

An «Interview» with Juvenile Court's case files

A quantitative research on Italian foster care

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Abstract

Foster care is a complex intervention in child protection, and for social workers and Juvenile Courts it is difficult to foresee its outcomes. Despite its thirty-year history, in the Italian social context, foster care is challenging, not only for social workers and the Court that makes the decision, but for the children and their birth and foster families too. This paper is a presentation of a quantitative research on fostering placements decided by the Juvenile Court of Milan, Italy. The aim of this research is to describe foster care placements determined by the Juvenile Court of Milan from 2010 to 2014. Documentary analysis is the chosen study approach. The research focused on the analysis of Juvenile Court's case files. The researcher was interested in social workers' reports, Juvenile Court's documents and hearing minutes. Information about fostering placements was collected by means of a questionnaire. The sample consists of 308 children, placed in foster care by the Juvenile Court. The data collected were analysed considering the factors for a good foster care placement identified through the literature review. This study offers an overview of social work practices in the Italian foster care system. The results of the study encourage reflections on aspects of child protection deemed important by social workers and other people involved in this crucial care experience.

Keywords

Foster care – child protection – documentary analysis – participation – social work practices

Foster care is present all over the world, including Italy. Despite varying regulations and implementations of this out-of-family placement, it is possible to affirm that a positive foster care placement depends on many factors such as, for example, giving the child a say at the beginning and during the fostering placement process, promoting the participation of the birth family and foster family in the decision-making processes, offering continued support on the part of the aid professionals and so on. It is therefore important that child protection social workers ensure that these conditions are met, with the aim of obtaining a positive outcome in the out-of-family placement.

On an international scale, numerous studies have gathered information about fostering placements from the point of view of the social workers, fostered children, their birth families and foster families (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Holland *et al.*, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman *et al.*, 2010; Goodyer, 2016; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2017). In Italy, however, empirical research studies on this topic are few (Favretto & Bernardini, 2010; Belotti *et al.*, 2012; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2017).

The aim of the research presented in this paper is to compensate, at least in part, for the lack of studies on foster care within the Italian context.

The purpose of this research, which began in April 2015 and ended in January 2017, is to explore Italian foster care by analysing the Juvenile Court case files of fostered children.

To be more specific, using a documentary analysis approach, this quantitative research studied foster care placements that were decided by the Juvenile Court of Milan from 2010 to 2014.

Analysis of foster care placements was carried out starting with the guidelines for «good fostering», which emerged from two important international literature reviews (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2017). The case files were «interviewed» using a questionnaire created for this study.

In the first part of this article, the author reports the empirical research carried out on an international scale about foster care placements and a brief outline of Italian foster care.

This is followed by an explanation of the research purpose and method. In the third part, findings about the participation of fostered children, birth families and foster parents in the initial stages and during foster care placement are presented and discussed in light of international literature. In conclusion, the paper also stimulates the possibility of reflection for social workers and judges.

Literature overview

Foster care is present in most Western countries (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Eurochild, 2010). Despite the different forms of regulation and the variety of operating practices, an examination of the research carried out internationally can provide important information, that is also valuable for the Italian social context.

Regarding foster care planning, researches highlight the importance of carefully devising the start-up phase, giving a voice to the involved parties and providing them with adequate information on foster care (Wilson *et al.*, 2004).

The effectiveness of foster care is closely connected to the presence and support of social workers right from the starting phase, as well as to their commitment to listening to the desires and points of view of the protagonists of this complex care experience (Wilson *et al.*, 2004).

Social work with birth families

For the members of the child's birth family, research (Kapp & Vela, 2004; Holland *et al.*, 2005) highlights the value of their participation in the decision-making process that concerns them. Keeping parents informed about their child's life and recognizing the importance of their role as parents, positively affect a fostering placement's process (Farineau *et al.*, 2013).

The international research (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Malet *et al.*, 2010; Angel, 2016) underlines the importance of social workers concretely assisting parents before, during and after a foster care placement, as well as establishing ad hoc support programmes and support groups.

