"A highly demanding measure": practitioner contributions to improving practice and policy for foster families

Elisete Diogo[1], Francisco Branco[2]

Abstract. Foster families provide at-risk children with a family environment. In Portugal, however, there appears to be a major lack of political investment in foster care programmes, with only around 191 children currently placed with a foster family. To increase these numbers, we need to listen and give a voice to the social workers who provide support to foster carers. This empirical study uses a qualitative methodology based on interviews with practitioners working in the only two organisations offering a foster care programme. The qualitative analysis is inspired by categorical analysis. The findings suggest an urgent need for policy action to train workers throughout the child protection system so as to guarantee service quality standards. Moreover, this should be combined with a mass information campaign aimed at the general public. This would provide a real social image of foster families, as well as improving their recruitment and retention.
Keywords: foster families; foster care; social work intervention; practitioner contributions to policy.

[es] "Es una medida muy desafiante" — Aportes para el desarrollo de prácticas y políticas de famílias acogedoras

Resumen. La familia acogedora ofrece un entorno familiar a los niños en riesgo. No obstante, en Portugal, parece existir falta de inversiones políticas en programas de familias acogedoras, considerando que en la actualidad solamente cerca de 191 niños están acogidos en una familia acogedora. Para aumentar los números, necesitamos escuchar y dar voz a los trabajadores sociales que dan apoyo a los acogedores. En el abordaje cualitativo, la metodología del estudio empírico se basa en entrevistas a profesionales que trabajan en los dos servicios que promueven un programa de acogida en Portugal. El análisis cualitativo se inspira en el análisis categorial. Los resultados sugieren que se necesita una acción política urgente para la capacitación de los trabajadores del sistema de protección al menor de edad, con el fin de garantizar los estándares de calidad de servicio. Además, esto debe ser sincronizado con una campaña de información masiva dirigida a la sociedad en general. Esto permitirá una imagen social real de las familias acogedoras, así como promover su reclutamiento y retención.
Palabras clave: familias acogedoras; acogimiento familiar; trabajo social; contribuciones de los trabajadores sociales para la política.

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[1]   elisetediogo@ipportalegre.pt
       Universidade Católica Portuguesa - Católica Research Centre for Psychological, Family and Social Wellbeing
       https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5303-8585
[2]   fnbranco@ucp.pt
       Universidade Católica Portuguesa - Católica Research Centre for Psychological, Family and Social Wellbeing
       https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0075-792X

1. Introduction

Governments are challenged to create political mechanisms to protect its people, namely the most vulnerable, including children (Chaves, 2018).

Analysing the role of the state in protecting children from maltreatment, Gilbert et al. (2011) found two approaches, across ten countries: *child protection orientation* and *family service orientation*. The countries are divided according to their system; Anglo-American systems are focused on child protection and the Continental and Nordic European countries are focused on the family wellbeing. The group definitions are similar to the welfare states identified by Esping-Andersen (cit. Silva, 2002), (a) Liberal or Anglo-American regimes and (b) Corporative or Continental regimes and Social-democratic or Scandinavian regimes.

In the same line of Gilbert et al. (2011), Lamont et al. (2010) also had highlighted the existence of two kinds of services. However, Gilbert et al. (2011), according to the study findings, suggested changing patterns of response, and created an alternative model based on the two existing orientations: *child-focused orientation*. The new model is in the middle of the other two. There are several differences between the countries, in terms of their historic, cultural, social, and economic traits. In the family service orientation model, support teams are multidisciplinary (e.g., social workers, nurses, psychologists); we believe that this is the Portuguese approach. In the child protection orientation system, the teams include only social workers. However, an international trend, as seen in Portugal, is the growing value of private organisations which are viewed as relevant social resources.

There are a significant number of child residential care organisations in Portugal, but of those, a very residual number offer foster care programmes. It may translate the challenges on the work with foster families (Freitas, 2019), therefore, more studies and diffusion of data on foster care are needed (Diogo, 2018; Gonçalves, 2017; Delgado, 2013) to understand the issue. This article is a contribution based on experienced practitioners such as social workers.

