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In 2001, the Centre for Educational Policy Studies (CEPS; see http://ceps.pef.uni-lj.si) was established within the Faculty of Education to build upon experience acquired in the broad reform of the national educational system during the period of social transition in the 1990s, to upgrade expertise and to strengthen international cooperation. CEPS has established a number of fruitful contacts, both in the region – particularly with similar institutions in the countries of the Western Balkans – and with interested partners in EU member states and worldwide.

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Revija je namenjena obravnavanju naslednjih področij: poučevanje, učenje, vzgoja in izobraževanje, socialna pedagogika, specialna in rehabilitacijska pedagogika, predšolska pedagogika, edukacijske politike, supervizija, poučevanje slovenskega jezika in književnosti, poučevanje matematike, računalništva, naravoslovja in tehnike, poučevanje družboslovja in humanistike, poučevanje na področju umetnosti, visokošolsko izobraževanje in izobraževanje odraslih. Poseben poudarek bo namenjen izobraževanju učiteljev in spodbujanju njihovega profesionalnega razvoja.

V reviji so objavljeni znanstveni prispevki, in sicer teoretični prispevki in prispevki, v katerih so predstavljeni rezultati kvantitavnih in kvalitativnih empiričnih raziskav. Še posebej poudarjen je pomen komparativnih raziskav.

Revija izide štirikrat letno. Številke so tematsko opredeljene, v njih pa je prostor tudi za netematske prispevke in predstavitve ter recenzije novih publikacij.

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Editorial

School and Vulnerable Families

In many ways, a person's educational path depends on their family background. Families' living conditions and current living situation affect the educational opportunities of children and young people, whose lives are influenced by the problems, inequalities or privileges that stem from their origins.

For example, there are differences in families' educational aspirations, i.e., their expectations and demands regarding the children and young people's success in school, and this undoubtedly affects their educational path. In the same way, parents have very different opportunities and a varying capacity for helping their children with school matters. Finally, the sociocultural and habituated dispositions resulting from the way families live their everyday lives are highly relevant to access to education. The family and the school are thus profoundly interdependent.

Within every family, a "family-specific habitus" develops, which depends on how families are involved in their milieu and extends beyond socialisation processes to produce a kind of "basic education", comprising of specific capabilities for action, preferences and adopted lifestyles (Brake & Büchner, 2011; Ecarius 2013; Grundmann et al., 2010). These family-related adopted lifestyles correspond to the behavioural expectations of schools in varying degrees. The expectations include factors such as students' rationality, cognitive approach, diligence, forward planning and capacity for considered communication. Depending on their milieu, families may meet these behavioural expectations to various extents, leading some students to have problems fitting into the school system (Lange & Xyländer 2011, 23; Sting 2016, 128). At the same time, families' habituated dispositions meet with varying levels of social acceptance, greater or lesser degrees of social recognition and prestige. Bourdieu's studies on the socially differentiating function of the habitus showed that family lifestyles are one element of a hierarchical set of social positions that produce unequal educational opportunities (Bourdieu, 1994). For the acquisition of legitimate education, an unequal background in terms of habitus goes hand in hand with an unequal socioeconomic background, which considerably limits the opportunities of low social status families to attain advanced levels of education.

Recent international educational studies have all shown a connection between family background and scholastic success. In the countries these studies investigate, links can be seen between the social status of children and young people's families and their educational opportunities. Although these links vary

in extent, one thing is clear: education and social support systems manage to reduce background-related educational inequalities to varying degrees (c.f., for example, Hartas, 2011; OECD, 2016, 74–89; OECD, 2016a, 63–78). One group that is the focus of particular attention is vulnerable families.

This special edition of the CEPS Journal, dedicated to vulnerability, clearly reflects the needs of our time: it comes at a point when the state is shirking its responsibility towards the vulnerable and underprivileged, when discourse on shouldering personal responsibility for one's own fate has intensified, and when responsibility for vulnerable families has shifted onto non-governmental, volunteer and philanthropic organisations.

Vulnerable families usually suffer from two levels of disadvantage: firstly, they mostly have a low social status, and secondly, they are affected by acute or chronic problems or crises that impact their involvement in and willingness to deal with school requirements. The contributions in this edition address the pressing need for collective responsibility and the concerted action of all experts and institutions in the fields of education, social care and health.

Contemporary work on vulnerability is currently facing a number of contradictions. Even though the understanding that priority should be given to policies and approaches that address the needs of the vulnerable in a holistic manner has been widely accepted, the various services and organisations very rarely communicate with one another, and infrequently share their experiences and findings or discuss the challenges and dilemmas that they encounter; they seldom establish common, intersecting areas of work or interdisciplinary response practices.

Furthermore, everyone – from academics and policymakers, to practitioners and service providers – agrees that vulnerability is a result of extremely complex situations; at the same time, there is recognition that every situation is unique. However, this complexity and uniqueness is systematically ignored both in professional practice and in research. The third contradiction is that, although we are all aware that the participation of family members plays a central role in defining their own situation and the responses to it, methods that attempt to elicit their perceptions and points of view, let alone allow their perceptions to influence professional approaches and policies, are rarely used (Te Riele & Gurur, 2015). It is therefore clear that the challenges facing contemporary work in the field of vulnerability lie in creating new and innovative approaches that stem considerably more from the needs and specificities of the family, and rectify the current dispersal of assistance to vulnerable families by merging and creating a more synergistic approach.

Reflecting this framework, the present issue opens with a consideration of the category of family vulnerability. Petra Bauer and Christine Wiezorek's

"Vulnerable Families: Reflection on a Difficult Category" offers empirical, qualitative insights into the process of supporting a family considered to be in need of professional intervention. Through evidence-based interactions, we witness how standardised professional concepts and insensitive professional norms about how a family functions can damage a family's basic right to be recognised as a unique entity that requires an individual approach and coping style to successfully fulfil the needs of their children.

The second article, written by Nada Turnšek, Olga Poljšak Škraban, Špela Razpotnik and Jana Rapuš Pavel, "Challenges and Responses to the Vulnerabilities of Families in a Preschool Context", begins by pointing out that, in modern times, educational institutions are attributed the role of an equaliser of educational opportunities, and are a key instrument in promoting the social inclusion of children. The idea of education as a social investment strategy reduces children merely to "pupils"; consequently, many families – particularly vulnerable families – are deemed unable to ensure an adequate environment in which to raise their children. Researching the role that kindergartens play in dealing with vulnerable preschool children and their families revealed the following paradox: kindergartens often try to respond to a vulnerable family's very complex and non-standard situation by using standard processes and conventional procedures. At the same time, kindergarten workers have also been found to respond creatively and inventively, using many flexible responses to the needs of vulnerable people, thus indicating a tendency towards creating innovative approaches.

Nina Mešl and Tadeja Kodele's "Co-Creating Desired Outcomes and Strengthening the Resilience of Multi-Stressed Families" also reveals that by working within families in their homes and forming relationships based on cooperation and partnership it is possible to overcome the current, often unsuccessful attempts to contend with a child's poor school performance. The plural case study shows that it is possible to establish co-creative working relationships founded on the commitment of all participants to take part in a joint working project. In such a project, the process of helping the family deal with a child's poor school performance is co-created in a safe environment of cooperation; in a relationship built on partnership, all family members are encouraged to express their desired outcomes and to contribute to solutions. A key part is also played by casting the child in the role of an expert concerning his/her own experience, one whose voice is protected and appreciated, and is regarded as important for collaboration in order to fulfil the desire for success.

The fourth paper, "Rethinking the Role of Pedagogical Assistants: Establishing Cooperation between Roma Families and Schools in Serbia", by Jelena

Starčević, Bojana Dimitrijević and Sunčica Macura Milovanović, examines the risks and challenges related to the cooperation of Roma parents/families with pedagogical assistants working with Roma pupils. The paper offers insight into ways of overcoming the pupils' struggles and difficulties related to school work, as well as the school's expectations, standards and norms, while also focusing on the obstacles inherent in these relations. These obstacles exist on both sides and concern not only the aspirations, knowledge, culture and strategies of the parents and families, but also the requirements, prejudice, stereotypes and discriminatory treatment of the institutions. The newly introduced education policy measure of pedagogical assistants in Serbia aims to support the learning and social participation of Roma pupils and establish cooperation between school staff and Roma parents. However, the authors perceive further segregation of Roma pupils and reduced engagement of teachers when it comes to establishing cooperation. They propose a framework for defining and understanding the roles of teachers and pedagogical assistants built on an intercultural perspective, which includes two main concepts: intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence with cognitive, affective and behavioural characteristics. Furthermore, they strongly emphasise the necessity of perceiving cultural differences in accordance with the ethnorelative worldview, both on the part of the teachers and pedagogical assistants.

Ulrike Loch's "Between a School-Centred Focus on Education and Family Needs" continues with the theme of vulnerable families in relation to schools, their expectations and standards. Loch first draws the reader's attention to the fact that the education system's social selectivity has a crucial impact on the social exclusion of children even before they enter the school. The evidence in this paper goes hand in hand with that presented by "Challenges and Responses to the Vulnerabilities of Families in a Preschool Context" earlier in this issue. The author uses her own experiences of accompanying children's social care service staff in Germany and Austria as an ethnographer while they processed child protection cases. The article focuses on families with mentally ill parents and reveals how the parents' mental illness is seen to affect the children, and what support the families in question require. Once again, stress is placed on the need for taking an individual family's specific situation into account in the educational discourse of not only child and youth welfare services but also within the frame of formal education systems. Loch outlines how a school-centred understanding of education affects children, while at the same time having an impact on the youth welfare practice/support processes within the families' context. The reader gains valuable insight into a case process, while the author warns that the current discourse on education and the social

living environment of families with mentally ill parents needs fundamental examination.

In "Lifeworld-Oriented Family Support", Špela Razpotnik, Nada Turnšek, Jana Rapuš Pavel and Olga Poljšak Škraban demonstrate that overcoming conventional approaches is possible after all, but only with a paradigm shift. The article presents a newly developing approach of "supportive entering into the family", based on the lifeworld-oriented social pedagogy paradigm. The fact that professionals are present in the family's everyday lives makes it possible for the family's life experiences to become the focal reference point when it comes to determining successful responses to the difficulties they face. In such an approach, the discourse of deficit is replaced by the discourse of resources: professionals and volunteers draw from the resources that the individual, family or community do in fact possess, rather than concentrating solely on what is inadequate or problematic. When contemplating future possibilities, the authors particularly highlight the increased role played by a support network of volunteers. They find that practices need to become more focused on the family, and that more attention needs to be paid to prioritising the support role over the supervisory role.

In the Varia section, Katarina Aškerc's article entitled "University Teachers' Opinions about Higher Education Pedagogical Training Courses in Slovenia" poses relevant questions as to the pedagogical qualifications of university teachers, which should – considering the current massive influx of students into higher education – encourage their more comprehensive study. Aškerc argues that a long-lasting training process, such as the one provided by pedagogical training courses for university teachers, produces positive effects on teachers' pedagogical thinking and their understanding of teaching and learning. The author also suggests the use of a combination of various methods in habilitation procedures in Slovenian higher education: in addition to the "probationary lecture" and sustained pedagogical training, she proposes some optional methods, such as various elective pedagogical training courses for university teachers, as well as teaching portfolios, student interviews, class observations and peer evaluations.

In the second paper in the Varia section, entitled "The Impact of Active Visualisation of High School Students on the Ability to Memorise Verbal Definition", Anamarija Šmajdek and Jurij Selan proceed from the proposition that visuality plays a central role in human multimodal communication competence development. They investigate pertinent questions from the field of educational psychology concerning the meaning of the simultaneous use of several senses in learning. Their empirical study proves that active visualisation

indeed provides general cognitive benefits for students in memorising and understanding in different school subjects. Additionally, they indicate various other dimensions of the role of visualisation in education, thus stressing that the education system needs to cultivate artistic/visual literacy more extensively.

ALENKA KOBOLT, STEPHAN STING AND NADA TURNŠEK

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»Vulnerable Families«: Reflections on a Difficult Category

Petra Bauer*[1] and Christine Wiezorek[2]

∼   The term "vulnerable families" refers to familial living situations that are considered problematic, with a particular need for socially responsible, professionally provided support. This means of categorising families is extremely ambivalent, indicating not only a need for society to support forms of family life and family achievements, but also a particular need to protect children growing up within the family. It also has implications for an understanding of interventions geared to the riskiness of family living situations and their standardisation, an understanding that risks losing sight of families' variety and individual peculiarities. Families in need of support have a fundamental right for their individuality and parenthood to be recognised. A detailed case analysis of a social worker who is working with a family in which a child's wellbeing is at risk shows how transferring standardising ideas about the family can damage that basic right. The article thus calls for the category of vulnerability to be applied to families with reflection on the specific case and on implicit normative leanings.

Keywords: vulnerability, child protection, family image, family concept, social work, family support

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»Ranljive družine« – refleksija o zapleteni/težavni opredelitvi

PETRA BAUER IN CHRISTINE WIEZOREK

Termin »ranljive družine« se nanaša na družinskobivanjske situacije tistih družin, ki so ocenjene kot problematične; te terjajo družbeno odgovorno in strokovno utemeljeno podporo. To pomeni, da je kategoriziranje takšnih družin samo po sebi ambivalentno, saj hkrati kaže na potrebo po strokovno odgovornih in hkrati celovitih podporah takšnim družinam, obenem pa tudi potrebo po subtilnem prepoznavanju njihovih dosežkov. Ob tem je hkrati treba primerno zaščititi otroke, ki odraščajo v okviru takšne družine. Opredeljevanje družin kot ranljivih ima prav tako posledice za razumevanje strokovnih posegov; ti morajo biti prilagojeni tveganosti življenjskih razmer družine, hkrati pa nekaterim njenim splošnim značilnostim, pri čemer se je dobro zavedati, da lahko spregledamo raznolikost družin in tudi njihove individualne posebnosti. Ta podrobna vsebinska analiza poteka dela socialne delavke, ki dela z družino, v kateri je ogrožena blaginja otroka, kaže, kako lahko prenašanje posplošenih idej o družini ogrozi to osnovno pravico. Prispevek zato poziva, da se uporaba opredelitve »ranljivost« opre na razmislek o posameznem primeru družine in implicitna normativna pričakovanja.

Ključne besede: ranljivost, varstvo otrok, družinska podoba, družinski koncept, socialno delo, družinska podpora

Introduction

The term "vulnerable families" refers to families ascribed a particular need for support. In German, the categories that relate to vulnerable families, or that are translated as "vulnerable families", extend from "sozial schwach", "gefährdet", "bedürftig" and benachteiligt (socially weak, at risk, in need and disadvantaged), to "verletzlich", "in Not geraten" and "hilfsbedürftig" (vulnerable, in difficulty and requiring support). Here, the category of vulnerability is aimed in different ways at the family's responsibility for caring for and raising children, as well as at how family members support and care for one another. This makes it clear that, in the conditions of our changing modern society, the family can evidently not (or can no longer) fulfil its socialising duties unquestioningly and as a matter of course. As a whole, the family thus comes across as particularly vulnerable or at risk with regard to its social functions.[3] Categorisations of "social weakness", neediness, vulnerability, disadvantage or "children at risk" are used in various ways to identify deficits that society needs to deal with (e.g., Hasselhorn et al. 2015), especially as familial reproduction appears to be at risk when it comes to educating and raising children in a socially acceptable manner.

On the one hand, these categorisations thus link in with the discourses that developed at the start of the 20th century (with an increasing emphasis on children's rights and child protection) on children's particular need for protection and the support they require when growing up (Honig, 1999; Lenz & Böhnisch, 1997; Zenz, 1979); on the other hand, they also form the basis for the increasing "discovery" of the risks involved in growing up *within* families, which has drawn institutional and professional attention to families not only as socially necessary places of shelter and protection, but also as a potential threat and risk to positive childhood development (Bauer & Wiezorek, 2007; Wiezorek & Pardo-Puhlmann, 2013; Wilhelm, 2005). From the variety of special needs strategies, early years programmes and resilience-building schemes that have now systematically colonised childcare and school (Andresen, Koch & König, 2015), the emphasis on children's vulnerability and the risks to which children are thought to be subjected as they grow up would currently seem to be particularly popular. As another example, the reorganisation of legal child protection measures involved an early years support system ("Frühe Hilfen") being established in Germany, which proactively reaches out to families in the

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3   This can also be seen from the fact that families are described as vulnerable, whereas schools are not. However, the question as to how effectively schools can and do fulfil their social task of education and childraising can, in fact, frequently be asked.

first three years after their children's birth, offering advice and help. This new, developing support system is aimed precisely at families' socially expected "vulnerability", especially in the early stages of the family. In view of the clear bias towards child protection work, its conception can, on the one hand, be read as expressing a perceived increase in public responsibility for children's upbringing; on the other hand, the early years support system always also gives the professionals involved the task of protection: during this stage, at which young children are not yet integrated systematically into any pedagogical institution, these forms of support provide a means of access to families that can be used to recognise child neglect and abuse at an early stage (Bauer, 2016). Here, too, the family is addressed as a place where children are potentially at risk (Helming, 2010). On the linguistic level, this is manifested in terms used widely in the field, such as "early warning system" or "high-risk family", expressions of an "investigative" understanding of intervention with technological connotations (ibid., p. 177). These terms reveal an approach to families that basically sees all families through a veil of suspicion (Hildenbrand, 2011). Dekker (2010) has also shown that the currently dominant aspiration to provide "better care for more and more children" exists in two versions, which, viewed in a historical perspective, do not contradict each other. The manifold efforts to enforce children's right to education are always accompanied by the "discovery" of an increasing number of "vulnerable" children. In this context, it is above all the family that appears to be a potential risk to the future prospects of their children, who, in turn, are seen as a potential risk for the future and for social cohesion (Hübenthal & Ifland 2011; Turnbull & Spence 2011).

Altogether, categorising families as vulnerable can be seen to have a paradoxical effect. In a rather casual, unreflecting manner, this categorisation increasingly seems to evoke images of families in which it is now the families themselves, rather than conditions of social inequality, that pose a potential threat to children's upbringing. Our main thesis, however, is that this also generally damages people's recognition of family integrity, i.e., everything that society should particularly be protecting;[4] in other words, it makes the family all the more vulnerable (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014).

From the pedagogical point of view of the family, especially, the category of "vulnerable families" seems "susceptible" to making the family even more vulnerable through generally categorising approaches. This thesis is related to various research results that show the ways and effects of categorisation in professional work with families. Thus, in various studies, White et al. (White,

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4   Section 6 (1) of the German constitution thus postulates that "Marriage and the family shall enjoy the special protection of the state".

2003; White & Wastell, 2010) elaborate the fact that professional judgements on problems are based on specific ideas about parenthood and childhood. Professionals see childhood as a time of fragility, passivity and also honesty, meaning that when professionals are actually working with families, they generally give greater credibility to children's stories about what goes on in their families than to parents' descriptions. "This privileging of the child's voice, combined with ironizing parents' versions, results in social workers working up versions of the troubles which tend to exculpate children while inculpating parents" (White 2003, 179). Here, the question of credibility or blame – laying the blame and responsibility for problems within families – is put forward as being fundamental to social pedagogical work with families. A central role is played by assessments of the family's child-raising abilities as "good parenting", on the one hand, or "bad parenting", on the other. Both takes are said to have direct effects on children's development. It is assumed that maternal and parental love is basically natural, but this is something that is quickly questioned in the case of parents who make use of professional support (Siembrouck & Hall, 2003). If parents do not manage to portray themselves as loving, caring parents, they risk being accused of lacking basic *human* abilities (see also Urek, 2005). This demonstrates the central function of "normalising" everyday images of the family when constructing a professional opinion on a case, which is where the second hypothesis that the present article is intended to explain comes in. We postulate that the outlined processes by which families are categorised are structured by the images of the family held by professionals. Images of the family, understood as "socially objectified, i.e. understandings of what the family is and what it should be which are valid, or at least capable of being valid" (Bauer, Neumann, Sting, Ummel & Wiezorek, 2015, p. 25) are based just as much on how professionals process their own family experiences as on socially and culturally conveyed concepts of the family (ibid; also: Bauer & Wiezorek 2009; Pardo-Puhlmann 2010; Wiezorek & Pardo-Puhlmann 2013).

