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Daniela COJOCARU

Foster care and the professionalisation of parenting

Secțiunea: Prezentări la conferințe naționale și internaționale

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Foster care and the professionalisation of parenting

Presented at the International Conference „Social work in European context – SWEC", organized by University from Pitești, Romania, Pitești, 2008, April, 18-19

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Abstract

A number of works dealing with the sociology of childhood talk about the recent trend in European policies to shift from the state to the parents and families and general the responsibility for the child's health, education and welfare. This increase in private parental responsibility has been accompanied by an amplification of parental supervision by experts, taking the form of a professionalisation of parents as carers and educators, achieved by defining the parents as partners to the specialists in various domains connected to child welfare, as well as by promoting parent participation, collaboration between parents and various types of specialists in schools and social and legal services. The process of professionalizing the parents as educator occurs in the general context of promoting the children's rights included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and their dissemination as ideology by the institutions involved in child welfare. This approach, seeing the parent/children relationship in terms of parental competence, reaches its peak with the advent of the profession of parent, which in Romania has the name of „professional foster carer" („asistent maternal profesionist"). This article explores the characteristics of this particular, professional, type of parenting, which represents an important form of intervention in the domain of child protection in Romania.

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Keywords

foster care, parenting professionalisation, parental competences, child protection, child protection ideology

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child focuses on the obligation the signatory states (one of which is Romania) have to provide protection and special assistance to children temporarily or permanently lacking a family environment, or who are unsafe growing up with their parents. Some of the provisions of this act refer to the possibility of ensuring protection for children by using a substitute family or an adoption family, and, only when this is not possible, an institution (CRC, art. 20, paragraph 1-3). This approach concerning the way children must be reared and cared for favours the importance of a family environment, albeit a substitutive one, by comparison to residential care. The principle of family primordiality, expressed in the shape of a child's fundamental right, has had significant effects on child protection policies worldwide, especially on the reduction of the number of institutionalised children, on the development of foster care as an alternative protection form, as well as on the support of in-country and international adoption.

Some of the studies performed show an increase in the number of children in the foster care system at global level (Pasztor and Barbell, 1997), as well as some of the negative effects of this form of protection aimed at children in difficulty. This process, the constant increase of the number of children in the protection system being cared for in substitute families, under contract, can be seen in Romania as well. Placement in foster care, despite being seen theoretically as a temporary form of protection, turns out to be, extremely often, a permanent solution for a number of categories of children (disabled children, older children, children who have been institutionalised for a long time, children who have been abandoned at birth, whose reintegration is not possible and who haven't been adopted, either). If we analyse the statistics concerning the evolution of foster care in Romania in recent years (Cojocaru and Cojocaru, 2008), and its present situation (2006 - 2007) and we focus on the average time spent by the child in foster families, we can notice the trend towards turning this solution – formally defined as temporary – into a permanent one, until the children leave the system when they turn 18, or when they finish their education. Some authors go as far as to say that long-term placement in foster care involve a tension between the residence of child in a new family and formal keeping of the child in the birth family (Kadushin, apud. Davids, 1971, p. 49). At the beginning of 2007, a number of 19,175 children had been placed in foster families, a figure that is much higher than the number of children in placement centres reported at the same date; a

number of 12,521 children were protected and cared for in permanent residence, while 9,070 were in family-type residential centres (smaller units simulating the family environment).

Evolution of the number of children in foster care in Romania

The manner in which the Romanian foster care has evolved mirrors the process of regulating childhood within the protection system, with its two dimensions: institutionalisation and familialisation. The foster care system has had a very rapid development, from the advent of this alternative to institutionalised protection until today. Seen at the beginning as a protection alternative meant to decrease the number of cases in placement centres, by the end of May 2006 foster care was protecting a number of children almost equal to that in the residential system (placement centres and family-type units).