We highlight that in Portugal, to establish whether the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the State takes place, firstly practitioners - as social workers - must assess the level of both, the risk and the protection for a child. Public action is translated into the daily intervention of the social services and the legal system. Social workers are integrated into both typologies of entities (Albuquerque et al., 2014). Historically, they have played critical roles, and studies indicate that social work degrees are the most appropriate degrees for this field of practice (Child Welfare League of America, 2002 cited in National Association of Social Workers, 2013).

In this context, social workers support multidisciplinary teams, and serve as the face of the government options, therefore, social workers should actively contribute to policy design. Social work must assume its political dimension, drawing attention to inconsistencies and insufficient public policies (Albuquerque & Arcoverde, 2017).

Practices are supported by the Portuguese law framework which follows the international recommendations as the Convention on the Rights of the Child – UNICEF, Council of Europe's recommendations, and the United Nations' resolutions. Therefore, the decision to remove a child from home is the last resort. Nevertheless, the placement of a child is decided according to the vacancies (Delgado, 2013). Placements in a foster family in Portugal are rare due to the lack of foster families available. Data revealed that, in 2019, there were 7,046 children in out-of-home care in Portugal. Of these, only 2.7% were in foster care, about 191 children; the number of children in foster care has decreased 70% over the last decade (ISS, 2020).

One of the reasons for children in foster care's decrease is the fact that since 2008, kinship care has not been considered foster care in Portugal (Decreto-lei 11/2008, of 17th January), since taking care of a child is believed to be a family members' duty (Delgado, 2010) and Chaves (2018) discuss the risk of keeping the maltreatment environment. Another Portuguese peculiarity is the huge geographic heterogeneity, the North of the country is the heart of the largest percentage of foster care placements (Carvalho et al, 2019), 71% of the out-of-home care (ISS, 2020).

2. Foster care in Portugal – what a challenge?

Foster care as a measure to provide protection and wellbeing for at risk children contains several challenges, according to the literature.

A starting point is that foster carers constitute a relevant resource for the system, and therefore, they must be given value (Nutt, 2006). However, recruiting and retaining carers is challenging for social workers and support teams (Freitas, 2019). It starts with the assessment of motivation for becoming a foster family to lead to the success of the placement (Delgado, 2007), since foster a child means just it (Cirillo, 1993). Second, providing competences to a family take care of a foster child (strengthening families), professionals must train and support families before and during a placement (Carvalho et al, 2019; Chaves, 2018; Amorós & Palacios, 2004; Denby et al., 1999). Then, an adequate matching between a child and a foster family to avoid disruptions (Oosterman et al., 2007; Brown & Campbell, 2007). Professionals should be close to carers to identify stresses

(Gilligan, 1996), but they involve themselves in situations with several difficulties in separating personal life from professional one (Riggs, 2015).

A cross-country analysis revealed an international reality significantly different from Portugal in terms of the political investment in foster care (Chaves, 2018). Around the world, foster care constitutes the most important resource to alternative care, namely for the Irish, English, Swedish, Canadian, Australian, American, and even Spanish systems. Doucet et al. (2018) highlighted Canadian institutional care as an exception as it does not meet the needs of children.

In Irland, foster care represents 93% of the placements. In Norway, represents 89%, in the United States represents 75%, and in Australia, represents (Furey & Canavan, 2019). In the Greek case, where the reform program developed with UNICEF, in 2026 it is foreseen a radical impact, decreasing to zero the number of children in residential care (UNICEF Greece Country Office, 2021).

Opening the door to deinstitutionalisation appears to be the course of action for Portugal (Chaves, 2018; Diogo, 2018), supported by scientific evidence on the benefits of growing up in a family environment (Schofield et al., 2000; Gonçalves, 2017; Negrão et al., 2019; Freitas, 2019).