We would like to use a case example to illustrate these reflections on family images and the effect they have when it comes to categorising families perceived as "vulnerable". This example comes from observation notes taken by a student. The notes were written during a teaching unit at the University of Jena aimed at reflecting on students' work placements on a case-by-case basis. In this seminar, students were asked to use qualitative surveys to reflect upon their experiences in practice (Riemann, 2010). In order to do so, they used, among other things, observation notes written during their work placement. The material gathered in these notes was reinterpreted by a research group that has been working for some time on the topic of images of the family in professional

pedagogical practice. The method used was sequential analysis. This is there-fore an individual example that is not integrated into a wider research context. The notes are an impressive document of the way in which processes of catego-risation that can be summed up under the aspect of vulnerability affect inter-actions. However, it also shows how students (prospective professionals) see things from the point of view of the mentor, the social worker. The notes thus also offer some insights into issues surrounding professionalisation, although this point is not discussed at this juncture.

The interaction between a social worker and a mother in the context of a risk to the child's wellbeing shows specifically what we have referred to as a paradoxical effect: the family's vulnerability is increased by professional inter-ventions, here expressed as the social worker's moralising, categorising percep-tion of the mother.

The influence exerted by ideas about the family on a social worker's actions: An example of an analysis

A social work student's report about a home visit paid during a period of work experience on a case with a social worker in the general social services ended:

> "The social worker said goodbye in a friendly way and said that she would get in touch if Marc was leaving the care home. Ms Schulze nodded and took us to the door, where she wished us a good day. As we left the block of flats, the social worker said to me that words failed her, and that she would now be doing her best to get the other two lads into a foster family, as it did not look as if the children would be returning to their mother."

This shows clearly that, at the end of the home visit, the social worker makes a decision about Marc's two brothers being taken in by a foster family. In Germany, living in a foster family, a form of full-term care, falls into the cat-egory of child-raising support offered under the law on child and youth welfare (German Social Security Code (SGB) VIII). Childraising support is one of the (family-related) services under SGB VIII: according to Section 27, Subsection 1, parents or legal guardians "have a right to support when raising a child or adolescent (childraising support) if the child or young person cannot be guar-anteed an upbringing conducive to his or her wellbeing and if the support is suitable and necessary for his or her development" (ibid.).

The reasoning noted by the student as being behind the social worker's decision to try to have the two boys taken in by a foster family is related to her

impression that "*it did not look as if the children would be returning to their mother*". The student notes the comment – a sign of outrage – that "*words failed her*" about what had evidently come to light or taken place during the visit; something that triggered the social worker's decision. The question that arises here is thus what led the social worker to the decision to try to have the "other two lads" taken in by a foster family. In order to find out, let us return to the beginning of the notes:

> "*On XXXX the social worker responsible for the case and I set off to visit Ms Schulze. The reason for the home visit was to inform Ms Schulze that her eldest son Marc was being moved into a foster family having spent several years at a children's home. Ms Schulze had to agree to this, and sign to confirm her agreement.*"

Here, too, the topic is a transfer to a foster family; in this case, that of Marc, Ms Schulze's eldest son. It quickly becomes apparent that Ms Schulze was not involved in the decision to relocate Marc, despite the fact that the law does actually foresee this kind of involvement. Decisions on the need, urgency and suitability of child-raising support are made as part of the support planning process set out legally in Section 36 of SGB Book VIII.[5]

In the case in question, however, the decision to house Marc in a foster family is revealed as a decision that Ms Schulze is simply informed about, and that only requires her to "*sign to confirm her agreement*": the purpose of the home visit is to retroactively legitimise a decision made without the mother – who has custody – being given a say in the matter. Ms Schulze thus does not come across as a service user entitled to support and working together with providers, as set out in the regulations; instead, she is addressed here as a passive beneficiary of support for whom paternalistic decisions are being made.

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5   This states, for example: "Section 36 of SGB VIII: Participation, support plan
(1) Prior to any decision on the mobilization of support and any necessary change in the type and level of assistance provided, the child or young person and their guardian must be advised of this and informed about possible consequences for the development of the child or young person. Before and during any support provided outside their own family, checks must be carried out as to whether adoption might come into consideration. If support is required outside their family, the people named in Sentence 1 shall be involved in selecting an institution or a foster family. This choice and wishes shall be complied with unless they imply any disproportionate additional costs. […]
(2) If support is likely to be provided for an extended period of time, the decision on the form of support which is appropriate in each case shall be taken jointly by several professionals. As the basis for selecting the support to be provided, they shall make a support plan along with the child or young person and the persons who have custody, deciding what is needed, the form of support to be provided and the services required; they shall then regularly check whether the form of support selected remains suitable and necessary. If any other people, services or institutions take part in providing the support, they or their staff shall be involved in compiling and checking the support plan."

Her point of view regarding where her son lives does not seem to be relevant to the youth welfare department employee. This has two implications: firstly, the assumption that Marc's mother shows a lack of interest in her son, and, secondly, the assumption that she cannot make any useful contribution to Marc's upbringing.

However, as demonstrated by the fact that her signature is required, the mother evidently has custody of her son, even though he has not lived with her for several years. This implies that the mother is interested in her child or, put another way, that she is making an effort to fulfil her responsibility as a parent. The negation of this in the present case gives rise to the interpretation that the social worker perceives the mother as inherently self-centred and unwilling to raise her children. This is a violation of the mother's rights to recognition as a service user who, although in need of support and help (therefore being vulnerable), also has custody and is thus entitled to receive certain services. Viewed in this light, the social worker's categorising perception of Ms Schulze as self-centred and unwilling to raise her children provokes a further "injury" regarding Ms Schulze, as can be seen from what happens next. The allusions to Ms Schulze's living environment bolster the interpretation that the professional has a moralising, hurtful perception:

> *"First we entered the hallway, which was full of shoes and old cardboard boxes. It also smelt strongly of sweat throughout the flat, which the social worker had, however, told me about on the way to the flat. The social worker in charge of the case informed Ms Schulze that she would like to see the children's room, and Ms Schulze first took us into her bedroom, where the youngest of Ms Schulze's six children slept along with her foreign boyfriend. Here it should be noted that Ms Schulze is in her mid-twenties."*

As well as the note on how messy the flat is (a recurrent theme in the continuation of the report), it is the comment that Ms Schulze's boyfriend is not of German origin and that she already has six children in her "mid-twenties" that the report-maker also uses to make an implicit moralising evaluation of Ms Schulze's living environment. The messiness, Ms Schulze's partner's background and the number of children, especially considering the woman's age, are turned into proof of the family's lack of effort in childraising and the need to monitor the family. In this respect, the monitoring approach taken by the social worker in charge of the case – as expressed in the wish to start out by seeing the children's room – does not come across to the student as needing further justification.

What is interesting is that throughout the visit, according to the notes, Ms Schulze complies with the social worker's requests: she goes to meet the two

visitors in the building before they have even rung the bell; she shows them the children's room on request; she answers the social worker's questions and gives her the signature she requests, and she says goodbye in a polite manner by wishing them "*a good day*". After the visit, the social worker nonetheless comes to the decision that two other sons who are also in the home, along with Marc and a daughter, at the time of the conversation should be taken on by a foster family.

As the notes go on to record, the trigger for this decision is when Ms Schulze tells them shortly before they leave that:

> "*she was pregnant for the seventh time and was thus about to move into a bigger flat. She also said that she and her boyfriend were planning to get married the following month.*"

The social worker obviously has some strong emotions at this point: she "*took a deep breath*" and said to the student that "*words failed her*". Basically, the mother's news cannot be seen impartially or understood, being ambivalent, as a possible expression of her trying to "normalise" her home circumstances, or an expression of her yearning for "normal family life". The social worker evidently only sees Ms Schulze's latest pregnancy as another indication of her lack of responsibility, as four of the six children are already living out of the home. The marriage and the move, which indicate that Ms Schulze is attempting to stabilise family circumstances in the long term, appear to be irrelevant to the social worker's evaluation of (future) family circumstances; she makes the decision to "*try to get the other two lads into a foster family*". This demonstrates the powerful influence of the normative notions of the family held by professionals: they lead to an ad-hoc decision on a future intervention regarding the family. It is clear that these normative notions about the family are already restricting the diagnostic perspective of the family: an interpretation in which Ms Schulze, despite needing support, is also a mother attempting to take on responsibility for childcare is no longer within the realms of her diagnosis of this case.

In this context, the view of the foster family sketched by the social worker is also interesting; they are presented in a similarly moralising manner as a "good" family. We thus learn from the notes that:

> "*The social worker informed Ms Schulze that the reason for today's visit was that her eldest son was to be taken in by a foster family, and that they [the foster family; P.B.; C.W.] had also stated that they were prepared to take the boy's little sister out of the home after a year, as the two had a close relationship and the foster parents did not want to separate them in the long term. […] After a questioning glance and a brief silence, the social worker handed Ms Schulze the necessary form. She also told Ms Schulze*

that the foster parents were very nice and lived in a big house with a garden; that the children also liked the foster parents a lot and were always pleased when they came to visit them at the home once a week. Ms Schulze signed the form and gave it back to the social worker, who then asked if Ms Schulze had any other questions. She looked down at the ground and replied 'no'. The social worker shook her head in disappointment and started putting her things together."

To begin with, this again makes clear that the home visit was only to inform the mother and retroactively legitimise the decision to find Marc a foster placement; it was not about the mother taking part in the decision-making process. This also applies to Marc's younger sister, who, it has already been decided, will be moving to the foster family. The picture is then painted of the "good foster family": the foster parents are highly committed, fond of the children (who return that fondness) and can provide a stimulating, generously sized living environment. They come across as the truly responsible, committed parents: firstly, they come to visit the children "*once a week*"; secondly, they later want to take Marc's sister into foster care; thirdly, this decision is based on the "*close relationship*" between the siblings; fourthly, the two children have already built a relationship with the foster parents and are "*always pleased*"; and, finally, the foster parents have a "*big house with a garden*". In other words, the mother is painted a picture of a family that is simply nothing like the children's family of origin.

The fact that Ms Schulze looks down at the ground and replies in the negative when asked if she has further questions could be diagnosed as an expression of her own shame and her perception of being put to shame: this could be understood as meaning that the mother was severely alienated by the description of the foster family as a "good family". After all, the portrayal of the "good" foster family confronted Ms Schulze with the ideal of a family and a manner of childraising that she herself is not able to live up to. In this interpretation, lowering her gaze and looking down at the ground could thus be seen as an expression of Ms Schulze's feeling hurt: a clear confrontation with the fact that her own family life is not a success, which is in any case a constant aspect of everyday life, as the four children are in out-of-home care, and thus not present. The radical demonstration of her own inadequacy inherent to the description of the foster family evidently touches a "sore spot" for Ms Schulze, and her only "response" can be to lower her gaze.

Thus, from the point of view of vulnerability, this shows how the social worker's moralising perception further "hurts" the client. These notions cancel out any interpretation of Ms Schulze as a mother who is both in need of support

and trying to achieve a normal family life while also (somehow) taking responsibility for raising her children. Instead, the social worker (and the note-taker) see her downwards gaze and negative response as proof of her lack of interest in the two children; in turn, the social worker makes her thoughts clear by shaking her head. This, too, can be understood as an indication that the social worker's view of Ms Schulze is restricted by her own normative notions about the family, which also makes it hurtful: the social worker's understanding does not allow for the possible interpretation that the mother's reaction might actually be a sign of resignation or acknowledgment of guilt from being confronted with the idea that there are probably "better parents" for her children, meaning that the social worker's confrontation is "painful" for Ms Schulze.

Apart from the route taken by the specific action in this case, the dichotomising perception that it expresses of the family of origin as a "bad family" and the foster family as a "good family" also has a structural cause: out-of-home care would, after all, not be necessary if the childraising in the family of origin was "good enough". At the same time, however, the dichotomisation that the social worker creates in this interaction sequence, with the family of origin as bad and the foster family as good, means that the blame is implicitly laid on the family of origin, making it difficult to come up with an appropriate diagnosis of the support required, especially by the children. It can also be seen that, ultimately, family relationships are seen as exchangeable, which is not in fact the case in this example, as can be seen from the need to "ask for" a signature.

Even though – or perhaps because – this example, in the form of a student's work experience notes, focuses entirely on one social worker (whom the student evidently does not question), it reveals the problems inherent in the automatic, unreflected use of notions about the family. These obviously have an influence, restricting the social worker's diagnostic view of Ms Schulze, which is in turn (unintentionally) accompanied by further injury to the family and, finally, leads in this case to a specific ad-hoc intervention: the two young children in out-of-home care are to be taken in by a foster family.

In summary, the example of the student's observation notes sheds light, on the one hand, on how notions, interpretations and assumptions about what is normal to families affect interactions with and perceptions of specific families; on the other hand, it draws attention to how, when this view of the family is witnessed and experienced (mimetically) in practice, it is passed on to the student by the professional, almost as a form of expertise. This case example is thus not just a one-off empirical example of how notions and interpretations about the family can influence social pedagogical diagnosis and active intervention, but also an empirical "lesson" about how professionals in the making become

acculturated during work experience by automatically, unquestioningly adopting the images of the family held by "veteran" professionals as the basis for their own reports.

Pedagogical links to the family: From considering the family's vulnerability to accusing the family of hurting the child

For the pedagogical view of the family, the category "vulnerable families" evidently seems to be a pattern of interpretation used to unite various, sometimes contradictory views of the family. An approach to the family that (as in the above example) perceives families and judges family practices against the background of what may be idealised family "normality" runs the risk of making the family even more vulnerable by acting in a generalising, categorising manner. The general conclusions that Böllert (2012) comes to regarding early years support also apply in the case set out here: the problems facing families, and especially parents, should be seen as "an expression of structurally produced needs for support" (ibid., p. 129) and not as the result of a drop in a family's performance.

Here, too, it is therefore necessary in future to take into consideration or underline the particular vulnerability of families caused by their socioeconomic positioning within society, by taking a case-sensitive approach to each family. However, if we follow Helsper (2004) in seeing professional pedagogical practice as basically interactive (asymmetrical) mediation between case assessment and rule-based knowledge, this calls for reflection on our own notions about the family.

The structural change in working patterns, gender relations and the balance between public and family childraising has now exposed such a plurality of forms of family life that one-dimensional notions of how a family is and should be made up can no longer truly do justice to the variety of possible arrangements. One result of these processes of social and cultural pluralisation is that they also "shatter the certainty and certainties of pedagogical practice" (Helsper, 2004, p. 31). Automatic pedagogical recourse to notions of a normal (bourgeois) family, which can be expected to perform family child-raising functions as a matter of course, can also be understood as an example of this loss of certainty (Bauer, Neumann, Sting, Ummel & Wiezorek, 2015; Ummel, Bauer & Wiezorek, 2013).

What does this mean for the pedagogical relationship to the family? "Practising professional social pedagogues", concludes Helsper (2004, p. 23) with

regard to pedagogical practice facing cultural pluralisation, "are increasingly unable to make children and young people – let alone adults in continuing education, re-entering education or retraining – conform to certain values, principles or ways of living. Instead, practising professional pedagogues are replacing a particularist attitude to childraising with a universalist outlook of making different ways of life possible, with the prospect of a 'post-traditional' form of recognition; an educational theory of enabling 'diversity' and plurality" (ibid.).

This is a reminder of the ethical obligation of professionals to adopt the specific attitude of recognising diversity. According to this, families (or groups of families) cannot simply be labelled "vulnerable" as a subsumptive classification within a category identified by specific characteristics; instead, it calls for a case-sensitive approach to the family. In terms of professional theory, this is based on *mediating* between inductive case assessment and deductively drawing upon rule-based knowledge. The category of "vulnerable families" can be considered part of such rule-based knowledge, but one that should only be used in specific cases based on the context.

Our considerations thus raise the question of the role played by pedagogues' notions or images of the family generated through experience in their lifeworld. The analysis of this case shows that the social worker's normative notions of the family had a strong influence in terms of the decisions she made as a responsible professional: they were an argumentative means of justification with regard to the character of her tasks and were of clear diagnostic relevance.

It is, moreover, likely that these notions also lessened the pressure of what might have been a heavy workload or high expectations (by others or herself): automatically taking recourse to images of the "good" family can reduce the variety and complexity of thinking processes about the family and parenthood, in turn allowing the social worker to access her knowledge about families in a rapid and, unsurprisingly, subsumptive manner. However, as a recent study on programmes organised by child protection services in Germany shows (Bühler-Niederberger et al. 2014), you can also see the social worker's attitude and interventions in the case study as part of a professional programme that is typical of social workers working in the field of child protection. In their comparison of different professional approaches, Bühler-Niederberger et al. determine that social workers primarily address the mothers when they are talking about their work with families. They also show how social workers address mothers in the manner of morality and with the goal of intervening in their way of life. In social workers' view, parenting is still reduced to motherhood and the behaviour of the mother; there is therefore a risk of losing sight not only of the importance of fatherhood but also of the child's wellbeing.

Against this background, the present case – with the mother being shamed and the ad-hoc decision about two of her children being taken into future foster care – also reveals the "pitfall" of this kind of unreflected recourse to one's own notions of the family in the sense of motherhood. This calls for reflection, explication and systematisation of the knowledge about the family that social workers acquire in everyday life and through experience.

The first change that seems necessary here is greater reflection on social workers' view of the family, paying greater attention to "how individual developments within the family depend upon one another and on the (individual) structure of each family" (Zenz, 1979, p.69). If the logic behind social pedagogical interventions mainly consists of addressing the mothers, there is a risk of losing sight of the mutual effects of family interactions and their interplay within the family as a system (Bauer & Wiezorek, 2007).

The second change would be to add to social workers' knowledge about families and the diversity of families' situations in life. Taking recourse to the category of "vulnerable families" and the knowledge acquired under this label about specific problems faced by families, and effective means of support, can absolutely be seen as an expression of this kind of scientisation of the pedagogical approach. At the same time, taking recourse to the socio-scientific category of "vulnerable families" does not necessarily guarantee that the pedagogical approach to the family will be *case sensitive*. Instead, it risks creating an individualising, implicitly blame-apportioning approach to families, which threatens to alter perceptions of the structural conditions of their living conditions, their ways of life and the conditions of inequality these imply (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014; White & Wastell. 2011).

When it comes to pedagogical practice, there is thus a need to make family vulnerability a criterion of a case-sensitive approach to families, in order to avoid generating paradoxical effects (Hildenbrand, 2011). It is only with reflection on related normative notions about the family that we can help families (including vulnerable families) in their efforts to raise their children and break down what may be unequal social structures rather than reproducing them (Hall & Slembrouck, 2011; White & Wastell, 2011). To this extent, the category of vulnerable families can thus be used effectively if it specifically serves to address families' structural need for support and to guarantee that they will actually receive the support they need in each specific case.

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Challenges and Responses to the Vulnerability of Families in a Preschool Context

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∾   Problems in vulnerable families are multilayered and include the intersection of physical, psychosocial and other forms of distress. The multidimensional nature of the problems of these families is closely linked to the fact that there are many institutions in the field of education, social welfare, health care and others, in which treatment and support are not satisfactory or adapted to their needs. The article presents the partial results of a large-scale qualitative research study, results that refer to the position of vulnerable families in the context of preschool education. The study examined how vulnerability is experienced by parents of preschool children, how the expert workers in the preschools involved in the study responded to the parents' vulnerability, and how they cooperated with experts from other services outside the preschool. A qualitative research method was used in the study. Data was collected partly through semi-structured interviews with various expert workers employed in two preschools, as well as with the parents of children in the preschools; the interviews were conducted individually and in focus groups. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we have identified four representative themes: amongst parents, the two recurring themes can be subsumed under the headings "*from door to door*" and "*adaptation/flexibility*", and amongst experts, under the headings "*powerlessness/incompetence/lack of information*" and "*power/innovation/sensitivity*". The study finds that the ability to effectively contend with vulnerability presumes a reconceptualisation of the attitude of institutional preschool education towards the family, including a change in the professional role of preschool teachers.

Keywords: children, preschool, social exclusion, vulnerable families

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Izzivi in odzivi na ranljivost družin na področju predšolske vzgoje

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∽   Težave ranljivih družin so večplastne; vključujejo presečišče fizičnih, psihosocialnih in drugih stisk. Večdimenzionalna narava problemov teh družin je tesno povezana z dejstvom, da obstaja veliko institucij s področij izobraževanja, socialnega varstva in zdravstva ter z drugih področij, katerih obravnava in podpora nista zadovoljivi oziroma prilagojeni njihovim potrebam. Članek predstavlja delne rezultate obsežnejše kvalitativne študije, ki se nanašajo na položaj ranljivih družin v okviru predšolske vzgoje. V raziskavi nas je zanimalo, kako izkušnjo ranljivosti doživljajo starši predšolskih otrok, kako se strokovni delavci vrtca odzivajo na ranljivost in na kak način pri tem sodelujejo s strokovnjaki drugih služb zunaj vrtca. Uporabljena je bila kvalitativna metoda raziskovanja. Podatki so bili zbrani z delno strukturiranimi intervjuji z različnimi strokovnimi delavci, zaposlenimi v vrtcu, in s starši predšolskih otrok v vrtcu; izvedeni so bili individualno in v fokusnih skupinah. Z uporabo tematske analize (Braun & Clarke, 2006) smo opredelili štiri reprezentativne teme: pri starših sta to tematiki »od vrat do vrat« in »prilagajanje/prožnost«, pri strokovnjakih pa »nemoč/nekompetentnost/neinformiranost« in »moč/inovativnost/senzibilnost«. Ugotavljamo, da uspešno spoprijemanje z ranljivostjo predpostavlja rekonceptualizacijo odnosa institucionalne predšolske vzgoje do družine, vključno s spremembo profesionalne vloge vzgojiteljev.

