

The role of foster carers in England and Portugal: Is it solely a parenting role?

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Funding information

Economic and Social Research Council,
Grant/Award Number: 1501012

Abstract

The role of foster carers can be described as similar to the role of parents, but with some additional tasks. Through focus groups, children in care, young adults who are care-experienced, foster carers, and social workers in England and Portugal shared their views on this role. Key themes included the need to promote children's sense of belonging and relationships with foster carers and their birth family, to support children's individual needs, and to recognise the influence of children's social care services, social workers and foster carers' family and social network. Foster carers and social workers in the English sample talked about the complementarity between the parenting side of the role and these additional tasks. On the other hand, children and young adults in both samples, and foster carers and social workers in the Portuguese sample, focused mostly on the parenting side of the role, but also stated the importance of some additional tasks, such as collaboration with children's birth families. These findings reflect policies and alternative care context differences between England and Portugal.

KEYWORDS

foster care, foster carers' role, parenting role

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INTRODUCTION

In Europe, different countries follow distinct evidence-based work in the field of child welfare (Grietens, 2013). However, when it is necessary for a child to leave their family and begin alternative living arrangements (i.e., in out-of-home care), in the majority of these countries, the preference is usually to place them in foster care rather than residential care (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013). This preference is based on the idea that foster care promotes an alternative family environment, and that children have the right to grow up in a family that provides an understanding, happy and loving environment (United Nations, 1989).

Two countries whose law reflects this preference for foster care placements over residential care placements are England (Children Act 1989) and Portugal (Child Protection Law). However, the two countries differ in their implementation of the law: whereas the majority of children in care in England are placed in foster care (Department for Education, 2019), in Portugal almost all children in care are placed in residential care (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020). This paper investigates the perceptions of key stakeholders in these countries (children in care, young adults who are care-experienced, foster carers, and social workers) on the role of the foster carer. It focuses on understanding how stakeholders in countries with differing uses and systems of foster care understand the role of foster carers.

THE ROLE OF FOSTER CARERS

The main aim of foster carers is to promote an alternative family environment for children, while supporting positive outcomes, namely their development but also their permanence (Thoburn, 2010). In the English and Portuguese contexts, research with children and/or people who are care-experienced (Biehal, 2014; Boddy, 2019; Colbridge et al., 2017; Delgado et al., 2016; Schofield et al., 2012; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Ward et al., 2005), and with foster carers and/or social workers (Biehal, 2014; Delgado et al., 2016; Diogo, 2018; Schofield et al., 2012; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003), identified foster carers' parenting attitudes and quality of care, as well as the relationship they promoted with children, as contributing to children's outcomes. Nonetheless, across the studies conducted in England there were a few references to some children in practice not feeling like they belonged to the foster carers' family, or in more extreme cases where love and the development of the relationship were perceived as not always being at the centre of the fostering practice; this was described as having a negative influence on children. This variability may also be present in the Portuguese foster care system; however, since there is limited research in this context, this is difficult to assess.

The role of foster carers is also comprised of some additional tasks beyond those typically performed by parents; indeed, Berrick and Skivenes (2012) have defined fostering as 'Parenting Plus', which is aligned with more recent research conducted on the personal characteristics of successful foster carers (Day et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2019). This is due in part to the additional challenges that often accompany the role, such as needing to support the relationships between children, birth families, and foster families. Another additional challenge is providing care adjusted to children's individual needs, given that comparisons of children in care with their peers from the general population show a greater prevalence of difficulties, such as behavioural, psychopathological, neurological and educational (Department for Education, 2020; Ford et al., 2007). Furthermore, children's behavioural difficulties in

particular have been identified as adding strain to foster carers, and in some extreme cases as leading to placement breakdown (Cooley et al., 2015; Goemans et al., 2018). As a result of these additional tasks, research has also emphasised the importance for foster carers to receive support from their partners (Buehler et al., 2003), their social networks (Sinclair et al., 2004), and their peers and social workers (Brown, 2008).