It must be a gradual process to decrease children in residential care and to place them into a foster family (Fernandez et al., 2020). Portugal was one of the first European countries to promulgate a legal system in the field of child protection. However, this has not been enough for the effective activation of existing community resources that current mechanisms and entities with expertise in the field of child protection advocate as essential for the real applicability of legal texts (Albuquerque et al., 2014).

In other countries, which have solid experience in foster care programs, such as the United States, it is possible to identify (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, n.d.) additional challenges: a) agencies often have difficulty providing adequate, accessible, and appropriate services for the families in their care. b) children of color, particularly African-American children, are disproportionately represented in foster care, a situation which raises questions about the equity of the foster care system and threatens the developmental progress of children of color. c) foster families can find the experience overwhelming and frustrating, causing many to leave foster parenting within their first year. d) organizational problems such as large caseloads, high staff turnover, and data limitations compromise efforts to adequately serve and monitor families.

On the purpose of contributing to embrace an understanding on residual foster care placements in Portugal, this study is supported on social workers' perceptions according to their solid experience. The research question (Blaikie, 2009) was: "What is the practitioners' perspective of the foster care system in Portugal?". Thus, this article gives voice to social workers, who know the field particularly well, by focusing on the practitioners' contributions to improving the practice and policy in foster care and the child protection system in general. The relevance of this scope of studies is highlighted by literature (Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2018; Bergström et al, 2019) saying scientific community is called for better knowledge about effective interventions for children in out-of-home care to provide meaningful support to policy makers and professionals.

3. Methods

The present study is part of larger research integrated into a Social Work PhD programme. The research project is focused on foster families, namely their motivations, foster experiences, needs and the relationships established with social workers and services.

The qualitative research option is inspired by Cardano (2020) and Flick (2005, p. 2), who suggested that a qualitative approach is particularly important for the study of social relationships because of the particularity of the universes of lives. Intending to contribute to understand why there are so few foster home placements in Portugal, the following research question (Blaikie, 2009) was formulated: "What is the practitioners' perspective of the foster care system in Portugal?".

This paper intends to give voice to practitioners who daily manage a foster care programme and know deeply the child protection system. Their experience and suggestions may represent solid contributions for practice and policy. In another publication, foster families' perspective is presented.

Sampling and Recruitment

This study interviewed practitioners who work in teams of the only two organisations that were offering foster care programmes in the country, one is public and the other one is a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Thus, the selection of the participants was uncomplicated. In the public institute (team *A*), we interviewed both members of the foster care team (there were only two workers), and in the NGO (team *B*), we selected the coordinator of the foster care programme who was the most experienced social worker. The average age of the participants were 44 years old and, all of them were female Portuguese and Caucasian. One was a psychologist and two were social workers. Both support teams are from the North of the country, where there is the largest number of foster carers. They were invited by phone to take part in face-to-face interviews, and they expressed interest to join.

The public service team at that time were supporting 11 foster families and 14 foster children. They were not accepting candidates for new foster families as the programme had been suspended by Social Security. The same happened in all country, in continental Portugal, without an explicit reason, neither for professionals nor for society.

The NGO was supporting 30 foster families and 48 children. The service is very active and follows international standards. At the same time, there were 12 carers available when a child needed to be placed.

Data Collection

The interviews with practitioners, experts in foster care programme, were conducted to provide contextual and varied insights and perspectives on foster care measures.

Face-to-face and semi-structured interviews enabled participants to speak about their thoughts on foster care and what it could or should be.

A semi-structured, conversational style interview schedule was developed, informed by reviews of the literature by previous studies on foster care, foster families, and child protection systems. The interview schedule comprised four dimensions and a total of 16 open format questions with prompts to aid discussion where necessary. In general terms, the four dimensions consisted of (a) the interviewees' personal background and experience with foster care programmes; (b) foster care programme in numbers; (c) foster families — motivations, expectations, impact, disruptions, and other issues; and (d) perspectives on foster care measures.

