

Gordana Horvat

The importance of formal and informal support networks for foster parents in establishing the normalisation of children's life: the case of Croatia

Foster care has become the focus of social work in Croatia in recent years, due to the lack of placement capacity in institutions and process of deinstitutionalisation which aims to achieve normalisation of human life in the community. In foster care, the normalisation of a child's life is a challenge for all those involved in the process, as there is no inclusive model of foster care in Croatia and the role of social work is divided between all actors in the foster care process. Therefore, the thesis is put forward that for the establishment of the normalisation of the life of a foster child, it is important to provide formal and informal networks in the community, which are built and connected by social work in joint collaboration. The purpose of this paper is to identify the current support network for foster care, determine the needs of foster parents for normalizing the life of a child in foster care, and examine how social work as a profession contributes to this process. Through a qualitative analysis of eight semi-structured interviews with foster families conducted between November 2021 and January 2022, the findings indicate that foster parents need more accessible ongoing institutional support from social workers, but also non-formal forms of support, particularly associations of foster parents in the civil sector and better collaboration with children's primary families.

Key words: foster care, childcare, families, deinstitutionalisation, social work, social work centres.

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Pomen formalnih in neformalnih podpornih mrež za rejniške starše pri zagotavljanju normalizacije otrokovega življenja: primer Hrvaške

Rejništvo je v zadnjih letih na Hrvaškem postalo predmet zanimanja socialnega dela zaradi pomanjkanja namestitvenih kapacitet v institucijah in zaradi procesa deinstitutionalizacije, ki si prizadeva za normalizacijo življenja v skupnosti. Pri rejništvu je normalizacija otrokovega življenja izziv za vse vpletene, ker na Hrvaškem ne ostaja inkluzivni model rejništva in ker je vloga socialnega dela razdeljena med vse akterje v rejništvu. Avtorica izhaja iz domneve, da je za zagotovitev normalizacije pomembno poskbeti za formalne in neformalne mreže v skupnosti, ki jih socialno delo vzpostavlja in povezuje. V članku prepozna obstoječe podpirne mreže za rejništvo in preučuje vlogo socialnega dela pri tem. Na podlagi kvalitativne analize osmih polstrukturiranih intervjujev z rejniškimi družinami, opravljenih med novembrom 2021 in januarjem 2022, izsledki kažejo, da rejniški starši potrebujejo več dostopne kontinuirane institucionalne podpore od socialnih delavk in delavcev, pa tudi neformalne oblike podpore, zlasti združenj rejniških staršev v civilnem sektorju, in boljše sodelovanje s primarnimi družinami otrok.

Ključne besede: rejništvo, otroško varstvo, družine, deinstitutionalizacija, socialno delo, centri za socialno delo.

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Introduction

The foster care system in Croatia, as in other European countries, is becoming more and more important, which is highlighted in the policies and guidelines of the European Union on forms of care for children and children's rights. It is estimated that around 5 to 6 million children in the world still live in institutional care (Goldman *et al.*, 2020, p. 606). In the countries of



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the European Union, a total of 758.012 children have been displaced from their families, of which 421,810 children live in family-type accommodation (UNICEF & Eurochild, 2021, p. 8). The lack of foster families is felt in all European countries (Sellick, 2011).

Data from the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy of Croatia (Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike (2021) show that in 2021 there were 1,286 foster families for children in Croatia, accommodating 1,980 children. Compared to 2020, there is a decrease in the number of foster parents and 300 fewer children in foster care. The motivation of potential foster parents is proportionally related to the support network, which represents a sense of belonging for the child, the possibility of developing relationships and easier acceptance of separation from the primary family, and enables the child's involvement in daily activities and the immediate social environment (Žižak *et al.*, 2012). In addition, research by Amanfo *et al.* (2008) and Krajnčan and Bajželj (2015) points to the child's need to feel safe and to have control over and determine his or her own life, which are elements of normalisation that influence the child's good adjustment to the foster family (Žižak *et al.*, 2012).

The research conducted by authors Sabolić and Vejmelka (2015) in Croatia shows that the motive for engaging in foster care is the support network the family receives from institutions or the community. Support for foster parents is necessary for the child to normalise life in a new family upon arrival, which means a life that is most similar to the life of children in their primary families (Ajduković and Radočaj, 2008, p. 24). This is an issue that needs to be talked about more in Croatia, given the lack of cooperation at all levels and the difficulty of establishing a support network (Laklija and Brkić, 2022).

