Entre la institución y la familia: Las familias colaboradoras como apoyo a los menores tutelados

Between the institution and the family: Cooperative families as support for minors under guardianship

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In Spain, people manage the care of minors in a situation of helplessness, mostly, through the measure of residential care. In a social context that questions the effects of long-term institutionalization, the cooperative families program arises in Andalusia as a complementary resource to the centers for the protection of minors. This work aims to know the impact and possibilities of the FACO improvement. Using the qualitative methodology, we compiled 8 key informant speeches through the semi-structured interview, specifically, representatives of cooperative family entities in Andalusia. Among the results, the need to improve the management of the institution-family communication process stands out, as well as the emotional, academic and social benefits that promote intimate, healthy and family relationships for minors. The FACO program connects the minor with the environment outside the center through a cooperative family.

**Keyword:** Residential care; family; research; interview. (Words taken from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

**INTRODUCTION**

In Spain, the protection system for minors guarantees the defense and guardianship of minors at risk and without protection. The mechanisms by which tutoring administration serves children's needs become complex and lengthy. The public entities involved try to avoid admission to centers through preventive measures such as: treatment with families in less serious cases (permanency planning) (Maulicccio, Fein & Olmstead, 1988). However, reunification with the biological family is not always possible and many minors come under the guardianship and custody of the State.

There are different resources aimed at minors under guardianship. In line with the recommendations of experts (Del Valle, 1998), the administration usually prioritizes the permanence of children with families through, for example, figures such as foster care (with extended family or others). The deinstitutionalizations of minors or specialized institutionalization are the tendency in Spain. However, this is not possible due to inconveniences related to: the management of the system itself (bureaucracy, shortage of available families, among others), or the minors' situations
or characteristics (age of majority, failed returns of the minors with their biological families, difficulties of the minors to remain with foster or adoptive families, minors with care needs and specific care, etc.)

Despite the suitability of some measures, the reality shows that many minors enter and remain in protection centers for a long term. In Spain, the total number of residential care is around 17,527, with 2,600 children being sheltered in protection centers in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia (Ministry of Health, Consumption and Social Welfare, 2018). Although the data has been decreasing in recent years, it is not trivial that more than half of the minors in care grow up and socialize in an institutionalized context.

In this article, we ask ourselves about the possibilities of improving the system, praising a figure of recent emergence such as the cooperative family. The institutional response diversifies to form a mixed model of care, in which the minors live in the protection center, but also have a collaborative family with whom they spend time outside the institution.

This resource arises in Andalusia with the purpose of offering minors alternative activities to relate and live together with a family, establish healthy emotional ties and expand their social support network (Junta de Andalucía, 2020). The program establishes periods that allow children or adolescents, who reside in protection centers, to share with families (generally, non-school times such as weekends, holidays, vacations, etc.). It aims at children over 7 years of age, who have no other family alternative in short term.

These children as well as those with health, psychological, emotional, physical or behavioral problems and groups of siblings have great difficulties to be adopted (Berástegui and Gómez Bengoechea, 2009). The imbalances between the demand of families willing to adopt or foster and the real characteristics of the minors in care, make it difficult for many children to integrate into families.

The cooperative family, known in other contexts as mentoring, would support the temporary or not coverage of homologous connections with relatives during children’s stay at the institution. The benefits of this association between the center
and cooperative families are many and diverse. Among all of them, family coexistence and the creation of support networks stand out, so they are essential for the minor when leaving the protection center after the age of majority. In addition, the program offers an effective measure to face the arrival of minors coming from Andalusia, minors usually admitted into large centers and whose age are close to 18 years.

This research has two objectives: (1) To investigate the type of care provided by mega-centers and to question whether the available resources respond by themselves to the psychosocial needs of minors. (2) To know the characteristics, development and improvement aspects of the cooperative families program as a complementary measure to the protection centers in Andalusia.

The last aim of this work is to explore new non-residential measures that may provide coverage for difficult-to-place or hard-to-place children (Kadushin, 1962).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Methods and techniques**

The interest in knowing the subjective discourses of the participants in the institutional framework as a cooperative family or representative of an entity led us to select the qualitative method of data collection and analysis. The semi-structured interview was the instrument used for data collection.