Social work with foster children

Research on fostering stresses the need to promote the listening to and the participation of children in the planning of their foster care placement and in decision-making processes that concern them (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Leeson, 2007; Selwyn *et al.*, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman *et al.*, 2010; Polkki *et al.*, 2012; Ridley *et al.*, 2015).

The removal from their family unit is a shocking and traumatic experience for children, and it is often associated with feelings of sadness, anxiety, guilt and injustice (Fernandez, 2007; Winter, 2010).

It is therefore important that social workers promote the participation of children, *primarily* by providing them with clear information on what is happening, on the reasons for their removal, and on their new placement as well as by carefully listening to their fears and desires (Reimer, 2010). It is also advisable to inform children about their rights, to explain them the meaning of fostering and to talk about their foster family (Strolin-Goltzman *et al.*, 2010).

Children between the ages of 8 and 15 with foster care experience, involved in the research of Mitchell and colleagues (2010), welcomed the opportunity of being listened to about the type of family they thought could care for them and what could help them in the transition phase.

Most of the interviewed children report having experienced confusion and difficulties during the transition phase of their placement in a foster family.

Researchers (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010) have thus attempted to outline, in the light of the data they collected, some useful guidelines for social workers: give the child time to process the news of having to go to foster care, to talk with his/her family about his/her concerns and to prepare to leave home, and explain to the child the social worker's role and what they will concretely do in view of the reunification with his/her birth family.

These guidelines are partly confirmed by what was stated by the foster children who participated in the research conducted by Goodyer (2016). They report the importance of having time to prepare for the placement, to be able to talk with their relatives and to have a chance to meet in advance the people who will take care of them.

The process of listening to children can be performed through specific professional practices that support the involvement of children and young people in the fostering process, such as advocacy (Dalrymple & Horan, 2008, Moss, 2009). Social workers should support and encourage children to express themselves (Wilson *et al.*, 2004), making time to listen to them and by being easily reachable (Farineau *et al.*, 2013). It is very useful for children to be able to talk to someone about what they have experienced (and are experiencing) to properly process it (Moyers *et al.*, 2006).

Finally, regarding the support given to foster children, research data indicates the importance of offering them the opportunity to be mentored by older children who have had foster care experience (care leavers) and to befriend other children and young people placed outside their family and/or in foster care (Pithouse *et al.*, 2004; Madigan *et al.*, 2013).

Social work with foster families

Some studies conducted internationally (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Pasztor *et al.*, 2006; Murray *et al.*, 2011) suggest that social workers consider foster families as partners. To carry out a «good fostering», social workers should give the carers adequate information about the children's personality and future projects concerning them (Munford & Sanders, 2016). They should also promote their active participation in the decision-making processes concerning their foster care placement (Rosenwald & Bronstein, 2008).

Farmer and colleagues (2005) advice social workers to listen to the doubts and objections expressed by the potential foster families regarding specific foster proposals. The research also shows that carers feel the need to be supported and guided through their foster care experience (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Holland *et al.*, 2005). For birth families, for foster families too, it is important to join for support foster parent groups, self-help groups and/or groups led by professionals (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Pithouse *et al.*, 2004; Murray *et al.*, 2011).

In the start-up and matching phase, it is also important to involve foster parents' birth children and consider their expectations, especially in relation to the age and personality of the child with whom they will have to share their parents and home (Younes & Harp, 2007; Sutton & Stack, 2013).

It is also advisable during the foster care placement to take into consideration the foster parents' birth children, who are also active protagonists in the fostering process (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Höjer, 2007).

The monitoring of fostering placements by social workers is also useful to capture signs of fatigue and specific needs expressed by the birth children (Sutton & Stack, 2013). It would be advisable to involve the foster siblings in the periodic checks on the progress of the foster care experience, consider their emotional and psychological needs (Wilson *et al.*, 2004) and prevent the risk of eventual breakdowns. In fact, research shows that if the host experience affects the wellbeing of children, the foster parents will be led to terminate the fostering placement early (Lipscombe *et al.*, 2004). It is therefore advisable that social workers dedicate «time» and «space» to birth children, offering them opportunities to be listened to (Serbinski & Brown, 2016).

