Attitudes and decision-making in the child protection system: a comparison of students and professionals

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Abstract

In the contexts of family neglect or maltreatment, the State intervenes by safeguarding the development and well-being of the child or young person in danger. In more severe situations, the intervention may lead to the child's removal from the family. The Portuguese Law on the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger (Law 142/2015 of September 8th) favours the placement of the child in a family environment, especially for children up to the age of six.

Despite this, in Portugal, in 2015, 8 600 children were in out-of-home care, only 3.5% of which were placed in foster care, while the remaining children were in residential care. Therefore, one of the fundamental rights of the child – living in a family environment – is compromised in practice.

This study aims to understand the decision-making process of 200 higher education students in domains related to child protection, and those of 200 professionals who are responsible for providing case assessments and recommendations for intervention in the Portuguese child protection system.

Using the Child Welfare Attitudes Questionnaire (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008, 2010), the study aimed to identify the participants' attitudes regarding removal of at-risk children from home, reunification and optimal duration of alternative care, children's and parents' participation in the decision-making process, and assessment of foster care and residential care, with the purpose of promoting children's development and well-being.

We concluded that both sets of participants (professionals and students) can be divided in two groups, one which is pro-removal and the other, which is less so. In comparison with students, professionals less often favour the removal of the child and more often defend reunification. There are no significant differences among participants regarding their opinion about the role of foster and residential care, and the participation of the child in the decision-making process. However, professionals tend to support parents' participation in the decision-making process more than students do. Finally, we present some implications of our findings for the practice of child protection.

Keywords: child protection systems, decision-making process, foster care, residential care

Introduction

In most European child-protection systems, foster care has become the first option for children's placement (Eurochild, 2010). The low level of social development reached by children and young people in residential care, the existence of scandals involving the abuse of children and young people in institutions, the priority given to the Convention on the Rights of the Child with

relation to family placement, and the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1944; 1951; Rutter, 1991; 1995) have sustained a growing commitment to family care as the best type of placement for children and young people who need to be removed from their families.

The most important decision in this process is choosing the best solution for each child and young person, which could actually be residential care, especially for the older ones with special needs. However, if the goal to be achieved is to promote a secure attachment, and to provide the conditions for complete development, the best response usually comes from the experience of living with a family, hence the tendency for children or young persons to be placed in foster care. Therefore, the State has the obligation to do everything in its reach to enable the child or young person to take advantage of this intervention. This trend is based on the assumption of a child-centred approach, which aims to allow all children, including those who are in care, the full and effective exercise of their rights, including the right to grow up in a family context (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011).

In order to achieve their full development, children and young people need commitment and individualised dedication from a career. Foster care has proved to be a context capable of strengthening relations of proximity and trust, based on affection and attention, showing that "it is not sad to have several affective relationships, what is sad is to have none" (Gersão, 2014, p. 128).

The amendment of Portugal's Law on Protection of Children and Young People in Danger, carried out by Law 142/2015 of September 8th, introduced significant changes in the protection system for at-risk children and young people. The aim of the intervention, the choice between foster care and residential care, and the placement length are examples of good regulation, since they are designed to favour foster care, the maintenance of the relationship with the foster carers, and permanence in that context, independently or in parallel to the relationship with the biological family.

However, in the last 10 years, the care and protection system has been characterised by a proportional increase in the use of residential care, the intervention applied to 96.5% of the children and young people (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2016). This scenario has no parallel in other countries with the same industrial or post-industrial model, and with which we share great cultural and social affinities. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014), in its concluding observations on the third and fourth periodic reports submitted by Portugal, warned of the need to strengthen family-based care and to develop a deinstitutionalisation process, with precise targets, aiming for the progressive elimination of institutions.

Local actors cannot implement social policies if they are not effectively supported by political power. The lack of recruitment campaigns for foster carers and resources that would support the costs of foster care, as well as the non-existence of a tax policy that favours and enhances foster care activity compromise its development, since public policies in Portugal are fundamentally structured in a top-down logic (Knill &Tosun, 2012).

Del Valle and Bravo's research (2013) pointed to a consensus on the need to ensure that children and young people who are removed from their families can live in a family environment capable of meeting their developmental needs. This evidence has resulted in a tendency to reduce the use of residential care and to increase the use of foster care.