In total, Buehler et al. (2006) identified 12 competency domains that foster carers needed to have to perform the role with success. These could be grouped under protecting and caring for children; supporting children given their physical, mental, cultural, social, emotional, and educational needs; managing the relationship, ambiguity and loss for children and their families; working in partnership with professionals; growing as a foster carer; and managing the demands of fostering on their own personal life. Some of these are directly related to standard conceptions of 'parenting', while others constitute additional tasks. Schofield et al. (2013, p. 46) described foster carers thus: 'their family is their work and their work is their family—so roles are not so clearly separated and boundaries are not so clearly defined.' This understanding of the role was also found in research conducted in other countries, such as in Belgium (De Wilde et al., 2019) and France (Renault et al., 2015).

FOSTER CARE CONTEXT IN ENGLAND AND PORTUGAL

England and Portugal have different uses and systems of foster care, which can be explained and contextualised by country-specific historical, religious, and cultural conditions, welfare regimes, legislative development, and structure of children's social care services.

Current legislation in England is based on the Children Act (1989), which specifies that the decision for removal of children from their context is determined from the level of risk they are exposed to. The total number of children in care has increased over the past decade, as a result of a shift in thinking about what 'risk' means and how professionals should perform their role, which many have argued has led to a risk-averse culture and bureaucratisation of practice (Higgins et al., 2015; Masson & Parton, 2020). Nonetheless, the rate of children (≤ 18 years old) in care in England (6.5 per 1000; Department for Education, 2019) can still be considered low compared to some other countries (Thoburn, 2010). Within this group, 49.5% of children ceased to be looked after < 1 year after entering care, and only 29.5% left care and returned to live with their parents, relatives, or other person with or without parental responsibility (Department for Education, 2019).

National data (Department for Education, 2019) confirm that within the alternative care context, priority is given to foster care (58.5% of all children in care were in 'stranger' foster care) and, whenever possible, to kinship care (placement with a close relative or family friend: 13.4% of all children in care). The first legislative document on foster care (Children and Young Persons Act) was published in 1908. According to Cronin (2019), the Children Act (1948) clearly stated a preference for foster care over residential care, and since then the number and proportion of children in foster care has grown. Moreover, this preference can also be explained by political and economic motivations, given the much lower cost of foster care comparative to residential care. Children in foster care in England differ in several ways from those in residential care, tending to be younger and to have fewer challenges such as special educational needs or disabilities (Department for Education, 2016). England makes different use of foster care according to the children's needs, and that is translated into several types of foster care placements, that is,

emergency, short-term, short-breaks (respite), remand, fostering for adoption, family and friends (kinship), specialist therapeutic and long-term (Narey & Owers, 2018).

In Portugal, the number of children in alternative care has been decreasing over the past decade, with intervention recommended mostly in situations of danger (Child Protection Law): this explains the low number of children in alternative care (3.4 per 1000 ≤ 18 years old, or 2.8 per 1000 ≤ 24 years old; Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020; INE. PORDATA, 2021). Within this group, only 18.6% of children ceased to be looked after < 1 year after entering care, and the majority (65.9%) left care and returned to live with their parents, relatives, or other person with or without parental responsibility (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020).

As in England, Portuguese legislation also gives preference to family contexts: permanence in the family of origin (kinship care is not classified as a type of foster care), adoption, or other stable family context. Moreover, foster care is recommended over residential care (Child Protection Law); however, the data shows that only 2.7% of all children in care were in foster care (191 out of 7046, Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020), this being one of the lowest rates of children in foster care in Europe (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013). The legislation further states that foster care is the preferred placement especially for children below 6 years old; however, only 1.8% of all children in care of this age range were placed in foster care (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020). Foster care was first implemented in law in 1979 (Decree-Law n.º 288/79). However, based on the available national data from since 2004, foster care has never been the preferred type of placement and throughout the years residential care placements became more prevalent (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020). This can be explained by the lack of political investment in children's policies but also by the existence of enough children's homes to provide support to all children in alternative care, some of which are run by the church (Carvalho & Diogo, 2021; Delgado et al., 2018). In Portugal, there is only one generic type of foster care, meaning the choice of placement is determined by foster carers' availability and not only by children's individual characteristics and needs (Machado, 2016).

