Fostering matters:
A foster carer's perspective

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Abstract: The views of stakeholders are increasingly seen as important to the delivery of services. The perspectives of foster carers therefore, can contribute to the organisation, management and provision of placements to children who are looked after by the local authority. This paper reflects the views of Foluke, a member of the symposium 'Fostering Matters' which took place at the University of Salford in March 2007. Foluke is not only an experienced foster carer and trainer of foster carers, but also an experienced social worker with current responsibility for educating social work practitioners. There is no suggestion that the views expressed in this paper represent the 'truth' of being a foster carer. On the contrary, it is appreciated that the opinions of foster carers will vary in relation to their social characteristics (such as class, gender, 'race' or ethnicity), their personal biographies and the context in which their opinions are elicited. Nevertheless, this paper contains important reflections on a main theme of the symposium - the professionalisation of foster care. Furthermore, comments on the quality of practice in relation to assessment and training may be of value to those responsible for the continued improvement in standards.

Keywords: foster care; foster carer's perspectives; stakeholders; service users; professionalisation; foster carer training

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Introduction

The authors' of this paper participated in the symposium 'Fostering Matters' which took place at the University of Salford in March 2007. Elizabeth co-ordinated the event on behalf of the Fostering Network and the journal *Social Work and Social Sciences Review,* whilst Foluke was invited to attend and contribute to the discussion on the grounds of her extensive experience as a social work professional and educator, adoptive parent and foster carer. Foluke, as an experienced social work practitioner, is currently employed as a Lecturer at the University of Salford, and has primary responsibility for educating child care social workers. In addition, she has assessed and trained foster carers. Given the above, however, she has also been a 'service user' in relation to these processes.

The symposium was a stimulating event, but there was inadequate time for discussion. In consequence, conversation on the key themes and the attendant issues for foster carers continued amongst participants for some time afterwards. In order that Foluke's insights as a foster carer were not excluded from the forum of the journal pages, Elizabeth taped and transcribed one such conversation. What follows is the product of that conversation: it is an elaboration and an agreed interpretation of a foster carer's perspective on a major theme of the symposium – the professionalisation of foster care. In addition to the question of financial rewards for foster carers and the implications for the relationship between the carer and the children being looked after, this theme involves the provision of training to foster carers, their assessment and the support they receive. Each of these issues will be addressed in turn.

Love and money in the provision of foster care

The question of whether foster care should be carried out on a voluntary basis for love rather than a fee was a major component of the paper presented by Derek Kirton (Kirton, 2007). Kirton acknowledged the emotional aspect of the dilemma, but rehearsed the tension between these two perspectives by referring predominantly to social theory. Foluke however, on the basis of her experience as a foster carer, illustrated the dilemma by means of psychological theory and the emotional content (sometimes symbolic) of the day-to-day exchanges between the adult carer and the looked after child. Children and young people appear to be acutely sensitive to the terms upon which they are being looked after. Residential workers, for example, may be treated with less respect on the grounds that they are paid to 'take' whatever behaviour they encounter: that is, children refer to the paid status of the workers to legitimise uncooperative or verbally abusive conduct. If foster carers come to be seen as the equivalent to the staff of a residential home, it may be more likely that

they will be engaged in such negative exchanges. By way of contrast, a situation was described in which a child who had been looked after appeared to be touched or moved by an act of personal generosity and commitment:

Foluke: There was one young person with me and I had to buy him things. He came to me with next to nothing. So I went out and bought trainers, and whatever, and there were a couple of [things bought that were] more than just needs, there were desires [being met] there. And he had gone on a contact [visit] and he came back in and said, 'My dad says that they give you money to get these things'. And I said to him, 'Actually, what they gave me wasn't enough, so I had to spend some of my money'. And I could see him kind of looking at me – in amazement.

In this example, Foluke's own money which paid for the desired 'extras', might have been not only material, but also symbolic: her willingness to give these tangible resources to the young person demonstrated her 'personal' as opposed to 'professional' commitment.

For Foluke, all of the children and young people who are looked after experience a sense of rejection. Irrespective of the circumstances, they endure a sense of being unwanted or unloved by their family of origin. In consequence, the relationship with the foster carer is crucial: it is a means by which the child can feel appreciated, valued and genuinely cared for. This relationship has the potential to help a child at an emotionally painful time, as well as to facilitate his/her overall development. However, both parties, the child and the foster carer, have to invest in the relationship for it to have significance and benefit. This investment might take many forms, and whilst foster carers should not be driven to financial debt, their unpaid commitment might be an important component – a component that is evident and meaningful to both foster carer and young person. For these reasons Foluke, who said she treated her foster children in the same way as her birth children, was hesitant about, though not against, the current drive towards the professionalisation of foster care.