Maintaining bonds between children and their family

Maintaining bonds with the birth family, or re-building them if necessary, has a positive impact on the progress of a foster care experience (Moyers *et al.*, 2006) and on the involvement of the birth parents (Lopez *et al.*, 2013). The continuation of these bonds not only concerns the foster care child's parents but also his/her brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Moyers *et al.*, 2006).

In the matching phase, it is advisable to take into consideration the conditions (place of residence of the foster family, public transport availability) that facilitate the maintenance of contacts between the child and his/her family, mainly with his/her siblings (Wilson *et al.*, 2004). Some studies (Moyers *et al.*, 2006; Malet *et al.*, 2010; Salas Martinez *et al.*, 2016) present interesting results on the importance of defining contact modalities between the child and his/her family in an accurate and personalized way and of periodically checking progress and listening to all the people involved.

Foster care in Italy

In Italy, foster care is regulated by Law 184/1983 and the subsequent Law 149/2001, known as *Right of the child to have a family*. Placements of children in need of temporary out-of-family accommodation are mainly of three types: group homes, foster families (families or singles who take care of a child in their home, without any remuneration from social services but with an income supplement) and professional foster families (families where one or both parents are paid as professional caregivers, usually by a non-profit organization). The Italian law identifies a sort of «order of preference» to be considered when placing a child: the first choice is a family, preferably with other children; the second is a single person and the last is a children's home.

Children can be on a full-time, day-time or part-time placement. When decisions about a placement are made, the child's specific needs and the birth families' problems

should be considered. Foster care placement, as well as other out-of-family placements, can be carried out in agreement with the parents or ordered by the Juvenile Court. Consensual foster care is formalized by the local authority and its maximum duration is two years. When necessary, the duration of foster care placement can be extended beyond two years but only through a decision made by the Juvenile Court. The foster care placement is managed and monitored by child protection social workers. In Italy, a parental supervision order is issued by the Juvenile Court. In most cases, the Juvenile Court decides on a parental supervision order and appoints the local authority to remove the child from his/her family and place him/her either with a foster family or in a children's home.

Placement of children in non-professional foster families, ordered by the Juvenile Court, is the main theme of this study. On December 31, 2014 (latest available data), 26,420 children lived out-of-family in Italy.¹ Of these children, 12,400 were placed in professional foster care or in children's homes, and 14,020 lived in non-professional foster care; among these children, 48% were in kinship foster care. The majority of foster placements – 4 foster placements out of 5 – are ordered by a Court (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche sociali, 2017).

Context and aim of the research

The present research project is the result of the collaboration between the Catholic University of Milan and the Juvenile Court of Milan, in Lombardy (a northern Italian region). This research project originated from the Juvenile Court's interest in knowing the implementation process of the foster care placements they ordered.

The purpose of the research is to analyse foster care placements, starting from the indications of «good fostering» that emerged from the international literature review. To this end, fostering placements decided by the Juvenile Court of Milan, from January 2010 to December 2014, were taken into consideration. This time frame allowed the researcher to analyse relatively recent fostering placements and to study current social work practices.

Method

This research is based on documentary analysis (Prior, 2003). This method aims to capture, in a way «to reawaken», the potential information contained in the Juvenile Court records. In this research, documents written by aid professionals and by judges have been an important source of information.

¹ The data does not consider unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Practically, the researcher has «interviewed» the files of children for whom foster care placement was decided. The researcher was interested in social workers' reports, Juvenile Court documents and hearing minutes. These documents not only illustrate the professional practices implemented in child protection but also the experiences, interpersonal relationships and life stories of children and families.

The documents' content was analysed with a quantitative approach. The information contained in the files was collected in a systematic way, by means of an ad hoc questionnaire which allowed the researcher to codify the available material and submit it to statistical analysis.