THE CURRENT STUDY

In both England and Portugal, foster carers are expected to meet children's needs and support their development while providing a loving and caring environment (Decree-Law 139/2019; Fostering services: national minimum standards, 2011). However, there are differences in context and practice that might affect how the foster carer's role is perceived. Moreover, there has been very little research conducted on this topic in Portugal. The current article therefore represents the first comparison between England and Portugal on perceptions of the foster carer's role, and with this aim it gathers the voices of a group of stakeholders who are experts by experience in foster care.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on qualitative data from a study on the role of foster carers conducted for the first author's PhD thesis. This study received approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford.

Sample

The sample was comprised of 53 participants in England and 46 participants in Portugal across 19 focus groups (Table 1). The participants who took part were from four different stakeholders' groups and fulfil the study criteria as presented below (note that no further sociodemographic information was collected):

- Children in care between 16 and 17 years old, from a Children in Care Council in England and an independent fostering agency in Portugal;
- Young adults within 5 years of leaving care, from two Care Leavers' Associations in England, and an independent fostering agency in Portugal;
- Foster carers with at least one child in care, from three local authorities and one independent fostering agency in England, and one independent fostering agency and one local authority in Portugal;
- Social workers who were working with foster carers, from three local authorities and one independent fostering agency in England, and one independent fostering agency and one local authority in Portugal.

In Portugal, the sample was collected only in two sites (one local authority and one independent fostering agency), whereas in England, there was a total of seven sites (one Children in Care Council, two Care Leavers' Associations, three local authorities, and one independent fostering agency).

Procedure

In England, the fostering providers and associations were chosen using criteria of geography, type and size, aiming for a diverse sample on these three characteristics. In Portugal, because foster care is rarely used, fostering providers were chosen for their population size, leading to the decision to collect data only in two sites. The fostering providers and associations sent information about this study to possible participants who fitted the study criteria. Each individual then expressed their interest in taking part in the study. All participants received an email before the focus group explaining in further detail the objectives of the research, along with consent forms and an information sheet. The small number of sites in Portugal and the fact that participants in both samples were self-selected should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings.

TABLE 1 Distribution of participants by stakeholders' group in England and Portugal

	England (<i>n</i> = 53)	Portugal (<i>n</i> = 46)
Children who were in foster care	3 (1 focus group)	4 (1 focus group)
Young adults who were care-experienced	8 (2 focus groups)	2 (1 focus group)
Foster carers who had at least one child in placement	16 (4 focus groups)	27 (4 focus groups)
Social workers who were working with foster carers	26 (4 focus groups)	13 (2 focus groups)

Data collection

A total of 19 focus groups were conducted, separately by group of stakeholders. In order to gain a deeper understanding on the role of foster carers, the participants were provided with two discussion prompts: 'What are good foster carers like?' and 'How can we measure placement success?' The participants were also asked to discuss the items of the extended version of the Casey Foster Applicant Inventory Instrument — Applicant Version, a standardised questionnaire for selecting potential foster carers (CFAI-A; Orme et al., 2006), identified by Luke and Sebba (2013) as the selection tool that covered the widest range of aspects of the foster carer's role and with the best evidence base. This questionnaire was presented after the discussion prompts so the participants could reflect if other factors covered in the questionnaire, beyond the ones they had stated, were important for this discussion.

Analysis

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The findings presented in this article form part of a body of work that followed an adapted grounded theory structure (Timonen et al., 2018). The analysis also relied on reflexive material that emerged from other sources of data collection and from the first author's own positionality as a former practitioner.

