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Foster parents on raising Roma children

Nevelőszülők a roma gyerekek neveléséről

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ABSTRACT

Both domestic and international research shows that children belonging to minority groups are represented in child welfare institutions at a higher rate relative to their population size (Neményi-Messing, 2007; Darvas et al., 2016; Drake et al., 2009; Cénat et al., 2021). In this study, we present research conducted with foster parents, the aim of which is to explore how foster parents view the issues surrounding the upbringing of Roma children and their own role in this process. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 41 foster parents. The majority of children raised in the foster families surveyed are Roma; we found only four families that did not have Roma children placed with them. Based on the responses, it can be concluded that the majority of the foster parents surveyed accept Roma children with reservations, a fact attributable to social prejudices. Foster parents see no difference in raising Roma and non-Roma children, but they have little knowledge of their family backgrounds and the customs of Roma families.

Kulcsszavak:

nevelőszülő,
gyermekvédelem,
elfogadás,
roma gyerekek

Nemcsak a hazai, de a nemzetközi kutatások is azt mutatják, hogy a kisebbséghez tartozó gyermekek létszámukhoz viszonyítva nagyobb arányban vannak jelen a gyermekvédelmi intézményekben (Neményi-Messing, 2007, Darvas és mtsai, 2016, Drake et.al., 2009; Cénat et. al., 2021). Jelen tanulmányban egy nevelőszülőkkel készült kutatást mutatunk be, aminek célja annak feltárása, hogy hogyan látják a nevelőszülők a cigány gyerekek nevelésének kérdéseit és abban a saját szerepüket. Félig strukturált interjút készítettünk 41 nevelőszülővel. A megkérdezett nevelőszülői családokban nevelkedő gyerekek többsége cigány, mindössze négy olyan családot találtunk ahol nem helyeztek el cigány gyerekeket. A válaszok alapján megállapítható, hogy a megkérdezett nevelőszülők többsége feltételekkel fogadja el a cigány gyerekeket, aminek oka a társadalmi előítéletekre vezethető vissza. A

nevelőszülők a cigány és nem cigány gyerekek nevelésében nem látnak különbséget, viszont kevésbé ismerik a családi hátterüket és a cigány családok szokásait.

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Roma children are over-represented in specialist child protection services (Neményi-Messing, 2007; European Roma Rights Centre, 2011; Darvas et al., 2016; Rákó, 2014, 2019). It has been established not only in Hungarian but also in international literature that children belonging to minority groups enter the child protection system at a higher rate than their representation within the general population would suggest (Drake et al., 2009; Cénat et al., 2021). In the United States, Hispanic and African American children are placed in child protection institutions at a higher rate than their numbers would suggest. African American children are present in foster care at nearly twice the rate compared to the general child population (Dettlaff et al., 2008, 2022). In European countries, too, it is observed that children from minority or marginalised social groups are over-represented in child protection, which particularly affects Roma children, migrants and those leading a nomadic lifestyle (European Roma Rights Centre, 2011a).

The proportion of children belonging to minority groups in child welfare institutions is also significant in Central and Eastern European countries. Slovakia has the highest proportion (82.5 percent) of Roma children in child welfare institutions, followed by Romania, where, according to a report by the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection, Roma children may account for as much as 80% of the population in children's homes in certain regions. Hungary ranks third in this regard, with Roma children accounting for 65% of children living in state care institutions. In the Czech Republic, according to an official estimate, 33% of children living in institutions are Roma, while 40.6% of children living in children's homes are (European Roma Rights Centre, 2011b).

The over-representation of Roma children in child protection can be explained by the complex interplay of several factors. "Research findings show that institutional bias, as well as a limited understanding of the lives of Roma families, often leads to confused and ineffective responses from national child protection authorities. The most common reasons for the institutional placement of Roma children are family poverty, inadequate housing and/or

truancy. Every European national government has developed a range of options to support families in difficulty. The question arises as to why these options are not made more accessible to Roma families in order to avoid the placement of children in institutional care, which is generally recognised as the least desirable outcome. Roma children facing difficulties are often forced to choose between just two options: persistent poverty at home or separation from their family, which is completely contrary to the spirit and letter of the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Byrne, 2024, p. 27).