The first part of the paper presents the theoretical framework and terminological concepts related to the research objectives aimed at determining the type of networks available to foster families and their availability, while the second part presents the qualitative research conducted with foster families in Croatia.

Foster care as a resource in social work and a strategic part of the deinstitutionalisation process in Croatia

In Croatia, institutional accommodation has less and less space for children (Laklija, 2011). On the other hand, there are more and more children who are abused and neglected in their primary families, as well as children with developmental disabilities (Thoburn, 2009). Children placed in foster care stay longer and longer in this form of placement and grow up in foster families because the conditions for a return to the family are not met (Tilbury and Osmond, 2006).

Foster families are an important resource in social work for the placement of children, but as there are still not enough foster parents in Croatia, social

workers face a complex task when they have to place a child outside their home. The role of foster care in social work is related to the process of deinstitutionalisation in Croatia, the aim of which is to ensure the right of children to grow up in an environment that is closest to family placement (Ajduković and Radočaj, 2008, p. 24). Despite the long tradition of foster care in Croatia, it is not conceptually focused on connecting all those involved in foster care with the community, and the primary family is particularly excluded.

In contrast to Croatia, Slovenia, which has a similar tradition of foster care, has a developed model of foster care that includes all participants (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019, p. 136), and the focus is on the need to provide the child with positive interpersonal relationships that include all participants in the foster care process and a support network (Kompan Erzar, Rožič and Simonič, 2011). In Slovenia, the concept of an individual group in foster care was developed, which includes all participants equally through a project of joint cooperation and is regulated by law (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006). The focus is on establishing cooperation, solutions and equality in power position and includes different types of support for the primary and foster family and the child (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019, p. 141). This example shows that deinstitutionalisation is not only a transition from an institutional form of care to non-institutional placements, but also requires a change in society's attitude, a change in power position and dialogue (Flaker, 2014, p. 24).

In Croatia, several studies have been conducted in the last two decades that addressed the needs of foster children, but no studies have been recorded on the support network for foster parents and the establishment of normalisation of a child's life in foster care.

Support networks for foster families

In order to meet the needs of the foster parents and the child, formal and informal support networks provide a social resource to meet the needs of the family in everyday or crisis situations (Lin and Ensel, 1989). The support provided by social resources in adapting to the living conditions provided by the network is emotional, psychological, physical, informational or material, depending on the needs of the person (Dunst, Trivette and Deal, 1988).

Furthermore, previous research shows that the support network available to the family is an important factor in positive coping with difficulties in foster care, but also in lower rates of children returning to the system (Farmer and Wijedasa, 2013). The main role in the foster care process is played by support from family, friends, neighbours and formal support from experts and institutions. The support network should actively involve all participants in the foster care process, the primary and foster family and the child, as the co-creation of solutions in the foster care system extends from the family to the community (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019, p. 150), which requires the activation of all possible available resources of the support network.

According to Nirje (1969), the principle of normalisation states that every human being has the right to a life that is most similar to the life of people without difficulties. The author interprets normalisation as the establishment of an everyday life that allows for a normal daily routine, living space to live in, privacy for each person, access to social relationships, normal experiences while growing up, or choice and participation in decisions that affect the individual's future.

Normalisation of the child's life in foster care

According to May and Finch (2009), normalisation is the work that actors do while participating in a range of activities, which may involve new or changed ways of thinking, acting and organising that integrate with pre-existing socially shaped knowledge and practise. Furthermore, the normalisation process theory model consists of several components, and one of them is flexible monitoring, which involves monitoring the way practise is understood by the actors involved (May and Finch, 2009).

Foster care as a service, institutional support for providers of such services, and society's acceptance and perception of foster care can be considered as practise, while foster parents and foster children are actors. Compared to institutional placement, the advantages of foster care are more personal approach to each child, the opportunity to create their own daily routine, and generally appropriate living conditions (Bronston, 1976). In contrast, professionals are taught from the beginning of their work in institutions not to establish personal relationships with users, which reduces the quality of life of users in institutions (Brandon, 1991).

The principles of normalisation, which include effective participation of service users in the institution are even more evident in foster care. While the normalisation of services in institutions refers to the transfer of power from the hands of professionals to shared decision-making that is important to the lives of users, this balance of decision-making sometimes already exists in foster care.

Unlike an institution, the goal of foster care is to empower people in foster care to stand up for themselves, make decisions about their own lives and develop personally in a family-like environment. Normalisation emphasises the importance of raising social awareness for the equal status of vulnerable members of society such as children (Bronston, 1976), thus ensuring the overcoming of physical and social exclusion (O'Brien, 1980).

