

Thematic Article

Opportunities and Barriers in the Partnership Between Foster Families and Schools

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Abstract

The primary socialisation area is the family, and the secondary socialisation area is educational institutions. From the point of view of educational sociology, the meeting between the family and the school institution represents the intersection of these socialisation areas (Kozma, 2001; cited in Bacska, 2020). This issue and its methodological development is something that Joyce Epstein has been working since the 1980s (Epstein, 1986; Epstein, 1987). According to Pusztai (2020a), parenting can be understood as a multifaceted concept, typically referring to the mutual relationship between parent and child. Researchers have focused on this parenting resource mainly from the perspective of the child's progress at school and learning at home, with the parent acting as an external supporter of the work in school. In this research we focus on the specific characteristics of the cooperation between foster parents and schools, and examine the characteristics of foster parent involvement, along with the supporting and detrimental factors of the partnership between foster parents and teachers at the intersection of child protection and public education. Recently, the number of research studies on foster care has increased (Erdei, 2019; Rácz, 2021), but the relationship between foster parents and teachers is still a little-researched area in Hungary. The novelty of our qualitative research lies in the fact that we are dealing with a special, rarely studied group of parents in Hajdú-Bihar County in terms of family-school relations. The second phase of the analysis has us exploring the narratives of teachers. Our basic research questions are: (1) How can the relationship between foster families and school be characterized? (2) What are the forms of contact and cooperation between foster families and teachers? (3) What factors support or hinder the development of partnerships between foster families and teachers? The focus group data collection was based on semi-structured interview schedules. The research participants were foster parents (N=15) and teachers (N=10). The interviews were coded and analysed using Atlas.ti software. The results show that, overall, there is regular, daily, mainly personal contact between foster parents and teachers. The teacher's tolerant attitude, taking into account the specific educational situation, appeared as a supportive factor. However, there were also a number of cases reported by foster parents where they had been received negatively by teachers. In order to facilitate collaboration between the two parties, teachers would like to receive training (foster families, foster-parent-school collaboration) and would find it useful to have ongoing supervision.

Keywords: foster parent; foster parent involvement; family-school partnership

Introduction

The primary arena for the process of social integration is the family, and the secondary area is educational institutions. From the point of view of sociology of education, the meeting between the family and the school is the intersection of the aforementioned socialisation arenas (Kozma, 2001; cited in Bacska, 2020). The issue of parental involvement and participation in school life and its methodological development was addressed by Joyce Epstein as early as the 1980s (Epstein, 1986; Epstein, 1987). James Coleman's social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) was also published in these years, with a particular focus on the relationship between sources of social capital within the family and school performance (Pusztai, 2004; Pusztai, 2009; Pusztai, 2020b).

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Coleman in his research has highlighted that the success of low-status students requires the involvement of parents in the community of educational institutions (Coleman, 1998). Epstein (2010) argues that the relationship between parents and teachers is about putting the student first. He created his partnership model, where the participants in the three-actor model include the school, the family and the local community. According to Pusztai (2020a), parenting can be defined as a multifaceted concept, typically covering the mutual relationship between parent and child. Researchers mostly study this parenting resource from the perspective of the child's progress in school and learning at home. In this way, the parent is seen as a so-called external supporter of the work at school. In the present research we focus on the characteristics of the cooperation between foster parents and schools, and we investigate the characteristics of foster parent involvement, the factors supporting and hindering the development of a partnership between foster parents and teachers. For this reason, the theoretical chapter will first focus on child protection provision and then on the conceptual understanding of the family-school partnership. Moreover, we review the results of Hungarian and international empirical studies related to our research area. The novelty of our qualitative research lies in the fact that we deal with a group of parents in special family-school-related situations, and in the process we also explore pedagogical narratives. Although the number of research studies dealing with foster care has increased in recent years (Erdei, 2019; Erdei & Kovács, 2020; Rácz, 2021; Haász & Viczina, 2022; Rácz & Bogács, 2022; Nemes-Zámbó, 2023), the issue of the relationship between foster parents and teachers is still a less researched area in Hungary. In the meantime, international literature draws attention to the importance of this research direction (Hines et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios, 2008; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Morton, 2015; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). The relevance of the topic is further strengthened by the fact that international statistics show an increasing number of children in foster care (Petrowski et al., 2017).

Previous studies (Hanák, 1985) have shown that children in child protection are at increased risk of early school leaving and that their educational attainment is below the average level of education of their peers not in child protection (Hanák, 1985; cited in Rákó, 2014). Education researchers have long been concerned with the question of how schools can compensate for declining parental involvement. This decrease is often due to financial issues. Researchers also address components parents can use to learn more effective methods of parenting (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; cited in Kocsis et al., 2022). It is no coincidence that the issue of parental involvement and engagement has become a focus of renewed academic interest in recent years. A growing body of research has arisen on the topic, with researchers exploring the issue from different perspectives. In some approaches, educational partners, such as parents (Pusztai & Engler, 2020; Csák, 2023a; Csák, 2023b; Csák & Fényes, 2023; Szász, 2023; Csák, 2024; Rusznák & Pusztai, 2024) and school professionals (Csók, 2020; Csók & Pusztai, 2022; Major, 2023; Pusztai & Csók, 2023; Pusztai et al., 2023) provide insights into patterns of childcare activities. The study of pupils with special educational needs and their families provides a separate slice of the analysis (Kovács et al., 2022; Bacska et al., 2023; Dan et al., 2023; Dan, 2023; Hrabécz et al., 2023; Pyrczak-Piega & Kutek-Sládek, 2023; Dan et al., 2024). Further groups, religious (Pusztai & Fényes, 2022; Pusztai, Róbert & Fényes, 2022; Pusztai et al., 2024a), athletic (Kovács et al., 2022; Kovács et al., 2024), volunteer (Kocsis et al., 2022), digital (Szabó et al., 2023) and student (Csók & Pusztai, 2023; Hrabécz & Csók, 2023; Pusztai et al., 2024b; Kocsis et al., 2024) communities add the overall collection of research to be analyzed. In our research, based on focus group interviews, we approach the issue from a new perspective, as we seek to capture the experiences and views of foster parents and teachers, and thus join the emerging academic dialogue. By simultaneously exploring foster parents' and educators' perspectives, we can build a differentiated picture of the relationship between foster families and schools, while also obtaining characteristic results about the foster parenting profession.