Training for foster care

For some advocates, the professionalisation of foster care not only involves the provision of fees, but also an extension of the current training for the role (see Kirton, 2007; the Fostering Network, 2008). Foluke acknowledged that in her role of foster carer, she drew on the knowledge base she had gained on her degree course, as well as the knowledge she disseminated as a social work educator. In particular, she made use of attachment and transitions theory (see for example: Atwool, 2006; Golding, 2007; Howe, 2005; Pughe and Philpot, 2007). The insights offered above on the topic of fees appear to be largely informed by attachment theory. The opinion was expressed that

these perspectives should be included in the training of all foster carers. However, this raised another question: with the provision of a fee and the requirement to be familiar with this knowledge base, would foster carers be transformed into social workers? At present, children do appear to understand the difference between the two roles. What might be the implications of this blurring?

According to the Fostering Network (2008), the provision of introductory training is ubiquitous, and it is usually their pack *The Skills to Foster* (2003) that forms the foundation of the course. Despite this apparent commitment of local authorities to the principle of training, the on-going provision of events as part of professional development is less in evidence (the Fostering Network, 2008). However, the Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs) have a better reputation in this regard (see Sellick, 2007). Foluke said she had been fortunate in that one of the two local authorities for which she has been registered as a foster carer provided a rolling programme of training opportunities. Although this was appreciated, there was also some criticism: the local authority was said to have been unhelpfully rigid in its approach. This rigidity was particularly manifest in its expectation that all foster carers should participate in the same training events, irrespective of their circumstances and knowledge base. This has meant that, even though Foluke was providing training for foster carers, when she joined a local authority and became a foster carer herself, she was still expected to undertake the introductory course. More recently, even though she has educated social work students on the policy initiative *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004), she has been expected to attend a training event on the topic. It was recommended therefore, that local authorities (and possibly IFPs) should abandon the 'one size fits all' approach and individually assess the training needs of foster carers and require participation accordingly. This view has been expressed by other foster carers, and in reflection of this, the principle has been incorporated into the Fostering Network's Policy on training and the professionalisation of foster care (see the Fostering Network, 2008).

Although this charge cannot be made against all local authorities or all training, rigidity can be demonstrated in the way in which courses are delivered. Whilst training packs are of great value, trainers may be inclined to deliver their content uncritically, and give inadequate attention to the possibility that there are times when the content of the course might require adjustment. For example, trainers might use such packs without engaging with the particular strengths or needs of course participants. In consequence, individuals can be treated as categories (trainee foster carers) rather than embodied beings with particular identities and experiences (Clare, 2007). Foluke described the situation in which she was required to sit through the introductory teaching on 'race' and 'racism' without any acknowledgement or recognition of her own identity or experience of being a black woman. However, there was recognition that training is frequently delivered by Family Placement Workers (FPWs) (now known as Supervising Social Workers in some agencies) who have not been specifically educated for the purpose. In consequence, these FPWs

may have a poor appreciation of the learning process. Reflexivity was advocated as the means by which trainers might develop their expertise.

The term reflexivity is used in a variety of ways (see D'Cruz et al., 2007). The use of the word here relates to the work of Schön (1983, cited in Pietroni, 1995) in which continuously improved professional practice requires a 'double feedback loop': that is, the professional acts, reflects on the action then both reflects and acts. According to this formula advanced practice requires 'reflection-on-action' as well as 'reflection-in-action'. By means of this approach not only would rigidity and the objectification of course participants be avoided, but the quality of foster carers' learning might be enhanced. Training courses should also facilitate foster carers themselves to engage in reflexive practice. For example, foster carers who have children placed with them might be encouraged to reflect on their day-today methods of relating to children. This particular approach to training and on-going professional development might increase the insight of the foster carers with ultimate benefit for the children in their care.

Assessing and supporting foster carers

The critique of rigidity was also applied to the assessment of foster carers. As with training, standard packs are often used as a means of ensuring that all the essential aspects of an assessment are covered. An over-reliance on the packs exacerbated by an absence of reflexivity can mean that FPWs are insensitive to some of the personal drives to become a foster carer: for example, the complex motivations that involve the anticipation of personal rewards and satisfactions. Instead of engaging with the positive aspects of becoming and being a foster carer, there is a tendency for FPWs to focus on the problems and difficulties that might arise because, according to the dominant content of the pack, the potential foster carer's response to these problems needs to be checked and approved. Whilst this may be important, the assessment can be challenging for participants and not for the 'feint hearted'. The overall conclusion regarding the ability of an applicant may be different however, if positive motivations and strengths are considered as well as the benefits of being a foster carer.

Similarly, the FPW conducting the assessment process can demonstrate an inappropriately rigid adherence to what are considered to be the appropriate values of a foster carer. Although a black woman herself, Foluke felt that the content of the pack that assessed the racial awareness of the potential foster carer was at times unhelpful. For Foluke, human thought and opinion is complex, and the term racist can not be applied without a sophisticated appreciation of the meanings behind a statement of opinion, and the context in which the statement is made. During the course of an assessment some potential foster carers may show a limited understanding of 'race' and fail to convince the FPW of their ability, not only to

meet the needs of a black child, but also their ability to inculcate racial respect in the children for whom they care. These people may fail the assessment, not because of their prejudice however, but because they do not have the knowledge and linguistic skills to present themselves in the best light. Such applicants should not be dismissed, but all their strengths and attributes ascertained as well as their limitations. Foluke's perspective is influenced by her own potential to fall foul of the assessment criteria on values: as a practicing Christian she may be (wrongly) perceived to be homophobic. By means of her education however, Foluke can successfully articulate her ability to reconcile Christianity with an appreciation of difference and a respectful approach to diverse sexualities.