The unit of analysis was not the fostered child, but each specific fostering placement documented in the case files. This research considers only children placed in a new family, outside of their family circle. For this reason, kinship foster care, short-term fostering, fostering of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and child care home placement were excluded. This choice was motivated by the fact that some of these placements do not allow a relationship between the foster family and the birth family, as in the case of unaccompanied foreign minors and pre-adoption placements, while in other cases the two families know each other as they are related (kinship foster care).

The selection of children was performed through the software used to manage the archives of the Juvenile Court. The software extracted 308 names of children for whom the Juvenile Court had identified the need of foster care placement from January 2010 to December 2014. A questionnaire was created to collect information on fostering placements. The questionnaire, consisting of 92 items, was aimed at recording the presence/absence of specific information about the child and the fostering placement, in the documents contained in his/her file.

The questionnaire is called the «Data Acquisition Form». With the finalization of the above survey instrument, a «Guide to the compilation of data sheets» was created, a sort of «instruction booklet» aimed at collecting the main guidelines and instructions for the data collection.

The survey form aims to gather information on:

- Documents consulted
- Socio-demographic background of the child
- Juvenile Court proceedings
- Planning and implementation of the fostering placement
- Social work with birth families
- Social work with foster children
- Social work with foster families
- Maintaining bonds between the child and his/her birth family
- Maintaining bonds between the child and his/her community
- Contacts between the two families
- Foster care placement conclusion and possible reunification with the birth family.

In putting together the questionnaire, two international literature reviews (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2017) were consulted. The reviews' authors have produced an operational synthesis of «good fostering» criteria and guidelines based on the available research about foster care. The survey questions were chosen and formulated with the aid of the guidelines for «good fostering» derived from the international literature on the matter.

A survey form has been completed for each foster placement analysed. Consequently, if a child had multiple foster care experiences, the latter were analysed by filling out as many fact sheets as fostering placements.

The collected data were processed using the Stata statistical software.

In this paper, some univariate and bivariate analysis will be presented on the data collected about children placed in foster care by the Juvenile Court and about the beginning and implementation processes of foster care placement, with a particular focus on birth families, fostered children and foster families' participation.

Data collection

For each child, all the files, open and closed, have been taken into consideration, and all the foster care placements concerning them have been separately analysed. The documentation for 13 children was not accessible for different reasons, mostly pertaining to the Juvenile Court's organizational system (closed files that were difficult to find, files still under assessment etc.).

Some of the limitations encountered were due not only to the disadvantages of the research method applied (documentary analysis) but to the chosen source of information.

The documents contained in the files are created for reasons other than study and research, and their aim is mainly to report to the judge about the situation of children at risk and, later, to inform the Juvenile Court about the progress of a foster care placement. For this reason, some data that would be useful for research purposes are not available in the analysed files. Furthermore, most of the documents analysed do not have a standardized format, and their content also depends on the discretion of the person who produces them. Sometimes, in very long reports on the progress of fostering placement, no useful information was found for this research's purposes. For this reason, it inevitably took a long time to consult the files and to collect the relevant data.

Another limitation is related to the accessibility and retrieval of the material to be analysed. The research involved the analysis of a large number of case files, some of which were difficult to recover. In this regard, reference is mostly made to pending case files, i.e., those cases about which the Juvenile Court has not yet expressed a definite opinion, and which are therefore not in the archives. These files are often located in the offices of the judges engaged in their assessment or are simply pending, awaiting further updates

from the social workers involved. For this reason, a greater effort was required in finding the material to be analysed.

The documentary analysis however made it possible to collect a large amount of information, difficult to find otherwise, relating to a great number of children and young people placed outside their birth family.

