

***Abstract of the Study***

***Children in Kinship Care.***

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This research took place in the region of Hauts-de-France, with the collaboration of an AEMO (social and educational intervention at home) service for the qualitative section, and the services of the Department of Nord and of Pas-de-Calais for the quantitative section.

**First, the quantitative study** describes the principal characteristics for kinship care, literally named “Trusted Third Parties” (TTP) as decreed by the judiciary, by comparing those subject to an additional social and educational intervention (AEMO) to those without any other measure. According to the DREES data, the TTP measures concern 7% of out of home placements. Analysis of the data base allows us to highlight the fact that, half of the time, in the Department of Nord (870 measures as of the 31st of December 2014), TTP measure were accompanied by an AEMO.

Trusted third party (TTP) WITH social and educational measures (AEMO)	Trusted third party (TTP) WITHOUT social and educational measures (AEMO)
More young children [16% vs 10% are less than 6 years old]	More youth from 15 to 17 years old [42% vs 17%]
The first protective measure is often an AEMO [53% vs 36%]	Frequently directly placed in child protection by a TTP measure (44% vs. 21%)
Families are a little less likely to receive a maintenance allowance [83%].	31% of families receive no material support.

Between the groups TTP measures with AEMO *versus* those without, there is no significant difference by gender. The age distribution of children in kinship care with AEMO is similar to that of all children in child protection services in the region, while that of children in kinship care without AEMO involve more adolescents from 15 to 17 years old. The data seem to indicate that two types of situations can be distinguished amongst TTP measures. On one hand, there are measures concerning adolescents who are dealing with the youth protection system for the first time and, on the other hand, there are situations similar to the collection of youth protection measures in the region: starting

early in childhood and continuing in various forms including here, placement in kinship care.

**The qualitative study** was conducted between June 2014 and September 2016. It concerns children placed with a relative and subject to social and educational measures (AEMO). Only 4 out of 30 situations are informal and correspond to an informal arrangement amongst relatives. Most interventions brought to our attention are measures decided by a judge who designated a member or members of the family as TTP(s).

This study shows that it is more often women who are designated as TTPs, even in the case of a child placed with a couple. These caregivers are from modest circumstances although they generally are amongst the least disadvantaged of the maternal or paternal families. The grandparents are most commonly designated as trusted third parties, with the father's and mother's side equally balanced, unlike in previous studies. In addition, the child's gender has no effect on a hypothetical attribution favouring one or the other of the families.

If we consider all the children from the same mother, the child placed with a relative is usually the eldest. Moreover, at the same time, siblings are very often affected by other forms of placement in a foster family or an institution.

We have observed that, contrary to other studies in France, children were mostly placed with a relative before the age of 10 years old and for significant periods of time. At the outset of our study,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of children had been living with a relative for at least 6 years. Consistent with the quantitative approach presented at the outset of this report, this study shows that, aside from with several placements occurring during adolescence, most children in our study were placed relatively early and for long periods due to the

complex issues often encountered in youth protection. The rare adolescents [Clémentine (1), Mélia (17), Claire and Coralie (23)] whose measures started later were, however, from the outset covered by an AEMO measure, along with being placed with a relative, due to a very serious situation of a conjugal break-up and violence (1), complex issues (murder and a father's imprisonment (17), or incest revealed by the adolescents (23)). The choice to involve an AEMO service does not allow us to reach adolescents placed with a relative and not subject to an AEMO, situations revealed by the quantitative study.

Relatives stress that it is often their first contact with social services, that the first hearings are particularly stressful, that they are relatively unaware of their rights and duties and that they are just discovering the roles of the various professionals involved in child protection. When we encountered them, they have accepted the expressed views of social workers with respect to each individual's role in the family. Also, they emphasize the fact that they are not the parents. They regularly refer to the work of a parent which they do and to "the correct distance" that they maintain between the child and them. The question of out-of-home care and the risk that caregivers will fully replace the parents (particularly the mother), is a matter of great concern for youth protection professionals. These questions frequently arise in professional practices with French foster families. Nonetheless, it seems that there is even closer monitoring from social workers when the person responsible for the child is a relative.