In our previous research, we sought to answer the question of whether, and to what extent, issues relating to the upbringing of children belonging to national and ethnic minorities are addressed in the professional programmes of children’s homes and residential care homes. Are there any activities or tasks that help children belonging to national and ethnic minorities to learn about their language, traditions and history? It has been established that the professional programmes of children’s homes contain few or no programme elements relating to the upbringing of children belonging to national minorities that serve to shape and preserve the children’s identity. In the majority of programmes, only the most basic legislation is cited, which in many cases amounts to little more than a list of children’s rights (Rákó, 2019). In professional programmes, integration is primarily defined in relation to children with disabilities or those struggling with learning or behavioural difficulties. However, a well-developed approach to inclusive education would offer more opportunities for children in child protection. By this we mean that child protection institutions should adapt much more to the needs of children, including all children, thus also those belonging to ethnic minorities. “Inclusive education can provide the conceptual framework and practical solutions capable of effectively responding to the complex life situations and individual characteristics of those growing up in child protection. Inclusive education does not ignore the hidden mechanisms that reproduce social inequality, but rather, taking these into account, focuses on the complex needs of the individual, and, building on this, shapes the development process within a heterogeneous environment, underpinned by the acceptance of the dual process of bicultural socialisation. “Turning towards the individual - taking their aptitudes, strengths, weaknesses, aspirations and needs into account to the fullest extent - makes the pedagogical development process more professional through the tools of inclusive education” (Varga, 2008, p. 20) In another study analysing the professional programmes of foster parent networks, the author

concluded that almost all of the ten professional programmes examined contained some reference to children belonging to national and ethnic minorities, but there was no detailed programme proposal. The research findings indicate that no further information was found on how foster parents, in practice, help children from other cultures to preserve their identity, nor on how this manifests itself in everyday life (Hunyadi-Illés, 2022).

Research methodology

The aim of applying a qualitative methodology is to explore the experiences of foster parents raising children with special needs, and the difficulties they face in their daily lives. A further aim is to provide a complex interpretation of the social and pedagogical processes that take place during foster care, and to examine the individual perspectives of foster parents in detail. We have chosen the semi-structured interview as the research method. The interview method was used to gain an understanding of the subjects' experiences drawn from their everyday world and the meanings they ascribe to this everyday world (Kvale, 1996; Sántha, 2009). Data analysis was carried out using deductive thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). In analysing the data, we applied Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step model; thus, after a detailed and thorough reading and familiarisation with the data, we coded it, then identified and reviewed themes, and following the definition of the themes, we interpreted and presented the results. We organised and coded the data using the ATLAS.Ti data analysis software, which enabled the structured processing of the texts.

The research method was the interview, the questions of which were organised around three main themes: the role of foster parents, the characteristics of the foster children, and issues relating to child-rearing. In addition to demographic data, we explore the foster parents' life circumstances, motivations, the difficulties they face in raising children with special needs, opportunities for professional collaboration, their experiences with the foster children, as well as their parenting practices and future plans. The interview outline and research questions were compiled on the basis of a review of the theoretical literature, which enabled consistency in data collection and, consequently, a detailed presentation of individual experiences. The interviews were conducted between May 2023 and January 2024. The foster parents from participated in the research on a voluntary basis. A

challenge in collaborating with the foster parents was that not everyone agreed to be interviewed. The interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, the methods of data handling, and the ethical guidelines. The interviews (n=24) were mostly conducted in the foster parents' homes; 15 were recorded online, and two were conducted within the foster parent network. The interviews were recorded in a relaxed atmosphere, and the respondents were open and willing to take part. Several expressed their delight at being able to share their experiences. Arranging a suitable time was typically difficult where the children were at home during the day. For this reason, data collection was often carried out online in the late afternoon or early evening. The interviews lasted an average of 1.5 hours. We made audio recordings of the interviews, to which all interviewees gave their consent. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were anonymised and contain no data that could identify the respondent or the foster care network. The data were used exclusively for research purposes. The research was conducted in full compliance with ethical guidelines.

In this study, we present a subcomponent of a larger research project: the experiences of foster parents regarding the placement and upbringing of Roma children. We seek to answer the question of what factors influence the upbringing of Roma children and how foster parents perceive their own role in this process. We defined the concept of "Roma" based on Kemény, Janky & Lengyel (2004), according to whom a Roma is someone whom their non-Roma environment considers to be Roma.

Sampling

Using a targeted sampling procedure, we included foster parents who were active at the time of the research and who have significant experience in the upbringing and care of children with special needs. In child protection, children with special needs include those with chronic illnesses, those with disabilities, and children under the age of three (1997. évi XXXI. törvény a gyermekek védelméről és a gyámügyi igazgatásról, 53§). Sampling was carried out within the three church-run foster parent networks operating in Hajdú-Bihar County. The research was assisted by the leaders and counsellors of the foster parent networks. The sample comprises 41 foster parents, which allows for a more in-depth exploration of foster care work.

Results

The 41 foster families participating in the research were raising a total of 132 children. Of these, 81 were classified as having special needs, which represents more than half of all the children.