Findings

Children with Court's provision of foster care placement: a general framework

The analysed documentation concerning 295 children shows that:

- 183 children have or have had at least one foster care experience, and among them, 12 children have had more than one foster care experience, and 20 children have been placed in a family known to the child or his parents, but outside of their family circle;
- in 43 cases, the child's case file had no documentation about the fostering placement, and so it has not been possible to say if that child still is or has been in foster care;
- 69 children were not in foster care, although the Juvenile Court ordered their foster care placement; these cases have been excluded from the data collection.

The research analysed 198 fostering placements, thus proving that some children had more than one foster care experience. At the time of the data collection, only 59 fostering placements were ended, and they represented 30% of the analysed fostering placements.

To draw a picture of the children for whom the Juvenile Court of Milan arranged a foster care placement, 240 data collection forms were analysed, containing data collected from the documents of 226 children's files.

The data show that children were equally distributed by gender (50% male and 50% female). Almost all the children were born in Italy (95%) and only 5% in a foreign country, although in 33% of cases there were noticeable ethnic and cultural differences between the child and the foster family. This finding means that one-third of the foster children had foreign backgrounds.

At the time the analysed documents were created, 21% of the children were an only child, while 79% had at least one sibling. The data also show that 8% of children had disabilities, although there were fewer physical (only 2 cases out of 20), disabilities than those due to a psychomotor development delay, mostly of medium level.

Considering the children's age at the time of the foster care placement decision made by the Juvenile Court, the data show that a low percentage of children at the lowest

and highest ends of the considered age group (0-3 and 14-18) have been placed in foster care, while a larger number was in the 3-6 years range (31%) and the 6-10 years range (28%). As shown in the graphic (Fig. 1), 43% of children for whom foster care placement was decided are under the age of 6, while 71% are younger than 10 years.

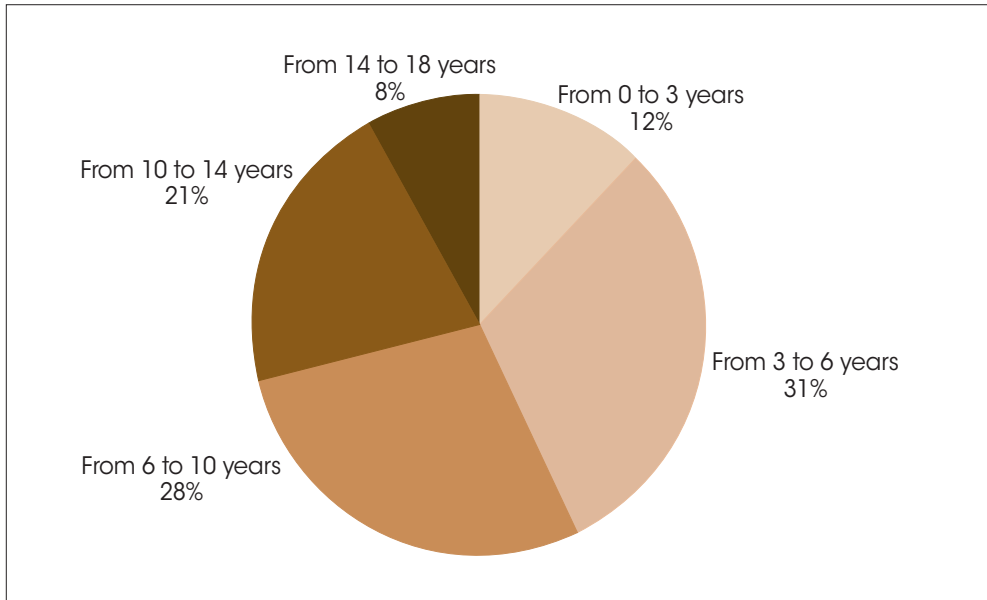


Fig. 1 – Children's age at the time of the Court decision of their foster care placement (%)

Another interesting data point is the child's placement prior to the decision of his/her foster care placement: 36% of the children were living with their birth family while 35% spent a period in a children's home before the beginning of the fostering placement. In this regard it could be assumed that the children's home was proposed as a «transition», a settling phase, to evaluate the fostering placement's adequacy and feasibility.

