A Foster Family as an Educational Institution: the case of an EU new-comer country

Vilma Staskevičienė, Kedainiai (Lithuania)

The main issue which is discussed in this review are the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution, which is functioning under the condition of a country in transition.

1. Introduction

The geopolitical situation of Lithuania has changed fundamentally during the last 17 years: the country has declared its independence and has become the member of NATO and the European Union. Because of these changes and the influence of the evolutional processes, such as transformation and globalisation the system of social welfare, education and activity of foster families have changed basically. In Lithuania foster families are functioning in the conditions of the country in transition. This aspect is very important, because the context of a foster family activity defines the specific features of this educational institution.

So, these factors reflect the interesting experience of the development of the children foster care system in Lithuania and could be treated as a case study of a European Union new-comer country.

This review focuses on the scientific research of the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution in a country in transition. The review is prepared on the bases of my doctoral dissertation, which was defended in September 2007 in Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania).

The policy of children welfare has been developed in Western countries already for two hundred years. The main element in this system is a child: his rights and needs. It is emphasized in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that one of the main rights of a child is his right to live in a family. Meanwhile, the theory and practice of children care in foster families started to develop since 1998 in Lithuania, when Child Care Law came into force.

A foster family is functioning as an educational institution in Western countries. Both scientists and practitioners pay great attention to the education of foster parents. Universities and colleges in cooperation with practitioners have created effective educational programmes for foster parents (S. Stukes Chipungu, T.B. Bent-Goodley, 2004).

Meanwhile, foster families, as educators, is a new social phenomenon in Lithuania, thus analysing the activity of this institution, a number of unanswered questions emerge:

- First of all, it is difficult for community members and for foster families to understand their role as a role of educators of neglected children.

- It is not clear, how a foster family should function in a country in transition. How should they educate "own-strange" children? How to prepare them to live independently?

- Does a foster family have features, which are characteristic to an educational institution in a country in transition?

Some questions also arise on the national level developing the policy of children foster care: which model of children foster care should we develop in Lithuania – to follow some model from Western countries or create our own model, which would correspond to the situation of Lithuania? So, all these questions require solution and emphasize the importance of this

research (1).

V. Baršauskienė and I. Leliūgienė (2001), L.C. Johnson (2001), D. Kabašinskaitė (1995), I. Leliūgienė (2002), D. Snieškienė (2001) and others analyse the problems of socio-educational work with (foster) families.

M. Barkauskaitė (1998), R. Braslauskienė (1999), G.S. Cuddeback, J.G. Orme (2002), M. Colton, M. Williams (1997), A. Kadushin (1978), J. Laird, A. Hartman (1985), A.N. Maluccio, B.A. Pine, R. Warsh (1994), T. Ryan, R. Walker (2001), J. Triseliotis, C. Sellick, R. Short (1995) and others analyse the problems of neglected children education and activity of foster families. It is important to emphasize that children care in foster families has been an object of scientific research since the 7th decade of the XX century in Western countries, but it is a new research object in Lithuania.

Studying the research literature, which focuses on the problems of the educational activity in a foster family, the author has noticed that the activity of a foster family has not been investigated holistically, i.e. there are not any researches on the activity of such families in the multidimensional aspect. Besides, the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution, which functions in a country in transition, have not been accentuated yet. It is not clear, in which paradigm such families function in Lithuania.

So, this research focuses on one of social innovations in Lithuania: the activity of a foster family. The *research problem* in that context may be detailed by the following questions:

- What features are characteristic for a foster family as an educational institution?

- What characteristics of the educational activity does a foster family have in a country in transition?

- Which paradigm – traditional or modern, according to Western experience – does the activity of a foster family follow in Lithuania?

The aim of the research is to determine the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution in a country in transition.

The research objectives are the following:

1. Validate theoretically the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution that functions in a country in transition.

2. Validate the research methodology on the characteristics of the foster family educational activity.

3. Investigate empirically the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution, which functions in Lithuania.

I have applied the following *research methods*: analysis of research literature; analysis of documents; method of modelling; questionnaire survey; action research method; method of in-depth interview; content analysis and statistical analysis.

Further in this review I discuss the main results of this research.