Ključne besede: otroci, vrtec, socialna izključenost, ranljive družine

Introduction

Vulnerability in the context of poverty and inequality

Contemporary times are marked by the negative effects of the economic crisis and austerity measures, and, consequently, a narrowing field of support mechanisms available to individuals and families. Increasing poverty levels and social inequality (e.g., Leskošek et al., 2013) are related to a range of negative social phenomena, such as psychological distress, psychoactive drug abuse, crime and lower educational achievements (Wilkinson and Picket, 2012). We are witnessing the growing phenomenon of families with multiple problems, identified as vulnerable families, who are coping with poverty as well as a number of other related problems.

As pointed out by Andersen (2014), poverty as a structural condition can be used to understand children as subjects who are simultaneously vulnerable during the childhood life phase. Poverty turns childhood into a period of *insecurity* for children. Just as security is found to be the central indicator of child wellbeing, (a feeling of) insecurity can be regarded as an indicator of vulnerability in childhood, along with experiencing insecure situations, relationships or residential environments (ibid.). Poverty has a particular impact on the educational opportunities of children. Within the dominant anti-poverty policy, the child and his/her parents have become the central objects of intervention (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014). Child and family social work has been assigned a key role in ensuring the wellbeing of children and the family. In addition, education systems have become increasingly perceived as a key instrument in the promotion of the social inclusion of children.

Early childhood education as an equaliser of educational opportunities

In the context of the transition of welfare states to "social investment" states, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has become regarded as an investment in human capital (Cantillon, 2011) as well as a profitable investment in terms of public expenditure (Heckman 2011; Ruhm and Waldfogel 2011). ECEC is a provider of lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and, later, employability; in the long term, its role is to produce economically profitable adults in the future. Both children and (their) parents are expected to adjust to the changing socioeconomic circumstances and integrate into post-industrial labour markets. As "inequalities in childhood pose a real threat to the accumulation of human capital and are a root cause of unequal

opportunities in the labour market and later in life" (Van Lancker, 2013 in Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014), ECEC is seen as the most effective equaliser of educational opportunities.

As children and childhood are considered the key to a successful social investment strategy, they become the central objects of interventions. Various types of disadvantaged families, including those with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, have been adjudged "at risk profiles" in terms of not providing an adequate upbringing environment for children. Consequently, "parenting" has become a public concern and therefore a legitimate site for state intervention (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014). The discourse on promoting "good parenting" is characterised by attempts to control and regulate the conduct of (poor) parents and, by orientation, to "pedagogicise" them. As Gillies (2012, p. 13) infers, "governments have increasingly come to see families more in terms of their practices than structures and have targeted policy interventions accordingly" (ibid.).

Consequently, the focus is on the preventive and compensatory role of ECEC as a promising means to compensate for a disadvantaged home life (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014). However, there is growing doubt among scholars in the field regarding the "formula" according to which early childhood education represents a good investment in the social state. Moss (2012) points out the incredulity of the "story of high returns", claiming that even in countries that have implemented national compensatory early interventions for decades, social inequality is still increasing. ECEC programmes rarely demonstrate a long-term impact on the learning achievements and social integration of disadvantaged children. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to gain understanding of the ways in which preschool education responds to the needs of children from the most vulnerable families, and to determine whether any support mechanisms, measures or practices exist that address the accumulation of problems.

Individual responsibility and the construction of bad parenting

Within the contemporary construction of the welfare state, parents are "responsible risk-takers". When it comes to parenting, upbringing and childcare, the responsibility for the child's future is placed almost entirely upon the parents, regardless of the circumstances in which they live, the resources available to them in facing and dealing with insecurities, the challenges of straitened circumstances, and the risks of exclusion. It is parents' own responsibility if they decide "incorrectly"; in most cases, this means "not in conformity with the normative majority" (Razpotnik, 2011).

Within the social investment paradigm, parental support utilises programmes aimed at supporting "risky social groups", formed in most cases by the long-term socially excluded population. This is just a stone's throw away from an entrenched paternalistic and supervisory role of social welfare and education (Vandenbroeck & Geens, 2007). For at-risk groups, some offers of "parent support" become compulsory and may even result in placing the child in an institution if the parents do not fulfil the necessary requirements, (ibid.). Parents' competence may be in doubt or regarded as unworthy of trust because it is not manifested in a way that complies with the culturally prevalent codes. Parents living in difficult circumstances are quickly accused of bad parenting, and their children are stigmatised as problematic children. If these parents refuse to cooperate with the programmes offered to them, or withdraw from such programmes ahead of time, they risk being blamed for going against "good" professional intervention. Programmes and interventions that do not reflect this view can further damage those families, parents and children who already lack self-reliance (De Mey, Coussée, Vandenbroeck & Bouverne - De Bie, 2009). On the other hand, in many cases, parents are aware that things are not running as smoothly as they would like, but they are trapped in difficult circumstances (poverty, social isolation, poor housing) that do not allow them to make the changes they want to make.

Vulnerable families in the "chain" of multiple helping professions

Although vulnerability has a variety of manifestations, vulnerable families share the characteristic of the accumulation of problems in various areas of life: from a lack of material goods and housing, somatic difficulties, social isolation, and relationship problems with family members and neighbours, to problems within the work sphere and conflicts with various forms of authority, including counselling and support services. The problems faced by vulnerable families are multidimensional and intertwined, and can be described by the concept of "radiation", a process whereby the mutual influence of problems in various areas of one's life negatively impact one another (De Vries & Bouwkamp, 2002). As many institutions in the education, social welfare and healthcare fields come into contact with these families (Strnad, 2012), they are also described as "multi-agency families". Despite the fact that many professionals are engaged, the problems often continue to accumulate and the situation worsens, and a complete stagnation of support processes is not unusual.

Harway (1996) observed that experts often formulate practices that enable them to avoid situations of which they are afraid; they place their own

(high and varying) demands on the family or set unrealistic expectations. Consequently, families often withdraw and become passive. Instead of finding solutions to pressing issues, the final result is avoidance. In addition, the work of professionals in bureaucratic, rationalised and formalised institutions often leads to the phenomenon of *alienation,* which is manifested in professionals feeling isolated from moral sources, detached from inspiration and personal talents, while people in vulnerable families feel isolated from the rest of society (Schouten, 2007 in Bowkamp & Bowkamp, 2014).

Vulnerable families are thus characterised by a long history of failed processes of support and assistance, while the failure of interventions is often attributed to reluctance on the part of families to receive support (Ghesquiere, 1993 in Bowkamp & Bowkamp, 2014). Due to the aforementioned accumulation of problems, experts who enter these families in a professional capacity also find it harder to recognise and fortify the *resources* that these families do have. However, recognising and addressing a vulnerable family's resources is of key importance; it presents a way to break the cycle of problems so often highlighted in professional discussions on vulnerable families.

Children from vulnerable families in the early childhood education system in Slovenia

Slovenian early childhood legislation prioritises measures supporting access to preschool institutions (preschools)[5] to all children, including the provision of preferential admission to socially disadvantaged children and children with special needs. National policy documents provide special measures and guidance aimed at supporting children from "less stimulating social and cultural environments". The focus is thus on children or *groups* of children being identified as *"at risk"* with regard to their development and learning (Turnšek & Batistič Zorec, 2009), rather than on understanding how various family problems in different areas of life can accumulate and result in family vulnerability, or have a decisive impact on child wellbeing and learning. Moreover, support is mainly focused on the child as a learner, with the aim of preventing developmental delays rather than improving the child's wellbeing, taking into account the family situation.

In addition, the Curriculum for Preschools (1999) supports the notion of a clear division of the responsibilities between preschool and family. It states that preschools should consider the culture, identity, language, worldviews,

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5   Hereinafter referred to as *preschools,* which, in Slovenia, are mainly public institutions conducting full-day programmes and enrolling about 95% of preschool-age children.

values and convictions, customs and habits of parents. The latter, on the other hand, should consider the limits of their involvement: parental decision-making should not interfere with professionals' expert knowledge (ibid.). Therefore, there is no tradition within the preschool system in Slovenia of directly connecting with families, or having an outreach function; instead, the non-intervention doctrine prevails, often justified by the idea of protecting the privacy of family life. Although preschools do have their own counselling services, which employ social pedagogues, social workers, special pedagogues,[6] psychologists, etc., due to the scale of the work, they are often preoccupied with bureaucracy rather than with hands-on psycho-social work. However, as experience shows, they do in fact often respond – on their own initiative – in inventive ways to the needs of children from vulnerable families.

In Slovenia, programmes providing flexible support to families within their home environment are not widespread. There are currently no family centres or other flexible support groups that support vulnerable families with numerous difficulties, including those related to parents' issues with childrearing. Furthermore, peer-oriented affiliation, bringing together individuals or families with similar problems, is also notably absent (Razpotnik, 2011). However, we must point out the association for help and self-help for the homeless, Kings of the Street, which, in response to a noticeable increase in the number of vulnerable families who experience housing risk or homelessness, has developed and enacted a flexible support system focused on improving the everyday lives of these families. This practice was the starting point and one of the frames of reference for our research.

Methodology

The Aim of the study

One challenge for contemporary fields coming into contact with vulnerable families is how to form innovative work practices that stem from the needs and specificities of the family, that are grounded in their home life, and that synergistically intertwine. This article presents the partial results of a large-scale qualitative research study entitled *"An Analysis of Situation and Needs Assessment among Vulnerable Families"* (Razpotnik, Turnšek, Rapuš Pavel & Poljšak Škraban, 2015), which was conducted within the Faculty of Education in the period 2014–2015. The study aimed to understand the characteristics of the existing support network for vulnerable families, and to identify potential

6   Special educational needs teacher.

unmet needs. It also aimed to identify the characteristics of support strategies and opportunities for more flexible approaches from the perspectives of all those involved: families and existing expert services. This article presents the results related to the position of vulnerable families in the context of institutional preschool education. We were interested in how vulnerability is experienced by parents of preschool children and how they experience the approaches of experts. We also investigated how children and vulnerable families are treated in preschools; whether vulnerable families are recognised as such; how preschool leadership teams, counselling services and teachers approach the problems of children and their families; how they respond to their problems, including which practices and approaches they use; and their methods of cooperation with experts from other services outside the preschool.

Research methods

The study uses a qualitative research method. Vulnerable families and their members were accessed by the researchers through a non-governmental organisation that works with this population, the association Kings of the Street, a housing support and retention programme. The range of people included in the analysis presented in this article includes 7 members of vulnerable families from the area of Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, and 22 representatives of preschool education from two preschools in Ljubljana. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (with two preschool head teachers, a social pedagogue employed in a preschool counselling service, and two parents). Focus group interviews were carried out with parents of preschool children in the housing support programme, and with their teachers. The focus group of parents included five people, while five focus groups of preschool teachers included from four to six people. Ethical principles of voluntary participation and protection of privacy of the participants were respected during the research. The results suggested the specific themes acquired in the process of thematic content analysis. Six phases of thematic analysis were used (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) writing up.

Results

This chapter foregrounds our understanding and interpretations of the research participants' positions.[7] The process of reviewing the themes that emerged from the participants' responses showed that preschool expert workers mainly expose themes related to the identification of vulnerabilities, along with ways and practices of responding to them, which corresponds to the professional qualifications for this kind of work. Parents' descriptions, on the other hand, mainly involve their experiences in their vulnerable position as well as their experiences with services and experts. Literal quotes of the participants in the study are therefore presented in corresponding content sets.

Identifying vulnerability

The statement by a counselling expert[8] given below implies that the preschool involved has no special expert procedures in place to identify children's vulnerability; instead, vulnerable families are recognised within the formal procedure of their children's enrolment in the preschool. Priority admission, and therefore circumvention of the usual selection procedure based on a points system, is only guaranteed if the opinion of a social work centre is submitted by the parents at the time of their child's enrolment, proving that the family is considered to be an "at risk" family.[9] Such cases are, however, rare. A social pedagogue who works in one of the preschools comments:

> *"In principle, very little is identified on enrolment, except through paperwork, that is, the opinion of the centre for social work; and even this only involves the centre's opinion that the family is socially at risk. These children are then given priority for admission …"* (SP1)

7 The quoted participants' statements are coded with the role that the participants have in the preschool or family, and with a serial number: SP1 = social pedagogue in preschool 1; H1 = head of preschool 1; M1 = mother 1; T1= preschool teacher 1.

8 The term "preschool counselling service expert" or "counselling expert" includes various expert profiles, such as social worker, special educational needs teacher, social pedagogue and others who work in preschool counselling services operating within preschools. These professionals undertake interdisciplinary work in preschools and for preschools, and participate in solving complex educational, psychological and social issues in cooperation with all of the parties involved in the preschool, and, if necessary, with appropriate external institutions, as well.

9 According to Article 20 of the Preschool Institutions Act, priority admission is guaranteed to "socially disadvantaged children". In the past, a kind of automatism existed whereby parents could only prove their social or material disadvantage by submitting a certificate proving their eligibility for social assistance. However, within the past five years, a different procedure has been introduced whereby the status of disadvantage is identified on the basis of an overall assessment of several factors in the family, one of which is the family's long-term treatment by a social work centre due to multiple problems.

Priority admission is a sort of "signal" to the preschool that a family with multiple challenges is involved: a family who has been treated by various experts over an extended time period. In this phase, the preschool has no insight into the nature of the family's problems, and it seems that preschools typically do not attempt to access that information.

> *"We usually don't know what has happened to the child in the past, because the child is registered there [at the centre for social work]. It is the centre's opinion that the family is registered there, meaning that it has a history at a centre for social work."* (SP1)

Preschools become acquainted with the problems of vulnerable families mainly through their communication with the parents. The preschool acquires information largely by "coincidence": through procedures or on the initiative of parents who are willing to freely share information in their contacts with preschool teachers. The responses of the two preschool heads interviewed when asked whether the preschool cooperates with the social work centre are as follows:

> *"No, because you usually communicate with parents ... A mother went to a safe house with her children in our direct vicinity; in this case, you get to know [from them] that they now also have a [restraining] order. This is how you are informed about a situation".* (H1)
> *"In the case of violence, parents themselves turn to us or tell us, so that we are informed somehow."* (H2)

The doctrine of non-interference with family life is identifiable and reflected in the tendency for parents to be offered help only when they ask for it themselves. As is shown by the statement below, the preschool prefers to focuses on the child's education independently of any knowledge of their family situation.

> *"In principle, while things are still running smoothly enough, when nothing is negatively reflected in the children and they are still functioning well, we mainly leave it alone and don't address it. Perhaps we pay these children more attention and offer them a little more help. We do not interfere with the family any more than that. Unless they ask us ..."* (SP1)

In the other preschool, a more proactive approach was observed, involving inviting the parents for a meeting in cases where problems are perceived with the child. However, the statement below implies that there is no systematic monitoring or observation of the children involved.

"If change in the child is obvious, we usually call the parents in for a conversation to make things right." (H2)

Parents' experiences and the needs of vulnerable families

As parents' experiences show, vulnerable families sometimes need certain adjustments or flexible forms of direct practical help. The narration given below, by a mother who lives with her children in a housing support programme, points out that the preschool's opening hours are not adjusted to the needs of a vulnerable family.

"None of us are educated or received enough schooling to be able to have an eight-to-four job. As a cleaning lady, I have to work in two shifts, as an ironing lady I need to work in two shifts; it's everywhere I turn … And when you work in the afternoon, there is no place you can put your children, because preschool is only provided in the morning … On top of that, I've had many other scheduling problems with my work and the preschool. I got a job that started at 6.00 am, while preschool starts at 6:15 am … They weren't willing to have a teacher come five minutes earlier. Only five minutes, and I could've dropped them off [the children, to preschool] and got to work on time. There was absolutely no understanding on their side … They tell you they open at 6:15 am, end of story. They don't listen to other explanations. You can't give any further explanation." (M1)

The achievement of more adjusted responses from preschools to the needs of families is related to parents' personal engagement and their persistent attempts to reach solutions with the various experts involved.

"And for the whole of September I struggled and did what I could, so that I could arrange that extra five minutes in the morning with the preschool … I had to write a letter to the social work centre, and I had to write a letter to the counselling service, and to the preschool. And then she stamped it, my own courtesy copy, because I requested it, otherwise she wouldn't have. Then this went to the head of the preschool with a request for approval." (M1)

In spite of parents' engagement, they often do not succeed. They try to fulfil the different tasks set by experts but do not reach a solution; instead, they are assigned even more work to do. As described by one father, this is how parents end up stuck in an endless cycle of unsolved problems.

"Essentially, they send you door to door, and from that door to another. And what happens? You're going around in the same circle, door to door,

door to door, and in the end you don't achieve anything, until you step out of this cycle and literally do it yourself. But when you do a certain thing yourself, when you do it, again they give you certain conditions: now you have to do this and that and the other. And I think, wait, what more can I do?" (F1)

The next report indicates the uncoordinated work of services that deal with families or children.

"Before, we lived in Z., then we moved here, and after that I went to M. to the social service [social work centre] and told them that we had moved, and the lady said she would register the changeover on the computer, so I would have everything uninterrupted, the child benefit, social benefits … Once I got here, well, I didn't receive a bank transfer of a benefit for a whole month. The second month, I didn't receive the child benefit. And then when I called, it was the same gentleman … And he said that perhaps he had mislaid my file. And I said: 'You know what, it's urgent. I can't do without the child benefit. I can't make ends meet; I simply can't. At the time, my kid needed nappies and food and you name it'. 'Sure, madam, we'll fix it somehow.' The second month passed, then the third month, and nothing. Then I remembered that somebody here had told me about the municipality benefit. Luckily, I went to ask about it, but I had to wait for 45 days for the bank transfer. When I finally got it, the woman wrote that they had been late, that my file had been mislaid, and they were finally giving me the benefit, to which I was not even entitled. They gave me 95 Euros, instead of 195." (M3)

The responses of preschools

Some interviewees did not highlight problems with the identification of vulnerable families; instead, they listed a number of inventive, innovative and more flexible approaches in response to the diverse needs of vulnerable families.

"We deal with vulnerable families on a more individual level. Regarding the written invitation to preschool, we don't send it to their home because they usually don't respond; instead, we call them. When you invite them to meet, they usually don't respond because they don't think it's important or they don't understand why they are being invited. For example, we're going to send a colleague to visit their village to invite them and to explain why it's important for the child to attend preschool.
We have some Roma children, and our special pedagogue visits them individually. There have been several occasions when we arranged for them to

be able to use the school minibus, which is usually only provided for school children, so that they could get to the preschool." (H2)

Some interviewees point to the significance of good management of the preschool; they believe that, with the rational distribution of work tasks between the employees, it is possible to respond more efficiently to the specific, diverse needs of vulnerable families.

"We have a mobile special pedagogue who devotes special time to some children ... Depending on the time available, we agree on who will take on what ... We always give these children to those teachers who know how to treat them, who have experience. But sometimes it happens that you can't do this, because the preschool unit is full." (H2)

The statement below by a head teacher indicates an inventive way of introducing a non-Slovenian speaking child from a vulnerable family to preschool by soliciting help from parents from another vulnerable family who speak the same language.

"We have children from former Yugoslav republics, quite a few of them. At the moment, we have a problematic Albanian-speaking family who owns a kiosk. I told you what happened when I went to buy some fruit in the middle of winter and the lady was nowhere to be seen … And then she stood up from nursing her baby under the counter; it was extremely cold, and the child was not even three months old. Catastrophic, really terrible … But now we have – well, we had – all of their children in our preschool. And it is this young mother whom we asked for help with an Albanian boy whom we received last year, because she speaks Albanian …" (H2)

Below is an excerpt from a conversation with a social pedagogue, illustrating the way in which preschool counselling services attempt to secure support in cases in which children experience accumulated but undefined problems. In an effort to provide children with appropriate developmental and learning assistance, preschools are initiating the process of categorising children with special needs. Based on the special needs statement, the preschools are then able to provide specialised professional work with the child individually within the preschool.