Interviews varied in length and took over one and a half hours, on average. Interviews were conducted in each team office to ensure that participants felt comfortable and to allow for the research team to observe the field environment. Ethical issues have been considered, for example, a written consent was obtained beforehand. With consent, all interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed verbatim. Interviews were anonymised and participants were assured of confidentiality. Along the paper, participants' quotes are identified as *Support team A1* (more experience)*; Support team A2* (less experience)*;* or *Support team B* to provide confidentiality.

Empirical Data Analysis

Transcripts were read and themes were identified by the first researcher with supervision; both authors are university-based researchers in social work.

The qualitative empirical data treatment was inspired by categorial analysis, highlighting that the interpretation of a text contributes to creating a theory and at the same time, is a basis for a potential further data gathering (Flick, 2005, p. 179). Several codes emerged to result in different analytical outputs. It was a thorough analysis supported by MaxQDA 12 software (2016 version).

4. Findings

4.1. The status of foster care system

In terms of facts and figures on the Portuguese foster care system, practitioners justified the numbers by both the foster care context of origin and its path. They discussed the welfare state that is supported by principles of assistentialism and charity. Therefore, foster care is characterised as poorly structured, without proper techniques and not professional at all.

> "We are still on a charity basis". (team A)
> "foster care emerged as a social support measure (…) there has not been an investment on the qualification.". (team B)

A clear, pro-active or real representative promotion of the foster care measure has not occurred. A massive communication to both society and professionals from child services is needed. Professionals from general child services demonstrate that they do not have sufficient knowledge and sensitivity on fostering,

> "media only provide bad news" (team B)
> "changing mentalities is the most difficult, to mobilise (…) everybody responsible for child welfare" (team B)

Foster care seems to have another *competitor*, aside from residential care, the adoption system,

> "adoption carries a remarkable weight too. It is a measure called competitor. But I think that it is not the reason for weak presence of foster care". (team B)

Another reason for low rates in foster placements is the financial, material and fiscal support for carers. More is required to take care of a child. Compared to residential care, the government offers less financial, school and health benefits to foster families to support the child's needs.

> " less is paid to families compared to those without children or to an institution… *I want to be a carer, but it should not strangle the family budget*". (team A1)

This highlights the disadvantages of foster care, compared to residential care, as supplementary difficulties emerge, for instance, micromanaging foster families and overcontrolling carers to the point that they give up fostering. Disruption has an impact on children,

> "(…) being in a foster family and then becoming institutionalised because a family gives up, that family too… (…) an institution it is bound to nurture a child, but a foster family is not". (team A2)

In the same line of constraints, the disparity between carers' interests and the reality of current circumstances is also an issue. Carers prefer to foster younger children, but most children in need of a home are far older.

4.2. The process of becoming a foster family

According to participants, Portuguese society, and therefore potential candidates to become a foster carer, learns about the child protection measure through social media and also by sensitised campaigns at a national level. Distributing brochures in schools and outdoor advertising are only used by the NGO mentioned in this study.

> "it is likely the Internet, social media, brochures in schools and outdoors". (team B)

Before starting the process to become a foster family, families are likely to have few information about the foster care system. The practitioners describe the candidates' perspective as being quite often pure fantasy. They usually ignore the real impact and dynamics of fostering. Fostering demands are multidimensional, such as contact with the child's family and the relation with services, namely the court system. To discover and prepare people to foster, social workers offer a training programme for candidates to become carers. However, in-service carers still ignore the real impact of fostering on their personal and family lives,

> "even with a lot of training sessions and information, carers are not always aware of the fostering impact on their families, on their family dynamics, on their children". (team B)

In the participants view, the candidates' motivation is based on values of altruism and solidarity. They are available to help a child. A pedagogical meaning is also mentioned, parents wish to share values with their children,

