

Making the right decision: a comparison between professionals approaches

A research in the Province of Piacenza

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The context



The province of Piacenza provides foster care services and supports the local services. It decided to carry out a research study in collaboration with the professionals working in the local foster care services in order to gather original data on the processes of foster care.

This paper presents the preliminary results of the research. The next step will be a comparison with similar studies carried out by the research group at the University of York.

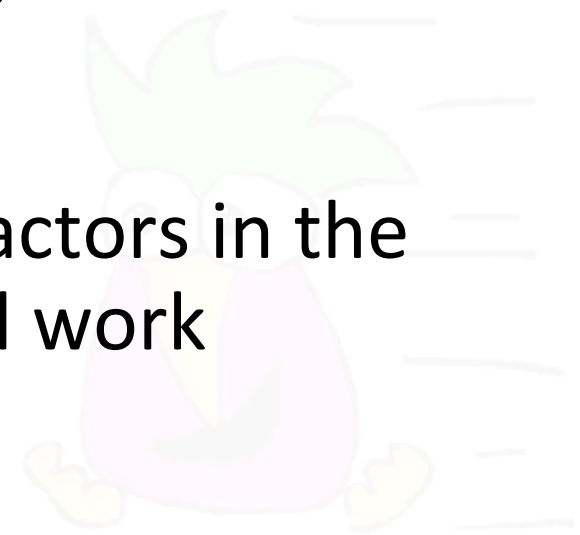


Research questions

Who enters care? Who goes home and who does not? Why is this the case?

How is this decision made? What factors are taken into account when making it?

How does their progress relate to factors in the child, parent, family, care and social work domains?



Acknowledgement

Permanent placement study (by Nina Biehal)

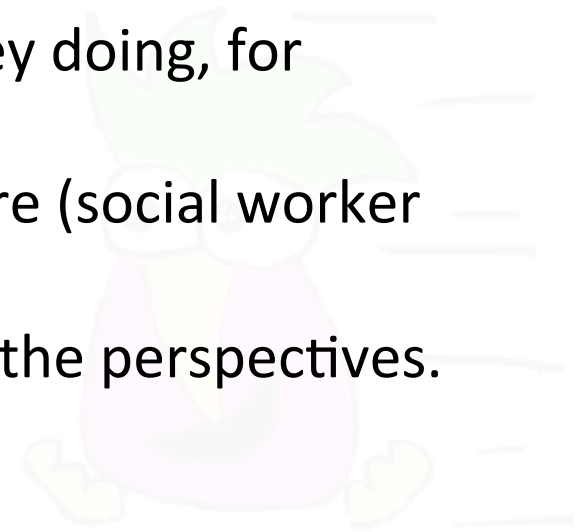
Outcomes for children who are looked after for reasons of abuse or neglect: the consequences of staying in care or returning home (by Jim Wade)



Questionnaire – 7 sections

completed by social workers involved in the foster care placements
(on going and terminated in the last 3 years)

1. *Preliminary* questions
2. *Birth parents*: situations and previous experiences
3. *Child*: situations and previous experiences
4. *Foster care*: how it started, when, professionals, court involvement, etc.
5. *Professionals*: what did they do, what are they doing, for whom?
6. *Perception* about the experience of foster care (social worker perspective).
7. *Evaluation* of the foster care experience and the perspectives.



Where are we now?

30 questionnaires

Expected questionnaires: 85



Preliminary analysis



Final report and comparison
among countries



Families: multiple problems

- 30 families present multiple problems.
- In 16 families both parents have health problems or social inclusion problems. In 17 families, also their children have problems.
- Mental health, delinquency, health, addiction: these are the main problems related to parents.
- In 21 cases there is parental instability (separation/divorce).
- Only one third of parents are working, sometimes without a regular contract.

Half of the birth families are already receiving support from social services, with many interventions already provided to the family as a whole and, in particular, to the foster child.



Foster children: multiple problems

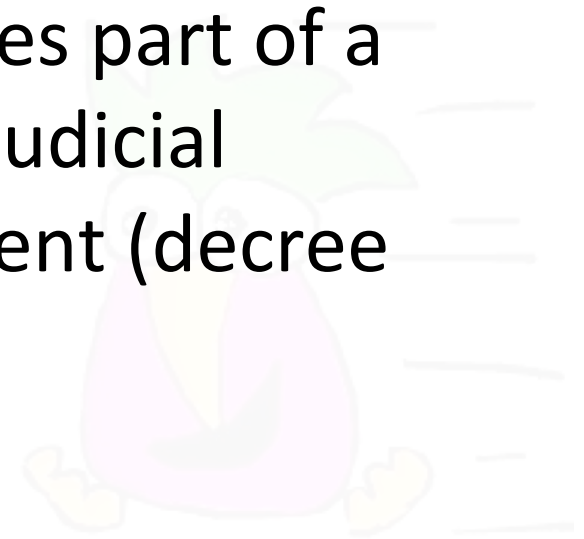
- 20 children have specific problems and 14 have problems in two or more domains (social, educational, psychological). Their conditions include: deprivation (8), learning difficulties (8), parental delinquency (5). 5 of the 30 children experienced neglect and/or abuse.
- 27 children (!) had **previous** experience of out-of-home care (mainly residential settings).
- Half of the children were placed for the first time when they were younger than 6 y.o.
- The reasons for placement were mainly related to the incapacity of parents to take care of their children and to neglect.



The decision making process (1)

In 26 cases the foster care plan is not an emergency decision but it is a *planned intervention*, planned jointly by social services and psychological/health services.

The foster care intervention becomes part of a *helping path*. In 29 cases there is a judicial measure for the foster care placement (decree from the Juvenile court).



The decision making process (2)

The intervention of social workers and psychologists is also addressed to the **birth parents**, with regular meetings (in 18 cases), support and assessment of parental competences, supervision of the birth family, meetings between birth parents and children in a neutral place, working facilities for parents, economic support.

The foster family can count on: psychological support meeting (in 14 cases), psychological counselling, afternoon day care centre, support from the educators and / or youth centre, working facilities for the youngsters.



A planned (not evolving) path

Even if planned, with a plan for reunification, in 19 cases children are experiencing a long-term foster care and the other cases are in an uncertain situation.

On one hand, professionals consider that the foster care experience is adequately addressing the needs of children and their families, on the other hand, situations tend to remain unchanging and not evolving towards a reunification.



Something about outcomes

As for the children whose foster placements have ended (7), two aspects should be noted:

- Foster care lasted less than two years (as required by the Italian law) in 4 cases, over 3 years (two cases exceeded 10 years) in the other 3 cases;
- The support in out-of-home care is not yet concluded: three children were placed in a residential placement, two in another family and only two have returned to their parents.



Reunification?

Even if preliminary, partial, incomplete... these data need to be discussed:

Can a foster family provide an adequate support for such complex situations?

How far are we from a reunification process for these children and these families?



Conclusions (preliminary)

Up to now, the preliminary data confirm that:

- foster care intervenes in situations that are already known to the services,
- foster care placements last many years, many more years than expected and low rate of reunification,
- work with birth families is carried out, but not enough to modify the conditions that led to the child's placement,
- the relationship between birth families and foster families is small or absent in many situations. The role of social work is a mediator between the two families.



Next steps

- Complete the analysis on all questionnaires
- Compare results with the English database, highlighting similarities and differences
- ...