"In the group, we have a child with attention deficit disorder, behavioural problems ... He is hard to control, so I don't know… We have more and more children like this, difficult to deal with. The assessment board will do me a favour, I've arranged for placement [the formal procedure aimed at

categorisation of a child with "special needs"], so that this child will at least get something [learning support provided by an additional staff member who provides specialised treatment]." (SP1)

Qualifications of preschool experts and characteristics of their work

Interviews with preschool teachers indicate a sense of powerlessness in dealing with problems, as well as the failure of formal teacher education to provide the knowledge necessary for dealing with the accumulated problems of children.

> *"The knowledge that the preschool teacher has … I can say this is a weak spot. Solving problems, working with parents ... initiating conversations. I know I didn't acquire this knowledge during schooling. I acquired it later, through practical work."* (T1)

One social pedagogue points to the need for teachers to be qualified for approaches that make a shift from exposing parents' individual responsibility and assigning guilt.

> *"Well, yes, parent counselling, I think that, at the moment, parents need that, but how do we manage it so that the parent will not experience it as 'tut, tut, that's not how it should be done'?"* (SP1)

The experts also point to the phenomenon of sending parents and children "from door to door" to different experts who each provide their own specialised treatment of the child.

> *"Unfortunately, Preschool Education [the study programme at the Faculty of Education] doesn't offer any help with emotional or behavioural problems that would enable to identify these children. I don't even know where to direct these parents today. We sent them to psychologists, who later told them to visit a therapist, and whomever else …"* (SP1)

The cooperation of the preschool with other institutions that deal with the welfare of children and the family is often one-way in terms of communication. The role of preschool counselling experts is often limited to merely forwarding information and issuing reports (on the child's behaviour, etc.), rather than cooperating as a team and having equal standing in a dialogue with experts from other related fields.

> *"This year, we've already had three children who have faced violence in the family … Because this happens in our precinct, it means we are thrown*

together with social service centres, or we are asked for a report; the pre-school then writes it up based on the legislation …" (SP1)

Preschool experts express a need for teamwork and find that coopera-tion with external experts is not common practice; instead, it is left to the ini-tiative of individuals. They express a need to be consulted as experts and have their opinion taken into account. For example, they often note certain problems with a child that are only visible within a group dynamic; outside experts do not notice these problems, as they do not occur in other contexts. Consequently, the experts do not believe the reports of these behaviours.

"We're experts, so other services should trust our opinion and that we're working in the child's best interests …" (SP1)

Identifying the key themes

In an attempt to summarise the research findings, we highlight the themes that best represent the positions of the parents, on the one hand, and the experts, on the other.

In the interviews with the parents of preschool children from vulnerable families, two themes can be highlighted as the key themes: sending families *"from door to door"* and *"adjustment/flexibility"*. The metaphor of going door to door illustrates the involvement of numerous experts who – each in their own way – deal with a certain, specific problem in the family. Each of them assigns diverse tasks to the parents, which the latter experience as "conditions", as fulfilment of these tasks is believed to a prerequisite to reaching a solution. However, the solution is not achieved, as this challenge often proves too diffi-cult for vulnerable families. Experts in preschool confirm that families are un-able to fulfil the numerous (sometimes contradictory) requirements imposed on them by the standard procedures typical of institutions (e.g., parents do not attend parent-teacher meetings because they do not understand the invitation written in Slovenian). Therefore, we face a paradox: the various non-standard situations faced by vulnerable families are approached using standard processes and procedures (adjusted to the majority population). As can be seen, although parents do make an effort, they soon end up responding with apathy, resulting in the halting of processes of support; unresolved situations are then often at-tributed by the experts to the parents' irresponsibility and lack of motivation.

Another salient theme is the need for preschool institutional organisa-tion to further adapt to the life circumstances of vulnerable families related to childrearing. As the authors of projects providing support situated in the family

context point out (McDonald, Moore & Goldfeld, 2012), what vulnerable families often need is simply more practical and concrete forms of support. Our research shows that, for preschools that tend to perceive and recognise the needs of families, such adaptations and flexible institutional solutions are fairly easy to identify and implement; while for families, they always have a profound impact.

The themes raised by the experts involve *"powerlessness/incompetence/ lack of information"*, on the one hand, and *"power/innovation/sensitivity"*, on the other. The former is defined by focusing on the obstacles: the participants highlight the lack of information that would help them to identify vulnerability, the lack of cooperation with experts outside the preschool, the unequal position and disrespect of preschool education in relation to other professions, and the lack of specialist knowledge and formal qualifications, due to which they often feel powerless and incompetent. The opposite perspective is defined by the preschool's proactive attitude towards finding solutions and answers, to the creation of responses that "circumvent" the preschool's standard protocols and practices, thus reflecting responsiveness and flexibility regarding the needs of vulnerable children. Both perspectives were identified in our investigation. As the findings suggest, which of these two perspectives the teachers and principals are committed to is of vital importance for providing adequate support to vulnerable families and their children.

Typically, within the *"powerlessness/incompetence/lack of information"* perspective, preschools place their practices within the frameworks of processes and procedures defined by *other* experts. A telling example is when they tackle "problematic children", whom they classify as children with special needs. Through the use of this – standard – procedure, the preschool attempts to provide children with individual specialist support, while at the same time ignoring the ethical dimensions of such solutions, along with other consequences for the benefit of the child. This perspective specifically involves the need to "define dysfunction", while the opportunity to create context-oriented understanding is ignored. Our investigation reveals that complex problems cannot be solved by applying a rigid conceptual apparatus (e.g., from the perspective of vulnerability, the obviously insufficient conceptual apparatus of special needs). Within this orientation, preschools mainly respond to the demands of outside institutions and experts (e.g., issuing the opinions that the preschool needs for *its* decisions) and comply with the professional standards, procedures and decisions of other institutions that they perceive to be more competent in solving the problems of families. Although these situations are perceived by them as distinctly inadequate, they rarely act proactively, either in terms of being more persistent regarding the use of interdisciplinary teams of experts or mediation

between the family and the institutions, or in terms of the coordination of various experts who work in the area of the welfare of children and the family.

In contrast, the numerous flexible responses of preschools to the needs of vulnerable people, which can be found in the narratives of preschool experts, also indicate the presence of a sensitivity towards the special life circumstances and perceived needs of vulnerable families, as well as a tendency to create innovative responses. Our research confirms the findings by Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp (2014), who cite the research of various authors indicating that professionals with a committed, active, structured and confrontational approach, together with a positive attitude, create a far better working relationship and achieve better results than passive and inaccessible professional workers. While preschools can be very resourceful in seeking more flexible responses, they primarily rely on their own internal resources. However, they act far less creatively externally, i.e., in creating connections with the family, in working within the family's life sphere, and in searching for solutions that are defined jointly with the family.

Conclusions: Creating new paradigms and approaches

Our research is taking place at a time when the level of poverty and social inequality in Slovenia is increasing, a time when various support networks and mechanisms are gradually deteriorating, when education systems are increasingly burdened by the care and social inclusion of underprivileged and vulnerable children. The currently predominant social investment paradigm, grounded in support strategies designed for target groups of children identified as socially at risk (such as language support to immigrant children) does not provide adequate support for the most vulnerable preschool children; such support requires a context-oriented understanding and the sensitive identification of the situation of each individual family. We believe that preschool education needs to reach beyond the predominant, yet often ineffective concepts and paradigms, in order to take on a more important role in creating adequate responses to the needs of preschool children from vulnerable families.

The findings show that parents' experiences largely depend on how teachers and other experts in educational institutions respond to their needs. Parents highlight the need for greater visibility, respect, accessibility and inclusivity. They also emphasise disparities in the perception of a family's problem or situation, which can often hinder a joint understanding and an effective professional approach. These findings lead to the conclusion that attempts should be made to achieve greater parental inclusion. The creation of partnerships with

families presumes a withdrawal from the concept of "non-interference" in family life and a shift towards acting within the life sphere of the family, which should be grounded on respect and a commitment to co-create mutually agreed responses. For Mešl (2008), collaboration in the process of assistance is of key importance, while other studies (McDonald, Moore, & Goldfeld, 2012) suggest that parents prefer services that are non-judgemental and that empower them in their role as parents (Ghate & Hazel, 2002). New, emerging forms of action respond to these needs through non-invasiveness, establishing a partner relationship and accessibility, with an emphasis on brevity, comprehensiveness and experientiality (De Vries & Bouwkamp, 2002). We believe that preschools, as meeting spaces for children, their families and experts, should also take a more active role in terms of the "meeting" of the perspectives of everyone involved in searching for jointly defined solutions.

Considering the fact that preschools express the need to connect to other experts, the possibility of outreach work should be considered, along with the promotion of programmes representing a flexible supplement to work in the preschool field, in terms of entering the lives of vulnerable families. Such programmes, developed in some European countries, are called "family support", as well as "home visiting service" (Barlow et al., 2003), "care-based visiting programmes" or "home visiting interventions" (Fraser et al., 2000). Of particular interest within the field are programmes that include families with very small children, in order to meet the criteria of "early intervention", meaning that vulnerable families receive the required support before their problems become too serious (Glass, 1999). Although home-based parent and family support programmes cover a wide range of interventions with vulnerable families, their evaluations show (McKeown, 2000) that their main advantage lies in facilitating greater *insight into the needs* of parents and children in vulnerable families, particularly with regard to the issues of parenting and childrearing. They have proved to be useful in reducing barriers to services and providing help in building the family's social network (ibid.). These alternative forms reflect a reconceptualisation of preschool professionalism. The predominant teachers' expert role, which is limited to "providing an encouraging learning environment", is extended with community-based work also involving teachers' networking competencies (Oberhuemer, 2000).

In any given micro situation, new paths must be paved, new concepts and, consequently, new systemic solutions must be established. There are, of course, no quick and easy solutions. However, we have found that insight into the family context and readiness to listen to complex family issues on the part of the educational institution represents an important step forward in bringing

the two sides together. With the socioeconomic situation of many families only getting worse, it is high time to consider new approaches to vulnerable families and therefore new paradigms, which should be more contextual, flexible and partner- and dialogue-oriented.

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Co-Creating Desired Outcomes and Strengthening the Resilience of Multi-Challenged Families

Nina Mešl*[1] and Tadeja Kodele[2]

∼   Families facing poverty suffer from many other stresses, with children's school performance being one of the common topics. A life of poverty and the related unfavourable circumstances should not define children's life stories. Ensuring this is not the case is partly the responsibility of professionals working with families. It is important to overcome the problem of the frequently dispersed help given to multi-challenged families. We proceed from the premise that the vicious circle of failures can be broken by providing support and help to the family and by establishing a co-creative working relationship involving all of the participants in a joint working project. The results of the plural case study confirmed the importance of working with multi-challenged families, which includes dealing with the children's poor school performance, in their homes. They also showed the inadequacy of the often dominant discourse claiming that families do not want to receive help. The results prioritise the role of social workers and the relationship established at the beginning of the collaboration with the family. The presence of a social worker who persists with a joint project even in the case of failure represents an important new experience for families. Although multi-challenged families are resilient, they sometimes need an interlocutor to help them recognise and strengthen that resilience.

Keywords: co-creative working relationship, individual working project of help, poor school performance, poverty, working with the family at home

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Soustvarjanje želenih izidov in krepitev odpornosti družin s številnimi izzivi

NINA MEŠL IN TADEJA KODELE

∽   Družine, ki se srečujejo z revščino, se spoprijemajo še s številnimi drugimi izzivi. Pogosta tema je tudi šolska neuspešnost otrok. Začetek življenja v revščini in s tem povezane neugodne okoliščine ne smejo definirati otrokove življenjske zgodbe, za kar smo soodgovorni strokovni delavci, ki sodelujemo z družinami. Pomembno je preseči problem pogoste razpršenosti pomoči, ki so je deležne družine s številnimi izzivi. Izhajava iz teze, da se začaran krog neuspehov lahko prekine s procesom podpore in pomoči družini, soustvarjenim v delovnem odnosu, ki v skupni delovni projekt poveže vse udeležene. Rezultati pluralne študije primera so potrdili pomen sodelovanja z družinami, ki se ob številnih izzivih spoprijemajo še s problemom šolske neuspešnosti otrok, na njihovih domovih. Pokazali so tudi na neustreznost pogosto prevladujočega diskurza, da družine niso naklonjene prejemanju pomoči. Rezultati v ospredje postavljajo vprašanje vloge strokovnega delavca in odnosa, ki ga vzpostavi, ko vstopa v sodelovanje z družino. Pomembna nova izkušnja za družine je zavzeta prisotnost socialne delavke, ki vztraja tudi ob morebitnih neuspehih v skupnem projektu. Družine s številnimi izzivi so odporne, a včasih potrebujejo sogovornika, ki jim pomaga odpornost prepoznati in jo krepiti.

Ključne besede: revščina, šolska neuspešnost, delovni odnos soustvarjanja, izvirni delovni projekt pomoči, sodelovanje z družino na domu

Introduction

Modern society gives individuals more choices, including those related to the organisation of family life. New opportunities bring new demands, tensions and challenges. Family life has always implied a constant search for a way to meet individual and family needs, making more room for various roles, connections and negotiations, as well as the challenges of handling conflicts. Each family structure is very complex, and the various life circumstances the family faces further increase this complexity.

In Slovenia, many families suffer from poverty due to various social circumstances. It is well known that few life contexts bring more adversities and uncertainties than poverty (Maholmes, 2014, p. 4), and that poverty affects people's health, family relationships, the role of the family in the community, etc. Research (ibid.) also indicates a high correlation between poverty and poor educational achievements, bad health and behavioural problems. Life in severe and long-term poverty represents a risk factor for children at a later age as well, increasing the possibility of economic difficulties and related problems in adulthood.

The project "Helping Families in the Community: The Co-Creation of Desired Changes for Reducing Social Exclusion and Strengthening Health"[3] aimed to co-create possible ways of overcoming the dominant family stories of exclusion, helplessness and despair, often passed down from generation to generation and created by a life in poverty and the related experience of many stresses. The collaborative projects of help aimed to find a path to the desired changes, to increased hope and power, and to the co-creation of new, empowering experiences and stories.

We worked with several families with different backgrounds, all of whom shared the experience of poverty. The present article presents the results of selected individual working projects of help (hereinafter: IWPH) for families who were, among other problems, faced with the children's poor school performance.

We proceed from the premise that the vicious circle of failures can be broken by a process of providing help to the family in a co-creative working relationship (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Kobal, Mešl, & Možina, 2005) between all of the participants, involving people from various areas associated with family problems in a joint working project. We can thus overcome the problem

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of the frequently dispersed help given to multi-challenged families,[4] in which each professional begins working with the family by focusing on one part of the problem. Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp (2014, p. 301) provide a vivid description of the issue of dispersion in the processes of help to multi-challenged families using the metaphor of a broken car that is being repaired in different garages, hoping that the problem will be solved once the car is re-assembled. To make it worse, many professionals who eagerly deal with the problems of families in detail in different separated areas represent the burden of multiple entries to and exits from family life. It is, however, unacceptable that the family is left without the required help in the end, despite the intervention of numerous professionals.

In the process of working with families within the project, the topic of children's poor school performance was often considered. Although numerous studies (e.g., in Boyd-Franklin & Hafer Bry, 2000; Maholmes, 2014) indicate the vicious circle of the early experience of poverty, poor school performance, premature school leaving, unemployment in adulthood, etc., there are some rarely highlighted stories that testify to the fact that children living in poverty can succeed and live well despite all of the risks. Although the circumstances related to their economic situation do not change significantly, some children and their families manage to cope with or overcome many consequences of poverty[5] (Maholmes, 2014, p. 4). The topic of (poor) school performance often represented the starting point for collaboration with the family, opening the door to the research of other complex topics in a non-threatening way. The experience of working on the project once again confirmed that many parents

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4   We have borrowed the terminology used by Melo and Alarcão (2011). These are families that are usually considered vulnerable families (Sharlin & Shamai, 2000), multi-stressed families (Madsen, 2007) and multi-problems families (Walsh, 2006). In daily life, they face numerous internal and external stressors that are often associated with difficult living conditions, leading to overload and destabilisation in the family. Many of these families fail to meet the basic needs, and they constantly face various challenges (e.g., job search with little possibility of employment, low incomes for survival, the inability to help children with school matters, or the burdens of disease, addiction, abuse, violence, oppression and homelessness). Most importantly, all of these families experience poverty (Melo & Alarcão, 2011). We decided to use this term mainly because we wanted to emphasise that the families involved in the project are much more than the problems they face. In cooperation with them, we were not focused on "what is missing and what should be", but on "what is and what could be" (Madsen, 2007). Terms organise our way of experiencing and interacting with people. We hope that the terminology will contribute to the recognition of the richness and colourfulness present in the life of these families, even if they suffer from many kinds of stress and multiple pressures of everyday life.

5   We certainly do not want to diminish the importance of the social changes that are necessary to overcome the terrible conditions in which children and families live. We believe that it is unacceptable that the state does not provide the conditions to ensure people, especially children, a decent life. The article examines processes that increase the resilience of children and families, which are understood as processes that need to be carried out together with the critical systemic changes that we should all promote.

want the best for their children; they want their children to experience success and they make great efforts to support them, but they often cannot do this by themselves due to all of the stress and pressure. The experience of good school performance is indeed significant, not only for knowledge development, but also as an inspiration for developing and realising dreams, for discovering talents, and for creating the space for children to nurture the vision that they can be someone who matters in this world. This is particularly important for families facing poverty, as their circumstances can overwhelm their dreams and visions of a brighter future (op. cit., p. 73).

The present article first briefly presents the idea of the project and its basic concept, which served as a foundation for the collaboration with families in the community.[6] It then presents the results of action research, discussing key theoretical emphases. The latter are understood as a possible support for multi-challenged families, but also as an opportunity for a child to achieve good school performance, an outcome that adults are obliged to enable.

Presentation of the Project with the Key Theoretical Basis

In the 2013/2014 academic year, the Faculty of Social Work carried out the "Co-Creation of Help for Families in the Community" pilot project within the "Social Work with Families" master's programme. The experience gained in the pilot project encouraged us to continue and upgrade our work. In February 2015, we thus initiated the project "Helping Families in the Community: The Co-Creation of Desired Changes for Reducing Social Exclusion and Strengthening Health", which was implemented within the framework of the 2009–2014 Norwegian Financial Mechanism and involved the University of Ljubljana (Faculty of Social Work, Faculty of Sport and Faculty of Health Sciences) and two partners: Norges Teknisk-Naturvitenskapelige Universitet from Norway and the Ljubljana Moste-Polje Association of Friends of Youth. The objectives of the project were to co-create changes with family members in order to reduce health inequalities, to create a model of help for families in the community, and to train professionals for working in the areas of the participating faculties.[7] Below, we will focus on the work of the Faculty of Social Work. In both the pilot and the current project, the students, who had already completed

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6   Within the project, helping families in the community is understood as providing help in their homes, i.e., in the communities in which they live. The IWPH co-created with the family is linked to other resources in the community that can support the family in making the desired changes (e.g., school, social work centre, charitable organisations, relatives, neighbours).

7   More about the project can be found at: http://spdse.splet.arnes.si/.

undergraduate studies at the Faculty of Social Work, entered into the processes of providing help to multi-challenged families independently. When carrying out practical work, they had intense and continuous support from small mentoring groups, as well as the possibility of regular individual consultations with their mentor at the faculty. The students visited the families independently in their homes and co-created the desired outcomes in a working relationship with family members (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Kobal, Mešl, & Možina, 2005).

The concept of a working relationship in social work defines the users and social workers as associates in a joint project with the mission of co-creating the solution. The working relationship helps the social worker to start a conversation with the family, allowing him or her to examine and co-create the desired outcomes (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2008). The social worker is an appreciative and accountable ally of the family (Madsen, 2007).

During the academic year, each student collaborated with at least one family and set up an IWPH (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2006). The working relationship enables solutions to people's complex problems to be provided as an individual working project. The projects are individual because they are developed separately for each family; they are co-created with the family and for the family. The projects are called working because they are focused on work, collaboration and the activities that follow the work carried out in the working relationship. We talk about projects because they pass in time and are directed towards positive outcomes (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2008).

When ensuring collaboration and further work with the families, we proceeded from the premise that multi-challenged families are resilient (Walsh, 2006). Although the families suffer considerable distress, the students noticed many sources of strength.