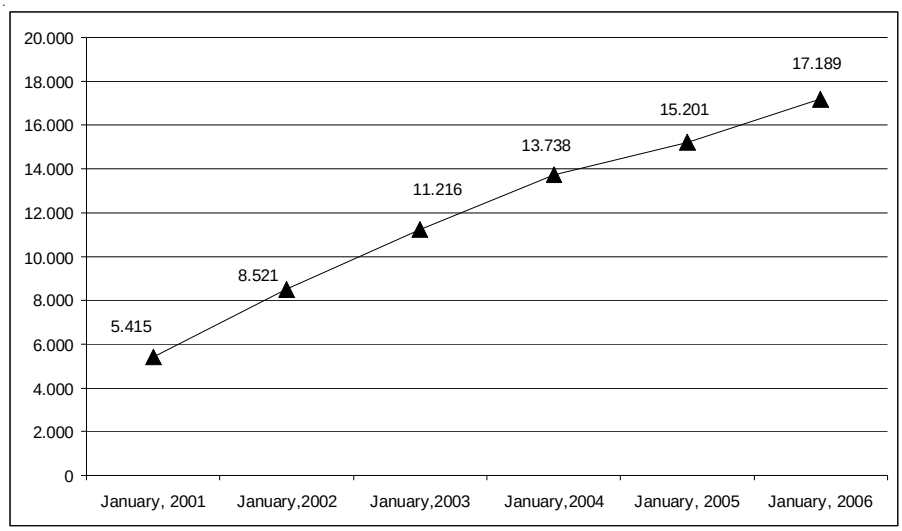

Chart 1: *Evolution of the number of children in foster care at country in the interval January 2001 – January 2007 (Cojocaru and Cojocaru, 2008)*

In Romania there is a definite social pressure on the child protection system, generated by the high number of abandoned young children (below the age of 3), left in maternity wards and in paediatrics hospitals, a phenomenon that could be explained by the precarious social and economic situation of some population categories. There is also the high level of interest from families in being paid to care for abandoned children, this level increasing in recent years, the proof being the increased number of applications for this type of employment. The high

expansion rate of the Romanian foster care system in recent years has turned the attention of public policies specialists towards the development of services aimed at preventing child abandonment and the child's separation from its family, in order to avoid the future expansion of the protection system.

We point out the fact that countrywide there is a constant upward growth trend in the foster care system. This trend has been used in child protection policies, by promoting the family-type care model, under the supervision of professional agents from protection institutions that is *the familialisation of protected childhood*. By comparison to 1 January 2005, it can be noticed that as of 1 January 2006 the number of children placed with foster parents had increased by 13.07 %, and later, in January 2007 it had grown by 26.14 % (again compared with 1 January 2005). These data reflect a growing trend in the number of children admitted into the foster care system, disproportionately large when compared to the number of exits from the system, exits that would mean finding a permanent familial solution, desirable for the child from the perspective of the protection system (integration in the biological family or adoption).

Growth rate for the number of children in the professional foster care system	Growth rate (%)
Growth rate at 1 January 2006 (compared to 1 Jan. 2005)	13.07
Growth rate at 1 January 2007 (compared to 1 Jan. 2005)	26.14

Table 1. *Growth rate for the number of children in the foster care system compared to 1 January 2005 (source: institutional files)*

Evolution of the foster care system in the county of Iași

The county of Iași has the highest number of children in foster care in the country, being one of the first promoters of this form of protection. Seen at the beginning as an alternative to institutionalisation, foster care has become in time one of the main protection forms for children separated from their biological parents. This is the reason why our study the analysis of substitute parentality was performed in several stages, having as case study the county of Iași.

Evolution of the number of foster parents

Ever since the beginning of the temporary family-type care system in the county of Iași, the foster care system has been growing constantly, this being the county with the highest number of foster parents and of children placed in this type of families in Romania, and the number of applications from families remains elevated; every year, the number of foster parents trained and authorised by the protection system has surpassed this institution's needs.

For instance, at the end of 2006 in Iaºi there were 66 families authorised as capable of caring for children from the protection system, but there were no children placed with them.

	Year								
TYPE	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
No. of foster parents authorised during the year	173	167	125	242	151	285	170	125	23
No. of foster parents at the end of the year	173	325	424	631	677	917	1,041	1,114	1,043
No. of foster parents with children at the end of the year	76	209	297	472	615	864	949	974	977

Table 2. *Foster care parents network in the county of Iași between 1998 and 2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

The data in the first row of the table concern the number of foster parents authorised by the Child Protection Commission Iași (CPC) during the year, for each year included in the reference interval. They represent the category of people who applied for the position of foster parent, were assessed, trained and was authorised by the CPC. The data in the second row of the table above concern the number of foster parents with a valid authorisation existing at the end of each year, consisting of both foster parents with children in placement and foster parents on the waiting list. The data in the third row concern the number of foster parents with children in placement at the end of the year, for each year included in the analysed reference interval.