The transcripts were coded line by line (open coding), the emerging codes were then narrowed to the most frequent and important codes (focused coding), after which, relationships between codes and categories were explored. MAXQDA 12.0 was used to support the coding and analysis of the data. Participants' identifying details were protected.

FINDINGS

Children, young adults, foster carers, and social workers in England and Portugal perceived the role of foster carers as being comprised of, and influenced by, a similar range of factors, even if these were described differently. The views of children and young adults across the two countries were mostly similar. Notably, however, the comparison between countries on the views of foster carers and social workers revealed some key differences.

To start, we present evidence on how the stakeholders described children's social care services in each country as a framework for the role of foster carers. We then focus on perceptions of the role as related to foster carers' personal characteristics; and children's personal characteristics, development, and permanence; before expanding on the stakeholders' views on contextual sources of support, namely, social workers in the fostering services, children's birth families, and foster carers' family life and social networks.

Children's social care services

Children's (social care) services were described as an overarching source of support by framing foster care and therefore the role of foster carers, while promoting children's outcomes, that is, their development and permanence. In the English sample, stakeholders perceived foster care as a temporary type of placement that could lead to reunification with birth families, adoption, or

permanency until children leave to another placement or to live independently, and foster carers as performing a remunerated role. This role was classified as bureaucratic and complex, given the requirements set by children's services, as stated by a social worker: 'foster carers are coming into a large bureaucratic system when they apply, and that is almost half of the job, ... meetings like every week or something, different professionals coming in and out of your house, taking the child to different appointments'. Foster carers were expected to work closely with social workers and other professionals in order to support children, but also to attend training and peer support sessions.

Moreover, children's services were portrayed as imposing a wide range of guidelines and regulations that foster carers needed to follow on how to interact with children, aimed at safeguarding all the parties. For example: children not being allowed in the foster carers' bedrooms in order to avoid allegations; and children being placed in respite care when foster carers needed a break (unless foster carers' personal networks had been previously assessed by the fostering services). However, some foster carers and social workers, as well as several young adults considered the focus on safeguarding as excessive. In the words of two young adults:

... You have got all of these policies and procedures in place but that is not going to work for every single young person, because every child is different. (Young adult, English sample)

It's like you don't get a robot to be a parent ... there are certain things you do with your own child, like, at a certain age you bath them and that, fair enough, but then you have to be careful with what you do when it is a looked after child. (Young adult, English sample)

In the Portuguese sample, stakeholders talked about foster care as a temporary type of placement that could lead to reunification with the birth family but that in practice commonly continued until children leave to live independently, which could coincide with the end of the placement or happen months or years after it. Furthermore, they described foster carers as performing a voluntary role. There were far fewer references to children's services in comparison with the English sample. Across the different stakeholders' groups there were references to the lack of requirements, such as training requirements and lack of formal support, such as frequent contact with social workers and financial support. In some cases, this context was perceived as negative and in others as positive. In the words of a child and one foster carer:

... It is illogical, [foster carers] already do so much, taking care of us and having us in their houses, now also having to pay for our things. (Child, Portuguese sample)

... This is like being a parent, I mean you do not study for that. (Foster carer, Portuguese sample)

Moreover, in the Portuguese sample, family members and friends of foster carers were described as stepping in and taking care of children without specific assessments. This is aligned with the fact that the concept of respite care does not exist in Portugal.

In summary, it can be claimed that English children's services implemented several rules and regulations around foster care, which for some stakeholders were too structured. In contrast,

Portuguese children's services implemented fewer requirements, which for some stakeholders were not enough.