> *"Despite all of the distress, the mother had hope; she remained patient with the children, she fought for survival and for her children like a lion, and she took care of the household, hoping that she could go back to work and that the girls would become more independent." (F15)[8]*

The basic principle of the work was also the understanding of Madsen (2007) and his belief that multi-challenged families are much more than the problems they face. When collaborating with them, we did not focus on "what is not there and what should be", but on "what is there and what could be".

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8   For the explanation of the excerpts' indication see Data Collection (p. 58).

Method

Definition of the Research Problem

In the current and pilot projects, we collaborated with multi-challenged families. The challenge was how to support these families in the transition from the old problems to the new future. Family members were mostly facing poverty and social exclusion, while (poor) school performance often represented an important working topic. Although the parents wanted and were willing to help their children, they were often helpless; they did not know how to help them or were unable to do so, especially because they were burdened with other problems.

The research was based on the following research questions:

- How can we use social work concepts when helping families in community that face many challenges, including poor school performance?
- How can helping families with a child's poor school performance support the family in other areas?
- What was the role of the student in helping multi-challenged families with poor school performance?
- How did the participants in the IWPH experience collaboration in the family home?

Type of Research

The research is qualitative. The data was collected using a plural or extended case study and was analysed using the method of qualitative analysis (Mesec, 1998).

Population and Sampling

The sample of the research were the families involved in the pilot and current projects. The pilot project included 11 families and the current project 28 families. The results presented in the article involve seven families (four from the current project and three from the pilot). The selection of the families was based on their involvement in IWPHs in which a child's poor school performance represented an important working topic.

Data Collection

Within the action project, a great deal of material was collected for evaluating the draft model of working with families in the community and for

the development of new knowledge. At the beginning of the collaboration, the students conducted an interview with the family, exploring the initial expectations of family members. In the middle of the collaboration, they carried out an interim evaluation with the family, which was followed by the final evaluation at the end of the collaboration. The purpose of the evaluations was to obtain feedback on the collaboration between the student and the family. At the end of the collaboration, the students wrote a final paper presenting the process of working with the individual families based on an analysis of the meeting records made after every visit. Recording forms with predefined categories (e.g., agreement on collaboration, strength perspective, ethics of participation) were created to facilitate the regular and professional recording of the work process. At the end of the collaboration, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the families.

The present article discusses findings obtained by exploring the initial expectations of the family members, as well as through final evaluations, one interim evaluation and the final papers analysing the processes of working with the families. All of the material refers to IWPHs in which a child's poor school performance represented an important working topic.

Excerpts from the students' final papers written within the pilot project were marked with the letter P (pilot project) and with the serial number of the family (e.g., final paper from the pilot project – family no. 9: PF9). Excerpts from the students' final papers written within the current project were marked in a similar way, but without the letter P (e.g., final paper from the current project – family no. 9: F9). Statements relating to the initial expectations of individual family members in the current project were marked with the letter E (for expectations), as well as with the number of the question, the number of the family and the first letter of the individual family member (e.g., the mother's answer to the first question about expectations – E1.F9M.1). The last number indicates the serial number of the statement. The statements from the pilot project included the letter P at the beginning (e.g. PE1.F9M.1). Similarly, we marked the statements of the individual family members from the interim and final evaluations using the letter I instead of the letter E for the interim evaluation (e.g., I1.F9M.1) and the letters FE for the final evaluations (e.g., FE1.F9M.1).

Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using the method of qualitative analysis (Mesec, 1998). The analysis included material from the initial expectations, the interim and final evaluations, and the final papers of both projects. From the

material collected, statements that were relevant to the defined research problem were selected for analysis. To begin with, qualitative analysis of a final paper was undertaken by breaking it into meaningful code units (individual sentences or paragraphs) and attributing an adequate term to these units based on the content (direct designation – Mesec, 1998, p. 107). The terms were selected on the basis of theory and common sense. Other final papers were then analysed in the same way, searching for similarities and differences with regard to the first analysed final paper. The statements were grouped according to common codes and the obtained terms were grouped into higher-level categories. Increasingly transparent material was thus obtained and a vocabulary of terms of the emerging experimental theory was drafted by defining this material. The initial expectations and interim and final evaluations were then analysed in the same way.

Results

Learning Assistance as the Beginning of Collaboration with the Family in the IWPH

The students collaborated with multi-challenged families dealing with complex problems that affect everyday life in the family and the community. Most of the families suffered immense financial and housing distress for various reasons (e.g., single-parent families, unemployment, problems with benefiting from public funds, debt, one parent leaving the family). The problems of poverty bring many additional pressures (see e.g., Walsh, 2006; Maholmes, 2014). In the participating families, problems piled up (domestic violence, drug addiction, suicide attempts, health problems, problems associated with raising children). Difficult life circumstances often caused troubled relationships within the family, burdening both parents and children. All of the selected families also suffered from children's learning difficulties. School performance is often a central topic in multi-challenged families, as is evident from the present project. This was observed when exploring the initial expectations of families at the beginning of the collaboration. The families mainly decided to participate in the project because the parents wanted the best for their children.

> *"She was worried because F9S1 got nothing but fail grades, and she was afraid he would have to repeat the third year. She said that she sometimes did not know how to help him and that they sometimes did homework for hours." (SF9)*

The parents expected the students to help their children do their homework and offer learning assistance.

> *"And I would like you to give learning assistance to my children. Especially to F9S1, but also to F9D in chemistry and maths." (E1.F9M.2)*

At the beginning of the collaboration with the families, the purpose of the joint work was mostly defined as supporting and helping children with schoolwork, as well as socialising with them.

> *"We agreed that I would help F15D1 and F15D2 with their homework and other schoolwork." (F15)*

The students wanted to help the children and relieve their parents. The parents also verbalised their relief.

> *"Now, when you visit me once a week, I can talk about what is bothering me. I feel relieved." (E1.F9M.1)*

Learning assistance, socialisation and relief of the parents represented entry points for collaboration with the family. Both children and parents needed some time to establish trust with the students.

> *"During our third meeting, F15M opened up and shared her distress, helplessness and despondency with me." (F15)*

Learning Assistance in the Co-Creative Working Relationship

When working with families in the IWPH, the students realised how important it is to reach agreement with the family on collaboration and to establish a working relationship (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Kobal, Mešl, & Možina, 2005).

> *"We agree on how we will work together. We agree on the future collaboration with the family and the girl based on regular weekly visits, with an emphasis on learning assistance to F21D1 in various subjects, especially English and maths. It is necessary to help F21D1 improve all of the fail grades. Before every hour of learning assistance, we talked about current affairs and about the situation in the family. We meet every second Friday for two hours." (F21)*

The personal involvement of the student was also important. Being personally involved, reacting personally and sharing one's experience or story represents a starting point for personal leading (Bouwkamp & Vries, 1995) as a basic element of working relationships. The experience of respect and dignity,

which is essential for social work with multi-challenged families, can only become a personal experience in dialogue and collaboration (Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al., 2005, p. 11).

> *"Due to the focus on the personal relationship, I noticed the first shift, a turning point when F21D1 showed me her drawings and colouring books. This is when I shared my personal story with her and presented a view on possible solutions" (F21)*

Co-creating solutions together with the family and the child was particularly important.

> *"In family F21, the initial instrumental definition of the problem was given over and over again, at every meeting. I explored her contribution to the solution together with the user. F21D1 repeatedly gave her own definition of the problem, while I contributed my vision. This was the only way to work towards the possible, the achievable. I always respected her experience and we worked on an achievable solution for every problem encountered in understanding the subject matter." (F21)*

While offering children learning assistance and working with the entire family on other working topics, the students mainly relied on the concept of strength perspective (Saleebey 1997) and the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994). They gave children an opportunity to express their opinions and suggestions.

> *"I realised how important it is to examine the problem and to trace exceptions, as well as to co-create solutions. When I discussed with PF11D what she was afraid of and what the test should look like, she became less afraid and we were finally able to move forward. If we had worked solely on learning the subject matter, PF11D would still be afraid of tests." (PF11)*

The students proceeded from the premise that children are experts on experience, thus giving up power they were not entitled to, i.e., that they are the sole owners of all knowledge and truths. Consequently, they provided the child with a valuable experience of co-creation in the process of learning and help (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2013).

> *"When I asked F21D1 where she sees her skills and knowledge, she replied that she is good, for example, at maths, because she understands the subject matter. She knows that she can learn it and that she is competent. She just needs some additional explanation, something more understandable than that given in school." (F21)*

The students repeatedly joined the families in their realities, meanings and stories. The children thus gained the feeling that the students understood them, which was essential for successful collaboration.

> *"When I showed understanding of the fact that he does not feel like doing his homework, our relationship got a new energy. I believe that F9S1 felt that I understand him, that I am O.K. with the fact that he does not feel like doing homework and that I find it completely normal. When he saw that this does not just happen to him, but also to me and to other people, he did not feel like an isolated case of laziness (as F9M often said), but as a completely normal pupil who does not enjoy doing homework." (F9)*

When working with the family and providing children with learning assistance, the students found it useful to praise the children and the parents and to pay them compliments, which is also the basis for solution-focused brief family therapy (Jong & Kim Berg, 2002). Compliments are one of the elements that help create solutions. They are used in social work with families throughout the entire process of work. We can certainly conclude a conversation with compliments that have developed during the working relationship.

> *"When he said something like this, I tried to show him how well he had done the last assignment or where he had been successful. After we finished his homework, I always praised him for sitting through to the end, even though he does not like doing homework and would prefer doing something else. When he was praised at school, I also paid him a compliment." (F9)*

The students found that working from the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1997) contributed to the child's increased motivation for participation and schoolwork. It also contributed to the formulation of long-term objectives and the child's desired outcomes in the project of help.

> *"As a result, the motivation increased and he started studying independently. He managed to improve most of the fail grades by the time of my last visit. His progress was obvious; even the teachers at school noticed it." (F22)*

In the process of support and help, the children needed considerable encouragement from the students. The concept of the strength perspective helped them respond when recognising learned helplessness (Seligman, 1992) in some children, which is why it was so important for the students to give up not believing in them (Saleebey, 1997).

> *"I saw how important the strength perspective is when I taught PF3D2. Every time she started doing her homework, I encouraged her by saying*

that I knew she could do it, that she could take as much time as she needed,
and that I believed she would complete the assignment." (PF3)

Parents and children also shared what they found most helpful in the
co-creative working relationship. They liked the fact that the meetings were
ongoing, that the student took time to talk to them, and that the work was car-
ried out in the present, deriving from the needs the family members expressed
"here and now".

"He also pointed out that he liked the way the project was aimed at work-
ing on the things one really needed and that the help was not predeter-
mined." (PFE2.F11F.4)

They also liked the personal participation of the student.
"You knew how to listen; when something was wrong, you said it in a pow-
erful but nice way. You managed to build a genuine relationship; you knew
when to be strict and when to be friendly. You always said it in a nice way,
not in a harsh way." (PFE2.F7M.9)

Family members highlighted common conversations; they felt safe and
relaxed enough to express their suggestions and desires, and to be heard and
appreciated.

"I would also assess it with 10 out of 10; I was heard and I really liked the
way you appreciated me." (PFE1.F7D.6)

They emphasised the importance of reaching joint agreements.
"I think that the conversations and agreements were very useful. We agreed
on our tasks together and divided them; it was not always the same person
who had to do something." (PFE4.F7D.23)

They found it important that the students joined the family without im-
posing their opinions on them.
"And you never imposed anything, only suggested it." (FE5.F9D.24)

They highlighted the so-called principle of interposition (Lüssi, 1991).
"I do not know how you were able to approach us all in the same way"
(PFE5.F7M.25)

They liked the fact that they could develop their new behaviour through
the experience of how the student acted in a given situation.

"Or, for example, I saw how you work with F9S1 and I tried it myself."
(FE5.F9D.25)

The Student as an Important Adult in the Family

The student who joined the family as an appreciative and accountable ally represented an opportunity for new hope. Hope can be given to someone as a gift, when family members and so-called mentors help them recognise and encourage their internal capabilities to achieve their goals and to fulfil their greatest potential in life (Maholmes, 2014, p. 97). The families found the students' learning assistance very valuable, as they often felt helpless and could not or did not know how to help their children despite their desire and willingness, which made them even more burdened.

> *"She was worried because F9S1 got nothing but fail grades and she was afraid that he would have to repeat the third year. She said that she sometimes did not know how to help him and that they sometimes did homework for hours. However, she had enough strength to attend the parent-teacher meetings and to ask how her daughter and son were doing in school. I offered to come once a week and help them do their homework and study. She immediately accepted my proposal and we agreed that I would come every week in the afternoon."* (F9)

The parents want the children to perform well at school, and the children share this desire. This was highlighted by Maholmes (2014, p. 70), who claimed that parents who face serious adversities and severe life circumstances want their children to have opportunities that they might not have themselves. They have aspirations and dreams for their children, and take the necessary steps to achieve these dreams. In initial expectations, when defining the greatest goal they want to achieve for themselves and their family by participating in the IWPH, the parents emphasised the better school performance of their children.

> *"It would mean a lot to me if my children did well in school." (E2.F9M.5)*

Parents consider a child's good school performance to be a significant protective factor for both the child and the family.

> *"At the first meeting, PF11F said that he was worried about his daughter's education, that PF11D would need help in learning maths, English and German."* (PSF11)

With the help of the students, the parents gained a new insight into their

children's learning difficulties.

> *"That I put their daughters' poor school performance into context; that they are not lazy and naughty, but affected by all the troubles the family has and confused because they speak two languages at home (the father does not speak Slovenian)." (F15)*

They realised how important their support is in improving school performance.

> *"My work showed the family how important it is for all family members to participate in learning support for the child. It is particularly beneficial for children with poor school performance to feel the support of their parents, for their parents to encourage them continually. The children need compliments, they need to be noticed and praised regularly. During the IWPH process, the parents constantly motivated their children and became increasingly involved in the children's school life." (F21, 22)*

The children found collaboration with the student significant and valuable. They began to trust themselves more, their self-confidence increased, they gained skills for independent learning, they overcame their fear of school and their attendance improved.

> *"PF7D started to go to school every day, which will enable her to get the necessary and missing marks and to achieve her goal of finishing school." (PF7)*

Support, leadership and encouragement are central components of the so-called mentoring relationship, as the relationship that developed between the children and the students during learning assistance could be called. As stressed by Maholmes (2014, p. 103), it is essential that the relationship is stable and long-term in order to co-create effective outcomes. Since the experience of poor school performance was often long-lasting, there was sometimes a need for time and a new positive experience to end the prevailing story of failure. In two cases, the child had to repeat a year or change schools despite the student's help; however, this does not imply that the collaboration was entirely unsuccessful, as the path the student and the child followed together included a new, positive experience.

The Experience of Meaningfulness and Trust Opens New Family Working Topics

During the collaboration with the families in the IWPH, learning assistance often proved to be an opportunity to open other working topics in order to support and help the family.

> "We decided to schedule our conversation every Friday morning so that she could talk to someone and share her thoughts. As she herself said, she does not have any friends or other loved ones she could talk to. F9D sometimes joined our conversations; we discussed various topics, such as job search, paperwork for compulsory and supplementary health insurance, ways to calm F9S1 down, what works and what doesn't." (F9)

During the collaboration process, the family increasingly trusted the student, thus leading to important changes in the process of helping the family.

> "The next shift in our relationship was that PF11D opened up to me. I believe this happened when she wanted to cancel the meeting, saying that she did not feel like studying. I nevertheless invited her for a coffee. We talked about other things – PF11D talked about her personal life, relating various anecdotes, and about her father, as well about her mother and her suicide. Although the meeting was like a conversation over coffee, I believe that it deepened our relationship immensely. It represented the moment of 'kairos'. We thus had two separate spaces: the space in her home, where the topic was school, and the space in the coffee shop, where the topic was her personal life." (PF11)

It provided an opportunity to consider a new working topic with the family and to help children in other areas of their lives.

> "After learning assistance, the lady turned to me; she was in distress because she felt that she was sometimes unable to establish a good relationship with F22S and that she found it easier to yell at him than to maintain her self-control. We talked about motivating F22S, about different ways of encouraging children to study. The woman was grateful for the conversation and the help I offered F22S, as it enabled her to develop a different way of thinking about her problem and the possible solutions." (F22)

The family's collaboration with the student substantially contributed to the functioning of the family as a working group; for instance, the family managed to agree on some family rules.

> "With my help, the family started to negotiate when and who would do the chores. Order was restored and the rules on a cleaning, washing and vacuuming schedule were established." (PF7)

Participation in the project sometimes led to changes in family communication and joint leisure activities.

> *"When the father comes home, they talk more. The father used to yell at them very often and now he does not do it anymore." (PF7)*

Learning assistance also contributed to better family cohesion and improved relationships within the family. Support for multi-challenged families on the relational level is essential for the success of the help processes, as strong, stable relationships are a key protective factor against the psychological and behavioural consequences of living in poverty (Maholmes, 2014, p. 54).

> *"They were delighted because it developed into part of the game; it strengthened their relationship and gave them a tangible feeling that each and every one of them can help achieve the accessible goal." (F22)*

During the initial expectations survey, some families mentioned other working topics that would improve their living situation (e.g., getting a job, solving the housing issue, regulating the rights from public funds). The aim of the families was to solve personal problems in order to improve the relationships within the family, both with the children and between partners.

> *"She said that she would like to change her life, since she cannot live like this anymore. According to her own words, she lies and sleeps all day; she does not go anywhere and is shut away within four walls. In addition, she is retired due to her disability status and her diagnosis of mental problems." (PE2.F7M.1)*

The Importance of Collaboration in the Family's Home

The students recognised the advantages of working with the families within the project in the fact that the work was carried out in family's home, in the community.

> *"I also liked the fact that we carried out fieldwork in the user's home. I believe it is easier to work in the user's home environment, where they feel safer and are not under the pressure of an institution." (PF3)*

The students considered working with the family in the community to be an important success factor in the process of collaborating with the family. Collaboration at home allowed them to learn about the complexity of everyday family life and facilitated an understanding of family stories. Madsen (2007, p. 26) says that we should join the family as an original culture and learn about this culture as

much as possible in order to understand the complexity of individual families. The students believe that collaboration at home facilitated joining the family.

> *"I learned how important fieldwork in the user's home is for social workers; not only to evaluate and control on the basis of public powers, but also to give up the power social workers have as professionals in order to explore the resource and strength perspective sensitively. In the official social centre premises, families are focused on an attractive appearance, on putting on a nice front; when working together at home, however, we can more easily see the distress that needs to be restructured into joint work on changes and possible goals through the working relationship."* (D21, 22)

Connecting with Other Institutions

When providing children with learning assistance, the students recognised the importance of collaboration with other institutions, especially with the school.

> *"Collaboration with the school proved to be effective, the school being an important partner in the project of providing help. During the process, I got to know how important it is to collaborate with other institutions to co-create help, particularly when the help and the solution depend on the institution."* (PF11)

Collaboration with the school often involved support for the child in overcoming learning difficulties, thus contributing to the child's better school performance. When collaborating with the school and other institutions, the main question is how to ensure collaboration and what kind of collaboration to offer. In the IWPH (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, Kobal, Mešl, & Možina, 2005), collaboration protects the space for co-creating agreements, whereby we hear and consider all of the voices, and for building the path to the desired changes, whereby all of the participants contribute to the solution and support each other in taking the agreed steps.

> *"Our collaboration allowed us to look at PF7D from different perspectives and choose a way of working for her without any disagreement. We all tried to listen to PF7D's desires and expectations and to respond to her needs. The collaboration enabled the school to be more supportive of PF7D, paying her more attention and discussing oral and written exams with her more thoroughly."*(PF7)

The students often showed initiative in establishing contact with the school and assumed the role of the child's defender, protecting the space for the child's voice.

"In the next step, we agreed on a multidisciplinary meeting with the school psychologist, special educators and the school counselling service, where I had the role of PF7D's defender. Although she was not present at the meeting, I made sure that her voice was heard, I made space for her and drew up a work plan for her based on her voice." (PF7)

The analysis results confirm Malhomes' findings (2014, p. 70) that programmes of help that form partnerships with schools and other organisations provide the family with important resources. At the same time, they strengthen parents' psychosocial resources, facilitating the identification of their roles in developing children's skills to fulfil their life potential. What is more, the children also strengthen their resources as interlocutors in the process of co-creating the desired outcomes.

Conclusion

The working relationship and the IWPH contribute to the co-creation of the desired outcomes and strengthen family resilience. The project aimed to go beyond the dominant discourse on multi-challenged families, i.e., social workers often believe that these families do not want to receive help (Bouwkamp & Bouwkamp, 2014, p. 297). The problem with this discourse is that, in the process of help, issues of failure are often identified as being characteristic of families (ibid.). In a co-creative working relationship, all of the participants contribute to solutions, while the social worker is responsible for leading the process of help and creating a safe space for collaboration. Madsen (2007, p. 33) also believes that collaborating in partnership and adapting services to the family's needs are essential for the success of the processes of help.