2. Characteristics of activity of a foster family as an educational institution, which functions in a country in transition

The number of foster families is not very high in Lithuania. Nowadays we have about 6077 families which foster children. About 3000 of children enter the care system every year. Relatives (grandparents, uncles/aunts, siblings and others) usually take care for the neglected children. Only 22,6 percent of such children are settled into families of foster parents (Ataskaita apie vaikų globą (rūpybą), 2005). These figures indicate that children foster care has not been popular in Lithuania, because education and care of the neglected children is difficult and responsible work. But treating foster care as priority in children care system, it is necessary to increase its popularity.

The term care is defined as the protection of the rights and interests of under-age children. A

person, who fosters a child, carries out the role of a social educator, because care (or caring) is the categorical conception, which defines educational reality L. Jovaiša (2001). Its meaning is complex, because "care" could be understood differently:

- as a social need (S. Montvilaitė, 2005);
- as an element of resocialization (G. Liaudinskienė, 2004);
- as a category of education (A. Jakobi, 2005);
- as a social service (L. Žalimienė, 2003).

Care is a component of education in the system of educational conceptions and it is connected with concern, personality formation, training, teaching and so on. Thus it is possible to treat a foster family as an informal social institution, which carries out the role of educator, because a foster family carries out the functions of educator, carer, teacher and trainer.

The conception *"foster family as an educational institution"* is complex: two components could be accentuated there – *"foster family"* and *"educational institution"*. An institution could be defined as a group of the individuals or as a social phenomenon. The needs and intentions of individuals define the nature of an institution (M. Douglas, 1986; I. Tamutienė, 2004). The functioning of an institution is based on emotional-psychological aspect, for example, the interactions in a family are based on the feelings of parents to their children (E. Durkheim, 2001). One of the main characteristics of a family as an institution is the *educational function*, because a family carries out the function of training and education (I. Tamutienė, 2004).

Children foster care (or children care in foster families) could be defined as short-time or permanent care of neglected children in a families of foster parents. A *foster family* is treated as a substitute of a biological family (I. Leliūgienė, 2002), because the process of a child's education continues in familial environment in the case of care. And a foster family is defined as a partly formal institution, which has a legal right to care and educate the neglected children. The state institutions, which are coordinating children care, ought to acknowledge them as foster parents (J. Triseliotis, C. Sellic, R. Short, 1995).

The characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution could be emphasized, comparing them with the features of other educational institutions, such as traditional families and a school. These institutions have both common and different characteristics. The socialization of children, their education, and the provision of the therapeutical support are characteristic for all educational institutions. A family (both a traditional and a foster family) carries out conscious and unconscious activity – grows up and educates children, and cooperates with school.

When a child lives in his own family, his biological parents carry out the educational activity. And foster parents do the educational activity, when a child is settled into a foster family.
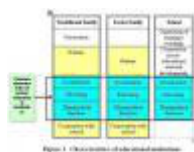
Figure 1. Characteristics of educational institutions

A foster family, differently from a traditional family, does not carry out the biological function – procreation, but the other functions are the same. A foster family carries out the following functions of educational activity: nurtures, educates, socializes children, provides therapeutical support, and cooperates with school.

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Figure 1. Characteristics of the activity of a foster family as an educational institution
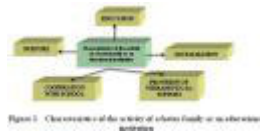
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- *Function of coordinating*, i.e. cooperates with the specialists, who provide specific support for a fostered child; coordinate relations between a foster child and his parents.
- Foster parents cooperate with the institutions, which coordinate care of a child, and are accountable to them.
- *Therapeutical function* – foster parents help a foster child to cope with his emotional and psychological problems, help social workers to prepare a child to return home.

A foster family also has specific features, which are characteristic only to foster parents:

- Foster parents are attributed educators in a family, in which relationships between an educator and an educated person are based on social relations.
- Foster parents should be prepared to foster children (this is not compulsory to a biological family).
- The therapeutical-preventional function is strongly expressed in such family, because an object of educational influence there is emotionally and psychologically damaged children.
- Foster parents resocialize a child: a foster parent ought to teach a child to recognize his feelings and express them in proper way, have to change and manage behaviour of a foster child.
- Foster parents have to cooperate with specialists and institutions, which control process of care.
- A foster family, differently than a traditional family, should cooperate closely with other familial educators – with parents of a fostered child. In that case foster parents act as:
  - Co-ordinators – they organize child's meetings with his parents;
  - Therapeutist – provide emotional and psychological support for a child and his parent;
  - Consultants – develop parental skills of biological parents.