Taking all these theoretical assumptions and guidelines into account and placing them in the context of fostering, a support network is necessary to have a good fostering experience. Furthermore, support networks strengthen the foster parents' sense of belonging to their new environment and the integration of foster children into the community is necessary for their proper development and daily functioning.

The problem of the study

Existing support networks are an important source of support for everyone involved in foster care process because there is no well-developed concept of foster care in Croatia. As social work is an important link for all participants and its role is to expand the support network in the community, the research objectives are to define the existing support networks available to foster families. The research objectives are focused on analysing the types of support networks available to foster parents that help the child and family gain more control over their lives.

In accordance with the work and research objectives, the following research questions were asked: How do foster parents describe the existing support network and what advantages and disadvantages do they observe? What support network do foster parents need to normalise a child's life? And how do social workers contribute to the normalisation of a child's life in a foster family?

Methodology

Data was collected qualitatively by conducting semi-structured interviews with foster parents to gain a better understanding of the topic under study by talking about their daily lives, which the interviewees interpret and describe through narrative data (Mejovšek, 2013).

Phenomenological qualitative research allowed me to gain a more detailed understanding of the topic and area under study, which enables the process of learning objective truth (Lamza Posavec, 2021), while interviewees describe their life experience of the phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 25), people's real problems are the starting point of the research (Mesec, 1998, p. 30).

Based on the literature review, I analysed the previous research findings in the field of foster care. The empirical research applied in the thesis provides data on foster parents' needs for establishing normalisation of a foster child's life, so that foster parents interpret difficulties in everyday life as well as the need for a support network.

The research used the semi-structured interview method, which was conducted with respondents in two ways: in person at the foster family's home (five interviews) and via the online platform Zoom (three interviews). The questions were prepared in accordance with the research questions and additional sub-questions were asked in relation to the answers in order to deepen the understanding of the researched topic. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Respondents expressed their experiences, feelings and thoughts on the topic, and open-ended questions gave them space to express their views.

The sampling criteria for the research and for conducting the interviews were established and included foster families with different criteria: from

rural and urban areas, with different lengths of foster care, foster parents with children of different ages, foster parents who are employed, unemployed or retired. Part of the sample is convenient, and concerns foster families known to me (N=3), while part of the sample (N=5) was collected using the snowball method based on recommendations from known foster parents who met the sampling criteria.

Eight interviews were conducted, from each family with one foster parent individually. Seven families consist of married couples and one family consist of a divorced woman who works as a foster mother. The age of the foster parents ranges from 35 to 65 years, and the duration of the foster care practice is from 3 to 18 years. In five families, one spouse is working while the other is unemployed or retired, while in three families both spouses are retired. The current number of foster children in the families ranges from without children at this time to a maximum of three children, and the age of the children ranges from 4 to 19 years. The length of current stay of children in foster families ranges from 11 months to 13 years.

The research was conducted with foster parents in Croatia, in the counties of Osijek-Baranja and Brod-Posavina, in the period from November 2021 to January 2022. Basic demographic data was collected at the beginning of the interview, while the second part of the interview was about getting answers to the research questions. Before starting the research, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Work in Ljubljana. Before the interview, I explained to all respondents what my role is, the aim and purpose of the research and the protection of their personal data. I explained that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. All participants signed their consent to participate and to the audio recording of the interview. After the interview, I offered the interviewees to read the transcript of the interview and to add to, or correct, statements if necessary.

After transcription, I analysed the interviews using the method of qualitative analysis in such a way that categories and subcategories were formed in the table in which the transcript data were linked, coded and connected with concepts from all the interviews. The concepts are grouped and related to the research subject and placed in relationships, theory and research questions. Each interview has a code marked with a letter and a number (Mesec, 1998). I have presented the findings descriptively and related them to previous academic findings and research in the discussion section.

Results

The findings of the research show that foster parents in rural areas do not have all the services they need, pointing to the lack of primary and secondary schools nearby, poor transport links, lack of lighting, shops, social workers, post office or medical doctors.

We live in the countryside, transport links are very poor. If you do not have a car, you cannot do anything. (U5)

The cooperation with the doctors is described as positive by foster parents, they are available for consultations and foster parents can always come with the child without long waiting times.

Most of the interviewees describe the teachers at the school as people who make a lot of effort to bring the child together with peers, to include the child equally in classes and to prevent discrimination of the child among peers.