The results of the plural case study confirm the importance of collaborating with multi-challenged families dealing with a child's poor school performance. It is important to accept the initial definition of the problem and the outcomes desired by the family members. At first, the latter may be focused on learning assistance to the child, but on gaining trust and experiencing the meaningfulness of collaboration we respond to new working topics raised by the family during joint conversations.

Life in poverty and related unfavourable circumstances should not define children's life stories. The experience of good school performance is an important protective factor in a child's life. Dryfoos (in Boyd-Franklin & Hafer Bry, 2000, p. 121) even concludes that good school performance is the only larger predictor of a child's future. Knowing this, adults are obliged to enable

good school performance for every child. Parents who face many stresses want to help their children and support them in improving school performance, but they often need assistance. The co-creative working relationship and the IWPH, co-created by all of the participants, support children and parents, enabling them to fulfil their desire for success. The project needs to connect resources in the community and to conceive a joint project. The child's role as an expert on experience whose voice is protected and appreciated is important for collaboration.

When the social worker joins the family with a positive attitude, this attitude is internalised by family members (Bouwkamp & Bouwkamp, 2014, p. 298). As an appreciative and accountable ally (Madsen, 2007), the social worker brings new hope to the family, acting as a motivation to overcome distress (Maholmes, 2014). The presence of a social worker who persists in a joint project even in the case of failure represents an important new experience for the family. Only this can overcome the despair that is a common companion of people in difficult life situations, including multi-challenged families.

Even in families where it seems that risks predominate in relation to protective factors, collaboration with the family can always highlight many resources. Although families are resilient (Walsh, 2006; Maholmes, 2014), they sometimes need an interlocutor to help them recognise and strengthen that resilience. On the first level, family resilience is strengthened through the experience of collaborating in a co-creative working relationship when solving a complex psychosocial issue. It is also increased on the second level, when contributing to the increased visibility of family processes and exploring the desired changes in relationships (Mešl, 2013). The experience of good school performance, which we are obliged to ensure for children, strengthens the child's resilience and the resilience of the entire family.

The context of helping families in their homes is an opportunity to get to know family members on an everyday human level. Working at home helps discover family resources when searching for answers to the challenges of life circumstances. Social work with families at home is no longer an abstract idea, but is becoming an everyday practice. We believe that this is the answer to the question of how to develop social work in the future. As Madsen (2007, p. 36), who himself works with families in their homes, says, the conversations can take place over coffee, at the kitchen table or in the living room, where we are surrounded by family photos. We suddenly become guests and not professionals with solutions, which changes the way of collaborating with people.

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Rethinking the Role of Pedagogical Assistants: Establishing Cooperation between Roma Families and Schools in Serbia

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∼   The aim of the present paper is to examine the risks and challenges related to the cooperation of pedagogical assistants (PAs) with Roma parents/families and their work with Roma pupils, as well as to offer further insight into ways to overcome these risks and challenges. Roma pupils and parents/families face numerous difficulties in education, which are reflected in prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination. The education policy measure of introducing PAs, formerly known as Roma teaching assistants, to the Serbian education system aimed to contribute to the learning and social participation of Roma pupils and to establish cooperation between school staff and Roma parents. The further segregation of Roma pupils and the reduced engagement of teachers in supporting Roma pupils and fostering communication with Roma parents are seen as possible risks related to the engagement of PAs. In order to minimise the risks, we propose a framework for defining and understanding the roles of teachers and PAs from an intercultural perspective. Relying on two concepts – intercultural sensitivity (IS) and intercultural competence (IC) – we elaborate the necessity of perceiving cultural differences in accordance with an ethnorelative worldview, on the part of both teachers and PAs. In addition, we outline the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of IC that we believe teachers and PAs should possess. Further recommendations regarding the engagement of PAs and the minimisation of risks and challenges are proposed.

Keywords: Roma teaching assistants/pedagogical assistants, teachers, Roma pupils/families, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competence

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Premišljevanje vloge pedagoškega asistenta – vzpostavljanje sodelovanja med romskimi družinami in šolami v Srbiji

JELENA STARČEVIĆ, BOJANA DIMITRIJEVIĆ IN
SUNČICA MACURA MILOVANOVIĆ

∾ Namen prispevka je preučiti nevarnosti in izzive, povezane s sodelovanjem pedagoških asistentov (PA), z romskimi starši/družinami in njihovim delom z romskimi učenci ter omogočiti vpogled v načine, s katerimi se je mogoče spoprijeti s temi nevarnostmi in izzivi. Romski učenci in starši/družine se spoprijemajo s številnimi težavami v izobraževanju, ki se odražajo v predsodkih, stereotipih in v diskriminaciji. Ukrep s področja edukacijske politike, ki je v srbski izobraževalni sistem vpeljal pedagoške asistente (PA), prej imenovane »pomočniki učitelja za delo z romskimi učenci«, je vpeljan s ciljem prispevati k učenju in družbeni participaciji romskih učencev ter k vzpostavitvi sodelovanja med šolskim osebjem in starši romskih učencev. Nadaljnja segregacija romskih učencev in zmanjšan angažma učiteljev pri podpori romskim učencem ter slabše spodbujanje komunikacije s starši romskih otrok so v prispevku prepoznani kot potencialne ovire pri delu PA. Da bi te ovire zmanjšali, predlagamo okvir za opredelitev in razumevanje vloge učiteljev in PA z vidika medkulturne perspektive. Ob opori na dva koncepta, tj. medkulturno občutljivost (MO) in medkulturne kompetence (MK), pojasnjujemo potrebo po dojemanju kulturnih razlik skladno z etnorelativnim pogledom na svet z vidika učiteljev kot PA. Poleg tega poudarjamo kognitivne, emocionalne in vedenjske vidike MO, za katere verjamemo, da bi jih morali posedovati učitelji in PA. Predlagamo tudi nadaljnja priporočila glede angažmaja PA ter zmanjševanja nevarnosti in izzivov.

Ključne besede: pomočniki učitelja za delo z romskimi učenci/ pedagoški asistenti, učitelji, romski/-e učenci/družine, medkulturna občutljivost, medkulturne kompetence

Introduction

In Serbia, as in the other countries of the Western Balkans and South-east Europe, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities belong to the Roma minority (Save the Children, 2001). Roma are the poorest and most endangered social group in Serbia. World Bank estimates suggest that 60.5 percentof the Roma population falls within the category of "very poor", compared with 6.1 percent of the total population. In Serbia, as in other countries of the region, Roma face racial prejudice, social exclusion and widespread discrimination in access to housing, employment and social welfare, health and education (Bennett, 2012, p. 98). Their education level is extremely low: 21 percent have no education, 34 percent have not completed primary education, 33 percent have primary education, 11 percent have secondary education and only 0.7 percentof Roma have higher education (Radovanović & Knežević, 2014). The proportion of Roma children reaching the last grade of primary school is 85.9 percent, while 15 percent remain outside the education system (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2014). Although the percentage of Roma pupils in special schools is decreasing every year, they are still over represented in special education and constitute almost one fifth of all pupils in special schools (European Roma Right Centre, 2014).

One of the strategies that can contribute to improving Roma education is built on involving Roma parents/families in their children's schooling. The results of studies (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Knowles & Holmstrom, 2013) indicate that family involvement in school improves children's achievements. In addition, dialogue and communication between parents/families and school contribute to resolving both behavioural and academic problems. However, Roma parents do not trust the educational institutions that have to care for their children (Flecha & Soler, 2013, p. 454). From the perspective of Roma parents, the major problems in their children's schooling are rooted in ethnocentric schools, discrimination and the low quality of instruction (Macura-Milovanović, 2012).

The lack of trust and the vulnerability of Roma in their contact with schools is a consequence of widespread stereotypes and prejudice, as well as of the discrimination that many Roma have experienced during their education. One of the common prejudices that contributes to Roma educational exclusion is related to Roma's so-called natural disaffection with school, e.g., the idea that Roma exclude themselves from mainstream education in order to preserve their culture. As reported by Flecha and Soler (2013), Roma researchers Hancock and Rose question these assumptions, arguing that they are used by non-Roma to

keep Roma on the margins of society. Gomez and Vargas (2003) also conclude that school disaffection can be explained by the ethnocentric perspective of school. Mainstream schools do not consider engaging in dialogue with Roma families, who end up perceiving school as an institution of the non-Roma world (Flecha & Soler, 2013, p. 453).

In the opinion of teachers, the difficulties of Roma pupils in schools (such as irregular attendance, etc.) are related to the context outside school – family, social situation, culture – or to the Roma pupil him/herself – lack of norms, lack of interest. When explaining the cause of Roma pupils' difficulties, teachers hardly ever allude to factors related to the actual role of the teacher (Gimenez Adelantado, Piasere & Liegeois, 2002, p. 77). Similarly, when explaining the causes of Roma pupils' under achievement, teachers offensively point to Roma parenting competencies, labelling them as "undeveloped". The ethnocentric perspective and the position of cultural superiority of majority-population teachers leads to advocating the need for the Roma minority to accept the values and identity of majority society as a basic precondition for achieving success in education. The key missing element in the overall school perception of the Roma family is an understanding of the importance of the trust relationship with Roma parents and children (Macura-Milovanović, 2012).

Roma families are often perceived as a risk to the status of the school, because they do not have the knowledge, contacts, confidence, time and money to invest in their children and thereby promote high educational performance. Therefore, as Lunch and Baker (2005) state, "the failure of schools to acknowledge the cultural dissonance that exists between their mores and practices and those of students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds exacerbates their educational failure and their sense of alienation from the education process itself" (p. 19).

One way of bridging this cultural dissonance, as well as improving Roma pupils' school achievements, is seen in establishing the position of Roma teaching assistants (RTAs). In many countries that are struggling to overcome the barriers that Roma pupils face in school, education policy measures involve, inter alia, engaging RTAs. Guidelines on inclusive early childhood care and education for Roma children (UNESCO and the Council of Europe, 2014) envisage that "official recognition of RTAs is seen as one of the rare success stories about Roma education. In most cases, they have been effective bridges between Roma families and the school and instrumental in increasing school enrolment and retention of Roma pupils in the education system" (p. 43).

However, the position of RTAs is also perceived as a "double edged sword". As Vandenbroeck remarks (2011), the model of Roma assistant/majority teacher reproduces the social inequality that prevails between the Roma

minority and the mainstream population. In addition, there seems to be an evident paradox: education policymakers have delegated the most complex and demanding tasks (such as establishing cooperation with "hard to reach" parents, reducing the dropout rate, preventing discrimination towards minority pupils, etc.) to RTAs, who are less qualified than teachers. There is an underlying assumption, as Vandenbroeck (2011) notes, that in order to establish cooperation with Roma parents, one needs to share a similar background. This may lead teachers to conclude that there is no need to try to overcome the communication gap with poor minority groups, or provide them with an excuse to avoid direct communication with the Roma community.

Bearing in mind the contested nature of the position of RTAs/PAs in education systems, in the present paper we aim to answer the following questions: What are the risks and challenges related to the cooperation of PAs with Roma families and their work with Roma pupils? How could these risks be overcome, or at least minimalized? A further aim of the article is to propose a framework for defining and understanding the roles of teachers and PAs in working with Roma. In the next subsection, we will first analyse how the role of PAs is conceived legislatively, and how it is implemented in the practice of educational institutions in Serbia.

The role of PAs: Legislative foundation and realisation in school practice

The specific role and profession of pedagogical assistants in Serbia have been developing for nearly 20 years. The socio-political context that allowed and supported the establishment of the new position in the education system was grounded in policy documents such as A Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, the Strategy for the Improvement of Roma Status in Serbia (2009), and the new Law on the Foundations of the Education System (LoF) (2009), as well as on financial support from the Fund for an Open Society, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Roma Education Fund, and others. The introduction of RTAs commenced in 1996, largely with support from the Fund for an Open Society, based on the "Step by Step" methodology. In 2006, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the OSCE initiated the project Support to the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights for Coordination Programmes for Roma, which was specifically aimed at introducing RTAs into primary school education.

In 2009, within new education legislation (LoF, 2009) that introduced inclusive education in Serbia, the position of RTAs was legally established and their title was changed to pedagogical assistant (PA). According to LoF, the

role of a PA consists of four basic tasks: 1) providing assistance and additional support to children and pupils in accordance with their needs, 2) providing support to teachers and preschool teachers, as well as to school psychologists/ pedagogues, with theaim of improving their work with children/pupils who need additional support, 3) establishing cooperation with parents/caregivers, and 4) together with school principals, establishing cooperation with relevant institutions and the local community (Article 117). It is interesting to note that, although the PA is delegated such highly professional pedagogical tasks, he/she does not need a work license (Article 122). Since a licence (which can be obtained by passing the official "licence exam") confirms professional competencies, in practice the absence of a licence means that the education system is not officially verifying the professional readiness of PAs to work with pupils, teachers, parents, etc. Furthermore, PAs may participate in the work of the school council, but they have no right to participate in decision making (Article 132).

PAs are engaged in schools and preschool institutions with a significant proportion of Roma pupils, and in most cases they belong to the Roma national minority as well, which is indirectly defined by the Rulebook of the Training Programme for PAs (2010). According to the Rulebook, a necessary precondition for the position of PA, besides a certificate of secondary education, is a knowledge of Roma language. There are currently 174 PAs employed in schools and preschool institutions in Serbia. Their salaries are lower than those of teachersand they have a working contract with the school for 12 months, with no possibility of permanent employment.

Several studies have attempted to evaluate the results of RTA/PA engagement since their introduction in the Serbian education system. The most comprehensive analyses of RTA engagement is provided in the Evaluation Study: The Role of Pedagogical Assistants for the Support of Roma Students by the Institute for the Evaluation of Education Quality (IEEQ, 2009). This study was carried out in 22 primary schools on a sample of 657 teachers, parents, pupils and school staff, including 24 RTAs engaged in the schools. The results of the study indicated that although the role of the RTAs was invaluable and successful (approximately 91 percent of Roma pupils improved their school achievements after Roma assistants were introduced), teachers did not engage in collaborative classroom teamwork with them. RTAs mostly carried out work with a Roma pupil or with a group of Roma pupils during remedial classes. In addition, the study indicates that the role of RTAs in cooperation with Roma families is mainly limited to home visits aimed at informing Roma parents about their children's achievements in school or gathering information about children that should be enrolled in the first grade and motivating families to enrol their

children. However, there is an evident lack of work on the empowerment of Roma families to take on a more proactive role in supporting their children in education, or on the further education of Roma parents.

The Study of Roma Pedagogical Assistants as Agents of Change (Duvnjak et al., 2010) analysed the role of RTAs on a sample of 29 assistants and 53 school representatives. The results of the study suggest that both groups of respondents agree that assistants devote the most working hours to working with pupils, followed by cooperation with Roma families, while cooperation with relevant institutions and the local community is in third place. However, the authors point out that there is a risk of assistants working on tasks that teachers regard as being beyond their traditional role (e.g., organising activities in Roma settlements, providing support for collecting personal documentation, revealing cases of discrimination of Roma pupils). In some cases, teachers do not want to work on cooperation with Roma families and provide support for learning (Duvnjak et al., 2010, p. 46). Another interesting study, entitled Assessment of Teachers' Capacities and Needs for the Development of Inclusive Education, undertaken with 811 teachers (Đelić et al., 2012), reported that only 10 percent of respondents stated that assistants are engaged in cooperation with the family, while 16 percent stated that they are engaged in providing meals, cloths and other material preconditions for the education of Roma pupils.

A recent case study analysing the role of the PA in a small primary school located in a remote settlement (Milovanović, 2014) draws attention to certain short comings in the realisation of the PA's role, such as the PA's lack of support for Roma pupils in the fifth grade, the lack of cooperation between the PA and teachers in planning activities, etc. Milovanović emphasises that the PA does not participate in extracurricular activities in school. "For this reason, the PA does not contribute to developing intercultural relations and a climate of mutual trust and respect within the school and the local community" (Milovanović, 2014, p. 64). However, it is important to note that the author stresses that these shortcomings are consequences of weak management of the PA in the school and the school's (lack of) organisation, and do not result from thePA's lack of competence.

In summing up the major challenges and risks of the PA role, we may state the following: 1) The introduction of PAs provides license for teachers to neglect Roma pupils, allowing PAs to actually teach these pupils, contrary to their officially more limited support role (Macura-Milovanović, Pantić and Closs, 2012, pp. 20-21). Although unintentionally, the work of PAs may provoke the segregation of Roma pupils within the class or school, because the PA and Roma pupil(s) become a special group within the class. In this case, there is a risk of scarce communication between Roma pupils and their peers

and/or teacher. 2) Some PAs perform additional tasks that are not defined by the LoF; on the other hand, they are not fully accomplishing the tasks that are delegated by the LoF. Even the most professional and skilful PA will be ineffective in aschool with a culture that is not inclusive and with teachers who lack competencies for teamwork and believe that Roma pupils and families are the responsibility of Roma assistants, for whatever reason.

Quality education for Roma: The roles of teachers and PAs from an intercultural perspective

Bearing in mind the aforementioned risks and short comings, as well as the insufficiently utilised benefits of the engagement of PAs, we sought to find new ways to define and understand the roles that both teachers and PAs should undertake. The choice of the intercultural paradigm seemed reasonable because work with Roma families and Roma pupils is by definition intercultural. Intercultural communication occurs in many directions: between teachers and Roma pupils, between teachers and PAs, and between PAs and non-Roma pupils, as well as with parents and the local community. Work with Roma is marked by differences in language and culture, but also by stereotypes and prejudice. In this regard, we were interested in the qualities of teachers and PAs that are deemed important in intercultural communication following two different approaches to this issue.

The first approach reflects the developmental perspective. McAllister and Irvine (2000) suggested three developmental models as a frame of reference for teachers' multicultural education and acquiring cross-cultural competence: the Model of Racial Identity, the Typology of Ethnic Identity, and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 2011). The latter, however, has two main advantages compared to the other two: it is the most elaborated and the most empirically supported model (e.g., Hammer, 2011; Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, & DeJaeghere, 2003; Westrick, 2004; Zhang, 2014). We therefore used Bennett's model of change from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelativist worldview as a basis for the delineation of teachers' and PAs' required level of intercultural sensitivity.

The second approach rests on the complex construct of intercultural competence (IC), which seems to prevail in studies of the traits and capacities considered essential for successful intercultural interaction. This approach is closely connected with the aforementioned intercultural sensitivity; according to Bennett (2004), "greater intercultural sensitivity creates the potential for increased intercultural competence" (p. 73). The three dimensions of IC

– cognitive, affective and behavioural (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Deardorff, 2006; Prechtl & Lund, 2007) – served as a frame of reference for defining teachers' and PAs' core competencies for working with Roma. At the same time, this framework corresponds to the definition of teachers' professional competencies in Serbian legal documents as a set of necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes (LoF, 2009; Rulebook of Competency Standards for Teachers in Serbia, 2011).

Intercultural sensitivity of teachers and PAs

Dealing with cultural differences along the continuum ethnocentrism – ethnorelativism, the DMIS defines a qualitative change of experience through the gradual transformation of one's worldview through six different stages: denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and integration (Bennett, 1986, 1998, 2004; Bennett & Bennett, 2004). According to Bennett, "as categories for cultural difference become more complex and sophisticated, perception becomes more interculturally sensitive" (Bennett, 2004, p.73). It is important to note that the DMIS is not a model of change of behaviour or attitudes; it is rather a model of development of cognitive structure (Bennett & Bennett, 2004), while behaviours and attitudes could be understood as indicators of the specific underlying worldview. In the present paper, we therefore present our expectations regarding manifestations of the different stages of intercultural sensitivity of teachers and PAs in the specific school context. We propose the argument that, both in the case of teachers and PAs, the characteristics of an ethnocentric worldview should be transcended in order to establish the possibility of successful intercultural communication.

According to Bennett, the first stage of the DMIS is the denial of cultural differences, which represents the purest form of the ethnocentric worldview (Bennett, 1986, 2004). Teachers and PAs in this stage would assume that all pupils/parents/colleagues share the same beliefs, behavioural norms and values. A teacher in the stage of denial would not perceive cultural differences between the pupils/parents as cultural at all, and would construct very broad cognitive categories for differences ("minorities" or "others"). Encounters with differences would be disturbing for teachers and PAs in this stage. During interaction with Roma parents or pupils, the teacher would express excessive politeness or would avoid cultural differences. This could result in delegating the task of maintaining communication and cooperation with Roma families to PAs. Teachers in this stage would not be able to integrate the intercultural perspective into lesson planning or use culturally appropriate material and content, nor would they be able to support pupils and families, due to the fact that they

would not be aware of the relevant differences. PAs in the denial stage could have difficulties cooperating with teachers and other school staff of the majority cultural background, possibly avoiding unnecessary interaction and focusing on working with Roma pupils and the Roma community.