Recently, the Recommendation 112/2013 of the European Commission (Official Journal of the European Union, 2013) has adopted this guideline by stating that the process of improving family support services and the quality of alternative care services involves the use of appropriate strategies aimed at avoiding integration of children and young people in institutions and promotion of regular reviews of cases of institutionalisation. It also proposes that priority should be given to collaborative work between entities and with foster carers and social workers, all considering the children's voice.

In Portugal, it has been assumed that more attention should be given to foster care, especially in the annual reports on the children and young people in care. In 2011, for example, the report stressed the residual number of children in foster care, in the group comprising new-borns to three-year-olds, as opposed to the number of children in residential care, and expressed concerns about the future impact of these decisions on their development, since these placement decisions may lead to "irreversible cognitive development delays" (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2011, p.66). It also noted the development of foster care in Spain, where there was a decrease in prevalence of residential care.

In the following year, the vast majority of children and young people in care was placed in residential care, with preference over foster care, even as foster care is defined in the national reports as a privileged space for the development of a very close relationship between the child or young person and the foster carer, without which a "secure attachment and a quality affective relation" can be compromised (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2012, p.83). In 2013, foster care was characterised as an intervention that is in a very incipient phase, recognising the need to regulate its different types of (emergency, short term and long term) and the need to invest in the proper selection, training, monitoring, and evaluation of foster carers (Instituto de Segurança Social, 2013, p.102).

As regards research, recent studies have shown the positive results obtained by children and young people in foster care (Delgado et al., 2013) and the reduced and limited outcomes among children and young people in residential care (Martins et al. 2013; Oliveira et al., 2014).

Deciding whether to withdraw or reunite the child with his/her family is a decision that has a major impact on both the children's and the adults' lives. This decision is always difficult because the best option is uncertain, underlining the need to understand the influence of contexts and personal specificities in these processes. The identification and analysis of the factors that determine the path of the decision-making process can thus contribute to a more informed decision, and promote reflection on the current practice.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in comparative studies of decision-making within the child protection systems. Studies have focused on the ability of a person or a group to interpret the information and analyze and reflect on the factors, the criteria and the procedures that surround the decisions related to the prevention, monitoring, evaluation, withdrawal, or reunification of the child with the family of origin (Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008, 2010; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001; Regehr, Bogo, Shlonsky, & LeBlanc, 2010).

The ecological approach (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011; Baumann, Kern, & Fluke, 1997) has shown that decisions in this area are influenced by a diverse set of elements, including the following: case characteristics; organizational factors such as professional team size, training, and resources; factors associated with decision making, such as the process guidelines and experience; and finally, external factors such as the legal framework, critical events, or community involvement. Benbenishty et al. (2014) note that decisions are made according to hierarchy and social context related to the person, the professional team, political and legal framework, region or country, and cultural and historical environment. However, this process is continuous, since the situation under analysis is subject to change with the mere passage of time, requiring a process of new collection of information and reconsideration of the initial assumptions (Gambrill, 2008). Despite all efforts, some features may have a negative impact, such as recent experiences, tiredness or boredom, any of which can influence the judgments and "get them to fall short of the optimum result" (Hardman, 2009, p.11).

Other authors emphasize the influence of workers' personal characteristics, such as personality and temperament, as well as their beliefs, in the decision-making process, which some studies reveal as especially important for the interpretation of relevant information and situation assessment (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010). Professionals' individual factors such as fear of parents' reactions, fear of making the wrong decision, feelings of guilt for breaking trust, or sympathy for the families with whom the intervention is to be made were also identified by Horwath (2006).

Moreover, the mother's behavior is referred to as a significant factor and as having an impact on professionals' decisions (e.g. Gold et al., 2001; Regehr et al., 2010).

All of these studies have been conducted with professionals. However, it is important to consider their prior training and higher education level, as these are the factors which have prepared them for this decision-making process. Therefore, we decided to study the perceptions of students in higher education, in order to try to analyze their preconceived ideas regarding a case of violence against a child in her family environment.

This research is part of an international study conducted in several countries such as Israel, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and Northern Ireland, coordinated by the Haruv Institute of Israel, a non-profit organization dedicated to preventing child abuse. The main objective of the study is to develop recommendations for practice and to better understand what influences and determines decisions in environments characterized by complexity and uncertainty, comparing the differences and similarities between the various countries and cultural contexts.