The rigidity in the practice of some FPWs may be associated, not only with a lack of reflexivity, but also an absence of independent and critical thought. This weakness in practice is encouraged, not only by assessment packs, but also the content of social work education and agency policies that emphasise a limited notion of 'evidence based practice'. Once research has been undertaken and the subsequent evidence has been marshalled to indicate 'what works', then the government and local agencies use it to develop policies. Students and social work professionals are then encouraged to follow the associated guidance. However, unthinkingly following policy directives or guidance on the basis that it is evidence-led is problematic (Frost, 2002). Frost argues that 'the move towards evidence-led practice tends to oversimplify the complex issues and challenges facing professional social workers in their day-to-day practice' (Frost, 2002, p.39). Although there are a number of problems with evidence-led or evidence based practice, of particular significance here is the idea that general conclusions resulting from research projects can inform what is best or appropriate for specific individuals or families. For example, approving specific applicants to care for children of a certain age only, on the grounds that research suggests this will work best due to the ages of their own birth children, may be too limiting: specific families may have the capability of caring for a broader range of children. In consequence, FPWs need not only to have the ability and experience to appreciate evidence and best practice, but also to assess and make judgements about individual people, their own particular strengths, limitations and circumstances, and whether the best practice guidance will apply.

In relation to the supporting of foster carers, it was noted that the topic was mentioned on numerous occasions throughout the symposium, but the meaning of the term was never elaborated or interrogated. The meaning and practice of support should vary according to the specific needs of foster carers: as with training, 'one size' does not 'fit all'. Given the drive towards the professionalisation of foster care, however, will FPWs become the line managers of foster carers? Will a process of appraisal have to be introduced? If so, this may require FPWs to develop management knowledge and skills. This will demand even more of the workforce just at a time when social work agencies have difficulty in retaining staff (Harlow, 2004). It may be considered an omission, that the crucial role of the FPW was not given attention during the symposium.

Discussion and conclusion

As indicated above, this paper has been read by Foluke and agreed as an accurate reflection of the conversation, and a fair representation of her experiences and views as a foster carer. However, there is no suggestion that Foluke's views represent the 'truth' of being a foster carer. On the contrary, it is appreciated that the opinions of foster carers will vary in relation to their social characteristics (such as class, gender, 'race' or ethnicity), their personal biographies, but also the context in which their opinions are elicited. Nevertheless, it is useful to examine an important trend, the professionalisation of foster care, from the perspective of someone who has undergone the assessment, training, and day-to-day challenges. Furthermore, comments on the quality of practice in relation to assessment and training may be of value to those responsible for the continued improvement in standards.

From the above it appears as though Foluke is ambivalent about the move towards professionalisation. It might almost be said that Foluke's commitment to treating fostered children as if they were 'her own' belongs to a previous era (Wilson and Evetts, 2006). Despite the arguments as to why the professionalisation of foster care is appropriate (see Kirton, 2007; the Fostering Network, 2008), Foluke is not alone in her ambivalence. This ambivalence is also shared by a number of foster carers, as well as the academics Wilson and Evetts (2006) who argue that the trend does have its problems. In addition to the ambiguities associated with the role as indicated by Foluke, there are ambiguities associated with the term professionalisation. With reference to the relevant literature, Wilson and Evetts (2006) show how professionalisation might mean the development of specialist knowledge and skills, but that it might also mean the promotion of self-interest. Drawing on the work of Fournier (1999), they also argue that the term has been deployed by managers as a disciplinary mechanism: that is, a means by which the practice of workers can be shaped and controlled. Wilson and Evetts have evaluated the deployment of the term professionalisation in relation to foster care and conclude that it is the latter version that is dominant. It is primarily the social service managers in children's departments that are driving the agenda:

The intention is not to give to the workforce the occupational control of the work but rather to regularise and, as far as possible, to standardise it. The control of the work, the selection of the carers, and the determination of what constitutes successful practice and achievement will remain with the social service managers who operate the budgets. This service work will need to be provided within budget and discretion can only be exercised within strict budgetary limits. Similarly, performance by the carers will need to be checked, monitored and constantly demonstrated (Wilson and Evetts, 2006. p.45).

Though tempered by the understanding that there is also a drive to recognise the special skills of foster carers, the conclusion of these academics appears to

be negative. Furthermore, the future scenario of regulated and controlled foster care may contrast with the reflexive, independently minded form of practice that is generally preferred by Foluke. Finally, professionalisation of foster care has implications for FPWs in particular and members of the children's workforce as a whole: a matter that will require the continued consideration of bodies such as the General Social Care Council as well as the Children's Workforce Development Council.

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