Theoretical background

The Hungarian child protection system

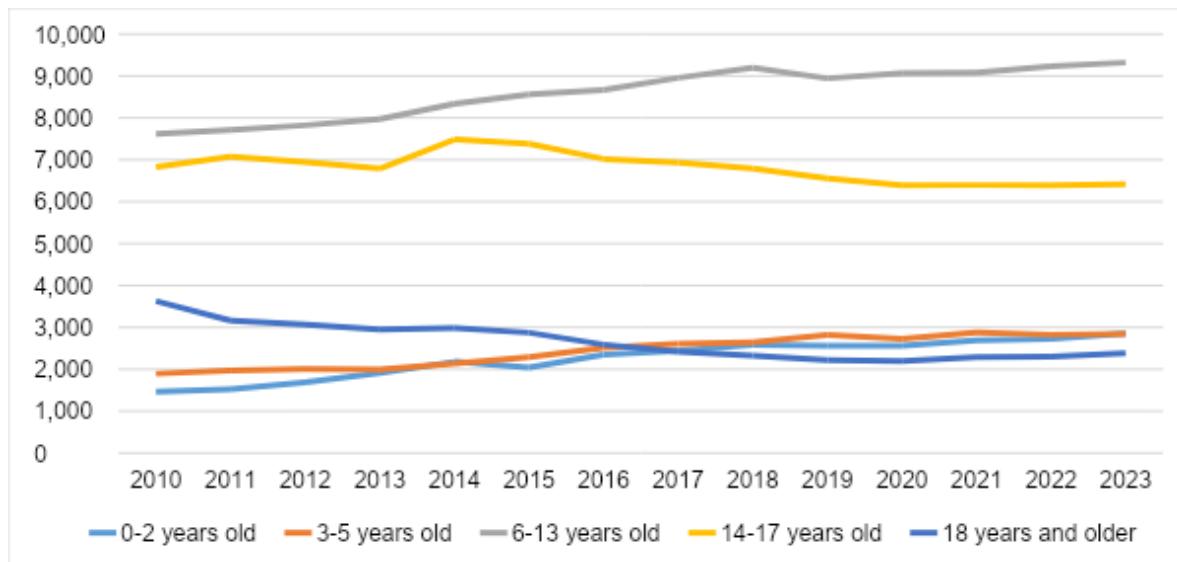
On the basis of the Child Protection Act (I1), it can be stated that the legislation declares the provision of specialised child protection care for children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their families. Specialised child protection services within the framework of personal care may take the form of residential care, aftercare and specialised territorial child protection services. The two main territorial units of specialised child protection services are specialised territorial child protection services and home care services. As defined by law, care in the home includes care and maintenance of family relationships and family care to support the

return to the family of origin. In cases where reunification with the family is not possible, the primary objective is to facilitate adoption and to provide aftercare necessary for reintegration and independent living (I1).

Home care can be provided by foster parents, children's homes or care forms covered by Act III of 1993 on Social Administration and Social Services (residential care home for disabled persons, residential care home for disabled persons or psychiatric patients, supported housing) (I1). Foster care is a central concept in our research. According to the definition, a foster parent is a person who takes in and fosters a child who has been appointed by the specialised service and placed in temporary or permanent foster care by the guardianship office (I1). As defined in the Child Protection Act, "A foster parent provides full care in his or her own household, on the basis of an individual care and education plan, for a child placed in foster care on a temporary basis."

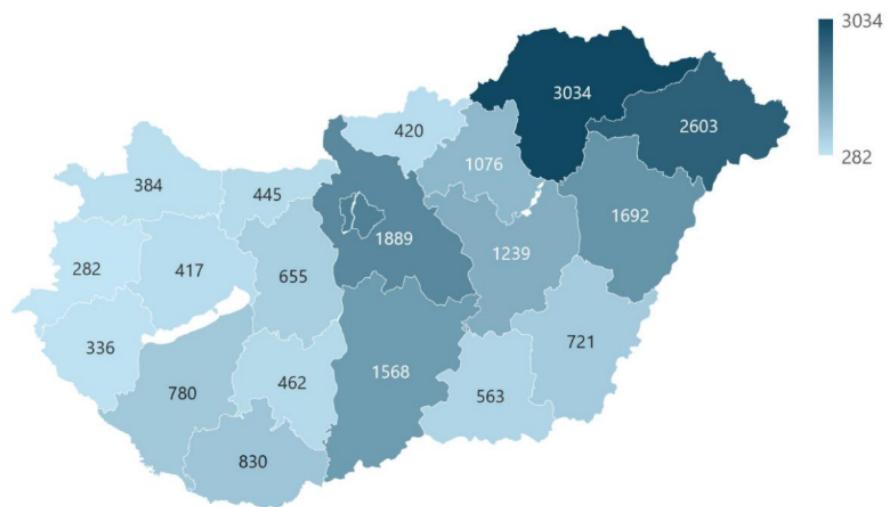
According to data from the Central Statistical Office, the number of underage children in child protection specialised care increased in 2022. Of the nearly 21 000 children, approximately 14 000 were living in foster care. There were 2 298 young adults in aftercare (I2). Figure 1 shows the age distribution of children and young people in child protection specialised care. These data suggest that the age group 6-13 years old has the highest proportion of young people in childcare and that there is an upward trend. Looking at data over the last almost a decade, a similar increase can be observed for the 0-2 age group.