In the second stage of the DMIS, the stage of defence, teachers and PAs are capable of perceiving certain differences as cultural, but the categories formed in this process would be general ("Roma", "Serbian", etc.) (Bennett, 1986, 2004). The Roma cultural group would be perceived by teachers as inferior in comparison to their own. Stereotypical thinking about Roma pupils and parents could be represented in a tendency to uncritically assign the same characteristics to most of those who are perceived as Roma ("talented musicians" or "uninterested in schooling"). Teachers could possibly negatively evaluate and overemphasise differences, interpreting them as the cause of lower learning achievement or difficulties in establishing cooperation with some Roma parents. PAs could evaluate their own cultural group as inferior, while stressing the superiority of the majority cultural group in a simplified and generalised manner, which is are versed form of defence (Bennett, 1986, 1998, 2004). In comparison to the Roma population in general, PAs have higher levels of education and cooperate with school staff, which could contribute to identification with the majority group.

In the third stage of the DMIS, the stage of minimisation of cultural differences, a person is able to perceive some differences as cultural, while at the same time focusing on human commonalities: biological universals or "transcendent" principles (Bennett, 1986, 1998, 2004). The minimisation stage represents a significant developmental advancement regarding the perception of minority pupils/families. The latter are perceived as similar to any other group of pupils/parents, and observed cultural differences are not negatively evaluated. Teachers and PAs in this stage would probably assume that all pupils have similar needs/concerns and that the same forms of support are adequate for all Roma pupils/parents. This could be particularly important when a situation is ambiguous for a teacher/PA and when their interpretation of the situation does not take into account the perspective of the Roma pupil/parent.

The fourth stage of the DMIS, acceptance of cultural differences, represents the first ethnorelative stage of the development of IS. Acceptance is characterised by the perception of one's own worldview as just one of many equally complex worldviews (Bennett, 1986, 2004; Bennett & Bennett, 2004). In this stage, behavioural differences of Roma pupils/parents would be perceived and recognised as a reflection of cultural values, both by the teacher and the PA. Cultural values would be perceived as a process of assigning meaning and value to situations and would not be evaluated according to the standards of the

majority cultural group as "adequate" or "inadequate". Teachers and PAs would not assume that cultures "have" values and that values are "transferred" to all members of a particular cultural group.

Language differences would be perceived as an expression of different ways of organising reality, rather than simply different ways of marking/naming the same phenomenon. Teachers and PAs would be aware of the fact that Roma pupils organise their thoughts in oral or written form differently than majority cultural group members, even if they are fluent speakers of the language of schooling. Communication and learning style, as well as nonverbal behaviour, would be interpreted as an expression of deeper cultural differences. Teachers and PAs would understand that their perception and interpretation of the same phenomenon is culture-relative, which is an expression of their cultural self-awareness.

Differences would not be threatening for the teachers and PAs, as their own worldview would not be compromised when they were faced with different behavioural norms and values. They would be able to tolerate ambiguous situations that include pupils/parents/colleagues of a different cultural background. PAs and teachers in this stage would be interested in understanding the others' point of view regarding the same school-related issue, and would seek to develop strategies for cooperation.

Intercultural sensitivity continues to evolve through the stage of adaptation, which is characterised by the expanding ability "to use the acceptance of cultural difference" (Bennett, 1986, p.51), applying knowledge, skills and perception of cultural difference in intercultural interaction. Although this ability would be beneficial for working in a heterogeneous context for both teachers and PAs, it would require intense and prolonged experience of immersion in a different cultural context, e.g., a foreign country. The same is true of the sixth and final stage of the DMIS, integration, which concerns issues of construction of identity on the margins of more than one culture (Bennett, 2004). A plausible expectation of teachers and PAs would require them to perceive cultural differences in accordance with the ethnorelativist worldview of the acceptance stage as a basis for the further development of sensitivity and competence.

Intercultural competence of teachers and PAs

After several decades of research, intercultural scholars reached agreement on the essence of IC: it is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248). Cognitive, affective and behavioural components are usually present in IC models and associated

constructs (Ang et al., 2007; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Prechtl & Lund, 2007; Ward, 2001), reflecting the complexity of intercultural interaction and the numerous demands this interaction imposes.

The Rulebook of Competency Standards for Teachers in Serbia (2011) alleges only few competencies of direct relevance to working with pupils from different cultural groups: (a) teachers need to know and understand social and cultural differences between pupils, and (b) teachers need to know how to support pupils from vulnerable social groups. The Rulebook, however, states a larger number of teacher competencies that may contribute to successful intercultural interaction in the school system (e.g., planning activities according to the experience of pupils, possessing knowledge of successful communication techniques).

We used models of IC in general as well as models of teacher's IC (Banks, 2006; Gay & Howard, 2010), along with the description and analyses of PA activities (IEEQ, 2009; Kyuchukov, 2012; Rulebook of Training Programme for PA, 2010; Rus, 2004, 2006), as a frame of reference for defining what teachers and PAs should possess in order to work effectively with Roma. We chose this method in order to indicate the elements of all three components of IC: the cognitive component refers to cultural knowledge and the metacognitive and cognitive abilities applied to intercultural interaction; the affective component refers to motivation, appropriate attitudes and positive emotions evoked by intercultural interaction; finally, the behavioural component refers to outward manifestations or overt actions, including communication skills and a large part of classroom activities. Some IC elements represent a combination of these components, but they can still be classified on the basis of their predominant domain.

Table 1. *IC of teacher and PA: Cognitive component*

Roles	Intercultural competence
	Cognitive Component
Teacher and PA	understand stereotypes, prejudice and other barriers to intercultural interaction; understand the impact of poverty and marginalisation on children's development and people's lives; know ways to reduce barriers in intercultural interaction and fight discrimination; possess cultural self-awareness and a capacity for self-regulation; possess the ability to decentrate from the one's own point of view; know about cultural values, norms and customs; understand others' worldviews; understand how culture affects thought, behaviours and patterns of life; know how pupils organise their thoughts in verbal and written form; know how pupils learn best; know the principles and strategies of individualised work
Teacher	knows how to create a climate and community conducive to development and learning for all pupils; knows multiple ways to adapt the curriculum, learning activities and assessments
PA	additional requirements are not necessary

Table 2. *IC of teacher and PA: Affective component*

Roles	Intercultural competence
	Affective Component
Teacher and PA	appreciate different patterns of life, different views and ideas; are motivated to establish and maintain intercultural contact; enjoy their duties in an intercultural context; possess empathy; possess openness; care about the wellbeing of pupils and parents
Teacher	additional requirements are not necessary
PA	additional requirements are not necessary

Table 3. *IC of teacher and PA: Behavioural component*

Roles	Intercultural competence
	Behavioural Component
Teacher and PA	provide families with all necessary information about school; provide families with all important information about the children's development; empower families to participate and take a proactive role in the children's education; talk in a way that pupils and families can understand; use descriptive communication messages (avoid judgements); manifest self-reliance, perseverance and reliability; display empathy and warmth; protect pupils and families from prejudice and discrimination; promote positive social values; provide conditions for regular school attendance; provide additional support to pupils' understanding during regular classes; provide additional support for the accomplishment of learning activities within schoolwork and homework; organise cooperative learning between pupils; use culturally relevant and authentic learning material; create equitable, culturally appropriate and authentic learning activities; use equitable achievement measures; work in a team to prepare, accomplish and evaluate an individual educational plan; prepare pupils for standardised testing and other academic activities; support pupils' engagement in extracurricular school activities; collaborate with school staff in order to support pupils and families; collaborate with relevant institutions and organisations in order to support pupils and families
Teacher	creates a supportive classroom environment; encourages understanding and support among parents; matches teaching style and instructional techniques to the pupils' needs; provides equitable and valid assessment; provides culturally sensitive extracurricular school activities
PA	speaks Romani; supports and assists families with school enrolment; assists in pupils' assessment

Overlaps and differences: Clarifying the roles of teachers and PAs in respect to working with Roma

In the previous section, we presented the level of intercultural sensitivity that teachers and PAs should possess, as well as the elements of their IC. The aim was to clarify and deepen the understanding of the roles of teachers and PAs regarding their professional engagement with Roma pupils and families.

First of all, it is important to clarify the fact that teachers need to be at the established level of IS and must possess all of the listed elements of IC whether they collaborate with PAs or not. In essence, these requirements are

part of the teachers' professional competencies, i.e., teaching, assessment, communication and other professional activities of teachers. In addition, bearing in mind the differences between the employment conditions and professional status of teachers and PAs (Kyuchukov, 2012; Rus, 2004), it would be unrealistic to expect that PAs alone could achieve the set goals without collaboration with interculturally sensitive and competent teachers (as well as principals and other school staff). It is also important to stress that the established level of intercultural sensitivity and IC of teachers are also necessary for working with pupils and families from any other cultural group. This appears to be the case with the activities of PAs, but to a lesser extent.

As argued above, teachers should be characterised by the same level of intercultural sensitivity as PAs, i.e., at least the stage of acceptance of cultural differences. The previous stages and the underlining assumptions, perceptions, and behavioural and emotional reactions to cultural differences are clearly inadequate for the role of teacher. Even the minimisation stage presupposes a lack of understanding of pupils, and particularly Roma families, which creates doubts about the quality of support these teachers can provide to pupils' academic progress and social participation. If teachers strive for a more complete understanding of pupils and families, in addition to aiming at skilful teaching and successful communication, their intercultural sensitivity needs to develop towards the ethnorelativist part of the spectrum.

Tables 1–3 show that teachers and PAs have a very similar IC profile. Although they share many IC elements, this does not mean that they should possess the same levels of knowledge, or should apply the same skills with the same frequency, etc.; it simply means that all of these elements should be part of their competencies. For example, teachers should care about pupils' homework and regular attendance, even if these activities are one of the well-defined activities of PAs. In other words, teachers need to remain teachers for Roma as well as for non-Roma pupils. The same tables reveal the differences between certain elements of the IC of teachers and PAs. These differences are mainly associated with the teachers' unique qualifications and job description (e.g., their knowledge of teaching methodology and classroom management), and PAs can only assist in these activities if teachers organise their involvement. Much the same applies to working with non-Roma parents as well as PAs' participation in parent meetings. Although PAs might be helpful in these activities, according to the regulations at least, it is the teacher who should have the main role. Finally, there are very few IC elements relevant only to PAs, the most prominent being a knowledge of Roma language.

The significant overlap of the roles of teachers and PAs prompts the question as to why schools engage PAs. The reason for engaging a PA is evident only

in those cases where families do not speak the language of schooling (or possess a very limited knowledge of that language).The reason is not, however, as evident in all other cases, providing teachers possess the recommended level of intercultural sensitivity and elements of IC. Research of teachers' intercultural sensitivity indicates that most teachers perceive cultural differences in accordance with an ethnocentric worldview (Leutwyler et al., 2014; Yuen, 2010). It could therefore be said that the employment of PAs most often reflects the failure of the school to provide quality education for pupils from vulnerable groups.

Below we posit the recommendations regarding the engagement PAs derived from considerations of the risks it brings, as well as from an analysis of the roles of teachers and PAs from an intercultural perspective.

1. The engagement of PAs should be guided by the goals and principles of inclusive education, fostering real participation of Roma pupils and families. Support for learning activities of Roma pupils should be provided during regular classes as much as possible.

2. The activities of PAs should be determined so as to focus on goals that are relevant to Roma (e.g., academic achievement, good social relationships, nurturing cultural identity).

3. The activities of PAs should be tailored in accordance with their qualifications, employment conditions and school status. PAs cannot replace teachers; their role should be only supportive, but with ample possibilities to contribute to the teaching process and other school activities.

4. The activities of PAs should be more appropriately planned and organised within schools so as to take into account the primary goals of the engagement of PAs and the risk of overload (Rus, 2004).

5. Special attention should be given to developing cooperation between teachers and PAs. School staff (psychologists, pedagogues, principals) should provide support for this process. Teachers should be acquainted with their responsibilities and understand their role when they cooperate with PAs. It is strongly advisable that teachers perceive their collaboration with PAs as an opportunity to develop their own competencies for working with Roma.

Conclusions

The present paper deals with the risks and challenges related to the engagement of PAs with Roma families/pupils, as well as ways of overcoming or minimising these risks. We argue that introducing PAs in schools could enhance the risk of segregation of Roma pupils by impeding communication with

peers and/or the teacher, as well as the risk of reduced engagement of the teachers in some aspects of their professional role. The risks could be prevented by introducing a competence-based framework for defining and understanding the roles of teachers and PAs, as scrutinised in the present paper. We argue that teachers and PAs need to perceive cultural differences in accordance with an ethnorelative worldview, and must develop every element of IC in its cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects. The engagement of PAs should be guided by the principles of inclusive education, assuring social participation and nurturing the cultural identity of Roma pupils. According to the proposed framework of IC, teachers should possess qualifications and should bear the main responsibility for providing support in the learning and social participation of Roma pupils, as well as in the cooperation with the Roma family. The activities of PAs should be planned and organised to complement, but by no means supplant, the activities of teachers. Cooperation between teachers and PAs needs to be based on the clear division of their professional tasks and responsibilities in achieving common goals, while support mechanisms should be provided by school leaders and other professionals.

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The Family as a Place of Education. Between a School-Centred Focus on Education and Family Needs

Ulrike Loch[1]

∽   The results of PISA studies over recent years have revealed the social selectivity of the scholastic education system. Based on my empirical research on families with mentally ill parents, I show how, for the children involved, social exclusion begins before they even start school. I also show how parents' mental illness is seen to affect children, and what support such families require. The findings demonstrate how important it is to take family coping situations into account in education discourse concerning child and youth welfare services and formal education systems.

Keywords: child and youth welfare, child protection, social exclusion, mentally ill parents, ethnography

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Družina kot mesto edukacije. Med izobraževanjem osredinjenim na šolo ter družinskimi potrebami

Ulrike Loch

〜   Izsledki študije PISA so v zadnjih nekaj letih pokazali na socialno se-lektivnost sholastičnega edukacijskega sistema. Na podlagi empirične raziskave o družinah s starši z duševnimi težavami pokažemo, kako se za vpletene otroke socialna izključenost začne, še preden začno šolanje. Pokažemo tudi, kako duševna bolezen staršev vpliva na otroke in kakšno podporo potrebujejo take družine. Izsledki kažejo, kako pomembno je, da v edukacijskem diskurzu upoštevamo tudi situacije, s katerimi se spoprijemajo družine in socialne službe, ki jih spremljajo.

Ključne besede: dobrobit otrok in mladostnikov, varstvo otrok, socialna izključenost, duševno bolni starši, etnografija

Introduction

The basis for the following exposition is my empirical study "Kinderschutz mit psychisch kranken Eltern" (Child Protection with Mentally Ill Parents, Loch, 2014a). As part of this study, I accompanied children's social care service staff in Germany and Austria as an ethnographer while they processed child protection cases. My research focused on families in which the parents were mentally ill.

The following relates to the current discourse on families as a place for education and the effects this has on families receiving support from child and youth welfare services. Based on the example of families with mentally ill parents, I examine how the current trend towards education in child and youth welfare is affecting families coping with difficult situations. Specifically, I study the question of how a school-focused understanding of education affects child and youth welfare in practice, as well as on the support processes arranged in this context with families. This question is investigated based on a case example, preceded by a fundamental examination of the current discourse on education and the social living environment of families with mentally ill parents.

The family as a place of education in social discourse

In Germany and Austria, one significant factor for the current discourse is acknowledging that the two countries' education systems reproduce social inequalities. The results of PISA studies in recent years have revealed the social selectivity of the scholastic education system. For Austria, analyses of PISA data from 2009 show, among other things, that: "While, for example, 75% of 15- to 16-year-olds whose parents achieve upper secondary qualifications as their highest educational level also attend a school at that level, that number falls to 23% when parents only attend the minimal amount of compulsory education" (see Bacher, Leitgöb & Weber, 2012, p. 432). In Austria and Germany, these repeated PISA results have led to discussion among academics and social policymakers, as well as within educational institutions, about the future development of the school education system and the importance of informal education. In the context of informal education, renewed attention is being paid to families as places of education.

The family as a place of education alongside the school

My analysis of the discourse on the family as a place of education shows that families are mainly studied as places of education alongside the school.

Wissenschaftlicher Beirat für Familienfragen, an advisory board set up by the German government, puts it thus: "The PISA study shows […] that the basic skills and readiness for scholastic learning and lifelong learning processes are taught to the next generation within the family. This is the basis on which human abilities are developed, in addition to the school. It affects people's choice of school type and success at school" (see BMFSFJ, 2002, p. 29). Thomas Rauschenbach et al. argue along the same lines: "The family is the first place where children are educated, and also the most important place in the period from early childhood until well into their schooldays […]; within the family, children acquire the primary habitus which has a considerable effect on their behaviour, their attitudes, their patterns of thinking and the way they act (see Bourdieu, 1984). This means that socialisation within the family sets the course for how and how well children and young people can adapt to other forms of socialisation, especially the school. […] Child and youth education processes are thus […] shaped and affected by the family" (see Rauschenbach et al., 2004, p. 31).

As these illustrative quotes show, the family and success at school, or family- and school-based education, are inextricably linked in the current discourse on the family. This discourse also highlights how important educational achievements within the family are for the school as an institution, and for the scholastic success of children and young people. At the same time, the reverse question of how the school can help family educational processes is beyond discussion: discourse on the family as a place of education is currently led, above all, by the question of how the family should support the school. In the end, this school-focused thematisation of the educational expectations addressed at families allows social policy to retain its fundamental focus on the school, despite the criticism of the formal education system coming from PISA results.

The school as a place where family education is recognised

As places of education, schools in both Germany and Austria follow conventional ideals such as rationalisation, a focus on cognitive skills, hard work and good communication (e.g., see Frevert, 1999; Sting, 2010, 2013, 2014). The implicit focus among the educated bourgeoisie on family education in school sets high expectations for families and non-school organisations such as crèches, kindergartens and after-school care. The school supports processes of social inequality, as it pays little attention to how well a family's educational options and understanding of education match the prerequisites of the formal education system. If families are unable to help children meet scholastic requirements without professional support, then the expectations that the school

holds regarding families are partly shifted towards family support schemes such as crèches, kindergartens, after-school care or home-based family support (e.g., Loch, 2011).

One thing that stands out in the discourse on the family as a place of education is that the topic of families is addressed without sufficiently taking into account the social conditions in which informal educational processes take place. For example, family educational processes are currently almost entirely addressed in the context of the discourse on formal education (see Büchner & Brake, 2006). This points to the link between families' social recognition and their recognition by the scholastic assessment system. Based on his empirical study of the family as a place of education, Peter Büchner explains that "the question of whether a person is recognised as being educated or not depends on who recognises whom in what situation and in what accompanying circumstances, or who is expected to recognise that person in what living circumstances. Seen thus, education initially appears a relative value linked to different understandings of education, depending on where someone positions themselves on the map of different educational profiles or where they are positioned by others" (see Büchner, 2006b, p. 11). School is currently the central education system that, thanks to processes of inclusion and exclusion, indirectly recognises or refuses to recognise processes of family education (see Büchner & Wahl, 2005).

The school, the family and pedagogical schemes outside the school

Notwithstanding the explicit reference to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), if social power relations are ignored, this encourages a shift of responsibility for the success or failure of scholastic education from the school to the schoolchildren's families of origin. This tendency can be seen in the discourse on the family as a place of education. "Many aspects which are attributed to the school [...] in fact cannot be ascribed entirely or even mainly to the school; [...] a sizeable number of problems identified in school [...] are the result of everyday education rather than the school as a formal place of education; learning which it is evidently being acquired as a matter of course by a dwindling number of adolescents" (see Rauschenbach, 2007, p. 446). The solution to this problem is seen as extending the number of full-service community schools and daycare providers. These pedagogical schemes are expected to increasingly replace families as places for informal education (see Rauschenbach, 2007). This line of argument – that the social relationship between families and pedagogical schemes needs to be reconfigured – shows little trust in families and their processes of education, especially when those families are defined as being disconnected from formal education

(bildungsfern). Mistrust towards families is particularly evident "if they are poor and socially and educationally deprived" (see Helming, 2013, p. 49). It is not unusual for the school's mistrust of marginalised families to come hand in hand with calls for increased state control (see Helming, 2013; Loch, 2011). This discussion on places of education to complement the family overlooks the fact that "the family's educational and cultural achievements (in both positive and negative circumstances) must be seen as key variables in the acquisition of education, in children's educational career and in their educational success" (see Büchner, 2006a, p. 40). Families are always significant in this way, however greatly a family's educational achievements may differ from a school's expectations.