A Country in transition – the context of a foster family activity

Because of the changes of the geopolitical situation of Lithuania processes such as transformation, globalisation and europeisation have effected the transformation of the educational institutions, including and a foster family.

Transformation is the evolutional process, which face the post-soviet countries. According to Sh. Eicher (2004), transformation is the transition from planned economy to market economy. As L. Resmini (1999) states, transformation is also related with the implementation of structural reforms, such as privatisation, opening of market, reorganisation of social and financial sectors and implementation of stabilizing politics.

Transformation also is a *political* and *social* process. According to A. Elbasani (2004), transformation is the process of country socialization, when a country adopts international institutionalized norms to its national context. According to D. Daianu (1994) and J. Kornai (2000), the development and establishment of liberal traditions, stability of macroeconomics, successful functioning of private sector and the entry into the EU should point to the successful end of transformation in this region.

Transformation is connected with two other evolutional processes, which influence the post-soviet countries – globalization and europeization. *Globalisation* could be defined as a general process, which includes technological revolution, dependence on media and mass culture, free movement of trade and capital, standardization of production and consumption (A. Guogis, 2004).

Some authors name the process of "becoming European" as europeisation. Europeisation is defined as an evolutional process, which has overwhelmed Europe. This process is the consequence of globalisation – the world experiences the evolution of finance market and economics. Markets are consolidating, thus they have bigger influence and power than national governments (D. Daianu, 2002). As the result of the mentioned processes, political-economical units, which are named as super-states, (for example, the USA, China and others) have been developing in the world.

A foster family in the context of evolutional processe

Because of the above mentioned evolutional processes, social life of Lithuania has changed basically. Foster families as social educators are one of the social innovations. Activities of foster parents are different in various countries because of the political evolutional processes. So, one of the peculiarities of children foster family activity in Lithuania is the context of its activity – **a foster family in Lithuania, differently from foster families in West countries, is functioning under the influence of transformation, globalisation and europeisation.** Foster parents have an important mission in the context of the country in transition: to educate a foster child as a citizen. But this mission is difficult for the educators because of their value orientations. According to A. Стродс (1998) two different value systems formed a modern person in post-soviet countries in post-soviet countries:

- Western – open;
- Soviet – closed.

Western values are displayed as modernism (pragmatism, scientism, utilitarianism and so on) and postmodernism (capitalism, pluralism). Meanwhile such value orientations as cosmopolitism (creation of communism in the world), atheism, and depersonalisation have formed a soviet person or so-called "homo sovieticus" (A. Стродс, 1998).

So, the majority of foster parents in Lithuania were formed according to scenario of the "homo sovieticus". When the soviet regime failed, Lithuania became independent, educational institutions of post-soviet countries were learning to be democratic. In that context the educators of the country in transition are experiencing a difficult period – they should take over Western values in order to educate free citizens, who are able to live in post-modern society.

The context of a foster family activity is complex (see figure 3):

Figure 2. Contextual elements foster family functioning in a transitional...

So, a foster family functions in the complicated conditions of a country in transition. The evolutional processes determine the change of the children care system. In that context the transformation of a foster family also goes on:

- Until 1991 foster families have functioned in the indiscrete environment of the Soviet ideology; care in families of relatives has prevailed.

- The context of foster families activity has changed because of the geopolitical changes of the country (1991-2004) – the evolutional processes started to influence a foster family; there appeared the need of professionalization of foster family activity (1996).

- The activity of a foster family has been legitimized (1998) (N. Bankauskienė, V. Staskevičienė, 2004).

By analysing the children foster care as a social phenomenon the change of the paradigm of the activity of a foster family was noticed. Thus, two attitudes towards the activity of this educational institution could be emphasized in the research literature:

- The *traditional paradigm*, which states that foster parents take over all rights and responsibilities of biological parents in a case of a child's care (Colton, Williams, 1997; Triseliotis, Sellic, Short, 1995).

