in a professional way and in accordance with the requirements. We will also show that with the responsibility for the foster relationship, foster mothers also take on a certain control and steering function. Thus, they control the professionals and their tasks in the support, they control the way the foster child is viewed by professionals and other foster family members. And they control the topics that are discussed with the professionals, which means they direct what is defined as problem and what is not defined as a problem. Having responsibility and control functions, foster mothers often find themselves in a subjective situation of excessive demands, which, however, can only be addressed hesitantly to the support system or is held out and concealed in favor of a good working relationship with social work professionals.

From the foster mothers' perspectives their private networks are perceived as important as well as their own personal competencies and character traits, e.g. assertiveness and getting help, being active oneself, being proactive and combative for one's own concerns and those of the child. The professionals are supposed to act as crisis managers, to back up the families of origin and perform administrative tasks. The foster care system is considered as helpful because of payment - but with biases: the payment triggers professionalism and foster mothers find since they receive a payment, they should not expect gratitude on the part of the child – even though they desire to experience gratitude.

From a professional and a research perspective these findings raise questions on (1) how control functions of foster mothers can be recognized and at the same time perforated, aiming to provide appropriate support to all involved (2) how children can be more involved in

support, regardless of the foster mothers (3) how appropriate support can be developed acknowledging the role contradictions and relieving foster mothers (4) How the role of foster fathers can be strengthened.

4. The ambivalent position of birth parents in a foster care configuration

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When a child is placed in a foster family, a configuration of actors comes into contact: the foster family members, the birth family and the professionals of different services (often at least two: one representing the child protection social services and one representing the foster family office). The ways in which those actors understand the reasons for the placement, collaborate in a day-to-day basis, deal with diverging opinions will create the conditions for a (un)successful placement (e.g., stability over time, well-being of the child, absence of conflicts). In this configuration, the position of birth parents (often birth mothers) is critical as access to their children is mediated both by the professionals and the foster family. How do they experience their parental role in the context of a placement? How are parental duties shared between birth and foster parents?

Our paper is based on multi-perspective case studies through qualitative interviews conducted in four cantons of Switzerland. Preliminary results showed that, in contrast to the other actors, birth parents tend to see the placement as temporary and are often ill-equipped to communicate their difficulties and negotiate care and visitation arrangements. Good collaboration with the foster family seems to be of key importance as they often act as gatekeepers. Nevertheless, the Swiss child protection system protects birth parents' rights; for instance, birth parents can trigger visitation rights even after several years of withdrawal. This is often perceived as a major threat to stability of the placement in the eyes of the other actors. Overall, foster care configurations tend to be in a precarious balance.