Figure 1. Age distribution of people in child protection specialised care



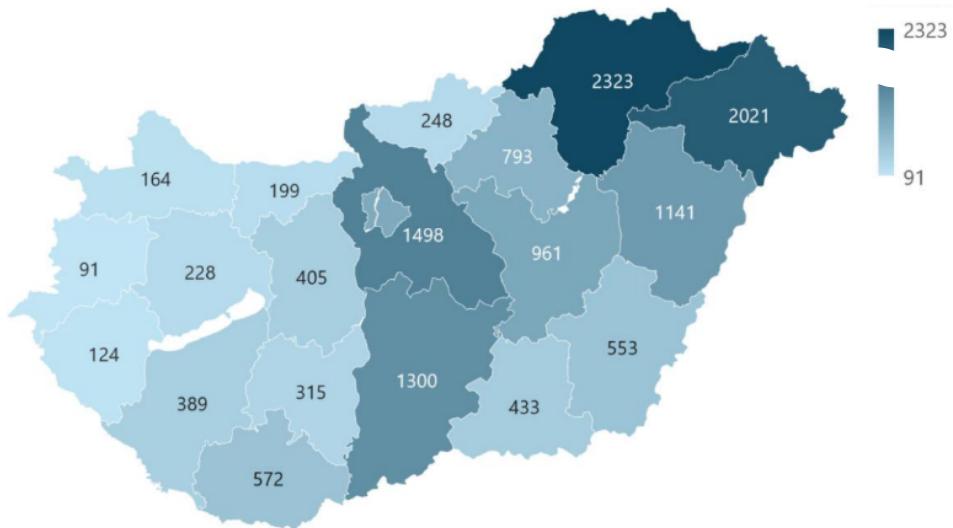
Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (2023) based on own editing

Data on the number of minors receiving child protection specialised care are shown in Map 1. The 2023 data show that in some counties of Hungary, the figures are very high. The most affected areas are the Northern Hungary region, the Northern Great Plain, Central Hungary and the Southern Great Plain.

Map 1. Minors in child protection special care by country

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (2023) based on own editing

Under the Child Protection Act, children under 12 years of age must be placed in foster care. According to data published by the Office of the National Assembly in 2019, more than 90 per cent of children in this age group, two thirds of all children in child protection care, are in foster care (I3). Analysis of the data also shows that the number of foster parents has been decreasing for decades, but has been increasing over the last few years (I3). The number of children placed in foster care has also been increasing. According to 2018 data, there were 49 foster care networks in Hungary (I3). When looking at the number of foster parents, we found that there is a significant difference between counties, which is shown in Map 2. The number of foster carers is high in the capital and in the counties of Hajdú-Bihar, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, with almost 60% of all foster care givers living in these areas (based on I3, KSH data release 5 July 2019).

Map 2. Minors in foster care by county

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (2023) based on own editing

It can be concluded that in Hungary, several studies (Vida, 2003; Homoki, 2011; Rácz, 2012; Rausch, 2013; Homoki, 2014; Rákó, 2014; Simon, 2019; Erdei, 2019; Farkas et al, 2019; Erdei & Kovács, 2020; Rácz, 2021; Haász & Viczina, 2022; Rácz & Bogács, 2022; Szennai, 2022; Nemes-Zámbó, 2023; Miklódi-Simon & Szűcs, 2024) focus on children in child protection care and cover issues such as placement conditions, family and social relationships, leisure time, health behaviour, academic performance, career choice, vision of the future,

or educational values. Researchers have also pointed to the social integration chances of young people in child protection, and the study of aftercare is gaining attention (Rácz, 2006). However, in addition to this, (foster) parental involvement is a relatively neglected area of research.

There are many terms used in studies to define the relationship between family and school. Often, researchers use the term "parental involvement" or "partnership", and the conceptual framework is mainly based on the Epstein model (Pusztai et al., 2024a). Considering the research of recent years, the term "family-school partnership" is becoming more and more prominent, and there is also a growing focus on this research area (Bacska & Imre, 2023).

Cooperation between education partners in the light of research

Based on previous research (Imre, 2017), it can be concluded that a majority of both parents and teachers are committed to working together for the benefit of the child's development. Nevertheless, disagreements and conflicts may arise, which are sometimes difficult to resolve. There are many ways of preserving the relationship in order to prevent conflict from arising and to maintain a harmonious relationship in an optimal partnership. Traditional forms of contact include, for example, parent-teacher conferences, visiting hours and open days. It can be concluded that the frequency of information flows is in itself a factor that shapes the relationship between the family and the school. Existing research shows that parents tend to appreciate it when teachers are almost always available by phone, open to meet in person, and when they regularly inform parents about their children's progress at school (Török 2005; cited in Imre, 2017). The vast majority of parents are interested in information about their child's academic performance, school integration and behaviour (Imre, 2017).

In the Valuing 2020 national survey, researchers used a multi-pronged approach, including child-rearing values (Dusa, 2020), family time use (Bocsi, 2020) and the characteristics of families with children with special educational needs (Hrabéczy, 2020). From the perspective of our research, it is noteworthy that Ceglédi (2020), examining the impact of family structure, found that coping with crises and difficulties can have a positive impact on disadvantaged students. A secure family background, a positive character trait of the child, and an appropriate relationship between parent and school can have a positive influence on the resilient life course. However, in many resilient situations, students may fall behind their more advantaged peers in terms of parental-school cooperation, which can lead to the widening and reinforcement of inequalities in the future. Csók's (2020) research shows that teachers have little information on the functioning of the child protection services and need help in contacting parents and child protection actors.

Berei's (2014) study shows that educational institutions, alongside the work in children's homes, play a key role in the success of social inclusion. The author concludes that the social integration of the three young people she studied can be considered successful, facilitated by the internal network of relationships, social capital and the opportunity-creating role of the supportive environment. Collaboration with the school was paramount in the process, as cooperation between child protection and education is considered a key resource (Berei, 2014).

In an international study, foster parents reported that they were often not seen as "real parents" by teachers. As a result, foster parents felt that teachers did not respect them or communicate with them adequately. For example, they did not receive sufficient information about their children's school performance (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). At the same time, interviews with teachers reported that foster care providers did not listen to and respect teachers. Some stated that they made efforts to work with the former to improve children's behaviour and school performance, but found that they did not take steps to achieve a common goal. According to educators, children's achievement and attainment could be improved if foster parents were more involved in school life (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019).