All these reasons, as well as the social context, justify this study, which intends to understand the decision-making process among 200 higher education students in domains related to child protection, and 200 professionals who are responsible for providing case assessments and recommendations for interventions in the Portuguese child protection system, and verify if they contribute to the decisions that privilege foster or residential care. Finally, it is expected that the findings of this study can contribute to a reflection on professional practices, and to an understanding of the attitudes of future professionals on this subject.

Using the Child Welfare Attitudes Questionnaire (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008, 2010), the study aimed to identify the participants' attitudes concerning removal of at-risk children from home, reunification and optimal duration of alternative care, children and parents' participation in decisions, and assessment of foster care and residential care, in order to promote children's development and well-being. Based on these dimensions, our research questions are as follows: (1) are there any differences between professionals' and students' attitudes regarding what concerns the situation of a child at risk?; (2) based on their attitudes, are there different profiles of professionals and students?; (3) if these different profiles exist, do they have any relation with their demographic and professional characteristics?; and (4) if these different profiles of professionals and students exist, are there any differences in their attitudes across the profiles?

Methods

Our study employs a cross-sectional design and a quantitative research strategy. The samples consisted of 200 professionals, who work directly or indirectly with children at risk, responsible for the supervision of these cases and for intervention recommendations in matters such as foster family and residential care, namely in the Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People, Framework Institutions for the family and residential care measure, early intervention teams and school intervention; and 200 students, studying in areas related to this problematic, such as Psychology, Social Education and Social Work, among others. The data were collected in 2014 in the main regions of Portugal (Braga, Oporto, Coimbra, Lisbon, and Faro); more specifically, in person at the workplaces of all participants from Oporto and Lisbon, and online with the participants from the other regions. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, either orally or in writing, and anonymity was guaranteed. The procedures were reviewed and approved in ethical terms by InED (Center for Research and Innovation in Education, School of Education, Polytechnic Institute of Porto). Data analysis was performed with the IBM-SPSS 20.

The student sample

The 200 students in our sample were enrolled in higher education: 85 were in the last year of their degree and 115 were attending a master's degree course. These degree programs are in relevant scientific areas for the promotion and protection of children and young people, and these students may in the future apply for a position in this field. Most of the students studied Psychology (61 students), Social education (58) or Social work (33). With less representation: Socio-educational animation (4), Education and social intervention (10), Special education (17), Child studies (8), Psychological intervention, education and development (2), and Psychosocial intervention (7).

The clear majority of respondents was female (91.5%). The sample shows some dispersion with regard to age, since six students were younger than 20; 131 were between 20 and 29 years of age; 36 were between 30 and 39 years of age; and 27 of them were 40 or older.

About 67.5% of students were single, and a total of 24% had children. Thirty-eight of these students were taking part in the labour market, practicing activities mainly in the social area, with 18 social educators, 14 social workers and six psychologists. Of these, 12 reported having experience working with children and young people at risk, and five were working for the Institute of Social

Security, I.P. in the area of childhood and youth. The number of years of professional experience among these students ranged from one to 20 (M = 7.22, SD = 6.06). With regard to religious affiliation, the majority (77.5%) was Catholic, although 67.7% of these are non-practicing. A minority (17.5%) identified themselves as atheists or non-religious and 5% as followers of other religions.

The professional sample

Analysing the sociodemographic characteristics of the professionals' sample, we can see that almost all respondents were women (92%). Their age distribution was as follows: 20–24 years (15 cases); 25-29 years (34 cases); 30-34 years (47 cases); 35-39 years (26 cases); 40-45 years (33 cases); and more than 45 years (45 cases). Most of them were married (64%) and 110 had children. The majority (75.5%) was Catholic, but 70.2% were not practicing. Their professions were distributed as follows: Social workers (23%), Psychologists (20%), Social educators (12.5%), Medical doctors (1%), and others (43.5%), such as Judges, Lawyers, Representatives of Local Authorities, Representatives of Child Care Associations, and Children and Young People Protection Committees professionals. There were 198 professionals that had a higher education degree (158 a Bachelor's, and 40 a Master's or PhD degree), and just two only completed Secondary School. Their professional experience (in years) ranged between six months and 40 years (n = 177; M = 13.54; SD = 9.23), and they had experience working directly with children at risk within a range between three months and 36 years (n = 164; M = 6.93; SD = 5.92). The average number of years working in intervention at the national care system was 6.49 (n = 79; SD = 5.15), and they had worked with 218 cases on average (n = 62; SD = 407.5).