> "it is basically motivation from solidarity, the feeling of helping a child. (…) Also, there is a pedagogical reason as they want to teach values to their children". (team B)

A financial reason is admitted, namely as an alternative to a job,

> "during the financial crisis (…) It was an economic motivation. I mean, they were unemployed". (team A2)

Foster families supported by the Social Security service started a different process. At that time, there was a different legal framework, which has now been revoked. It was likely that a social worker would invite a person to foster if there was a placement need. A child at risk or a child with special needs could represent a placement,

> "He was beaten by his stepfather. At that time, a social worker would say -*He stays here tonight, would you mind?* And so, they become a foster family. (…) (team A1)

The desire to foster a child seems to involve predetermined criteria, such as particular characteristics of the foster child. Carers are likely to prefer younger children which follows the law amendment in 2015[3]. The behaviour of younger children is considered easier to manage,

> "commonly carers submit for that age range [up to 6 years old]". (team A1)

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[3]   Foster care placement, rather than residential care, as the main response up to 6 years old.

The transitional nature of foster care and the relationship with the child's family appears not to worry applicants, according to the perspective of the Support team B,

> "they are available for the family of a child and also accept the temporary feature". (team B)

4.3. Impacts of fostering a child

However, fostering is a demanding task. It takes emotional involvement, emotional bonding with the child and complex formal proceedings,

> "being a foster family is very demanding (…) Carers must be aware of that". (team A2)

The impacts of fostering are not completely anticipated by carers, although participants admit that it is a determinant for the success of the placement,

> "I have to be aware that my life is going to change". (team A1)

Fostering a child in the intimate space of the family affects the couple and their children as well as the foster child and their family.

> "placement and a child interfere with the dynamic of the family and its children, obviously. It is complicated to manage". (team B)

A foster family is asked to be available to host a child but also her/his family and even social workers from child services,

> "[a family] has to be very open to the child's family, to the support team, to the Social Security team, to the Child Protection Committee, to the court… it has to be open-doors in this process". (team A1)

Economic and financial issues are considered secondary by carers, and it have never been mentioned to the Support team B by them. Carers assume that they must be responsible for all the expenses of a foster child,

> "they assume all expenses and never refer to them… never". (team B)

However, practitioners admit the need for more economic, financial and stimulus support and valorisation for foster families due to their complex and relevant role. They highlight that caring for a child involves significant expenditure,

> "improve the support system a lot. There should be more benefits and incentive to carers". (team B)

Happier moments for carers are related to affection, esteem, and the development of a child. It is important for a foster family to realise its contribution to a child.

> "appreciation for what they give to a foster child (…) the development of a child and their progress. Words, acts of affection, a token of gratitude". (team B)

The foster family's own children's development is influenced by contact with a foster child. There is positive evolution, namely in autonomy as a foster child is likely to be more independent than others,

> "they become more autonomous, lose fears, become more responsible. Through playing together, they learn and grow up". (team B)

4.4. Implications for remain or leave the foster care system

However, when there is jealousy between a foster child and the carers' own children, they may reject the foster child. Family discomfort may lead to foster disruption,

> "their son rejected the foster child; he was jealous, he was three years old. The carers gave up (…) they are not available if a placement interferes with their own children". (team B)

The management of the child's behaviour is the main weakness. It can lead to carers' tiredness or overload. A foster child's characteristics can be very demanding. They are more rebellious and stronger, so it is more difficult to manage the relationship. The greatest concern is educational success,

> "One of the main problems is school homework because there is educational underachievement and demotivation. Carers want it to go well." (team B)

Participants disagree on contact between families. There are a range of views, from carers' availability to their inability to deal with it.

> "carers play an important role in the biological family. (…) carers are not prepared to deal with visits and with the children's families". (team A1)

However, carers face the challenges and do not quit,

> "from those [foster families] I know, there are any [who have waived]". (team A2)

Concerns about quitting are visible. Foster families are not obligated to maintain placements, so it is difficult to manage this resource. It can lead to system instability and uncertainty.