- The *modern paradigm*, according which foster parents should act as professionals, providing the psychological-therapeutical support for a foster child (Great Britain National Association of Foster Parents – Ryan, Walker, 2001).

The analyses of the characteristics of the educational activity of a foster family has indicated that a foster family in Lithuania, as in a country in transition, functions in the context of the traditional paradigm and is different from the same families in Western countries (see table 1).

Table 1. Educational activity of a foster family...

In the West a foster parent acts as a member of a team, which provides support to a biological family. Such team consists of a social worker, a child (children), biological parents, foster parents and other specialists. The team works together in order that the parents of fostered child could solve their problems and a child could return to his/her family. Meanwhile there is no developed network of such socio-educational services for biological families in Lithuania. Foster parents work by themselves – the main goal of a foster family is to provide a social service to a child, i.e. to care and educate him/her.

3. Validation of the research methodology on a foster family as an educational institution activity

This research is based on the following *theoretical* concepts:

- **Modern humanistic theory** (A. Maslow, 2006; C. Rodgers (quoted L.C. Johnson, 2001)) enables a researcher to analyse the process of education, keeping in mind the needs of a child, acknowledging the equality of each person, who takes part in the process of educational influence, the development of freedom and autonomy of an educated person.
  According to the concepts of this theory, the author investigates the educational activity of a foster family from the perspective of a foster child's needs and rights. The importance of an educated person (foster child), and not of an educator (foster parent) is emphasized in this research. The influence of modern humanistic theory of education on the process of change of a foster family paradigm is highlighted.

- **Ecological theory of systems** (C. Germain/A. Gitterman, 1970) enables to investigate people and social phenomena as an element of a system, i.e. a research object in its social environment. A person or a research object is perceived as an element of a system, whose functioning depends on the influence of a system.
  According to the concepts of the ecological theory of systems, a foster family is investigated into the context of its activity – in conditions of a country in transition. The researcher, at first, analyses the context of a foster family activity, and later analyses the characteristics of the research object.

- The **principle** of **integrated education** (L. Jovaiša, 2001) states that the essential aim of a personal education and self-education is completeness of existence. All the fields of life: morality, religion, science, art, social life influences the formation of a personality.
  On the basis of this principle, the educational activity of a foster family is analysed in different aspects: philosophical, legal, socio-educational, and psychological, keeping in mind that these aspects enable to reveal the peculiarities of fostered children education.
  The principle of integrated education enables the researcher to reveal the complexity of the activity of a foster family as an educational institution, i.e. to investigate the educational activity of foster parents in multidimensional aspect.

After the theoretical analysis of the educational activity of a foster family, the main features of its activity have been indicated. The second stage of this analysis has been the classification of these features – there has been indicated the characteristics, criteria and indicators of the educational activity of foster parents there. The following characteristics and indicators of a foster family could be pointed out:

The characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution were investigated using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, i.e. the principle of triangulation (K. Kardelis, 2005). This principle enabled the researcher to analyse the research object in different aspects. Besides, the information about the research object is more valid in that case. The research methodology on the characteristics of the educational activity of a foster family consists of the following parameters:

1. The educational activity of a foster family is formulated by theoretically validated characteristics, criteria and indicators.
2. The instrument of the empirical research consists of:

1. Nominal and Likert scales, structured questions, which have been formulated according to the paradigms of a foster family activity and indicated characteristics of a foster family activity;

2. Open questions, which enabled the researcher to get a deeper perception of a foster family as a research object; to understand how the respondents perceive the activity of a foster family in a country in transition; and to help the respondents to express their perception, values and attitudes towards foster families.

3. The method of reflection has been applied committing the experience, emotions and opinion of the respondents, analysing the attitudes and values of the researcher and describing the process of the qualitative research.

The ***research methods***, used in the research, are the following:

- *Analysis of research literature* helped to define the conception of "a foster family as an educational institution", to analyse the context of activity of this educational institution and the characteristics of the educational activity of a foster family, comparing that family with other educational institutions.