By analysing the data in the table we notice that at the end of 2006 the foster parents network had an occupancy rate of 93.6%, only 66 of the foster parents with valid authorisations did not have children placed with them. On the other hand, we notice the trend towards saturation in the foster care system and the way the DGASPC adapted its strategy to this phenomenon by decreasing the number of foster parents it recruited, assessed, trained and authorised (in 2006 only 23 foster parents were authorised, all of them specialising in caring for children younger than two). This is due partly to the inclusion in the Romanian legislation of a restriction on placing children under the age of two in institutions, and partly to the pressure on the child protection system to provide a protection measure for children under two abandoned in maternity wards, paediatrics hospitals or in public spaces, or at the request of parents going through a crisis (in particular underage mothers who do not agree to use the services of the shelter).

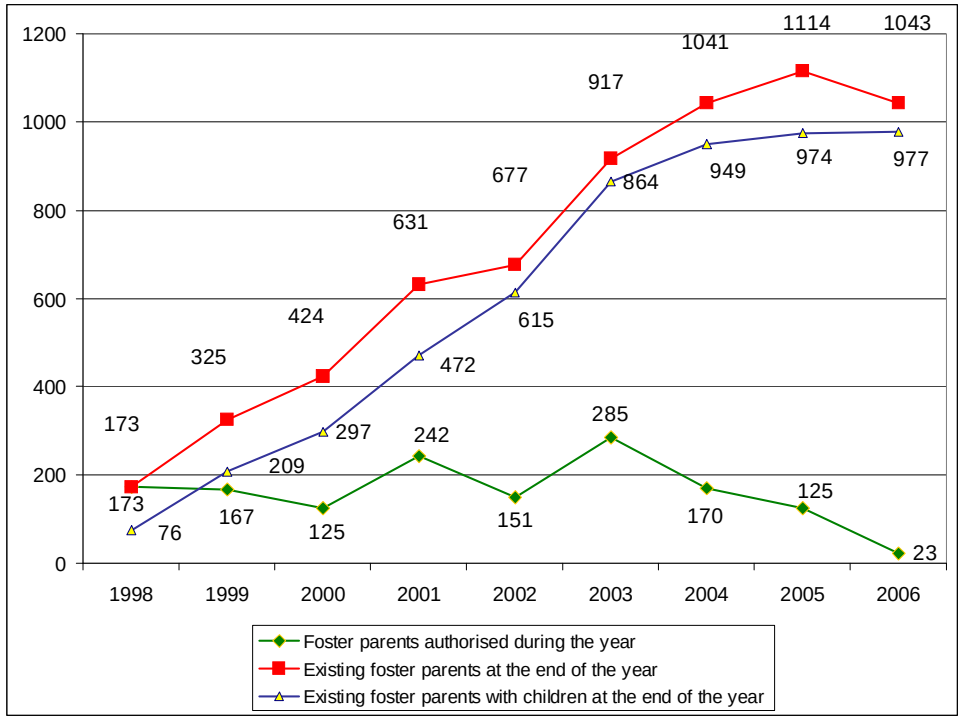

Chart 2. *Evolution of the foster care network in the county of Ia˘i in the interval 1998 – 2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

Chart 2 shows the growth trend in the network of foster parents of the Iași DGASPC from 1998 until 2005. Once the system was saturated, the number of authorised foster parents began decreasing, at the end of 2006 reaching a number of 1043. The highest annual growths were recorded in 2001 (48.8% higher than the previous year, i.e. 207 foster parents in absolute numbers) and in 2003 (35.5% higher than the previous year, i.e. 240 foster parents in absolute numbers). The same upward trend was recorded in the evolution of the number of foster parents receiving children in placement, at the end of 2006 there were 977 foster families with children in their care. The downward trend in authorising foster parents is natural, given the fact that the foster care system had developed continuously.

Gender in the foster care system

The legislation concerning foster care allows the authorisation as foster parents of adults irrespective of gender. In the evolution of foster care in the county of Iași there is an upward trend in the numbers of both male and female authorised foster parents (at the end of 2006, the number of male and female foster parents was 12 times higher than in 1998). The data concern the number of foster parents with children in placement at the end of each year in the reference time interval.