Foster carers' personal characteristics

The vast majority of stakeholders in both samples argued that foster carers' personality traits, psychological well-being, and past experiences, are relevant for the role. Specifically, they talked about the personality traits of affection, self-regulation and communication skills, self-reflection and willingness to learn, empathy, flexibility and adaptability, and sense of humour. When it came to psychological well-being, the focus was on foster carers' ability to deal with the different types of stress that resulted from the role. Lastly, they gave examples of three types of past experiences, that is, parenting experiences, life experiences, and social care services experiences. These different personal characteristics of foster carers were described as contributing to the foster carers' role, when it comes to understanding children's context and needs and supporting them given their individuality, while promoting their outcomes, i.e., their development and permanence.

In all groups there was a strong focus on the foster carers' personality traits, but there were some differences in emphasis according to the type of stakeholder and sample. Children and young adults in both samples, and foster carers and social workers in the Portuguese sample, talked particularly about affection. As shared by a child in the Portuguese sample: '[a] good foster carer is the one who gives affection ... affection to a child who is not related to them, no relationship whatsoever.' Affection was considered as crucial to the bonds that foster carers promoted and developed with children, which in several cases were described as being for life. According to a young adult in each sample:

... It is important that children have someone to turn to because for me at 25 sometimes I want my mum, I want my dad, I don't have a dad, I don't have that sort of family support, sometimes my [foster] mum calls and she will talk to me, she will actually call back and you know, she will come around sometimes and sit down with me and watch TV with me. (Young adult, English sample)

It's good that the bond won't end, even if when we will live apart, continue to be together ... I think it's important. (Young adult, Portuguese sample)

However, some young adults in the English sample stated that not all foster carers would make them feel loved or would build a relationship with them. One young adult shared that: 'I have seen carers who are just too scared to nurture that child, to love that child because of the rules and regulations'; while another said: 'I felt like I was seen as a money package, you know, that my carers could just make money out of me'.

Foster carers and social workers in the English sample, despite talking directly and indirectly about the importance of affection, focused more on foster carers' self-regulation and communication skills, and self-reflection and willingness to learn. As shared by a foster carer and a social worker in the English sample:

... The persistence, you never give up and you have to keep saying that by the end of the day, no matter how bad it gets the kids matter, the kids are the ones that

are important, the children are what is important, so you have to keep just battling through, don't you? (Foster carer, English sample)

Because if people are able to self-reflect, they are more likely to take on board new ideas, they don't take it personally and they just look at how they can learn from the experience rather than taking it in a very personal level if, say children are not responding in the way they may wish. Self-reflection for me is huge. (Social worker, English sample)

On the whole, stakeholders in the different groups focused on different foster carers' personality traits that in their opinion are crucial to the role. Children and young adults in both samples, and foster carers and social workers in the Portuguese sample, were more vocal about the importance of affection compared to foster carers and social workers in the English sample. Moreover, in the English sample there were a few examples of young adults who did not feel loved by foster carers.

Children's personal characteristics, development, and permanence

There were several references to the diversity of children who enter care, to their distinct personal characteristics, and therefore to the individualised support they required from foster carers. Stakeholders also talked about developmental areas that foster carers should support, that is, emotional and social, physical and mental health, and education, and recognised that foster carers needed to pay particular attention to children's behavioural problems. In the different groups, stakeholders stressed that children benefited from stable placements, where they would be supported and integrated in the foster family, regardless of their personal characteristics and developmental needs. Therefore, they considered that foster carers needed to balance the guidelines and regulations of children's services and the needs of children. This was stated mainly in the English sample; in the words of one young adult: 'it doesn't mean that [foster carers] can't bend [guidelines and regulations] a little bit to support that child and that child's needs'. Stakeholders in both samples, but particularly children and young adults in both samples, and foster carers and social workers in the Portuguese sample, stressed the importance of children feeling part of that family similarly to foster carers' own children. According to a young adult in the Portuguese sample and a child in the English sample:

...It is necessary to have love for a child, to have affection to give to a child, just like they would give to their own child. (Young adult, Portuguese sample)

...It depends on how the foster parents treat you, if they treat you as if they are your own, they are your own child, then the foster, then the placement will be successful. If they treat you like you are an outcast like you don't belong, then they shouldn't be a foster carer. (Child, English sample)