- *Analysis of documents* helped to analyse the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution, especially analysing the activity of foster parents in legal aspect. The analysis of documents was one of information resources in the action research of a foster family educational activity.

- *Method of modelling* has been applied in two levels. First, this method has been applied in´the theoretical research of the educational activity of foster families. Theoretical modelling helped to draw an idealised model of the research object. After that, the researcher, using statistical methods, constructed the MDS model (multidimensional scaling) of the functions of educational activity of a foster family, processing the data of the empirical research. Both the theoretical and empirical models helped the researcher to find the differences between the idealised research model and the model, which exists in practice.

- *Questionnaire survey* has been applied for researching the attitudes of local communities toward foster families. The methodology of this survey is based on the characteristics of foster parents' socio-educational activity, presented by J. Triseliotis, C. Sellic and R. Short (1995). The questionnaire survey has also been applied in the interview of the specialists, who work with foster families.

- *Action research* method has been applied in investigating the educational activity of foster families. This research has been based on the methodology of action research, recommended by L. Cohen, L. Manion (1997), and the methodology of a qualitative research and sample selection, suggested by T. Oka and I. Shaw (2000).

- The Method of *in-depth interview* has been applied for interviewing the experts, who assessed the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution. The research based on the methodology of in-depth interview, discussed by R.S.Y. Berry (1999) and M.Q. Patton (1987).

- *Content analysis* was used in two empirical studies: first, analysing the data of action research on a foster family educational activity; second, processing the data of the experts' in-depth interview.

- *Statistical analysis* of the research data (using the programme SPSS for Windows 13.0) was applied for processing the data of the questionnaire survey of local

communities and the questionnaire interview of the specialists, working with foster families.

4. Analysis of the research of the characteristics of a foster family as an educational institution activity

The aim of the empirical research is to determine, which features are characteristic for a foster family as an educational institution in a country in transition.
The following hypotheses have been formulated:

1. The educational activity of a foster family is wider than the activity of a traditional family.

2. A foster family functions in the context of the traditional paradigm in Lithuania.

This empirical research consists of four stages:

1. the questionnaire survey, with was applied investigating the attitude of communities towards foster families;

2. the expert assessment of the educational activity of a foster family;

3. the interview of the specialists, who work with foster families;

4. the action research of the educational activity of a foster family.

According to U.Brofenbrenner's model of social environment, a foster family has been investigated in its natural context, i.e. in a country in transition. First of all, the context of the activity of foster parents has been analysed (the questionnaire interview of local communities); after that the mezzo level has been studied – the experts in-depth interview and the survey of the specialists. Finally, the action research of the educational activity of a foster family represents the micro level (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Stages of the implementation of the empirical research

The qualitative questions, which have been used in all stages of the research, also integrate the four empirical researches. These questions are the key questions, which correspond to the research problem of the research:

1. What phenomenon is a foster family (what is the aim of children foster care)?

2. Which functions does a foster family do?

3. In which paradigm – the traditional or modern – does a foster family function in Lithuania?

The attitude of local communities toward foster families

This research focuses on the attitude of local communities toward a foster family, and analyses the change of communities' attitude toward this educational institution. 112 respondents from seven districts of Lithuania (Raseiniai, Jonava, Utena, Kaunas, Kaišiadorys, Vilnius, and Varėna districts and Kaunas city) have been interviewed.

Figure 5. Distribution of respondents according to regions (%)

Summarizing the results of the interview, it is possible to conclude that the communities notice the elements of the modern paradigm of a foster family, but the stereotypes of the traditional paradigm prevail in empirics. The majority of informants (83,9 %) answered positively the question if foster parents should take over all rights and responsibilities of biological parents. The respondents disapprove the attitude of the Great Britain National Association of Foster Parents that foster parents cannot be a father/mother to a neglected child, they ought only to provide psychological help to a child. 76 or 67,9 percent of respondents think that it is impossible for foster parents to carry out only the function of a psychologist, because neglected children need to experience love and care, and specialists – psychologists or psychiatrist – could provide a child psychological-emotional help.