Measurement

For the purpose of this study, we asked the participants to fill in the 'Child Welfare Attitudes Questionnaire' that has been used in previous studies (e.g., Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008, 2010). The questionnaire consists of 50 statements covering six content areas. In each of these areas both positive and negative attitudes were included. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each item on a five-point scale, from '1=strongly disagree', to '5=strongly agree'. The following attitudes were included: 'against removal from home of children at risk' (Cronbach's α: professionals= .734; students= .795; 11 items); 'favours reunification and optimal duration of alternative care' (α = .675; .774; 7 items); 'favours children's participation in decisions' (α = .779; .729; 9 items); 'favours parents' participation in decisions' (α = .762; .699; 9 items); 'positive assessment of foster care to promote children's development and well-being' (α = .700; .621; 8 items); and 'positive assessment of residential care to promote children's development and well-being' (α = .679; .664; 6 items). All these Cronbach's alpha values, measuring internal consistency, are considered acceptable for an exploratory study (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsmann, 1991).

Results

The attitude that professionals and students supported the most was the importance of children's participation in the decisions concerning their individual care plan (Table 1). It can also be noted that, with statistically significant difference, professionals favour keeping at-risk children at home, reunification, and parents' participation in the decisions.

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of Child Welfare Attitudes

	Professionals N = 200		Students N = 200		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Favour maintaining children at risk at home	2.65	0.47	2.50	0.51	4.052**
Foster care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.59	0.43	2.57	0.40	0.433
Residential care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.53	0.46	2.48	0.47	1.064
Favour reunification	2.95	0.51	2.83	0.61	2.220*
Favour children's participation in the decisions	3.71	0.48	3.65	0.45	1.375
Favour parents' participation in the decisions	3.10	0.52	2.96	0.47	2.655**

*p < .05
**p < .01

In order to identify different types of professionals and students on the basis of their attitudes towards key issues involved in removal and reunification decisions, we carried out cluster analyses of the scores on the attitudes measures (Tables 2 and 3). In both cases, we chose a two-cluster solution as the most parsimonious and effective approach (professionals' effect size: η^2=.66; students' effect size: η^2=.63).

Table 2 Means and standard deviations by Child Welfare Cluster in the Professionals' sample

	Anti-removal N = 136		Pro-removal N = 64		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Favour maintaining children at risk at home	2.86	0.34	2.21	0.38	12.200***
Foster care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.64	0.44	2.46	0.41	2.733**
Residential care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.66	0.42	2.27	0.41	6.195***
Favour reunification	3.16	0.38	2.52	0.47	10.215***
Favour children's participation in the decisions	3.82	0.46	3.48	0.46	4.859***
Favour parents' participation in the decisions	3.29	0.44	2.68	0.44	9.183***

**p<.01
***p<.001

Table 3 Means and standard deviations by Child Welfare Cluster in the Students' sample

	Anti-removal N = 122		Pro-removal N = 78		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Favour maintaining children at risk at home	2.78	0.39	2.07	0.36	12.973***
Foster care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.69	0.37	2.38	0.39	5.642***
Residential care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.61	0.44	2.28	0.44	5.155***
Favour reunification	3.20	0.39	2.26	0.42	16.080***
Favour children's participation in the decisions	3.69	0.41	3.58	0.49	1.618
Favour parents' participation in the decisions	3.18	0.37	2.62	0.40	9.998***

***p<.001

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was carried out to compare these two groups of professionals, showing a significant and meaningful difference in the various measures (F = 63.26; *p* < .001), indicating that indeed, these are two distinct groups. The same was made in relation to

students, showing also a significant and meaningful difference in the various measures (F = 64.57; *p* < .001).

As can be seen (Tables 2 and 3), the professionals and the students in the first cluster (anti-removal) are characterised by a greater tendency to object to removing the child from abusive or neglectful homes, and this difference is statistically significant. However, both groups score less than 3 points on average, showing nevertheless that they are not as radical as the pro-removal group, merely less in favour of removal. As expected, the pro-removal groups agree more that foster care and residential care do promote children's development and well-being. On the other hand, the anti-removal groups favour reunification and children and parents' participation in the decisions, with the exception of the students' group, with regard to children's participation, since there is no statistical difference between anti and pro-removal groups on that matter.