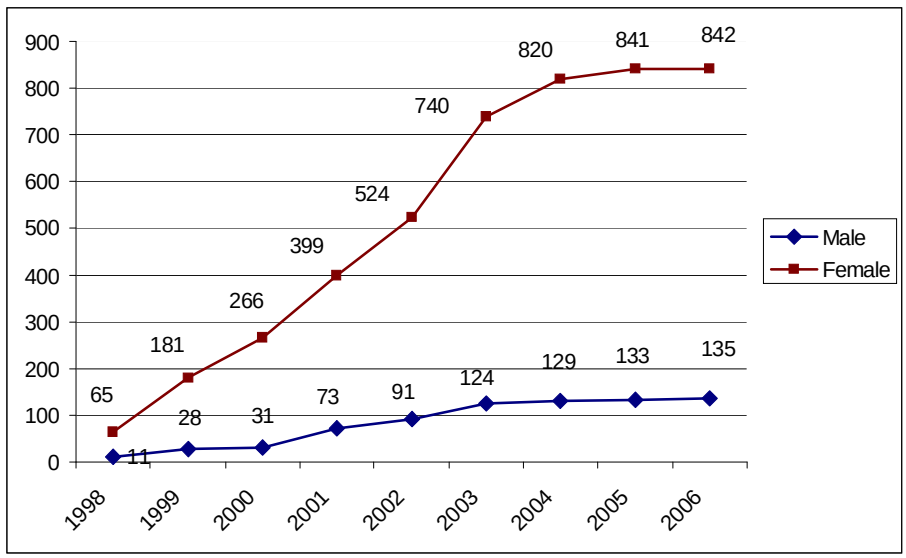

Chart 3. *Gender-based evolution of the number of foster parents in the county of Iași in the interval 1998 – 2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

Discussing the same time interval (1998-2006), the gender structure of the foster parents network has remained almost constant from year to year. Thus, the chart below shows, in percentages, that this ratio of genders among the total of foster parents has remained constant. This distribution depends on the number of double and triple placements in the same family of foster parents; in order to support the foster family in providing for the larger number of children placed in one family, a strategy was adopted to assess and authorise both spouses as foster parents, and thus both spouses are paid according to the contract, despite the fact that in most cases it is the foster mother who deals with the care, education and rearing of the placed children.

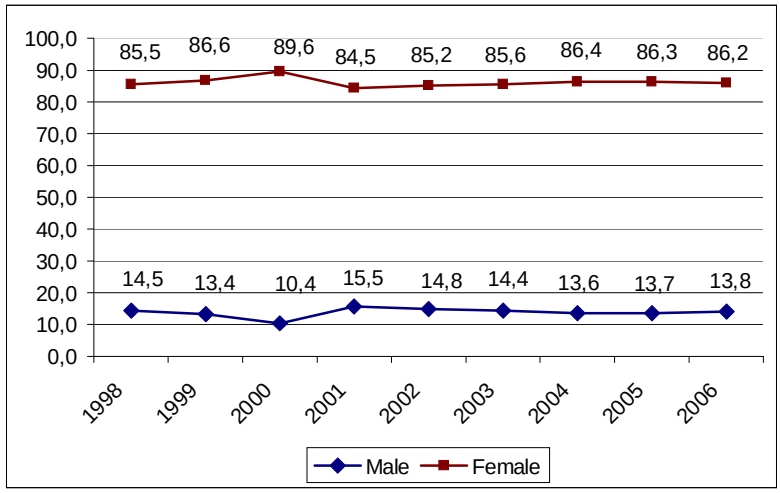

Chart 4. *Evolution of the gender distribution of the number of foster parents in the county of Iași, interval 1998 – 2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

This strategy – motivating the family so that it takes several children in placement –has been used mainly for placing groups of siblings with the same foster family.

Age of carers in the foster care system

The data in the Iași DGASPC case files show that most foster parents took children in their care for the first time when their ages were between 30 and 39 (33.5% of the total) and between 40 and 49 (33.1% of total foster parents). Placements with individuals aged 18-19 and over 70 are exceptions.

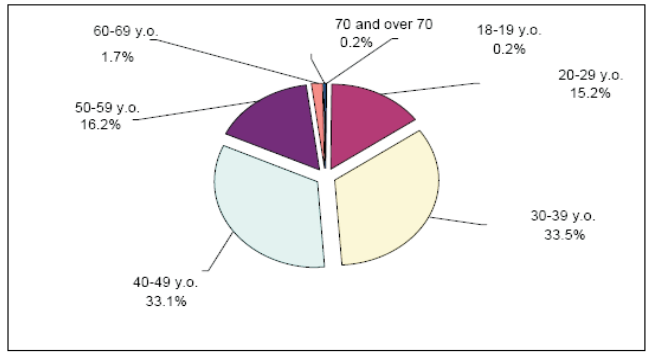

Chart 5. *Age structure of foster carers in the county of Iași at the first placement (Source: DGASPC Iași)*

The data concern the number of foster parents who took at least one child into their care between 1998 and 2006. The age groups were calculated depending on the age each foster parent had reached at the date the first child was placed with them. Studying foster parents' age at the first placement is useful when identifying the stage of the life cycle of the family when it receives a child into its home, this influencing the investments the family is willing to make for the child's rearing, education, care and sometimes rehabilitation, in the case of disabled children.