**Participants**

The protagonists were eight (8) key informants, representatives of cooperative family entities in Andalusia. Most of the informants were, in turn, foster or cooperative families and had one or more foster children. The mean age of the participants was around 42 years, including those informants who had been in office for> 4 years. In the following table (table 1) you can see some basic data of the interviews carried out and the coding assigned by the researchers.
Table 1. Participating entities.

| Type of entity | Code | Province | Years of experience |
|----------------|------|----------|---------------------|
| Association    | PCB  | Córdoba  | 4                   |
| Association    | PAE  | Almería  | 4                   |
| Association    | PGJV | Granada  | 6                   |
| Association    | PJS  | Jaén     | 4                   |
| Association    | TSCM | Cádiz    | 15                  |
| Association    | TEJM | Jaén     | 17                  |
| Association    | PHR  | Huelva   | 5                   |

**Source:** Own elaboration

**RESULTS**

This section lists the most outstanding speeches generated in the interviews conducted with representatives of Associations for the reception and collaboration of minors under guardianship in Andalusia, as well as their analysis according to their repetition and theme. We present the resulting content in thematic blocks: I. Child protection centers for debate. II. Cooperative families as a resource to support the centers. III. The FACO program may be improved, areas to be strengthened… how?

**I. Child protection centers under discussion.**

Participants PCB, TSCM and PAE valued positively the work done in the protection centers, especially, in terms of basic care and coverage provided to minors. Free access to health, education and social services for national or foreign minors emerged for the current protection system in Spain.

In relation to the opinion of PSJ and PCB, basic attention, although necessary, was not enough. Informants identified problems regarding quality and personalized care in juvenile centers. They highlighted two fundamental problems: the overcrowding of the centers and the insufficiency of staff.
Both circumstances hindered the psycho-social support that minors demanded during their stay in the centers. All participants argued this statement as follows:

"We have a model that sure, was the best so far, but it has not been studied that the model has to change and has to adapt to the times." PGJV

"The minors in the center are doomed, come on, there are two things. First, minors are not educated in the center, no matter how much it is affirmed, the center is not like the family, they are in the hands of caregivers who have their schedule (...)

"PGJV

- Others consider that these are problems of the institution management and not of the model of norm attention:

"It facilitates everything that is material, everything that is economic, everything that is paperwork, I think it facilitates all this, but I think that the scourge is in the facilitation on an emotional level, of support (...)" TEJM

"None of the laws are badly made, but then none are carried out." PGJV

The informants TEJM and PGJB move between both positions proposing solutions. Everyone's concern is to improve current attention to the emotional needs of children. In relation to this subject, the speeches refer to the adequate training and even, necessary vocation between the professionals of centers. They also talk about the need to foster other types of non-professional relationships with group or family cohabitation.

On the other hand, there is a need to reinforce relationships similar to those of relatives. Aspects such as solidarity, reciprocity and voluntarism make up the plus in an affective, emotional, healthy, positive and barely tangible family context. Homologous resources to the family, whether substituting or supporting the children's stay in the centers suggest a good strategy to improve the system in the short term. The position of the informants is homogeneous in this respect.
II. Cooperative families as a resource to support the centers

The transition towards less institutionalized models carries with it the greater involvement of civil society in the problems of others. Despite this difficulty, informants emphasize the benefits of minors participating in the family experience versus institutionalization. The hybrid model of staying in a center of protection and support through the cooperative family is useful in many cases, for example, in situations of minors with difficulties for their adoption or permanent foster care due to the age, the bureaucracy or other circumstances. In this sense, we highlight that minors with a cooperative family do not live with the family continuously, but only on weekend and holiday periods. In spite of this, families perceive the positive influence on minors in very different fields: academic, emotional, and behavioral. Among the fragments, we highlight the following arguments in terms of academic performance:

"We notice that they have improved a lot academically, when they have family support" PGJV.

The interviewees also give the greatest importance to the emotional aspects:

"Besides, school is the least of it." PHR

"You focus more on the emotional level, trying to rescue what the child needs, but families prioritize it." EaP

Regarding the improvement of their behavior:

"They improve their behavior in the center and at school, it almost always happens"

However, the emotional aspects are the most relevant since they influence the other spheres of life. Precisely, the previous works of (Del Valle, 1998; Iturbe; Galdácano, 2006) show the loneliness experienced by the minors under guardianship; also, the consequences that this may have on children’s psychosocial well-being such as childhood depression, anxiety, etc. The figure of the cooperative family provides them with personalized accompaniment until the adult age. Besides, it offers tools for
secondary socialization and social interaction as well as an accepted and replicable model of social behavior that minors may reproduce.