> "an institution is obligated to take care of a child; foster families are not". (team A1)

Support team A made comparisons between residential and foster care measures and the need for more vacancies in foster families.
Once they start fostering, foster families tend to be open to place new children. Long term placements are suitable by some carers willing to take care of a child until adulthood,

> "we have families that are willing to commit to long term foster care: *Well, I can help until his/her self-sufficiency*". (team B)

For practitioners, the will to foster new children may be related to previous placements and whether the child's transition and farewell occurred by mutual agreement without any suffering. However, there may be distress if a foster family feels its opinion about the child's future is not considered.
Carers often feel as if the duty has been fulfilled. Some carers want to contribute to society but just once. They place a child until the end of the process and the cycle was closed.

> "mission accomplished". (team B)
> "give up being a foster family because the experience was not as good as they imagined". (team A1)

4.5. Suggestions for developing the measure

The participants made relevant suggestions for improving the practice and policies of foster families. The Social Security department and the state should provide a clear and national orientation to both reduce residential care and increase the number of foster families available,

> "a clear orientation by Social Security saying: "*We must decrease residential care by x per cent and to do that we will provide grants to improve foster care*". (team B)

Both teams refer to the need for colossal investment in a solid social policy to increase the motivation of potential candidates to become foster families and to retain carers to improve child wellbeing in out-of-home care.

> "I think that it is really a lack of social policy investment and definition. A failing of the government". (team B)

A structured foster care system according to the type of fostering needs instead of general fostering is well accepted by participants. Foster care training and specific preparation for fostering lead to a more efficient service,

> "in Spain [foster care] is very structured by type; there are foster families just for emergencies, weekends, nights...". (team A1)

5. Discussion

The view of expert practitioners is an essential contribution to the success of foster care. Social workers have several main competences such as sensitising society, supporting children and foster families, and recruiting and training candidates to become foster carers. Participants of this study presented their perspective on the foster care system and the Portuguese legal framework on foster families and child services.

The results reveal some diverging opinions. The divergence suggests a different origin, evolution and dynamic of the services involved in the study. Foster care emerged as just a Social Security responsibility. At a later stage, 12 years ago, the NGO was authorised to offer a foster care programme supervised by Social Security. We found the practitioners from the Social Security (team A) service to be more negative when talking about the foster care system than the practitioners from the NGO (team B). On one hand, *Support team A* highlighted unsuccessful placements and worries about the development of the measure. On the other hand, *Support team B* highlighted the constraints of the system and social policies.

Participants' speech evidences the importance of increasing foster care in Portugal as the main placement. They consider a family environment the most adequate for a healthy development, namely for children in out-of-home care. However, practitioners recognise the constraints of the foster care system, and that the management of the measure is more demanding than residential care. Therefore, participants advocate the need of knowing the system well and understanding foster families.

Identifying the few numbers of children in foster care, participants are adamant that a solid policy is required. The need for investment in national policy is unanimous between the discourses, as stated in literature (Chaves, 2018; Diogo, 2018). In parallel, the power of residential care institutions in the child welfare system is highlighted. Cultural features of Portuguese society and the history of foster care explain its current nature.

Compared to residential care, a foster care programme involves more availability and flexibility from social workers. Recruiting and preparing foster families constitutes a challenge for practitioners (Freitas, 2019). Matching a child with the most suitable foster family may lead to a successful placement; however, this takes work. Delgado (2007, p. 58) underlines that a carers' improper motivation may produce an adverse result. Foster care practitioners must determine if the candidates have genuine motivations. Cirillo (1993) warns against typical *family games* related to fostering a child. Families may desire to foster a child to replace an unborn, dead or lost child, for change extended family limits or to make an attachment to a person through a shared commitment. For instance, when adoption is the purpose behind becoming a foster family, there is a high risk of wanting to keep the foster child and to disqualify the child's family. Fostering must mean just its meaning, fostering a child who need a family to grow up healthy. However, having adequate resources, time and space seem to be imperative when considering either to become or not a foster parent (Freitas, 2019).