Foster families' residential environment

The analysis of statistics made available by the Iași DGASPC shows that the foster care network developed since 1998 is predominantly focused on the rural environment (over three quarters of the foster carers who have had or still have children in their care live in the rural environment). On 31 December 2006, there were 1194 children placed in foster families, 77.6% of them being in families in the rural environment. This phenomenon is due to several factors, such as:

- the willingness and openness of families in the rural environment to receive children in placement;
- families in the rural environment have greater space availability, there fore they can provide a separate room for the child; urban buildings such as apartment blocks do not always offer this opportunity;
- lack of employment in the rural environment and the decrease of commuting into town due to massive lay-offs in various industries;
- strong motivation of individuals in the rural environment to have secure salaries, employment contracts and a work record (the main document used in Romania to verify an individual's work and salary history before potential employers and creditors, and as support documentation when claiming unemployment benefits and pensions);
- availability of material resources on the homestead, due to animal farming and agriculture;
- experience in rearing children in large families, often seen as a strength when assessing foster families;
- approval by the community of such activities, seen not only as a source of income, but also as „the Christian thing to do";
- the high number of children in the county's protection institutions after 1989, mainly older children, resulting in a policy of accelerated recruitment of foster parents that would provide an alternative to institutionalisation;

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Total foster parents	76	209	297	472	615	864	949	974	977
of which	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
FP in urban environment	35.5	30.6	20.9	19.9	18.7	21.8	21.4	23.7	24.5
FP in rural environment	64.5	69.4	79.1	80.1	81.3	78.2	78.6	76.3	75.5
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3. *Structure of the network of foster parents with children in their care, depending on residential environment, in the interval 1998-2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

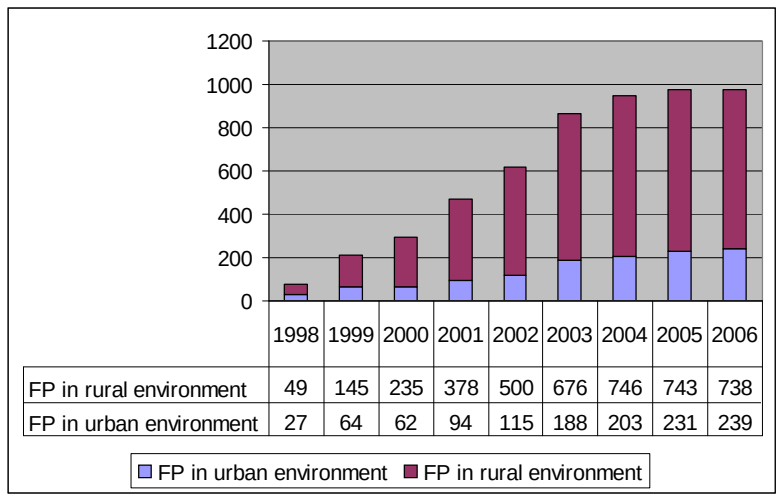

Chart 6. *Distribution according to residential environment of foster parents with children in their care between 1998 and 2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

The data in Chart 6 concern the number of foster parents with children in their care at the end of each year in the reference time interval, distributed according to the foster parents' environment of origin.

Evolution of the number of children placed in foster families

Starting in 1998, the number of children in foster care in the county of Iași has grown rapidly, reaching 1,194 at the end of 2006, the highest number of children placed in this form of protection in Romania, by comparison with the other counties. This is also one of the reasons we have opted in our research to analyse the phenomenon of foster care in the county of Iași.

	Year								
Category	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Children in placement with foster parents at the end of the year	88	229	365	566	728	991	1,083	1,130	1,194

Table 4. *Number of children in foster families in the county of Iași in the interval 1998 – 2006 (source: DGASPC Iași)*

As we can see in the table above, the number of children in foster families has risen continuously in this time interval, at the end of 2006 their number being 13.6 higher than in 1998; in the past three years the increase of the number of children placed in foster families has grown only moderately, the average growth rate in this interval being 6.4% each year.

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