Previous research (Hass & Graydon, 2009) has looked at possible sources of resilience in young people in care who were judged to be successful in terms of academic progress. Young people were found to be successful if they had completed a vocational, post-secondary programme or had attended college or university (Hass & Graydon, 2009; cited in Morton, 2015). Rio's (2008) study found that when asked where youth who had been in foster care received the most help, 11 out of 24 attributed foster care as the reason for their academic success (Morton, 2015). Of the 14 youth in foster care, all responded that they viewed school as a positive (Hines et al., 2005), and further research (Rios, 2008, Merdinger et al., 2005; cited in Morton 2015) highlights that teachers, school counsellors and supportive environments, and rigorous tutors were all a resource in their lives (Morton, 2015). Respondents highlighted that they remembered by name their teachers who did their utmost to help foster children progress (Morton, 2015).

Research design and Methods

Objectives and research questions

As pointed out in the previous chapters, foster parent involvement is a relatively under-researched area. Our aim is to explore the characteristics of the relationship between foster parents and teachers. Based on the literature, we formulated the following research questions. (2) What are the forms of contact and cooperation between foster parents and teachers? (3) What factors support or hinder the development of partnerships between foster parents and teachers?

Sample

The research participants consisted of foster parents and teachers. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office, the number of foster parents is particularly high in the North Great Plain region, including Hajdú-Bihar County, as shown in Map 2. These data justify a more in-depth analysis of this geographical area. The subjects of the foster parent interviews were foster parents belonging to a foster care network in the city of Debrecen. Another group of interviewees were teachers teaching in primary and secondary schools. The aim was to select heterogeneous groups of interviewees. The design was carried out by school type and stage of education, and interviewers were invited using snowball sampling. The willingness to respond influenced the composition of the interviewees (Pusztai & Csók, 2022; Pusztai et al., 2023; Pusztai et al., 2024c). 15 foster parents were interviewed in three focus group interviews and 10 teachers were questioned in two focus groups. The group members were identified by randomization (Morgan, 1997; cited in Vicsek, 2006).

Measuring device

The focus of the research was on the relationship between foster parents and the school, and the partnership between these parties. The research was based on semi-structured interviews, which were territorially delimited to the Hajdú-Bihar County. The interviews were conducted in the form of focus group discussions. The number of participants in focus groups is considered to be between 6 and 10 (Morgan, 1997; cited in Vicsek, 2006). However, the ideal group size depends significantly on the topic under investigation (Morgan, 1997; cited in Vicsek, 2006; Pusztai & Csók, 2022; Pusztai et al., 2023). In cases where the interviewees can be considered experts on the topic, or where detailed stories, personal experiences and accounts are to be explored, a smaller focus group may be a more effective solution (Morgan, 1997; cited in Vicsek, 2006). Predefined questions were used in the interviews with foster parents and teachers. The main blocks of questions in the foster parent interview outline were related to the process of becoming a foster parent, to family life, and to the relationship between the family and the school (see Appendix 1). The teacher interview outline was structured along the following blocks of questions: description of the municipal and school environment, description of foster families, and the relationship between the school and the family (see Appendix 2).

Data retrieval

The research for this paper was conducted between February and March 2024. Research participants were granted full anonymity. The focus group interviews were audio-recorded and used as the basis for the transcripts.

Procedures

The text was processed using a combined (deductive and inductive) logical procedure (Sántha, 2017). Predefined main categories and subcategories were created (Bacska et al., 2023; Pusztai & Csók, 2023), to which subcodes were assigned inductively from the text fragments (Sántha, 2017). The text corpus was coded and analysed using Atlas.ti 7 software. The main themes and subthemes identified for the foster parent and teacher interviews are illustrated in Appendices 3 and 4.

Results

This chapter presents the results of the interviews with foster parents and teachers. The analysis was conducted using predefined code families to provide a more nuanced picture of certain issues. While the family-school partnership is the guiding theme of our analysis, the focus group discussions revealed additional main themes and sub-themes, which were also analysed for deeper interpretation.

Foster parent focus group interviews

15 foster parents participated in the focus group interviews. The age of the interviewees ranged from 41 to 64 years, two of them were under 40. The average age of the interviewees was 50.

Characteristics of family life

Looking at the demographics of foster families, we found that on average they have between 2 and 5 children, and between 1 and 3 children by blood, most of whom are now adults and living in separate households. The age of the foster children ranges widely, with some caring for infants and young children and others for adolescents and young adults in aftercare. The young foster care providers are mainly in vocational and technical secondary education, but there have been students who have gone on to study at secondary school afterward continuing on to university.

During the interviews we also asked about the factors behind the removal of foster children from their birth families. In the majority of cases, inappropriate living conditions, inadequate housing, neglect (physical, emotional) were reported. Parental abandonment of the children was a frequent reason for removal. Other factors mentioned were addictions (alcoholism, substance abuse, gambling), sexual abuse, and parental incarceration for a crime.

“Mine were, well, they were singled out because of drugs, alcohol, inadequate living conditions. But they gave it up. The father cut them off and the mother gave them up.” (N1/2 interviewee)

“The little boy because the mother is an aftercare worker and the father is in prison.” (N1/3 interviewee)

In the next block of questions, we wanted to know how the children in foster care were integrated into the family. The majority of foster parents described the integration of their children as a smooth process. It is likely that this is due to the fact that many of them had the children as infants, meaning that adapting to norms and rules started almost from the very first moment. Two foster families reported that they had not been able to integrate their foster child into the family. One of the interviewees explained that their family had applied for a change in the placement of the child, which had not been completed at the time of the interview. Another interviewee shared a similar situation, when they had previously felt that the foster child had not integrated despite their best efforts. As a result, they requested, the child be transferred to another family. Integration was achieved on this second try. When collecting characteristics of smooth integration, the foster parents found that being the first foster family in the children's lives may also play a role, making it easier to accept and apply the rules. A further contributing factor is the presence of foster children by blood, who act as role models for the others. In addition, the setting of rules, which are agreed upon, and full involvement in family life and family activities can also facilitate the process of integration.