A lack of information and an inaccurate picture of foster care may demobilise candidates. And Portuguese population does not have much knowledge about the foster care system (Freitas, 2019). If people do not profoundly understand the system, foster care may not meet their initial expectations, leading to a drop in participation. Social marketing campaigns and additional benefits for carers are crucial for increasing the number of foster vacancies.

It appears that carers want to be respected and have a good relationship with services and social workers. Quinton and Treseder (1993, as cited in Amorós & Palacios, 2004) highlight the relevance of continuous support, problem-solving help and seeking better solutions together. However, Riggs (2015) also mentions the practitioners' inability to separate personal life from professional relationships.

Service monitoring may alleviate the carers' burden through support and emotional and materials answers. Training is essential (Carvalho et al., 2019). Amorós and Palacios (2004) analysed the Spanish system from a multidimensional perspective to draw a response for a range of cases. They suggested initial and continuous training for practitioners, professional supervision from those who have greater experience and knowledge, and finally, practitioners' concerns should be considered at the political level.

Some reservations on the carers' training (team A) emerged. Denby et al. (1999, p. 301) enhanced the relevance of training. The curriculum should focus on two dimensions: the best preparation for carers to manage challenging behaviours and infrastructure for (and between) support carers. In the same line, Amorós and Palacios (2004) suggest carers should be involved in planning and decision making; carers should be considered as part of the team. Chaves (2018) in the same line, refers the importance of two dimensions in training methodology, one theoretical and other practice, with carers testimony.

Foster families in Portugal (Diogo, 2018) point out their needs, they ask for example: the reimbursement of the child expenses; the right of parental leave; and information about foster care for the Portuguese society. In addition, the interviewed practitioners all agreed that more financial, material, labour and fiscal benefits for foster families are needed as stated in the Portuguese literature (Chaves, 2018; Diogo, 2018). A package of diverse stimuli and valorisation should be created for their role. Delgado (2007) states that a payment system should reward carers according to their responsibility, the time spent and their skill level. He gives Glasgow, within the Scottish system, as an example. Portugal would profit from the same principle, reserving the most challenging placements for carers that are specifically prepared for that situation.

Policy and practice recommendations from foster care practitioners are based on the children and foster families' wellbeing. Social Security must contract a foster care service with several NGOs that are interested in offering a foster care programme, substantially increase in the budget allocated to this measure, and reduce that of residential care to define clear policy goals, send information to society at a national level, and value foster families by offering preparation, training and more support. These aspects are validated by Portuguese literature (Chaves, 2018).

Disruption takes place with older children (Oosterman et al., 2007), so it must be considered during the matching stage (Brown & Campbell, 2007), to ensure that their initial expectations and criteria for the success of the placement are met. Supervision in the field is also vital. Carers are undervalued (Nutt, 2006) even though they represent a valorous social resource for children and the public welfare system.

5. Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Policy

This article contributes to the development of knowledge on foster care, namely about the Portuguese system. It highlights the urgency of increasing and investing in foster care in Portugal, as the main answer for the placement of children at risk. Growing up in a family environment is a child's international and legal right.

The study results suggest the need for a solid policy investment in society awareness and in training professionals who offer child services. Both actions would guarantee service quality, offer a more accurate picture of fostering and finally, would help to recruit and retain foster families.

There were some limitations with this study, namely the sampling size for empirical data gathering. This is justified by the residual number of foster care teams and organisations offering the programme; besides that, the criterion of maximum variation (Flick, 2005) was considered.

In terms of further research, a vast range of research topics can be considered interesting, such as the relevance of assessing the impact of foster care law amendments, as well as applying an investigation-action approach to contribute to the quality and uniformisation of the technical and operational intervention of social workers. A project on this topic could support practitioners in their daily routine with scientific evidence.

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