Similarly, the cooperative family proposes coverage for minors who would otherwise spend much of their lives in a shelter. If the experience is satisfactory, minors often strengthen ties with the cooperative family beyond the duration imposed by the program. This is especially positive for minors who will have significant support during their transition to adulthood and beyond.

III. The FACO program may be improved, areas to be strengthened... How?

The interviewees value very positively the emergence of the FACO program in Andalusia, in this respect, they agree that it may improve and point out two issues:

The support, monitoring and coordination between system-center-family.

Informants describe this as insufficient. There are no formal and mandatory communication channels, so communication between the various parties involved is scarce. In relation to the family center, the professionals involved recognize a lack of staff resources that limit the dedication to cooperative families. Indeed, the minors with FACO obtain a complementary support in opposition to the minors without FACO; therefore, the professionals focus their attention on this.

Regarding the system-family channel, it is worth noting the development that the FACO program has had in Andalusia in recent years. Although the impetus has promoted the existence of a larger number of FACOs, resources for training, preparation, support and follow-up of program participants have not been well-sponsored.

The economic issue is not an incentive for families but it is a necessary investment for the achievement of quality programs. Specific regulations are therefore, required to control and recognize the rights of the child and the FACO, as well as greater investment in training, monitoring and program support.

Participants agree on the effectiveness of the cooperative family program. They think that it may serve as a bridge for families to become involved in permanent programs
such as foster care or adoption. Likewise, it does not involve incentives, so it is very profitable for the protection system and the state. In addition, the experiences have been very satisfactory. Consequently, we should strengthen the program. One of the most important aspects is the uptake of families and the lack of economic incentive that may act as a condition for the involvement of the FACO, however, authors such as Lamarca, Hernández, López de Foronda., Martínez, Barceló; and Pagola, 2006) argue that this factor is not decisive when families participate or not in collaboration programs with minors. The previous satisfactory experiences of cooperative families and the minors’ processes of improvement may contribute to the dissemination of the the existence of this resource. The informants agree that, given the effectiveness of the program, it is important to reinforce and publicize it.

One of the main obstacles seems to be the inability to manage the program with the available resources. It is irrelevant to consider whether it is possible to guarantee the support and follow-up of cases with few families. For those involved, poor support implies a lack of capacity for growth at the institutional and political levels.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The result of this work evidences the manifesto of the informants with respect to the existing problems in the management of the megacenters, related mainly to the massification and the scarce personnel. As positive aspects, they value the basic attention that is paid to the minors (protection of the health, education, maintenance), nevertheless, they ask themselves if the program provides the psycho-social attention that they need for their socialization in this type of centers. The speeches discuss the preeminent model of residential care in large centers and advocate foster care or a mixed model in small institutions in cases where the former is not possible. Foster care or other similar figures are the best alternative for foster children (Palacios, 2003). Incorporating minors with a extended or external family has tangible and intangible benefits. Informants highlight the individualized emotional support of the family and the ability to provide inclusion in social reality by preventing the child from living in an institution. Moreover, they support the acquisition of socially
accepted norms that families reproduce and transmit to minors, as well as the increase in support that the child will have in the future and after coming of age. The latter is especially important since the protection system sets 18 years as the maximum age to stay in the system.

The FACO accompanies the children in many areas of their lives giving affection to children in a healthy family environment. Previous research of (Millán, Hamido-Mohamed, and Gómez, 2009) state the importance of attachment and affection for minors with prior family difficulties (Infante and Martínez, 2016). Informants reaffirm this, noting that the participation of minors in a harmonious family environment generates positive changes in their self-esteem, academic performance, and behavior, among others. Another noteworthy aspect is the coverage that FACOs make to minors after coming of age, since the link with families usually extends beyond the time established in the program (18 years), thus the share of minors who have participated in the program, find important support from their cooperative families after leaving the center. This aspect is one of the greatest benefits of the resource according to the professionals of the centers and the cooperative families.

Finally, the informants outline the possibilities for improving the cooperative family resource. They consider that this one has a short route; therefore, it is possible to improve certain aspects of its management. On the other hand, poor family-center-system coordination, insufficient support for FACOs, and limited resources to keep the emancipation of minors are the issues that concern to informants. Likewise, the transition to adulthood stands out as an important care for participants. In line with previous research and reports, the urgent need to review the current system of protection and the situation of minors under the age of majority is underlined. The cooperative family or mentoring figures may be an effective resource for this problem. It is advisable to continue researching the subject in other studies, as well as to know good practices in other countries or contexts.
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