“It was very easy for us to adapt because the little girl was two weeks old when she came to me and the little boy was three days old.” (N1/3 interviewee)

“The third child, not so much, they were already brothers and sisters with us, because two brothers and sisters had left us. We are the fifth family. It was also much harder for him to fit in, because there were different rules everywhere. It was strange for him to have to study, it was strange for him to have TV only after studying.” (N2/4 interviewee)

“We had a 12-year-old boy who we realised wasn't meant to be in our family, we couldn't fit him in, he was moved to another foster family, he's doing really well there.” (N2/4 interviewee)

In the rest of the focus group discussions, we wanted to explore information on contact with birth family. It can be said that nine children in foster care have regular contact and one is in the process of making contact. For

four children, foster parents reported infrequent interaction with varying frequency, while for some children communication was only in its initial stages. The experience of the foster care providers revealed that some children's birth-family interactions were supervised and others' were suspended entirely. Contact can either be face-to-face, or by telephone. They perceive contact with birth family members as both good and bad. The main problem perceived by foster parents is the promises made by birth parents, which have a negative impact on children. In contrast, when parents take action to create better living conditions, contributing to the child's reintegration into the birth family, that is seen a positive step in the right direction.

At the end of the focus group interview, we asked the foster parents to tell us a specific situation or story that illustrates the beauty and the difficulties of being a foster parent. They were unanimous in their responses, highlighting the beauty of the foster parenting profession. Many spoke of the beauty of adoption and the joy it brings, despite its difficulties. Some saw this as the difficulty of the profession, as the adoption process was unexpected and hard for them to come to terms with.

"There was a baby we had to give up for adoption. I said I would never bring a baby home again. Because it killed me, twice, and the whole family. But we keep getting information about it. That's what gives me strength. For many foster parents who can adopt." (N2/4 interviewee)

"For me, it was the 23-year-old who was the biggest. He sent me this photo of his arm the other day. It has something tattooed on it with Roman numerals, by the time I got it out, April 11, 2012. That's when they came. I asked her why you had this tattooed here in such big letters. And he said because that's when my better life started." (Interviewer N2/5)

Among the difficulties of foster care, foster parents also mentioned the lack of information, as they may have had little information about the child in care, and, after placement, certain problems and existing illnesses might be discovered, these proving more difficult to deal with at the identification stage.

Relations between foster parents and teachers

The focus of the interview questions was the family-school partnership. In this respect, we wanted to get an accurate picture of how the cooperation between the parties is implemented. Many of the interviewed foster parents said that they were in daily, in-person, telephone, and internet-platform contact (Messenger, email, KRÉTA) with the teacher instructing their children. Contact with teachers is mainly for information purposes, with foster parents most often asking about the school performance and behaviour of their fostered children. The interviewees reported it less likely that they keep in touch with the school only through the parent-teacher meeting.

"I know them personally, we are in daily contact. And in any way I thought it was important because, for example, if there was a contact or if there was a trauma that they had, I thought that the teacher should know that, they are with them almost all day." (N1/1 interviewee)

"I kept in touch with almost all the teachers in high school and elementary school, which was very necessary because it helped the teachers understand that this child - they didn't have any other children in their care - thinks and behaves differently. He gets excited all of a sudden, and then he gets tired very quickly. The teachers were partners in everything, and that's why he was able to graduate and go to university." (Interviewer N3/1)

We also explored the experiences of foster parents, regarding the behavior of teachers towards them. In some cases, teachers were seen as more of a professional or superior. Interviewee narratives indicated that in a significant proportion of cases, teachers' attitudes towards them were negative. Several highlighted that they had experienced prejudice and negative discrimination from teachers regarding foster families and their children. Meanwhile, during the interviews, foster care providers described a number of situations in which teachers behaved favorably with them. Among the characteristics that came up in describing teachers was helpful, empathetic, tolerant, non-judgmental and inclusive. It can be assumed that due to these positive teacher characteristics, almost all of the foster parents interviewed consider the teachers of their foster children to be partners. Furthermore, they mentioned, they and the teachers shared cooperation, problem solving, taking into account the interests of the children, adapting teaching and learning to those interests as common goals. In two cases, partnership was mentioned. It was therein advised for parents and teachers to agree on certain educational

principles and goals in certain educational issues, allowing for the consistent education of children in both the institutional and at home.

“In principle, people are already prejudiced against us as foster parents, for some reason, on some level, to such a degree that it’s a horror.” (N2/2 interviewee)

“The problem is that society doesn’t really know what it entails and how it works.” (N2/5 interviewee)

“The only thing better than that is when I see an acquaintance almost every two weeks or every week, in quotes, and every time he asks me, ‘Do you still have children at your house? Are you still involved with children? I say, where do you think we put them in a week? No, that society doesn’t know that, they don’t understand this whole process.” (N2/5 interviewee)

“There are many educated children in this school. But they never make an exception. I, for one, don’t feel looked down upon.” (N1/4 interviewee)

Foster families from the perspective of teachers

It should be stressed that in this section we are examining the characteristics of foster families from the perspective of the educators, so we must keep in mind the subjective nature of the narratives throughout. Most of the teachers interviewed found that foster carers wanted to fulfil the responsibilities of foster parenthood and, although they gave their biological children a higher level of parental care, they also tried to attend to the physical and emotional needs of their foster children. At the same time, a sense of emotional insecurity and attachment was noticeable in the families.

“Well, I think it was that they wanted to meet the expectations, the foster parents. But there were also children of their own, and I heard feedback about that, and I felt that my own child was a little different. But they tried to give it their best. So I don’t know how much of an emotional attachment there was or was. There was definitely some, but less than my own child.” (P1/3 interviewee)

It is true, adolescent children may have behavioural problems and foster parents may not always be able to provide the necessary conditions for their care (Rákó, 2014). This was recounted by interviewees who noted shifts in the attitudes and commitment of foster parents from positive to negative. Examples include when a harmonious relationship developed between the foster child and the foster parent, when teachers saw consistent child-rearing practices on the part of the foster parent, and when school-foster parent relations were equally smooth. By adolescence, however, the depth and intensity of relationships seemed to falter, in both child-parent and teacher-parent relationships.