Considering only cases where the child was placed in a foster family and excluding the 43 cases, in which there was no documentation about the child's fostering placement, the data shows an increased number of direct placements from the birth family to a foster family (38%) and a reduction in cases in which the child is first placed in a child care home (30%).

The data also show that more than half of the children (55%) lived together with at least one parent or a relative before the decision of their foster care placement, namely 38% with at least one parent, 8% in kinship fostering and 9% with their mother in a residential home. This empirical evidence is consistent with the recommendation given by the Italian Law 184/1983 to choose protective measures first within the birth family and to resort only as a second choice to out-of-family placement.

Foster care planning and implementation

Regarding the participation of the fostering protagonists during the planning and starting phases of foster care placement, the data show that:

- in 55% of cases, at least one parent took part in the planning of their child's fostering placement;
- 35% of children over 3 years of age were listened to during the planning of their fostering placement;
- in only 33% of cases did social workers involve the foster parents in the process of planning fostering placement.

With regards to the other items considered in this paper, due to the lack of information in the documentation, it cannot be affirmed that the fostering protagonists were not involved, but their participation was not documented either in the progress reports of social workers or in the documents produced by judges.

The birth family's participation in the planning of fostering placements seems to be a more widespread practice in situations when the child, at the time of the foster care placement decision, still lived with one of his/her parents or in kinship fostering and in cases of direct placements from the birth family to the foster family.

In cases where the child was listened to, the issues addressed were related to general changes in the out-of-family placement (59; 95%), the maintenance of bonds with the birth family and with other significant persons (28; 45%) and the type of foster family that he/she would prefer (26; 42%).

The social workers' activities in the phase of matching the child with a foster family, and the reflections that led to the choice of a specific family for a child, were documented in 29% of the fostering placements analysed. The social workers' supporting intervention in the delicate transitional phase to foster care was documented in only 25% of placements. In more than half of the cases (60%), on the other hand, there was no record about meetings between children and social workers to plan together how to make the transition into foster care.

Comparing the planning phase with the implementation phase in fostering placements (Fig. 2), the data show a significant decline in the participation of the birth family in decision-making processes concerning the child's life (from 55% to 27%). If in the start-up phase of foster care, the foster family appeared to be the «less involved» party, during the implementation of foster care, in 42% of cases, it appeared to be the protagonist, listened to by social workers and involved in decision-making processes concerning the child in care.

A drop in the amount of documentation was also noted regarding listening to the child and his/her participation in the decision-making process about his/her experience outside the birth family and his/her everyday life. In fact, it emerges from the files that the involvement of children in their fostering placement was documented in only 27% of cases.