I also asked for help from the school and the pedagogue, the pedagogue gave me instructions and that helped me. (U5)

For foster parents, the most important thing is the support of their own family, but also the support of friends and the understanding of neighbours.

My relatives and others were happy, many of them think I am doing something good. (U5)

The support expected by primary family of the child is regularly absent, and relationships with the primary family are described by foster parents as complex and difficult. One third of the respondents state that they are in contact with the foster families where the child's brothers or sisters are placed and that they try to maintain these relationships because they are in the child's best interest.

Respondents mention civil sector as providing support in the area of additional education, thematic workshops, support or organising activities and socialising for foster parents. Foster parents indicate that they are well accepted in the community and that there is no difference in acceptance before and after fostering. They indicate that the environment in which they live is stimulating and that most people think that they do humane work, but a part of people believe that foster parents work only to earn money. Foster parents state that they lack certain resources in the community that could meet the needs of the child and the foster family. One respondent stated:

It is more of a problem that we do not have activities for the children to participate in. (U7)

When it comes to achieving the normalisation of the child's life upon arrival in the family, respondents talk mainly about the need for social workers and institutional support. Respondents indicate that they received the most intensive support at the very beginning of foster care, after which the intensity of support decreases. A quarter of respondents are satisfied with the support they receive from social workers, while a quarter of respondents indicate that they cannot rely on them, but only on an informal support network.

At the beginning of the foster care I was satisfied with everything, with the support of the centre, the psychologist, the social worker. I had support, help and everything. Later, that was lost, and I did not have support anymore. (U1)

The centre gives me the most support. They participate, they want everything, there is no problem with them. (U4)

Half of the respondents say that they are supported by the social workers, but that they have to fight for it, invest a lot of effort and be persistent in their demands. The frequency with which foster parents need contact with social workers varies, averaging 2–3 times per month. All respondents indicated that they would like to be visited by social workers more often, they invite them often, but the most common response is that they do not have time, they have many families they are responsible for, and they are sure that everything is fine with the foster parents.

All foster parents indicated that they do not have a change plan for the child (a plan for working with the child) and that they write a report every six months on the child's progress based on their observations. In addition, all respondents emphasise the importance of having an association for foster parents in their area that no foster parent has. They see the associations as a space for learning through sharing experiences, but also as a benefit to the foster child to whom the foster parents can provide a better understanding (Redding, Fried and Britner Redding, 2000). Currently, foster parents make informal contacts on online platforms (Facebook) or in groups on applications (viber, WhatsUp).

When I participated in the foster care workshop, I learned a lot. (U5)

I personally did not receive any written instructions to behave this way or that way, I participated in the association's workshop and learned all kinds of things. If I had known them beforehand, it would have been much easier for me at the beginning. (U1)

As specific problems related to social work centres, respondents mention restrictions in the area of consent for the child, which should be given by the still custodial primary family, or the social work centre. Consent is required for activities at school, such as photo shoots, field trips, going to the movies or theatre, to more complex needs of the child, such as medical exams or serious illnesses. Foster parents are often unable to reach the child's parents, or the parents promise to sign the necessary documents but often do not.

Most foster families expect support and cooperation from the primary family, but this is often not forthcoming, which interferes with the normalisation of the child's life, in which the presence of the primary family is still very important (Žižak, 2008). All participants agree that parental consent is necessary for more complex things in child's life, but for everyday life and minimal risks for the child, they believe that they can make the decision themselves.

You cannot do anything. The child is yours 24 hours a day. There is nothing you can do. Sign off on the surgery? No. Field trip? No. Theatre? No. Nothing. And the child is yours 24 hours a day and you are responsible for him. (U6)

We had to complain about the cooperation with the centre, they are slow to react when something happens. When you need them for something. (U7)

Another important problem cited by foster parents is the jurisdiction of the child's social work centre, which is often not located in the same city or even county. Foster parents turn to unfamiliar social workers, and there is a lack of communication and visits by a social worker due to distance, while obtaining the necessary consent is difficult. All respondents indicate the importance of support from social workers in crisis situations when they need advice on how to deal with certain problems, how to approach the child, or how to respond to certain behaviours of the child. They describe the lack of support in such situations as feeling that they do not have enough skills.

If you say you cannot handle it, then you are not a good foster parent anymore, then you are a number and a place that needs to be filled. (U1)

Respondents understand the needs of social workers when it comes to the placement of the child and the urgency of the situation, but at the same time feel that there is a lack of reciprocity in the joint relationship.