“And when we started high school here, I can say that there was no problem, the foster parent was really a partner, he was interested, he helped me with my work. But when it came to the student, he obviously grew up, he wanted to grow up, he had desires and dreams, which on the one hand had a financial aspect, and because he didn’t get this, there were problems, which we tried in vain to deal with as a lightning rod with the professionals here, but we couldn’t manage to put things right between him and the foster parent. From then on, we went downhill.” (P1/2 interviewee)

Moreover, several teachers also remarked about the rules in foster care that were excentuated during the COVID epidemic. During absenteeism, children were sometimes unable to register for certain classes because they spent lunch time with their families, as providers of foster care stressed the importance of sharing meals, an essential family activity. In these cases, the children had to weigh whether it was the right choice to meet the expectations of the foster parent or the school. They typically chose the former.

Interviews with teachers also revealed the role of birth parents in child-rearing and the existence or lack of contact with birth families. In many cases, teachers experienced promising ('repatriation') by birth parents and its negative consequences. The uncertainty and the unfulfilled promises had a detrimental impact on the relationship of the child and the foster parent, accompanied by the child's disappointment and feelings of abandonment, along with the foster parent's blame for the failure of the placement.

Teachers discovered the most negative aspects of contact with birth parents among their pupils in child protection care. They reported that after meetings with the former, behaviour of the children changed, their

attitudes, attention and concentration deteriorated, and sometimes their academic performance took a downward turn.

Teachers' experience also manifested a strong attachment to the birth family among children from difficult backgrounds and poor living conditions. Several cases were reported where children, despite the security and care provided by the foster family, wanted to return to their birth family and therefore found it particularly difficult to cope with prolonged or unsuccessful reunification.

“That foster parent was trying to take care of him in every way, his emotional life and not just the material things, not just making sure that the child had shoes and normal clothes and bought his school supplies with his money, but also making sure that if he had a bad day or the adolescent child had a temper tantrum, how he handled it, and hats off to him. There were times when he really acted like a parent, that foster parent. That said, there were a lot of problems with the child who was with this really loving foster parent. Even with that, it was not good for him because he was always longing to go back to his real parents (...)” (Interviewee P1/1)

“Because the most terrible thing, and I've been here for many years, is that the child who had a dad who was like that, that child was attached to that parent tooth and nail. No matter how bad the circumstances, they still cling.” (P1/4 interviewee)

“And we did gymnastics, we picked flowers, and I asked at the end who was going to take the flowers to whom. It was very interesting that there was someone who didn't live in a family but said he was taking it for the family, and there was someone who was taking it for the assistant of the class or giving it to me (...)” (Interviewee P1/5)

From the interviews with teachers, it can be concluded that the foster parents they knew were in the middle-aged group, and it was found that these foster parents had become such alongside their children who were already adults.

As pertains to school performance, teachers have found that a harmonious child-parent relationship has an impact, because when children are surrounded by a balanced family environment, they are more relaxed. They are better prepared upon arrival at school, and they do better in lessons and at home. Contrastingly, family problems are often mirrored at school, leading to conflicts between the parties involved. It should be noted that the social composition of the schools represented by the respondents is heterogeneous and the processes and interactions described are not exclusive to foster families.

“We are definitely happy that if we feel that the child is surrounded by a loving environment, then there is hope that the child will come back from the weekend or a longer break calmer, and we definitely feel that if the child's problems are solved there, or if not, then the upset and conflictual existence that usually accompanies the life of children in foster care will continue.” (P1/1 interviewee)

For effective cooperation with foster parents, the quintessential conditions according to educators were to have consistent educational principles and common steps to create emotional security. Though there were some negative experiences with foster parents and varying trends regarding the former (isolation, refusal to help), the conclusion from the interviews is that, overall, teachers have positive experiences of working with foster parents. Their relationship was thus described by several interviewees as “formally nice”.

“As far as I am concerned, I have a better relationship with one of the foster parents regarding the two girls in the class. This is due to the fact that she often takes an interest in the child, asks me a lot of questions and consults me.” (Interviewer P2/2)

“Then it was difficult to reach him, he was nervous, he was tense, if he had to talk about the child, that he had to do it again, what was it again... and then he would make it felt with words, with tone. It was difficult to get him to come to school.” (Interviewer P2/1)

Teachers also highlighted the importance of collaboration with guardians, as some respondents found that building and maintaining partnerships with child protection professionals was much smoother than with foster care providers. In these cases, the child's guardian took the teacher's suggestions fully on board and acted as a kind of intermediary between the school and the foster parent. In addition, in many situations, teachers work with support professionals and partner institutions. In the case of foster families, guardians, foster-parent

counsellors, social workers in the kindergarten and schools, psychologists and development teachers were mentioned most frequently.

“I’m in almost daily contact with the guardianship, the network of defenders, the network of foster parents, the network of family support, the network of child welfare, for example, because I have a department where the situation of the children requires this daily contact. Our cooperation, I can say, is smooth, and everyone always tries to respond immediately to things. We can either call, e-mail or text each other. We already have the professionals to whom we can turn. A child is always attached to someone.” (P1/1 interviewee)

Teachers were also asked whether they would like to receive further training on the theory and methodology of children in child protection and foster families, as well as on good pedagogical practices. There was a significant number of people who do not feel the need for this type of training content, relying mainly on the experience accumulated over the years and on instinctive strategies for solving problems. Simultaneously, almost all the teachers interviewed would have liked to take advantage of the opportunity to improve their knowledge and to have up-to-date knowledge, including both theoretical and practical elements.

“It’s very demanding and difficult to accompany a child with such a fate, and maybe that’s what we need, how to do it spiritually, we need support. This is something that we need to prepare those in teacher training and those who are already practising.” (P1/1 interviewee)

“I think that it would definitely be worth a couple of hours to hear about these things, because there are more and more abandoned children, they are in foster care or in residential homes, and I think it would be good to know how it happens, what is going on there, how things happen, so to be able to peek into everyday life, how it is all set up, would be a great help (...), to understand what’s in the child’s mind, what’s in the foster parent’s mind, to see it from their point of view.” (P2/1 interviewee)

Conclusions

In this study, we focused on a specific area of the relationship between home and school education, and we attempted to investigate this under-researched topic in Hungary, when we examined the characteristics of foster parent involvement, and the supporting and hindering factors of the partnership between foster parents and teachers. We identified personal familiarity between the foster parents and their availability as supporting factors in the collaborative process, which help to establish and maintain a smooth relationship. We identified social stereotypes, negative attitudes on the part of teachers and the phenomenon that foster parents are not seen as 'real' parents, but rather, in many situations, as barriers. These factors can be assumed to be related to a lack of information about the child protection system and foster care, and the lack of knowledge can be defined as a further source of problems and obstacles.