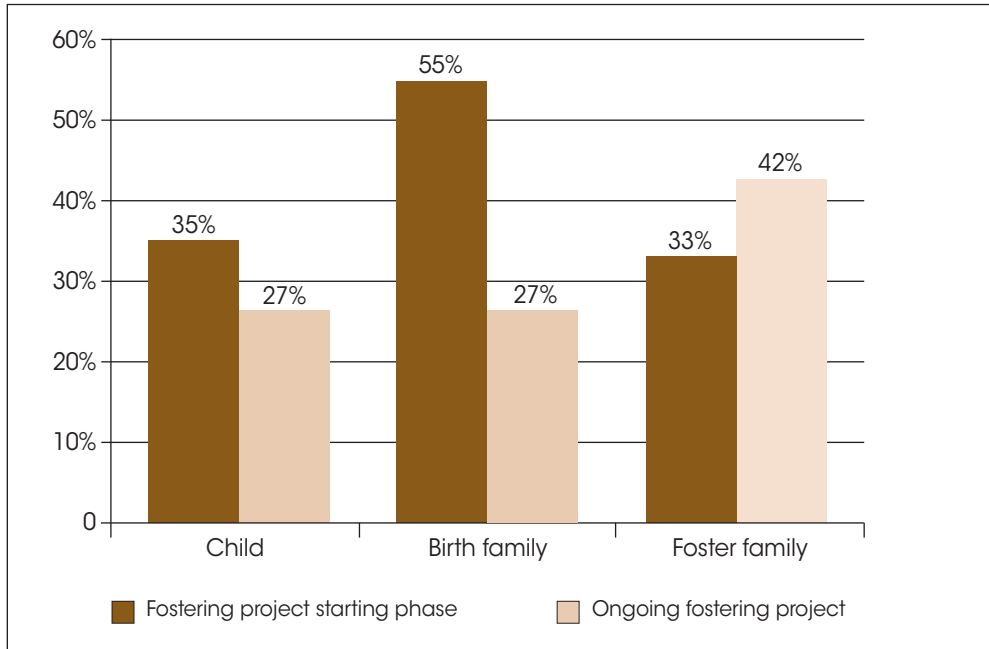


Fig. 2 – Participation of child, birth family and foster family during the planning phase and the implementation of the foster care placement (%)

The activation of specific interventions in favour of members of the birth family was well documented. In 60% of the analysed files, social workers had documented the ways they provided parents with parenting and psychological support, as well as their activation of specialized services providing the family with economic, working and residential aid. The involvement of the birth family in the daily life of the child was less documented.

Regarding the support offered to children in foster care by older children with foster care experience (peer mentoring and contacts with care leavers), the data show no information about it in the analysed files, and there was also no documentation about foster children having the opportunity to spend time with other out-of-family children.

Monitoring of fostering placements was documented in 72% of cases analysed, while in 64% of cases, social workers had given foster families a listening space for mutual updates on the placement's progress. In the files analysed, however, no information was found regarding support interventions offered to foster families, such as respite care to give caregivers a break from their duties (2%), support for birth children (6%), family support groups (9%), or practical help in everyday life tasks (24%).

Considering the bonds between the child and his/her birth family during his/her foster care placement, the research shows that social workers were attentive when documenting the ways to provide and schedule contact between the child and his/her

family. In 63% of cases, the maintaining of bonds with siblings was documented, which occurred mostly in «free» mode, in the absence of a supervising and facilitating social worker. The analysis of the files shows that foster parents were often engaged in organizing and managing siblings' meetings.

Contacts between the child and his/her birth family were also well documented in the files analysed. The data show that 43% of foster children maintained contact with all the relatives with whom they were in touch at the beginning of their foster care placement, while in 49% of cases, they maintained contact only with some of them. Only 4% of foster children no longer had any contact with their parents and relatives. Regarding the maintenance of bonds with other family members, it was documented in the files that 40% of the children in foster care had relations with their grandparents and 19% with their uncles/aunts and cousins.

Discussion and implications for practice

Foster care planning and child/family matching are the less documented phases in the Juvenile Court's files. Little information is found regarding listening to the child about the project that is being planned for him/her, the child's wishes and expectations and what could help him/her during the transition phase of his/her placement in the foster family. Contrary to what emerges from the international literature (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Farmer *et al.*, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman *et al.*, 2010), social workers document neither the work done to prepare the child and his/her family to transition to foster care nor how they prepare the foster family.

In many cases, there is no evidence of the reasoning that has led social workers to choose one family among all the others available at the beginning of the foster care experience. When the final decision of the Juvenile Court has been made and the file is closed (in about half of the cases), this lack of documentation could be justified by the fact that the Juvenile Court's update on the case is generally performed after two years from the date of the judges' decision. In these cases, most likely, social workers do not describe in detail what has been done but rather offer a general picture of the project implemented in favour of the child. In those situations, however, where, during the planning and starting of a fostering case, the Juvenile Court proceedings are «in progress», and social workers are called to update the judges on the progress of the project, the questions then arise: do social workers pay sufficient attention to the matching and starting phases of fostering cases as suggested by the international research? To what extent are those directly affected involved in planning the fostering placement? Why, if preparation and support work for a foster care placement has been performed, has it not been documented?