The lack of socio-educational services for foster parents was emphasized, such as that foster families lack educational, legal, psychological knowledge. The respondents were asked, if foster parents should complete trainings. Almost all respondents (94,6 %) affirm that training was necessary for foster parents, because trainings give the possibility to obtain new knowledge about their responsibilities, needs and development of neglected children, they would learn to know a child, would prepare for their future activity and so on. So, it is possible to treat a foster family as learning institution.

The research has proved the hypothesis of the theoretical research that a foster family is a unique educational institution, which functions in Lithuania differently than in Western countries. The educational activity of these families is wider than the activity of traditional families.

The most important characteristics of the educational activity of a foster family are the following: nurture, education, socialization, coordinating-consulting, therapeutical-preventative activity, representation, management.

The educational activity of a foster family: the expert assessment

The experts' in-depth interviews have been carried out in June-July 2005. 12 experts, who work with foster families and know the problems of foster parents very well, were interviewed. 6 of the interviewed experts are scientists – professors, associated professors and doctors of Kaunas University of Technology and Vytautas Magnus University; and two doctoral students in social work of Lapland University (Finland). And 6 experts were practitioners – specialists of Kaunas city Children rights' protection service (2), social workers of Children Welfare Centre "Pastogė" (2), and heads of Jonava district Children home (2).

The experts treat a foster family as an educational institution and indicate the following characteristics of its activity: nurture, education, socialization, coordinating-consulting, therapeutical-preventative activity, representation, management.

The experts also treat the educational activity of a foster family in the context of the traditional paradigm, i.e. perceive the activity of foster parents as the activity of the traditional familial educators.

familial educators.***The empirical research of the criteria and indicators of a foster family educational activity***

The interview of the specialists, who work with foster parents, is the third stage of the empirical research. This research has been made, aiming empirically at validating the instrument of the research of the educational activity of foster families and at checking the theoretical model of the educational activity of a foster family.

The research was conducted made in September-December 2006. The researcher interviewed all cohorts of respondents – 60 Children rights' protection services in Lithuania.

The interviews of the specialists proved that a foster family is treated as an educational institution in mezzo level. Its activity is specific and wider than the activity of other educational institutions such as a traditional family.

The factorial analysis of the educational activity of a foster family has proved the characteristics and their compounds of the educational activity of this educational institution, which have been indicated by the theoretical analysis and two previous empirical researches (nurture, education, socialization, coordinating-consulting, therapeutical-preventive activity, representation, management). The main characteristics of the educational activity of a foster family

- Education - 65,3%
- Nurturing - 43,5%
- (Re-)socialization - 12,2%
- Representation - 11,6%
- Therapeutical support - 10,2%
- Management - 1,4%

The specialists who work with foster families also perceive the activity of these families in the context of the traditional paradigm.

The action research of a foster family educational activity

The action research of a foster family educational activity has been made in 2003-2006. The design and the sample of this research is based on the methodology, recommended by Japanese scientists T. Oka and I. Shaw (2000).

The researcher investigated two foster families: a) a complete foster family (both spouses) without the educational experience and b) one parent foster family, without educational experience.

The base of this qualitative research is the action research of the educational activity of a foster family.

Planning this investigation, the researcher aims to analyse the activity of a foster family "from the inside", i.e. to describe the activity of this educational institution. Thus, the main question of this research is: How does a foster family function in a country in transition?

This research has proved that a foster family functions as an educational institution. Its activity is characteristic of above mentioned features.

The investigated foster parents perceive their activity in the context of the traditional paradigm, i.e. they treat themselves not as therapists who ought to provide emotional-psychological support, but as educators who should take over the place of biological parents.

The research has proved that the effectiveness of the activity of a foster family as an educational institution depends on the level of its educational knowledge. Based on this research it is possible to presume that the educational intervention into foster families and their education would increase the effectiveness of foster parents' activity. Summarizing the results of the four levels of the empirical research, the following presumptions could be made:

- A foster family is an educational institution. The theoretical and empirical researches have supported the hypothesis that the activity of a foster family is wider than the activity of a traditional family.

- The characteristics of the educational activity of foster parents can be divided into two main groups: a) features, common to familial educators; b) features, characteristic only to foster families. Seven main characteristics (which have their own compounds) could be emphasized in the educational activity of foster parents:
  1. Nurture;
  2. Education;
  3. Socialization;
  4. Coordinating-consulting;
  5. Therapeutical-preventative activity;
  6. Representation;
  7. Management of the educational process of a foster child.