A limitation of the method used in this research is that the results are not generalisable due to the small sample size (N=25) and the nature of the specially selected sample. In the present research, the method proved to be suitable for exploring deeper structures. Our aim is that our results provide the basis for a large sample survey, thus reducing the gap in the research field.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Interview guide for foster parents

Introduction

Please introduce yourself in a few words (age, marital status, type of municipality where you live, highest level of education, occupation)

Becoming a foster parent

Please tell us who has been a foster parent, how many years they have assumed that role, why they chose this profession (what prior knowledge and ideas did they have about foster parenting and where did they get information before making their final decision)?

During the process of becoming a foster parent, what training did you receive? (training, courses)

To what extent do you think that the training in foster parenting has prepared you for your role as a foster parent? (In which areas do you feel that you need more in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge and training?)

Please tell us about how your immediate and extended family members, friends and acquaintances have received the idea of becoming a foster parent? Were they supportive of you? (husband, biological children, parents, friends, neighbours)

Please give us some examples or concrete situations and stories about the difficulties and the beauty of being a foster parent.

Family life

How many children are you raising? Please indicate the number, sex and age of children by blood and foster care. (How many of them live at home/moved away?)

Please explain why the foster child/children were removed from their family.

How do you feel the children have settled into the family, what challenges have they faced? How have you been able to help and facilitate this process?

Please describe the contact with birth parents (form, method and frequency of contact, both for children and foster parents)

Relations between family and school

Please describe the educational history of the birth and foster child(ren) (type of school attended, whether they have changed schools, academic performance, further education and career plans...).

Of the teachers who teach your foster children, how many do you know personally? How and how regularly do you keep in touch with teachers? (face-to-face, email, phone, social platforms, in-school or out-of-school events, leisure/community activities...)

In which situations and for what purpose do teachers who teach their foster children come to see them?

What do you think is the role of a parent and a teacher in raising children? Please give concrete examples of individual and joint tasks.

Do they feel prejudice, ignorance, lack of information, isolation on the part of teachers towards foster children and foster families?

What do you think about whether teachers take into account the educational challenges of children's specific life situations (emotional needs of the child, listening, support for adaptation when changing schools)?

Is there cooperation from professionals supporting education and learning (e.g. school psychologist, school social worker, special needs teacher, development teacher) and if so, in what form?

How do you view your child's teacher (morning teacher for primary school children, class teacher for upper school children)? Why? (as a partner, employee, supervisor, professional)

How do you think your children's teacher views you? Why? (as a partner, employee, supervisor, professional)

How do you feel schools and teachers can help you in child-rearing and alleviating the difficulties of foster parenting?

How would you describe the teachers with whom you have a very good relationship and those with whom you have difficulties or obstacles?

How do you think your foster children interact with their peers?

Leading questions

Please describe in a few sentences what your 5-year future plans are!

How do they feel, are they planning to leave foster care? If so, what changes in child protection would be needed to remain a foster parent?

Appendix 2

Interview guide for teachers

Introduction

Please introduce yourselves in a few words (age, marital status, number of children, type of municipality where you live, highest level of education, number of years in teaching, job title/profession)

Introduction to the village and school

Please introduce the school's municipality! (socio-economic environment, job opportunities, travel, cultural, sporting, artistic opportunities in the area)

What is typical of the relationships between people in the municipality? Do people know each other, do they often meet their students' parents in the street, in the shop, etc.?

Tell us about the students! What social backgrounds do they come from? What do their parents usually do?

What kind of child-rearing practices do you see from families? Furthermore, what family, educational and child protection problems and challenges do they encounter in their work as teachers?

Do they cooperate with support professionals to solve family, educational and child protection problems? (e.g. school social worker, foster parent counsellor, school psychologist, social worker, special needs teacher...)

Introduction to foster families

Please tell us how many children in foster care have you taught or are currently teaching? What are the main reasons for removing children from their families (e.g. neglect, endangerment, child abuse, addiction or mental health problems of the parent...)?

Do you perceive any special educational challenges among children in child protection care (e.g. academic performance, difficulties in fitting in, absenteeism/drop-outs, discipline problems, difficulties in choosing a career...) How do you feel, as an educator, you can support children with family and child protection challenges in their academic progress and in overcoming difficulties?

Have you noticed any similarities or differences between the foster parents and yourself? (rules, values, norms, opinion of the student, future of the student)

Is it common in your institution for foster parents to ask teachers for advice on parenting issues? If so, in which areas do they typically seek support and guidance from teachers?

What are the age characteristics of foster parents in your school? How many years have the foster parents you know been in the foster care profession?

Relations between school and family

Of the foster parents of the children you teach, how many do you know personally? In what ways and how regularly do teachers and foster parents keep in touch (face-to-face, email, phone, social platforms, school or extracurricular events, leisure/community activities...)

In what situations and for what purpose do you contact the children's foster parents? What are the basic principles of your pedagogical practice in dealing with families and foster parents?

In what situations and for what purpose do you get contacted by the foster parents of children? In your experience, what is typical, is it that one or both of the foster parents or neither of them maintain contact with the school?

How would you describe the foster parents with whom you have a very good relationship and those with whom you struggle to maintain contact? In your experience, what challenges and obstacles do foster parents face that can make it difficult to maintain contact with the school?

To what extent do you think you speak the same language of parents and foster parents?

What do you think is the role of a parent and a teacher in raising children? Please give concrete examples of individual and joint tasks.

Leading questions

In teacher training or in-service training, have you heard about theoretical and methodological issues and good pedagogical practices concerning children in care and foster families? And if so, what? Would they need further knowledge in this area? What would they need most?