Nonetheless, in both samples there was a shared understanding that despite foster carers integrating children in their family, it was not always possible to treat children equally to their own children, because of the guidelines and regulations of children's services and children's developmental needs, but also to ensure their identity and individuality. In the words of a foster carer in the English sample: 'there is a lot of ways, you have to learn, you have to be patient, you have to treat them

differently than your own kids, they can't be treated the same, even that you want to ... you have to be different, [there are] rules'. Apart from this understanding, some young adults in the English sample shared examples of foster carers who in some way would make children feel different and in extreme could even make them feel like they were not part of the family. One young adult shared: 'you live, you have got like from our point of view you are living in somebody else's house and that is, you feel like you are intruding, you feel like an outcast'.

In the different stakeholders' groups, there was a joint perception that foster carers needed to provide care to children according to their personal characteristics and developmental needs and to avoid situations where children would not feel integrated within the foster carers' family. Notably, however, in the English sample there were some examples of foster carers who had made children feel different or even not part of the foster family.

Social workers in the fostering services

Across the different groups, stakeholders considered that social workers (in the fostering services) acted as a contextual source of support, and therefore contributed to the role of foster carers and to children, by supporting their development and permanence.

Stakeholders in different groups in the English sample and social workers in the Portuguese sample stated that social workers expressed their expectations and offered instrumental and emotional support to foster carers and children. They did this by providing training opportunities, setting up support groups between foster carers, making referrals to other professionals, ensuring assistance for their everyday routines, as well as building trusting relationships. In these different groups, social workers were considered as important, but for foster carers and social workers in the English sample, they were considered as crucial. As stated by a young adult and a social worker in the English sample:

... At the start you may not think the foster carer is going to be good, [but] with the right sort of training and the right sort of support you can [see] development, because that is like us, you know, when I was a kid I was written off straight, I was told I would never achieve anything, you know, but certain people saw something in me, ... and with the right kind of support and the right development I flourished, ... and I believe [that is] the same for the foster carers. (Young adult, English sample)

... [Foster carers] are part of the legal system and they should do what is expected of them and they should be able to adapt and change, and always understand that they are in the system and that they are not working alone, right? They shouldn't do what they feel, try to do, they should ask for information. (Social worker, English sample)

In contrast, foster carers in the Portuguese sample considered that social workers were important but mostly in more extreme cases, such as when the placement was unstable, and beyond that, occasional check-ins would be enough. In the words of a foster carer: 'sometimes, they go to my place, they talk with the children'. In the groups of children and young adults in the Portuguese sample there were no direct references to the support provided by social workers.

This finding is aligned with those in the section on *children's social care services*. In England social workers work more closely with foster carers and children, while in Portugal foster carers and children have less professional support.

Birth families of children

In the different groups there were some references to the positive influence of children's (birth) families on the foster carers' role and even more on children, thus acting as a contextual source of support. Moreover, stakeholders talked about foster carers supporting children's families to enhance their relationship with their children, and ultimately their reunification. A social worker in the Portuguese sample said: 'we have families that teach parents how to cook, how to care for their children'. There were also references to social workers directly supporting children's relationship with their families, as shared by a young adult in the English sample: 'I didn't have contact, too much with my birth family, but what I did it was usually supervised ... I felt weird at the time, but it is something that they do quite well'. Across the different groups there was a shared understanding of the importance of the relationship between children and their families. According to a child and a foster carer in the English sample:

[Children] should let go of some aspects of the past but they shouldn't let go of the fact that their birth family is their birth family. (Child, English sample)

I think that for me initially I wanted to rescue children, but now I realised that they did not want to be rescued. Now how I develop is that I want to reconnect them with their birth family and keep their connections going and I will help them therapeutically. (Foster carer, English sample)