Of the children with special needs, 41 have a disability, whilst 27 children are in the 0-3 age group and therefore require enhanced care due to their age. As we have seen from the literature reviewed above, Roma children are over-represented in the child protection system. Our research also supports this: with the exception of four families, all of them have Roma children, totalling 119 individuals. Looking at the composition of the children, it is clear that foster parents face a wide range of challenges in their work. In addition to meeting the challenges of raising children, the work of foster parents depends significantly on what members of the wider and immediate communities around them think and how they view them. The actors in the micro- and meso-system - the neighbours, friends and professionals surrounding the foster parents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) all influence foster care by either accepting and supporting it or rejecting it. When asked how their immediate and wider social circles view and accept foster care, the majority of respondents (n=23) stated that family members accept and support foster care. Acceptance is also present in the wider community, but compared to the immediate family, far fewer (n=14) stated that their wider community would be accepting of foster care. Opinions are divided on this point.

“I think it’s about 50-50: some people fully accept it and encourage me, whilst others accept it but still urge me to find a ‘normal’ job - which is very strange, by the way. Obviously, I respect other people’s opinions. In the last 10 years, I haven’t been able to recruit a single person as a foster parent; everyone is worried about the time commitment involved in this work - that it’s a 24/7 job - and that they wouldn’t be able to live with another person’s child; even professionals think this way” (MR, Interview 12.)

For the respondents, the difficulty lies more in the prejudice coming from the wider community. As we have seen previously, foster care is more readily accepted within the immediate family circle, whereas the wider community is less accepting of the very concept of foster care itself. Acceptance of foster care is influenced by the foster child’s condition, ethnicity and behaviour. This

is further exacerbated by the foster children's Roma background, particularly if this is also evident in the child's outward appearance. The following responses reflect that members of the wider community are less accepting when it comes to Roma children.

“My immediate circle accepted it perfectly well; it was more my wider circle who looked at me as if to say, ‘Ugh, she’s taken in a Roma child.’ But my family and relatives accepted it completely; we still get together for birthdays and garden parties. They accepted it completely” (BKK, Interview 4).

“Many people have said that they wouldn’t let a foster child, especially a Roma child, into their house—not just into their house, but not even into their garden. People have a terrible attitude, really” (GFV, Interview 9).

The foster parents' immediate and wider social circles clearly have an impact on their daily lives. When asked whether taking in a Roma child would cause difficulties, the majority of respondents replied that they accept Roma children because, in their view, they would not be able to do this work otherwise. They consider acceptance to be important, including from the perspective of family members. Regarding family members, they stated that accepting Roma children does not cause them any difficulty.

“It’s important to fully accept them. But I can’t tell you how. People always tell me I’ve been very lucky with these children, because right from the start they accepted us and grew to love us, and we them too” (BKK, Interview 15).

At the same time, when it comes to the children's acceptance, the foster parents set conditions of their own. The conditions set by the foster parents mostly relate to the children's outward appearance; specifically, their expectation is that, as far as possible, the foster child's Roma heritage should not be visible, or at least not very visible, in their physical features. This stems from the dismissive attitude of the wider social environment and social prejudice. This is reflected in the following responses:

“All my children so far have been Roma. None were Hungarian, but none were jet-black either. But I’d definitely be bothered by someone who’s very dark-skinned. I can accept the little ones with creole-coloured skin, though (BKK, Interview 15.)

“But to be honest, I wouldn’t really want a very, very dark-skinned Roma child, because then there’d be more prejudice from the people around us. Though, personally, I have absolutely no sense of shame about walking around with Roma children... Sometimes I was afraid to cross the road with four dark-skinned children, wondering whether they’d let us cross or run us over. Because of the prejudice, even though they’re very sweet children.” (MR 12, Interview).

“No. I don’t mind if they’re Roma, as long as it’s not too obvious, because the village doesn’t really like them and that way they won’t be singled out.” (GFV, Interview 5)

It is clear from the responses that prejudice causes significant emotional strain for foster parents too. Foster parents face various forms of prejudice. On the one hand, they are often labelled ‘foster parents for financial gain’, who only take on the care of children for the money. On the other hand, they also frequently receive negative feedback for taking in and raising children, particularly because they take on the care of children with a different skin colour or those living with a disability. As the following respondent puts it:

“People’s contempt, the fact that they sometimes don’t treat us as human beings, constantly staring at us, asking why there are brown-skinned children with you when you are white. It is not always the children who cause the difficulty, but those around us.” (MR, Interview 11).

In response to the question of whether raising a child of Roma origin causes them difficulties, the answers received reveal that the majority of foster parents see no difference in raising Roma and non-Roma children. Raising Roma children does not pose a problem for the majority of respondents (n=19); they have not experienced more or different problems than with non-Roma children. Rather, the parental background emerges as a source of problems, as does the lack of family upbringing. They consider the child’s personality to be more important in their upbringing and attach little significance to the child’s background. According to the respondents, the children who come to them are

often neglected and dirty, but this is entirely unrelated to whether a child is Roma or not. A neglected appearance is just as much of a problem in the case of non-Roma children. As is clearly evident from the following responses.