I believe that foster parents should be asked a lot and given a lot. (U1)

They note the overwork of social workers in social work centre, the lack of professional staff, and the frequent change of staff in charge of their case.

We are satisfied with everything except for the waiting time at the social work centre, which can take up to an hour, and the overload of social workers should be reduced because they are usually not available when we need them. (U2)

I would like the social workers to visit and talk to the children more often. More social workers should be hired because when we need them, they are mostly in the field or must take care of paperwork. (U3)

Discussion

Formal support is defined as support provided by professionals, services, agencies, or institutions (Spilsbury and Korbin, 2013), which includes all systems and sectors available to families. The education sector plays an important role in the child's adjustment and integration into the new environment, as the child's experience of moving to a new school can influence the stability of the child's placement in foster care (Barber and Delfabbro, 2004). Research by Žižak *et al.* (2012) in Croatia shows that children have better experiences with foster care when they are better accepted in a social environment such as school, which is also evident in my research.

The health sector provides significant support to foster care. Sobočan (2014) points out that medical support after a child's arrival in the family is particularly important when foster parents are confronted with the most neglected children who need medical care, which they perceive as a demanding

task, especially because there are no doctors and medical specialists in the area.

For foster parents, the strength and stability of the informal, personal network, as well as the connection between family members, is of the greatest importance, according to Žižak (2008). The author notes that foster parents have a developed informal support network and rely on the support of their spouses, their own children, close and extended relatives, and friends, which is consistent with the findings of my research.

In addition, Rodger, Cummings and Leschied (2006) link foster parents' motivation to engage in foster care to the fact that it is higher when there is more informal support. As Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019, p. 170) stated, the child's informal social networks can also be helpful for the child as a source of self-confidence and power, as the child lives not only in the family but also outside it. Although the child's contacts with the family are crucial for the child's proper development and growth (Morgan and Baron, 2011), they are often absent or not regular, as the results of my research show. Žižak *et al.* (2012) state that the family network influences the child's experience of belonging to his or her own family.

The importance of involving and working with the primary family is illustrated by the example of Slovenia (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019), where this is highlighted as a fundamental role of social work. In Croatia, children are often placed in foster care far away from the place where they have been living, which limits the possibility of the child's contact with the primary family (Laklija and Brkić, 2022), but also the cooperation between foster parents, the child and social workers.

Lietz and Strength (2011) define the importance of a support network in facilitating the moment of a child's separation from the primary family, which foster parents agree with, stating that this is the moment when they most need the support of social workers. Opinions about the support provided by social workers are divided, and similar results are shown by the research conducted by Sabolić and Vejmelka (2015), who found that foster parents are most satisfied with the support of the informal network, while social workers are most often unavailable and not interested in cooperation.

My findings, which relate to recorded infrequent contacts between a social worker and a child, are consistent with research by Ajduković, Sladović-Franz and Kamenov (2005) which shows that 90% of children in foster care do not receive the professional support they need and that social workers visit foster families on average once or twice a year.

Thoburn (2009) shows in his research that foster care outcomes are strongly influenced by the continuity of contact between foster parents and social workers. The involvement of the child and foster parents is based on the assessment of the child's needs and planning together with experts who actively participate in foster care placement (Jeđud Borić, Miroslavljević and Šalinović, 2017).

In addition, activities related to the foster care process, such as creating a plan for the child, are an important segment for foster parents because they provide a sense of partnership or belonging to the institution where they provide services to children. The exclusion of foster parents and the child from the planning process suggests that there is neither an inclusive model of foster care nor a shared collaboration among all participants.

Čačinović Vogrinčić (2016) cites as an example a concept she developed in Slovenia, in which work with families is understood as a joint co-creation and the work of all participants through an individual work project to support families. The concept aims to solve problems and involve all participants as equal actors, while my research shows that the primary family is insufficiently involved, i.e. they only participate in certain parts of the plan development. Children and foster families participate only partially or not at all in the development of the plan, while further cooperation with social workers takes place only a few times a year or it is difficult to get the necessary support.

According to Jeđud Borić, Mirosavljević and Šalinović (2017), research shows that children want to participate and be included, but this is often not the case when decisions are made about their future lives, which is the basis for the normalisation of the child's life in a new family. The theory of normalisation process includes understanding work as a purposeful social activity that involves investment of personal and group resources to achieve goals (May and Finch, 2009). An example of this type of "work" is foster parent associations, which are almost non-existent or not accessible to all.