However, a few social workers in the Portuguese sample pointed out that some foster carers had difficulties understanding and relating with children's families. This is aligned with the views of some foster carers in this sample, who stated that contact and reunification between children and their families were not beneficial for children or for them. In fact, they shared some examples of their personal experience:

[The child] gets so angry, they bang the doors, they no longer hear me, they turn their back, get completely undisciplined, now after one day, or 2, or 3 days, everything gets back to normal, this happens because when the child has contact with their mother. (Foster carer, Portuguese sample)

[Contact] affects negatively the work [I'm doing with children], it damages our patience because we are doing our role and we are seeing that everything gets affected as a result of an hour they spend with their parents. (Foster carer, Portuguese sample)

As well as having a different perspective from the other stakeholders, these foster carers also questioned the decision of children's services or the court to allow contact between children and their families or to promote reunification. A few social workers also stressed the negative influence this can have on the children placed with them.

In essence, tensions between foster carers and children's families were only described in the Portuguese sample, while in the English sample, children's families were mostly described as a contextual source of support.

Family life and social networks of foster carers

Foster carers' family life (i.e., partners, birth children, and extended family) and social networks (i.e., friends and neighbours) were also identified as a source of support for the foster carers' role and for children. The support could be grouped under social expectations, and instrumental and emotional support. Across the different stakeholders' groups the focus was mostly on how the family members of foster carers, through these different types of support, could promote the integration of children in their family. A young adult in the English sample stated: '[it is important] to not make the child feel like they are in care, to make them feel like they do actually belong in a family'; while a foster carer in the Portuguese sample shared: 'the entire family welcomed the child and their biological siblings ... my mother-in-law takes all the [foster child's birth] siblings for a week [of holidays], even if there are currently placed in different foster families'.

Moreover, even if there were indirect references to the importance of bonds between children and foster carers' family members across the different groups; children and young adults in both samples, and foster carers and social workers in the Portuguese sample, stated as crucial the fact that the family members of foster carers actively promoted bonds with children, and therefore their sense of belonging. In the words of a child in the English sample and a young adult in the Portuguese sample:

When you feel accepted by the family, pretty much, when you feel like you are connected to the rest of the family that is when you feel like, you have done good, and you feel like you are part of the family. (Child, English sample)

For us, father and mother there is only one, but I call [my foster carers] uncle and aunt, and my sister calls them mother and father, no, actually mother and uncle, which is even weirder. (Young adult, Portuguese sample)

In summary, stakeholders in the different groups considered that foster carers' family life and social networks were an important contextual source of support, with a particular focus on children being integrated in the foster carers' family. Children and young adults in both samples, and foster carers and social workers in the Portuguese sample also shared particular examples of bonds between family members of foster carers and children.

DISCUSSION

Across the different groups, stakeholders shared their views and personal experiences on what makes a good foster carer and on indicators of placement success to shed light on the role of foster carers. Similarly to previous research studies, they talked about several personal characteristics of foster carers (Day et al., 2018; Van Holen et al., 2019), focused on children's personal characteristics, as well as development and permanence outcomes (Thoburn, 2010), and explored the supportive role of children's services, social workers, children's families and foster carers' family life and social networks (Buehler et al., 2006). Even if stakeholders were in agreement that all these factors were important, there were differences in how they described them and how they perceived the relationship between them. Consequently, distinct stakeholders described the role of foster carers differently, some leaning more towards parenting and some more towards the additional tasks of the role (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012). These differences could be explained by

the context and the practice in each country (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020; Narey & Owers, 2018).

The way that children's services acted and consequently framed foster care was described differently in England and Portugal. In England, foster care was mostly explained as an alternative and temporary family environment, where foster carers were paid and provided with different levels of support (Narey & Owers, 2018). Stakeholders stated that children's services set in place clear and detailed guidelines and regulations aimed at structuring foster carers' role, promoting children's outcomes, but also safeguarding all involved parties. However, there were some references in this sample to children's services in some cases promoting a risk-averse culture and bureaucratisation of practice, which consequently could hinder the sense of 'normality' in a family environment and children's feelings of belonging (Masson & Parton, 2020; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003).