Appendix 3

Table 1. Number of occurrences of codes linked to main and sub-themes in interviews with foster carers

Main topic	Subtopic	Codes	Code numbers
Becoming a foster parent	career choice	had no prior knowledge	1
		recommended by a family member or friend who is a foster parent	7
		assistance, love of children	5
		interest in the workplace	2
	formal preparation for becoming a foster parent (training experiences)	basic training for foster parents (pre-decision training, foster parent training)	15
		KOP training	15
	the reception of the environment (family, friends, neighbourhood...)	positive, supportive	10
		negative, treated with reservation	3
		mixed feelings	2
Family life	children by blood	no biological children	2
		there is a biological child (the foster parent lives in his/her own household)	5
		have a biological child (living in a separate household)	8
	the removal of a foster child from his or her birth family	they gave up the child	5
		unsuitable housing conditions	8
		neglect	4
		parents who have been in prison	2
		abuse	2
		addiction	3
		lack of information, not knowing the exact reason for the highlighting	1
	integration into the foster family	smooth	10
		heavykes	3
		did not happen (the foster parents "returned" the child)	2
	frequency of contact with birth family	regular contact	9
		infrequent contact	3
		not implemented	2
		is suspended	2
	impact of contact with birth family	positive, positive impact	7
		negative impact	5

Family-school partnership	the impact of adoption on the foster parent	can't cope, becomes a "career leaver"	0
		enthusiasm, a sense of motivation ("fulfilling a goal")	8
		it is very hard, but he stays on track	7
	living the foster parenting vocation	difficulties, challenges	6
		beauties, "achievements"	9
	type of educational establishment	kindergarten	7
		primary education	13
		secondary education	4
		higher education	1
	how to contact teachers	in person	8
		by phone	3
		social platforms (email, CREDIT, Messenger)	4
	the regularity of contacts with teachers	per day	11
		weekly	2
		monthly	1
		once or twice every six months	1
	the reason and motivation for contacting teachers	interest, request for information (behaviour, conduct, school performance), transfer of information	9
		identifying the cause of the problem	6
	a joint parent-teacher task	Cooperation	6
		agreeing educational objectives and tasks	4
		creating emotional security	5
	teachers' attitudes towards foster families (from the perspective of foster parents)	prejudice	8
		taking account of educational challenges	7
		taking into account the needs of specific life situations	7
	working with support professionals	with a guardian	2
		with a (school) psychologist	3
		social workers in nursery schools and schools	2
		with a special needs teacher	4
		with a development teacher	4
	teachers in the eyes of foster parents	partner	11
		professionals	3
		above	1
	foster parents in the eyes of teachers (from the perspective of foster parents)	partner	13
		professionals	0
		above	0
		cannot judge the answer	2
	a profile of teachers with whom there is a particularly good relationship with foster families	helpful	6
		empathetic, tolerant	9
	characterisation of teachers who are difficult to communicate with	prejudiced	12
		negative discrimination	3
	children's relationships with their peers	corresponding to	6

		heavykes	9
		want to stay in foster care	15
		promoting the (further) learning of the child(ren)	5
		provide support for children who have grown up	2
		want to have your own house, your own family	1
		would like to work in addition to being a foster parent	2
		if your situation and state of health allow, you would still like to foster a child	1
Future plans	long-term		

Source: own editing based on our interview database

Appendix 4

Table 2. Number of occurrences of codes linked to main and sub-themes in interviews with teachers

Main topic	Subtopic	Codes	Code numbers
Presentation of the school	the social background of families	lower	4
		middle	4
		high	2
	working with support professionals	with a foster parent counsellor	4
		with a (school) psychologist	3
		with social workers in nurseries and schools	4
		with colleagues (teachers)	7
		with a guardian	7
	number of foster children taught in his/her career	1-2	7
		3-4	2
		4 or more	1
Introduction to foster families	special educational challenges with children in foster care	resolving an unstable living situation	6
		replacement of norms, patterns	5
		prevention of early school leaving	1
		integration, behavioural difficulties	4
	perception of similarity between the foster parent and themselves	child-centredness	3
		educational principles	3

		does not feel any similarity	4
	perceiving a difference between the foster parent and themselves	educational principles	4
	the foster parent asks the teacher for advice	on educational issues	3
		for further studies	4
		did not occur	3
	the specific age of the foster parent	middle-aged	10
Family-school partnership	how to contact the foster parent	in person	8
		by phone	2
		on social platforms (email, CREDIT, Messenger)	2
	the regularity of contact with the foster parent	per day	4
		weekly	4
		monthly	1
		once or twice every six months	1
	the reason and motivation for contact with the foster parent	request for information	3
		transfer of information	4
		reporting a detected problem, investigating the cause	3
	a description of foster parents with whom you have a very good relationship	helpful, attentive	6
		child-centred	4
	characterisation of foster carers who are difficult to communicate with	abstainer	2
		hostile, cold	3
	parent-educator joint task	Cooperation	4
		agreeing educational objectives and tasks	2
		creating emotional security	4
Improving knowledge on theoretical and practical issues affecting foster families in child protection	there would be a need	more emphasis should be placed on it in teacher training	2
		theoretical, methodological, legal issues, pedagogical good practice	3

		counselling, supervision	3
	you don't need it	draws on years of experience	2

Source: own editing based on our interview database

Appendix 5

Table 3. Demographic data on foster parents (N=15)

Interviewee	gender	age	number of years as foster parent
N1/1	female	59	6 years
N1/2	female	53	3 years
N1/3	female	46	6 years
N1/4	female	46	3 years
N1/5	female	62	5 years
N2/1	female	56	6 years
N2/2	female	52	6 years
N2/3	female	33	3 years
N2/4	female	50	5 years
N2/5	female	64	14 years
N3/1	female	51	7 years
N3/2	female	36	4 years
N3/3	female	55	5 years
N3/4	female	41	5 years
N3/5	female	43	4 years

Source: own editing

Appendix 6

Table 4. Demographic data of teachers (N=10)

Interviewee	gender	age	type of school
P1/1	female	59	state primary school
P1/2	female	43	state secondary school
P1/3	female	55	state primary school
P1/4	female	53	state primary school
P1/5	female	40	state secondary school
P2/1	female	43	state primary school
P2/2	female	26	state primary school
P2/3	female	24	state primary school
P2/4	female	25	state primary school
P2/5	female	40	state primary school

Source: own editing



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