We examined the relationships between cluster membership and the demographic and professional characteristics. There is no significant correlation with any of these variables: gender ($\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 1.403; p = .236), age group (K-S-2 = 1.104; p = .175), religion ($\chi^2_{(3)}$ = 4.591; p = .204), marital status ($\chi^2_{(2)}$ = 1.043; p = .594), having children ($\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 0.004; p = .951), education level (K-S-2 = 0.206; p = 1), and profession ($\chi^2_{(4)}$ = 7.219; p = .125). The same analysis was performed with regard to students, with similar conclusions: gender ($\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 0.107; p = .743), age group (K-S-2 = 0.952; p = .324), religion ($\chi^2_{(3)}$ = 6.065; p = .108), marital status ($\chi^2_{(2)}$ = 1.918; p = .383), having children ($\chi^2(1)$ = 2.567; p = .109), education level ($\chi^2_{(2)}$ = 4.107; p = .128), and profession ($\chi^2_{(4)}$ = 6.856; p = .077).

Table 4 Mean differences between pro and anti-removal groups

	Anti-removal			Pro-removal		
	Prof.	Stud.		Prof.	Stud.	
	Means		t	Means		t
Favour maintaining children at risk at home	2.86	2.78	1.77	2.21	2.07	2.275*
Foster care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.64	2.69	-0.89	2.46	2.38	1.276
Residential care does not promote children's development and well-being	2.66	2.61	0.86	2.26	2.28	-0.235
Favour reunification	3.16	3.20	-0.79	2.52	2.26	3.55**
Favour children's participation in the decisions	3.82	3.69	2.402*	3.48	3.58	-1.274
Favour parents' participation in the decisions	3.29	3.18	2.161*	2.68	2.62	0.798

*p < .05
**p < .01

As we can see in Table 4, in the anti-removal group, professionals agree more than students with children and parents' participation in decision-making, and this difference is statistically significant. Meanwhile, in the pro-removal group, students have stronger negative attitudes than professionals concerning the maintenance of children at home and reunification.

Discussion

There are hardly any significant differences between participants concerning the participation of the child in the decision-making process. It is true that favouring children´s participation is the attitude that professionals and students supported most, which is in line with the main international legislative documents, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), in

its Article 12, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Official Journal of the European Union 2007), in its article 24. Both articles consecrate the involvement of children and young people in the processes that concern them, according to their age and maturity. This principle was also transposed to The Portuguese Law on the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger (Law 142/2015 of September 8th). The collected data show that children's participation is a principle assumed by the respondents, in their representations and values, with likely positive repercussions in the practice that the professionals are currently carrying out and that will be developed by the students in the future.

As noted before, we concluded that both sets of participants (professionals and students) can be divided in two groups, one more pro-removal and other less pro-removal.

The pro-removal group agrees more that residential or foster care promotes child development, is thus less inclined to favour reunification, and favours parents' participation in the decisions less than the anti-removal group. There is no relationship between demographic and professional characteristics studied and cluster membership. For future research, it would be interesting to identify variables that may possibly be associated with belonging to one or the other group. Likewise, it would be interesting to analyse whether integration into one of the groups results from the values and representations that the participants have constructed over the course of their lives about the family, the system of protection, and types of placement.

In comparison, professionals do not favour the removal of the child as much as the students do, and defend reunification more than students do. That might explain why professionals also support the participation of the parents in decision-making more than students. In fact, students, as well as professionals, consider that the child or young person's participation in decisions concerning their life, such as withdrawal or reunification, is important, but this attitude, for the students, is not the same in relation to parents' participation or role. The finding of importance of children's participation in the decision-making process is in agreement with previous studies, such as that developed by Davidson-Arad and Benbenishty (2016). However, parents' participation is important for all actors involved and, for the child in particular, during the removal process, the period of care and the reunification, unless such participation is detrimental to the physical or mental integrity of the child. Therefore, it seems useful to include the topic of parents' participation in students' lectures and in professionals' training, in order for them to become aware of the need to involve parents in the decision-making process regarding their future and the future of their children. The biological family must play a role in the process of protection, their opinion must be valued and listened to in the construction of the proposed life change, with a view to the effective recovery of their parental skills and responsibilities, in order to guarantee the necessary and adequate conditions for (re)unification.