The quality of care, the relationship between foster carers and children, and the integration of children in the foster family were described by stakeholders in the English sample as crucial, however, they also acknowledged that foster carers needed to perform additional tasks beyond the ones performed by parents, such as following children's services guidelines and regulations, collaborating with social workers, and supporting the relationship between children and their family. Furthermore, there was a shared understanding that foster carers needed to adjust the way they performed the role to the specific aims of each placement. Therefore, we argue that the role of foster carers in England can be classified as 'Parenting Plus' (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012). However, there were some exceptions to these findings: a minority of stakeholders considered that in practice some foster carers were too focused on these additional tasks and did not put love and the development of a relationship with children at the centre of fostering. In part, this could be contextualised by children's services strict regulations and guidelines, but also by the short-term nature of some placements (Higgins et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2005).

In Portugal, stakeholders described foster care as an alternative family environment, where commonly children would stay long-term (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2020), and where foster carers performed a voluntary role. Children's services were mostly perceived as not providing enough support (e.g., training or financial resources), and therefore, as delegating almost completely the responsibility of children to foster carers. Despite the emphasis placed on the relationship between foster carers and children and the integration of children in the foster family, foster carers were still expected to focus on children's needs (i.e., development and permanence), while promoting the relationship between them and their family. We argue that even if foster carers in Portugal have more discretion than foster carers in England, the role of foster carers in Portugal can also be classified as 'Parenting Plus' (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012). However, it is important to stress that some foster carers in Portugal would actually describe their role as solely parenting orientated, and would neglect the role of children's families; this could be explained by the level of discretion they have and the fact that they considered these children as if they were their own birth children. This, however, can contribute negatively to children, as well as hinder the reunification with their families, which is the most common permanent plan for children in Portugal (Delgado et al., 2016).

Analysis of the findings from England and Portugal has highlighted the importance of taking into account the historical, cultural, and legislative context when making cross-country comparisons.

Findings from the English sample suggest that children's services have a crucial role to play by implementing guidelines and supporting the practices that enable children in foster care to

feel well looked after, loved, and integrated in the family environment, regardless of their developmental needs and placement aims.

In Portugal, we argue that foster carers need to be supported by children's services, receive formal support regarding contact, and have training around working alongside children's families, respecting children's identity, and understanding the impact on children of their views and attitudes towards children's families. This is especially pressing given upcoming developments in the Portuguese context, resulting from recent changes in the law and policy, that favours foster care.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the limitations imposed by a self-selected sample, and the limited number of sites representing a very small population in Portugal, this study contributes to research on the role of foster carers, and consequently to reflections and discussions on social work practice in England and Portugal. The study's attention to the views of different stakeholders in England and Portugal has revealed that despite the differences in context and practice, most stakeholders in both countries classified the foster carer's role as 'Parenting Plus.' Where there was a lack of shared understanding on the role of foster carers, this could mean that some foster carers did not support children accordingly, and therefore placed less emphasis on integrating them in a caring and loving family that promotes their belonging while they are living away from their families, or on promoting their relationship with their families. Children's services should continue, or in the Portuguese case promote, and enhance, direct and formal support to foster carers fulfilling this 'Parenting Plus' role.

Following this first comparative study of England and Portugal, further work is needed to explore in more depth the historical and cultural contexts behind the differing policy, practice, and social care services in England and Portugal, and how these might contribute to differing conceptions of the role, despite similarities in broader societal issues such as growing socioeconomic inequality and insecure employment prospects for children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Professor Judy Sebba and Dr Neil Harrison for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. We would also like to thank all those who took part in the study and gave generously of their time and input.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Pinto VS, Luke N. The role of foster carers in England and Portugal: Is it solely a parenting role? *Child Soc.* 2022;36:249–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12536>