“What difficulty? (he asked indignantly) Well, he’s a child too! The fact that his skin colour is different means nothing. It’s true that when the children arrive here they’re quite dirty or, how shall I put it, a bit neglected—though he wasn’t exactly like that—but this doesn’t depend on their background. There was one foster parent who said that two such small children had been placed with her from a Hungarian family and they were lice-ridden and dirty. We’ve got used to this; when they arrive here, I immediately heat the water and give them a bath, and that’s it. But this doesn’t depend on whether the child is Roma or not” (GFV, Interview 5.)

“The fact that they’re of Roma origin isn’t a problem; it depends on their personality, because a child of Roma origin can be very sweet, intelligent, ambitious, grateful, lovable, and so on. It doesn’t matter at all whether their skin is lighter or darker than mine; that doesn’t cause any issues” (MR, Interview 12).

“We had Roma children who were as black as coal, and yet they were the apple of my eye; but just because they’re Roma children, they’re still the same as Hungarian children, just a different colour. It’s no harder to bring them up than Hungarian children. At least, I’ve never seen any difference. It was more of a problem with the family, not with the children.” (GFV, Interview 3)

Those foster parents (n=13) who mentioned difficulties in bringing up Roma children primarily found the children’s behaviour to be a challenge. They find it difficult to deal with the children’s frequent behavioural problems, such as stealing, vandalism and running away. According to the respondents, in the case of older children, due to the longer time spent with the family, the patterns brought from their biological family have become more deeply ingrained, and such behaviour occurs more frequently in their case. One problem highlighted was that, due to a lack of experience, the children are unable to use their toys and equipment properly, so these items quickly get broken.

“Well, there are times when they steal things; at one point we locked all the doors. There was a time when he stole a knife from the kitchen and attacked us, so we ended up locking our bedroom door as well. But this doesn’t apply to everyone. If the child is older when they come to us, there’s a greater chance of things like that happening, if they’ve seen such examples at home already” (GFV, Interview 10).

“We haven’t looked after any older children yet who might have problems with, say, stealing, so for us it’s only lying that’s a problem, and they’re much more likely to damage and break toys.” (MR, Interview 5)

Four respondents cited the children’s temperament and temperament as a difficulty, stating that these children are more impulsive. Foster parents also cited differing customs and family patterns, which the children had acquired through family socialisation, as a further difficulty. The responses reveal a lack of knowledge about Romani culture and customs, and the fact that foster parents do not know what the foster children’s family background is like or what their customs are. In their research, Vargáné Nagy and Molnár (2017) highlight that a stereotypical image of Roma families, based on templates and inherently prejudicial, prevails in mainstream society; we assume a complex relationship between parents, grandparents, relatives and children within a large family, with characteristics rooted in Roma culture and customs. According to our respondents, Roma children are given greater freedom in family upbringing, which is evident, among other things, in the absence of rules. The child’s wishes are usually fulfilled immediately, their needs are met, and delayed gratification is rarely used (Vargáné Nagy & Molnár, 2017). The respondents put it as follows:

“They are more temperamental. They have been brought up more freely; nothing applies to them, and no one should tell them what to do. That is the upbringing they receive at home” (GFV, Interview 6).

“Well, with bloodlines, we don’t know what their family background is like, or what their habits are.” (BKK Interview 1, 4).

“Well, the parents might be the problem, or they might bring habits from home that aren’t exactly acceptable, such as rummaging through bins or stealing” (MR, Interview 1).

Summary

A significant number of Roma children live with foster parents; they are over-represented in the child protection system, and we found this to be the case among those living with the foster parents participating in our research as well. Foster parents accept Roma children in their role because they consider acceptance to be fundamental to foster care work. At the same time, there is a degree of ambivalence in that this acceptance is conditional, specifically that, where possible, the children placed with them should not visibly display their Roma background. The conditions set by the foster parents are justified by the prejudiced behaviour of the wider community. A dual prejudice is expressed by the wider community regarding foster parents. On the one hand, foster care is viewed as a means of earning money; on the other, there is a negative attitude towards raising children who are not one's own. Raising Roma children does not pose a difficulty for the majority of foster parents; they consider the children's personalities to be more important than their background when it comes to their ability to be brought up. During the process of raising the children, they frequently encounter behavioural and conduct problems, particularly with older children, which they attribute to dysfunctional family patterns. They also mention differing customs and socialisation, as well as the patterns conveyed by the biological family, as further difficulties. We consider it important to support and train foster parents so that they can help children from different cultures to preserve their identity and learn how to put this into practice in their daily lives.

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