- The empirical researches of the dissertation have proved that a foster family functions in the context of the traditional paradigm in Lithuania, as in a country in transition.

5. Conclusions

Characteristics of a foster family educational activity were investigated in the theoretical and empirical levels. Summarizing the results of this research, it is possible to do the following conclusions:

1. A foster family, which functions in a country in transition, is an educational institution, which should have permission from state institutions, coordinating children care, to care and educate neglected children. And foster parents are acknowledged as educators, when state institutions evaluate their (foster parents') preparation to educate neglected children.
   Analysing features of a foster family as an educational institution in multidimensional aspects, there was ascertained that these features are complex. Thus, after a systemic analysis these features were classified, i.e. were compounded into characteristics, which have special criteria. Such characteristics of activity are (būdingos) to a foster family as an educational institution: growing, educating, socialization, representation, managing, coordinating-consulting, therapeutical-preventional activity.
   The educational activity of foster parents is wider than activity of a traditional family. A foster family is such an educational institution which educates children and also provides social service – care – to neglected children and a state.

2. These parameters reveal the essence of the research methodology of features of foster family educational activity. Educational activity of a foster family is expressed by theoretically validated characteristics, criteria and indicators. Features of the activity of a foster family as an educational activity were defined applying quantitative and qualitative research methods, i.e. the principle of triangulation.
   Constructing the instrument of the research there were used:
   - Nominal and Likert scales, and structured questions, which were formed according to discussed paradigms of a foster family activity and the defined characteristics of activity of a foster family as an educational institution.
   - Open questions, which enabled the researcher to analyse the research object; understand how respondents perceive activity of a foster family; and helped respondents to express their perception, attitude, values freely, without any farming.
   - Method of reflection was applied in two levels: first, when respondents expressed their emotions, opinion, experience; and secondly, when the researcher expressed her

value orientation, opinion about the research object, and analysing, describing the process of qualitative researches.

3. The empirical research of the characteristics of foster families' educational activity has proved that a foster family functions as an educational institution in a country in transition. The activity of this educational institution is wider than the activity of a traditional family.

   The educational activity of foster parents is treated in the context of the traditional paradigm in empirics. A foster family does the functions of traditional familial educators in Lithuania. A foster family activity in Lithuania and Western countries is different:

   - A foster family is not treated as a member of the team of specialists yet. The system of foster parents' selection, assessment, and education is in the stage of formation only. Foster parents lack professional socio-educational support.

   - The activity of a foster family is wider than the activity of a traditional family – a foster family carries out the function of coordinating: cooperates with pedagogues and specialists; coordinates the contacts between a foster child and his biological parents and other relatives; cooperates with institutions, which controls the process of neglected children care and education;

   - The function of education has a therapeutical aspect in the activity of a foster family – the main aim of the educational process in that case is to help a child cope with pedagogical deprivation;

   - Nursing, nutrition, and provision – the elements of nurture – are more important in a foster family than in a traditional family.

   - The therapeutical-preventive function is very important there, because the children, who enter the care system, have number of psychological problems and developmental disorders.

   - Foster parents re-socialize a foster child – change and manage his behaviour.

   The empirical research has validated the following characteristics of the educational activity of a foster family, which have been emphasized in the theoretical research: nurture, education, socialization, coordinating-consulting, therapeutical-preventative activity, representation, management.

Annotations

(1) The traditions and problems of children education in a family have been widely investigated abroad and in Lithuania. The problems of children education in a family have been researched by Z. Bajoriūnas (1997), B. Bitinas (2000), G. Butkienė, A. Kepalaitė (1996), H. Cunningham (1995), L. Dencik (2005), M. Herbert (1988), A. Juodaitytė (2003), G. Kvieskienė (2000) and others.

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Vilma Staskeviciene (MA of social work, doctor of social sciences/educology) is head of the Adult Education Department of Kaunas College at the Kedainiai Jonusas Radvilas Faculty. Her research areas are education and socialization of neglected children; socio-educational work with foster families.

Tags: child and youth welfare, EU, families, Lithuania