In order to achieve normalisation of a child's life in foster care, foster parents must provide a daily decision-making routine for the child, which is a problem when the homes of the primary and foster families are farther apart, but also when they are not far apart because all those involved in the foster care process are not connected. Social workers play a key role in normalisation of foster child's life by mobilizing existing and new support networks (Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl, 2019, p. 170), and Kimberlin, Anthony and Austin (2009) show that the lack of a support network can be considered a risk factor for successful adjustment and reunification with the primary family, which is one of the goals of foster care.

According to my research, overall support for foster care is inadequate, especially from the formal network, which does not have the resources to provide a better service. The informal network is the main source of support that foster parents rely on, but professional support is still lacking.

The shortcomings of my study lie in the small sample size (eight foster families). It is difficult to generalise and draw definitive conclusions, so it would be good to expand the number of participants in further research. The limitation in the research is reflected in the impossibility to conduct the research in all counties of Croatia, as the number of foster families varies greatly from region to region. For future research it would be good to use a larger and representative random sample in order to obtain the best possible generalisation of the results. In addition, it would be important for social work academics and practitioners

to explore other topics that respondents said were important to them, but which are not the subject of this study, such as creating an individual plan for child, developing a foster care model, and methods of working with families.

Conclusion

The results of my research show that despite good policies in the field of foster care, implementation in practice is still difficult and support for foster parents is insufficient. Formal forms of support are rare and inadequate, while the civil sector is weak and there are insufficient associations for foster parents. Social workers are insufficiently involved in the foster care process. Mobilizing and building a support network for foster parents is not a systematic process and does not receive sufficient attention.

The needs of foster parents aimed at normalizing the child's life in foster care cannot be fully met. This directly affects the difficulty of establishing a daily routine in the family, the difficulty of making decisions about the child, or the extension of time to resolve the obstacles and difficulties of foster care. Institutional support exists but is scattered and does not connect all professionals in a single support network.

Although the law clearly defines foster parents' rights, practice shows that it is difficult to monitor and implement all the institution's obligations to foster parents. This is particularly evident in the creation of a plan for a foster child, which, according to the findings, involves not only the foster parents, but also the child and the primary family. The involvement of all participants in foster care in the planning process is a possible topic for further research in social work.

In addition, the normalisation of a foster child's life and the quality of the foster care relationship are reflected in the relationship with the primary family, which research has shown to be disrupted or difficult for the foster family. For social work, it is important to balance the relationship between the foster parents and the primary family and to include them in a common support network. Social work is an extremely important link in the normalisation of a child's life in a foster family, which is expressed in foster families' needs for more frequent meetings with social workers, acceleration of processes necessary for the daily functioning of the family, and more intensive support after the child's arrival in the family.

Foster parents rely primarily on the informal support network, but there is a need to develop additional services in the community. The results show the foster parents' need for information, exchange of experiences, and emotional support, which are prerequisites for the balance and dynamism of family life and, consequently, for the normalisation of the child's life in the new family. Guidelines for improving informal support for foster parents are reflected in the possibility of developing support groups in the community for foster parents, which would allow foster parents to share experiences, acquire new knowledge, and create a sense of community.

On the level of formal support, regular group meetings of foster parents with social workers could lead to a similar outcome. In Croatia, the social work profession should focus on developing new social work concepts, advancing foster care practice, and methods of working with families. The role of social work centre should be clear and focus on the quality of foster care, well-educated and trained social workers to work with families with multiple problems, and an inclusive approach to working with families.

An example of best practices in other countries may be useful, such as the family group conference method, which allows for the participation of all participants in the foster care process, as well as independent decision-making by the family about their own lives. Although this method does not exist in Croatia, research into its possible application would contribute to the development of social work science and practice. A similar example of integrative foster care practice exists in Slovenia, a system of individual project groups and experts working with families in assistance and support processes (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019, p. 139) or the example of the Children's Project Ark, which is discussed by Mann and Kretchmar-Hendricks (2017), who present a model of foster care based on children and primary parents living together with support.

The identified need for more intensive involvement of social work in mobilizing and expanding the support network for foster parents also requires changes on the institutional level, such as changes in the organisation of the workload of social work centre, a bigger number of social workers, and additional training of social workers to work with foster parents. Frequent turnover and departure of social workers from social work centres who are working with families was also observed, an issue that should be further investigated. My research provided good evidence for a deeper exploration of this topic and the identification of foster parents' needs and opened up new topics as an occasion for further research in the field of foster care.

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