The prevalence of unstable situations sharply raises the question of financial support to kinship caregivers. In this context, the reader will be astonished to learn that the maintenance allowance (clothes, food, books, etc.) was not systematically provided from the moment the judge assigned custody, or that such a systematic and proactive

process was not undertaken by social services. (It is worth defining whose task this is, both in conjunction with a measure of AEMO, and in the absence of such a measure.) Indeed, for certain situations, the work of close family or friends in raising a child is unpaid in two ways: it does not involve a salary, and it does not systematically lead to monetary compensation for expenses. To this, we can add social workers' hesitation to modify the name of the beneficiary of family allowance payments, for fear of symbolically side-lining parents even further. Overall, as in the English studies, the material problems of the kinship carer are definitely not given due consideration. Currently, these individuals must scrutinize the judgment and themselves initiate procedures with the appropriate authority of the department concerned. The cost of this type of initiative is such that they resign themselves to this situation, moved by a moral obligation and a sense of duty to do everything possible to avoid a placement outside of the family. This moral obligation may make them feel uncomfortable in claiming compensation for their commitment. Similarly, considering the precarious state of the families concerned and the lack of information on the status of this caregiver and the child in question, it would certainly be wise to make families more aware of the possibilities of assistance for young adults. For those who reach adulthood in the course of their studies, the measure is interrupted and it was not possible for us to contact these families. This abrupt halt confirms the quantitative data which highlight a very small number still in foster care once they reach the age of majority.

On the other hand, the work of Sarah Mosca has revealed that the role of close kin transpires within an extended family network, unfamiliar to social professionals. This occurs throughout the placement and very often precedes it. This was already observed in England, but the current work was able to complete this information in observing that

**this support often benefits the parent(s), as well as the child**, which does not exclude the possibility of misunderstandings between the child's grandparents and parents. Moreover, interviews with social workers showed that this **support continues when children are returned to parents**. The social workers see this continuity **pragmatically while, at the same time, questioning the motivations** of the close kin. The latter organize themselves to take care for the child, alone or with the help of those around them, visit the child in a neutral location, adapt to administrative annoyances engendered by a rare and unclear situation, provide for the child's needs, and seek support when needed by calling on nearby relatives, but such a commitment often leads to professionals' questioning their motivation for all this. Thus, social workers fluctuate between a search for unacknowledged motivations and seizing the opportunity of a solution which, most often, has already been tried and proven its worth before the crisis.

Nonetheless, once a father or mother expresses a desire to be with the child, in conformity with the French paradigm of child protection which favours a return to the parent(s), the security net which the relatives have woven around the child gives way to the parent's desire and returns to its informal status. Meetings must be organized, and a link established, sometimes for the first time. It often makes both the close family member and the child feel insecure. Even if the parent has not fulfilled his or her role for a number of months, or contacted the child and those around the child, has not worried about the child, and has kept a distance, the parent may still appear at any moment. In a certain way, parents may be negligent in their parental duties – or perform their parental duties only erratically – without this calling into question any of their rights. This study poses a question common to all the measures of placement away from the birth parent(s): how is it possible to establish or maintain a form of parenting without

aggravating the discontinuity of the processes? Pluriparenting, a concept which foresees the possibility of a number of attachment figures, not competing with each other, seems to have had considerable difficulty in gaining acceptance in France. When we take into account the obsession with not taking the place of the parent, at the same times as taking on parental functions, both in the discourse of social workers and in that of the relatives, we can see to what extent pluriparenting is unthinkable for all the stakeholders in child protection services.

As Hunt mentioned in her work, relatives hope to have the opportunity to speak with each other or with a different social worker from the person in charge of the intervention to be taken for the child. Indeed, faced with the AEMO social worker mandated to ensure satisfactory relations between the designated caregiver and the parent, and the fragility of the measure (which places the parent's rights in the forefront without guaranteeing those of the relative), the expression of real or perceived difficulties to the social worker is seen as possibly calling into question the legal custody of the child. The AEMO social worker is well identified as serving the interest of the child and the regulation of conflicts. As a consequence, the social worker does not appear to be a neutral participant likely to support the relative fully.

Finally, at the end of this study, a question remains: is the search for a relative likely to be able to take care for the child undertaken systematically when it appears to social workers that it is necessary to resort to a placement? With the new possibilities opened up by the law of March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016, this question will certainly be on the agenda in months to come. The present study draws lessons from the experience of parents and professionals in the field before the new law.