There are no significant differences between participants in what concerns their opinion about the role of foster and residential care. From the perspectives of professionals and students, both contribute to the development and well-being of the child or young person. This indifferent appreciation of the two types of care departs from the evolution pattern of the main industrial or post-industrial model of the protection system, which we have previously discussed, helping us explain the high percentage of children and young people in residential care in Portugal. Therefore,

the participants' attitudes towards residential care and foster care, particularly those of profes-sionals, who are directly involved in the decision-making process, contribute to the *status quo* in the Portuguese protection system, characterised by an excessive and indiscriminate recourse to residential care, particularly when it comes to infants and young children. It should be noted that in 2015, 1097 children (12.8%) in care were under five years of age and only 21 children lived in foster care (Instituto de Segurança Social, 2016).

Conclusion

In sum, we can conclude that there are differences between professionals' and students' attitudes regarding the situation of a child at risk. First, professionals favour maintaining at-risk children at home, reunification, and parents' participation in the decisions more than students do; second, two different profiles of professionals and students exist based on their attitudes, one more 'pro-removal' and other less so, the latter of which we have called 'anti-removal'; third, there are no differences between these profiles and their demographic and professional characteristics; finally, professionals agree more than students with children and parents' participation in decision-making in the anti-removal group, while in the pro-removal group, students have stronger negative atti-tudes than professionals concerning the maintenance of children at home, and their reunification.

On the one hand, the data from this study show that participation in the decision-making process, especially that of children, is a principle assumed by respondents in their representa-tions and values. This attitude is reflected in the professionals' current practice, and it seems to be well-accepted by the students. On the other hand, the students showed a less open attitude than the professionals regarding the involvement of the parents in the decisions regarding foster care. This attitude suggests that it could be useful to include the theme of parental participation in the student component and the training of professionals, and to emphasize the need to involve parents in the decision-making process about their future and the future of their children. The biological family must play a role in the process of protection, their opinion must be valued and listened to in the construction of the proposal of change of life, aiming at the effective recovery of their parental responsibilities and responsibilities, in order to guarantee the necessary and the adequate conditions for the (re)unification (Neil, Cossar, Lorgelly, & Young, 2010).

Thus, regarding students, we find a need to reinforce or include in the curricula of social work course topics related to the protection system of children and young people, related to prevention, decision-making and types of placements. Whenever possible, they should study concrete cases in the context of classroom or in the field, in practical modules.

It is well known that the paradigm of institutionalisation, which characterises our protection system, will remain unchanged if the true meaning of foster care is not disclosed more broadly. This can include spreading the special features of this type of placement, more specifically the im-portance of the attachment and the meaning of living in a familiar, stable, welcoming and unique environment, for the promotion of the emotional, affective and identity development of each child.

Following the legal amendment, the change in practice implies a need for effective in-stitutional leadership, development of specialised campaigns to ensure the recruitment of new

foster carers, development of the selection process, and monitoring and support of their activity by professionals with the necessary resources to adequately conduct their work. It is essential to decide the role of the Social Security Institute and the private sector institutions in this process. It is necessary to rethink the network of existing residential care institutions in Portugal in terms of their number, size, location, human and physical resources, and to develop effective preventative work, to avoid the removal of children and young people from their biological family wherever possible, and to promote, at the same time, the recovery or development of the parenting skills of the biological families.

All these changes currently depend on the policy-makers. The implementation of these policies is the responsibility of the State, moving from the discursive and structural dimension to the materialisation by the competent professionals, who work in the area of protection of children and young people in danger. Those professionals also have a key role, since, in addition to implementing the policy makers' decisions in practice, and besides Portugal being fundamentally structured in a top-down logic, they can use their discretion and influence the way they are involved in implementing these decisions. In fact, their views on the types of placements and their representation of family, institutions and family care can promote or condition the process. Furthermore, the comparison of the Portuguese reality with other legal models and protection systems, and the access to the know-how concerning what is done and how it is done can certainly contribute to the development of the Portuguese child protection system and to the professionals' development.

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