The lack of information in the files necessarily leaves these questions unanswered.

Methods and schedules for maintaining bonds between the child and his/her birth family are carefully documented, which this shows an interest and commitment to avoid the weakening of family bonds, as advised by international studies (Moyers *et al.*, 2006; Malet *et al.*, 2010; Salas Martinez *et al.*, 2016).

There are numerous social workers' interventions aimed at supporting and facilitating the relationship between the child and his/her parents mostly in structured contexts. Rarely, however, there is any information about the involvement in the daily life of the fostered child by members of his/her birth family. The presence of documentation relating to the maintenance of contacts between the child and his/her birth family is due to specific indications by the judges when the foster care placement was decided.

The research highlights the tendency of aid professionals to document interventions, when the latter respond to specific needs of the child and his/her parents. On the other hand, decision-making processes, and the difficulties faced during the implementation of a fostering placement, remain in the background.

During foster care, the participation of the child and his/her birth family undergoes a decline compared to the planning phase. The involvement of the foster family in the decision-making process, on the other hand, is more documented.

In the consulted files, the decision-making processes about the fostering placement and the child's life seem to be managed mainly by social workers, sometimes involving only the foster parents. The scarce documentation about listening to the child and the involvement of his/her family encourages reflection on their participation in the monitoring and re-defining the fostering placement, especially in view of reunification.

While the international literature underlines the importance of concretely supporting those directly involved in the fostering placement (Wilson *et al.*, 2004; Holland *et al.*, 2005; Höjer, 2007), in the documentation consulted there is no evidence of either any concrete aid put in place in support of the child and the foster parents or of attention given to the birth children of foster parents.

Furthermore, research highlights the scarce diffusion of participatory practices in the planning and implementation of fostering placements, and even more so of innovative practices such as advocacy in support of the practice of listening to children, and of forms of peer assistance both for children (peer mentoring and support by care leavers) and for the adults involved (self-help groups or other group work experiences).

In general, the crucial issues that have emerged from the voice of the fostering protagonists collected by international research have little relevance in the Italian Juvenile Court's case files.

Given the study approach used, it is not possible to say with certainty that the undocumented methodological steps, such as the practice of listening to the child, the participation of those directly involved in decision-making processes, and the measures used in the matching phase, were not actually taken into consideration and implemented during the fostering placement. However, it is possible to hypothesize that if the indi-

cations for «good fostering» are not found in the documents reporting about the care experience, it is likely that they are not considered relevant or are underestimated by aid professionals who are called to initiate and implement the fostering process.

Conclusion

In promoting and implementing family foster care, the active involvement and participation of service users are required (Wilson *et al.* 2004; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2017). However, data analysis on Italian foster care shows a reduced diffusion of participatory practices. The focus of child protection social workers is mainly on interventions in response to the specific needs of the child and his/her parents. The management of decision-making processes and of the difficulties encountered along the fostering process, on the other hand, remains in the background.

The research highlights that the constituent elements of «good fostering» that emerged from the international literature are not well documented in the Juvenile Court's case files. Child protection social workers and other aid professionals' commitment should be oriented towards using more participatory practices that take into consideration the point of view and the resources of the service users.

For the good performance of its provisions, the Juvenile Court could promote dialogical opportunities with child protection services, where the aim is to have an exchange on social work practices and on the judges' work. This collaborative work could be useful in creating a common language between the social sector and the legal sector, which are, all too often, distant.

The outcome of collaboration between the Juvenile Court and child protection services could be the drawing up of operative protocols and of agreed recommendations. These documents could refer to the importance of careful documentation of foster care placement and highlight the key stages that need to be considered during planning and implementation of fostering.

Well documented reports from social workers can help the Juvenile Court make decisions that are more beneficial and personalized.

The ideal work partnership between the Juvenile Court and child protection services should not be forced, nor should it «come from the top»; instead, it should be a process that is built together, step by step. It would be advisable to have monitoring and, if possible, an evaluation of effects and results.

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