Research design

The central research questions in the present study are: How do youth welfare services process child protection cases with mentally ill parents? What are the professional, social and organisational conditions behind the youth welfare department's child protection casework, and how do they affect the support process? This wide spectrum of questions meant that the research not only involved cooperation with child and youth welfare services and the education and health system, but also touched on the families' living conditions.

As part of my study, I carried out ethnographical observations of youth welfare workers dealing with child protection cases at a total of four youth welfare departments: two in Germany and two in Austria. The ethnographic surveys took place between 2008 and 2012. In empirical terms, ethnography is about "bringing attention to a field of practised sociality" (see Amann & Hirschauer, 1997, p. 11). In the fields of social work and education, observations have revolved around social pedagogical practice (see, for example, the studies by Cloos, 2008; Riemann, 2000; Wolff, 1981). In the case of child protection, "ethnographical observation" meant that, among other things, I was present during telephone conversations, while advice was given to parents, and during cooperation with various institutions, as well as at team meetings, home visits and care proceedings. In other words, I studied the full range of professional practice in the field of child protection. My results are thus based on a research method that is closely linked to practice in child and youth welfare.

Every day, I took ethnographical notes on my research trips, while some support processes were also recorded electronically. In certain cases, the ethnographical observations were supplemented by interviews with professionals and data collected from youth welfare files or artefacts such as child protection statistics created at youth welfare departments. The results are thus based on a

broad database covering both the professionals' actions and the organisation.

The main focus of my study was child protection cases with mentally ill parents. The feature shared by the cases chosen for the reconstruction is that at the time the risk was reported, the children were younger than age six, and their parents were mentally unstable or ill. These were the central selection criteria for the theoretical sampling (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The broad range of the research method and the decision, developed within Grounded Theory, not to distinguish between the stages of data collection and evaluation (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990) meant that it was possible to reconstruct not only situational professional practice at the youth welfare department but also the genesis of the observed child protection cases. In other words, it enabled a reconstruction of the full range of child protection procedures.

The data collected were interpreted using hermeneutic perspectives (see Gall, Borg & Gall 1996; Oevermann, 1993; Rosenthal, 2004). The analysis results for the different data types (interviews, ethnographical notes, etc.) were then triangulated to reconstruct the processes by which child protection cases are established, and how the cases progress. This point of view means that the research results do not so much reflect "natural" child protection problems as the way cases are formed interactively (see Loch & Schulze, 2005) based on organisational, professional, personal, familial, legal, political and socio-political factors. The results of this study thus link in with the results of Stephan Wolff's ethnomethodological study of youth welfare departments, according to which the practical value that municipal social work offers its official clients is not systematic, following a practical logic, but is, ultimately, political (see Wolff, 1981, p. 3). In other words, the study results point to the social constitutionality of the problems in the social and education system produced, inter alia, by the social disadvantages of children and families with mentally ill parents.

On the living situations of families with mentally ill parents: empirically grounded results

Below, I focus on the living situations of families with mentally ill parents receiving support from child and youth welfare services with the aim of promoting the child's best interests. As the article continues, I will establish a link between the living situation of the children involved and their educational careers in the context of the discourse on education.

My research results reveal that the living situations of families with mentally ill parents share similar traits in terms of family background, family relationships, social exclusion, daily routine and the support procedure. These

shared traits are so consistent that they indicate the social constitution of the coping strategies found in the families.

To link in with the works of Lothar Böhnisch (2005), "coping" (Bewältigung) means that the people involved are in difficult living situations in which their own actions have little influence, and in which they nonetheless – according to their own possibilities – attempt to find their bearings, trying to find positive self-esteem and support in close relationships. "Coping strategies are based […] on 'learning survival skills', arising from a biographical confrontation with psychosocial burdens" (see Sting, 2014, p. 181) in their specific social context. Below, I look into the form those burdens take for families with mentally ill parents and the work that this can imply for social pedagogues in contexts of coping.

Mental illness as a coping attempt that may be socially accepted

The parents' mental illnesses relate to trauma suffered in their childhood and/or youth. This trauma and its effect have such a major presence in the families, especially on the level of interaction, that the children suffer from the consequences of the trauma and their parents' mental illness through their transgenerational relationship. The parents' mental illnesses are reactions to traumatic childhood experiences in socially difficult living environments; at the same time, they are accepted within the family as an attempt to cope. In addition to the parents' mental illness (and often that of other family members), the affected families show signs of other problems such as an increased tendency to suicide and alcohol consumption, domestic violence and/or unemployment. As such, the families suffer from a combination of problems that indicate a multigenerational need for support (see Loch, 2014a, b).

The children's wellbeing may be an unattainable aim for parents

All of the mentally ill parents involved in the study are interested in their children's wellbeing. This motivation has led many of the parents affected to seek help within the family and/or low-threshold support from pedagogical institutions or psychosocial professionals. To a large extent, parents have managed to protect their children against directly exercised violence, such as psychological and sexual violence, which they themselves suffered in their childhood and/or youth. Nonetheless, they have unintentionally drawn their children into the problems of their family of origin across the generations via the parent/child relationship. This has led the children into parentification, resulting in experiences of neglect and psychological violence, without the parents noticing these

processes of parent/child role reversal. The results of these parent/child interactions, centred around the parents' needs, were seen in children as developmental delays in areas relevant to special needs (such as motor skills, speech, play and social behaviour) and in cognitive/emotional areas. These developmental delays, which are observed from early childhood on and can become a disadvantage in terms of access to formal education, are not coincidental, as current research into attachment theory shows. A reliable attachment is considered "an early emotional and cognitive prerequisite for education" (see Ziegenhain & Gloger-Tippelt, 2013, p. 793). Reliable social interaction and relationships form the basis on which children can develop the ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings, as well as developing structurisation skills. Childhood structurisation skills are understood as the ability to solve problems in line with the child's age and developmental stage. The affected children's developmental deficits first become salient when the children are integrated into pedagogical schemes such as daycare groups and centres. The pedagogical staff at the daycare facility are usually the first to point out to parents that their children have developmental delays, and these are usually at an advanced stage from a professional point of view. In all of the families, the pedagogical staff have to spend a great deal of time providing parents with information before they recognise the children's need for support and (where possible) can help the children cope with the tasks assigned to them. In other words, mentally ill parents are a group that, due to their own childhoods, have a great need for professional support in looking after, encouraging and/or caring for their children, as well as a need for intensive supported parenting lessons, so as to take on the child-friendly parenting role they would like. This need for supported parenting applies to all parents who are interested in their children's wellbeing, even if the children are in out-of-home care.

Parent-centric parent-child interactions starting in early childhood

Viewed retrospectively, the first problems with parent-child interactions occur when the child is a babe in arms. During consultations, the parents sometimes made comments such as "The problems started when our child was two months old". Such parental observations correspond with clinical experience; at just nine months old, parentified parent-child interactions are observed in babies, a phenomenon that can be interpreted as children adapting to their parents' style of interaction (see Deneke, 2005). These coping strategies initially make the children's and families' lives easier. However, if children in these overly demanding situations do not receive any support, these parentifying coping

strategies become ingrained. In the long term, parentification is a means of coping that is of more harm than good for children's development. As a result, the children show signs of behavioural problems and delayed development, which can go as far as the parent-child relationship being seen as endangering the child's wellbeing.

The parents' difficulties in interacting with their children grow as the children show signs of wanting autonomy in line with their developmental stage. These processes of autonomy mostly open up for the children through their integration into daycare provisions such as centres, groups or childminding. Autonomy processes represented such a great threat to all of the parents that, when possible, they took their children out of childcare, etc. for fear of losing them.

All of the mentally ill parents in the study have a great need for support in understanding the child development process and in dealing with their own fear of loss. On the part of the parents, this need for support usually starts out with basic, but existentially threatening questions such as "Why doesn't my child want to cuddle me when I come to the daycare centre?" or "Why does my child want to play with another child now instead of letting me read him a book?" Mentally ill parents often interpret new behaviour in their children, such as adapting to a peer group (e.g., at the daycare centre), as rejection. In all child protection cases, processes of autonomy in the children cause such a strong fear of loss in the parents that they start to act as if staff (e.g., at the daycare centre) are in competition with them. They threaten to take their children out of daycare and sometimes do even take them out. In some cases, even primary schoolers stayed away from the school so as to protect their parents.

In fear-ridden situations of this kind, those parents who were in touch with their families of origin were supported by the latter in taking their children out of care and support (such as the daycare centre or childminding) in favour of a greater focus on the family. In other words, staff need to work hard with the parents, supporting them in their emotional needs and translating the children's needs into a language that the parents understand. This is the only way to stop the parents and children from acting as if there is a competition (with professionals) for emotional attention and thus retreating from society and cancelling daycare arrangements. Tendencies to retreat into the family as a central point of reference in socially difficult situations can be observed in parents and children alike, whatever the actual resources offered by the family of origin. One key trigger for self-exclusion is when pedagogical staff question parent-centric parent-child interactions without offering the parents alternative forms of support. For the parents, parent-centric parent-child relationships are, after all, transgenerational attempts at coping, without which life seems even harder.

Parentifying parents cannot usually appreciate the effect that parent-centric behaviour has on their children. This does not, however, make the effect on their children any less destructive.

In the literature, this pattern of behaviour, where parents largely give up their function as parents to their children, is described as "emotionally destructive parentification". Johannes Graf and Reiner Frank describe emotionally destructive parentification thus: "Parentifying parents abandon their function as parents. They (mis-)use their child to satisfy their unmet needs, neglecting or ignoring the child's own needs. This gives the child an inappropriate role that crosses generational borders. […] The child accepts this delegated role at the cost of its own needs, learning and displaying patterns of behaviour to suit that (inappropriately responsible, caring) role" (see Graf & Frank, 2001, pp. 317–18; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Jurkovic 1997; Loch 2014a, b). Emotionally destructive parentifying parents find emotional stability through the parent-child relationship to such an extent that even when the parent and child are separated only temporarily this can lead the parent to be destabilised even further. Among highly traumatised parents, the fear of such destabilisation can be triggered by their children being integrated into daycare centres or full-service community schools. If this parental destabilisation is not picked up by trauma-sensitive work with parents accompanying the pedagogical provisions, it can worsen symptoms of an illness, especially among single parents. Children who have undergone emotionally destructive parentification may react to their parents' mental processes with greater social aberrance and developmental deficits. This can manifest itself, for example, as children behaving uncharacteristically in daycare, having previously been considered to be well-integrated there. Pedagogical staff rarely interpret this aberrant behaviour as an interactive pattern learnt through the parent-child relationship; their interpretations mainly concentrate on the child, with the child being described as difficult.

Socially isolated families with reduced access to social education

One point that stands out is families' social isolation, which often accompanies poverty and limited access to recreational and educational schemes. As a result, the children's social contacts in their early years are largely limited to their families, meaning that during this period they mainly learn relational and interactional patterns that fall within the context of psychological aberrance and coping. One example of this is fear-ridden parent-child interactions in which children are rarely challenged to test their own limits or explore their environment. Among other things, this can result in ritualised patterns of play

and the avoidance of new situations, such as learning new games at the daycare centre. These restrictions can be interpreted as reduced access, starting in very early childhood, to socially accepted forms of education: "Different types of family of origin produce and pass on specific cultural practices which extend to all aspects of how people lead their lives. These have different levels of affinity to socially legitimated and rewarded practices" (see Sting, 2013, p. 49). Thus, even in very early childhood, the children in question show signs of social practices which are not very compatible with the school-focused educational expectations demanded of families, and which have little chance of earning social recognition in the formal education system and beyond.

In the first contexts they encounter outside their family, such as children's groups or daycare centres, the patterns of interaction that the children have learnt in their family mean that they experience social exclusion, to which they tend to react with self-exclusion. The patterns of interaction in their family are largely incompatible with the dominant social expectations. For example, in daycare centres, one aspect that stands out is that the children in question rarely play with peers (or are unable to do so) thanks to their isolated upbringing by their parents, and thus tend to seek contact with adults. Thus, even in very early childhood, children who have grown up in isolated families with relational patterns encumbered by illness and trauma display patterns of interaction that: a) exclude them socially, resulting in them excluding themselves; b) limit their access to social (and thus to formal) education; and c) risk their continuing their parents' isolated, illness-encumbered life or reproducing its patterns.

Parent-child interactions are tainted by the parents' unprocessed traumatic experiences, which they pass on to the children in the form of high expectations of loyalty. Family secrets, taboos and experiences that cannot be put into words have a long-term effect on family interactions (see Imber-Black, 1993; Rosenthal, 1998); their latent nature can lastingly prevent the development of autonomy and participation (see Loch, 2006, 2014b). Family interactions instil rules (e.g., social rules) and loyalties that give members of the family different degrees of freedom to become independent or to access education, or that limit processes of autonomy, expressed, inter alia, as dropping out of education (see Loch 2014b). In families with mentally ill parents, the shift in generational borders means children are expected to show loyalties and take on delegated tasks that clash with the tasks they face at their particular developmental stage, and with educational requirements within society (at the daycare centre or school). Without support, when such clashes occur, children (or families) tend to repeat behaviour that stabilises the family, resulting, inter alia, in their leaving child and youth welfare schemes or daycare centres, or dropping out of school.

Child-friendly daily routines

In all families, creating a child-friendly daily routine is a difficult task which parents cannot always achieve. As a result, some children are forced to become independent at an early age, as is evident, for example, in a child having to collect yoghurt under his bed as a reserve of food for days on which he was not given anything to eat. Others have a highly controlled daily routine with no exceptions allowed, leaving children no room for manoeuvre and limiting their opportunities to become independent. In the case of food, this results in the same meals always being served (punctually), with the child having to eat the same amount every day, regardless of how hungry s/he is. Any change in this practice (whether it is a lack of routine or excessive routine) is a major cause of stress and mental effort for mentally ill parents, meaning that such changes cannot be achieved through walk-in support, with no other support. Instead, if the parents live with their children, what is needed is longer-term social pedagogical guidance within the families' everyday lives and therapy to enable the parents to untangle the daily family routine from their own emotional needs.

In terms of relationships, these problems in establishing a routine emerge for all parents as difficulties setting limits for their children, either as a lack of limits or as highly controlled, fixed limits. Such problems in establishing a routine make it hard for parents to gain authority over children, or lead children to take on responsibility for their parents' wellbeing. In other words, the daily routine reflects the results of emotionally destructive parentification.

Child protection support procedure

All of the child protection cases reconstructed for my study proceeded the same way. The families started out with walk-in support from child and youth welfare services, then went on to receive out-of-home support. For the children, this procedure often involved repeated changes of childcare facilities such as daycare centres and/or foster families. This series of steps is currently symptomatic of child protection work with mentally ill parents in Germany and Austria. The similar way in which support is provided can be explained by the fact that child and youth welfare services and the education system have insufficient resources, meaning out-of-home care is their only possible answer to medium-term threats to the child's wellbeing arising from emotionally destructive parentification. The result of this lack of resources by child and youth welfare services for families with mentally ill parents is evident in the high number of cared-for children with mentally ill parents (see Leitner, Loch & Sting, 2011).

At the same time, it can be seen that the destructive mess caused by parenti-fying child-parent relationships cannot be unravelled through child-focused pedagogical or therapeutic schemes alone (Loch, 2011, 2014b; Schmid, 2007).

Another parallel is the question of whether such children can complete their educational path at a mainstream school, a question that regularly arises in collaboration between the youth welfare services and the daycare centre or school. For many children subject to emotionally destructive parentification, even those in out-of-home care, this question arises while they are still at kindergarten: the school asks whether their level of development meets scholastic requirements. Among older children, situations frequently occur in which the school calls for the children to enter out-of-home care (see Loch, 2011). This reflects the school's expectation that children should acquire informal education within their milieu of origin, forming the basis for the concept of children being "ready for school" as held by the school as a system of formal education. When families do not fulfil these expectations, extrafamilial, professional foster families or residential childcare are expected to take over. These requirements reflect existing controls on marginalised families, as expected by society.

Case example

I would now like to illustrate what has been described above with the case of Florian Titzan. As a baby, Florian grew up with a single mother who drew mental stability from the mother-child relationship. In the years before his birth, his mother gained support from schooling and vocational training, but when she fell pregnant, memories of violent childhood experiences increasingly occupied her thoughts. After Florian's birth, Ms Titzan was initially supported by her family, before asking to be taken into psychiatric care along with the baby. When the mother was released from adult psychiatric care, a child welfare risk report was sent to the relevant youth welfare department, and the mother sought help from the same source. As a result, on being released from hospital, the mother received various forms of walk-in support from child and youth welfare services, before asking for her child to be cared for in a foster family, as she was unable to cope with everyday life. The mother's intention was to make sure that her child was being taken care of, while at the same time combining parenthood, vocational training and her mental stability more effectively.

After Florian was taken into a foster family, he developed in leaps and bounds. Ms Titzan's reaction to Florian's development was positive, but at the same time the autonomy of her child's progress triggered fears of loss in the mother. During the period that followed, Florian cried a lot, especially when

in contact with his mother. As the analysis shows, the three-year-old's developmental progress brought him into a conflict of loyalties between his wellbeing in the foster family and his responsibility towards his mother. Ms Titzan made an impulsive decision to take Florian out of foster care, explaining that it was because of his regular crying and her own conflicts with the foster family. This pattern of conflict was repeated with the subsequent foster family, meaning that Florian finally entered his third foster family at the age of four. Despite intermediary phases of stability and the development of skills, by the age of five the little boy thus had such extensive deficits in his motor skills, social competence and language development that he was unable to attend a mainstream school.

Florian was initially given another year before starting school, intended to enable him to attend mainstream schooling, and received support within the third foster family from a daycare centre and an early-learning programme. The early-learning programme was designed to help him learn the motor skills and language required by the school. At the same time, the early-learning centre worked with Florian's birth mother, who wanted her child to be returned to her by the time he started school. This dual role taken on by the early-learning centre unintentionally meant that its work revolved around the mother's wishes for their relationship. As a result, parentifying elements of the mother-child relationship were reinforced in the context of early learning. This was possible because the professionals reflecting on the case paid too little attention to the effects that the parent-child relationship was having on the little boy.

Only the foster family was called upon to promote the child's social skills: "Early-year support […] aimed at preparing Florian for school; the social deficits are not being processed, much to the regret of Ms Merhard [the foster mother, U.L.]" (excerpt from the youth welfare department file). As Florian grew older, his social behaviour increasingly showed parallels with that of his mother, who had largely retreated into social isolation. For example, Ms Titzan had to give up her vocational training due to basic communication problems in the workplace. Florian showed signs of similar communication difficulties: "Florian quickly grows frustrated and cries because other children are unable to deal with his form of communication. The children and Florian then do not understand one another" (excerpt from the youth welfare department file). When the youth welfare department realised that Florian would not be able to attend a mainstream school due to his developmental delays, a special needs school was sought out and the child was appraised by the department of child psychiatry.

Cases are frequently seen to develop in this way in the field of child and youth welfare services. This means that when the support services offered by child and youth welfare services focus on the educational requirements demanded of

families by the school, without at the same time improving the family's educational resources, formal education can remain on a risky course for children subjected to destructive parentification. When they do not manage to enter a mainstream school, the children are additionally confronted with childhood psychiatry diagnoses. The children run the risk of becoming isolated and reproducing their parents' difficult life courses. If children receive adequate support and institutions simultaneously offer to work with parents in a child-focused manner, the parents and children can have experiences of autonomy that help them cope with difficult situations in life and with educational processes.

Emphasis on formal education increasingly extending to kindergarten children

As discussed in detail at the start of this work, the current focus on the family as a place of learning involves school-centric informal educational processes that are in line with the ideals of the educated bourgeoisie. At the same time, the call for school-focused pedagogical provisions, such as after-school daycare or full-service community schools, mainly addresses contexts outside the family that are intended to help families fulfil their educational role. For marginalised families, these pedagogical provisions are intended to tackle school-focused educational work in place of the family. Little educational trust is placed in these families. Meanwhile, the empirically unproven idea that pedagogically initiated educational processes can tackle school-based informal education instead of these families with an educational disconnect means that pedagogical professionals face high expectations. Whether these can be fulfilled is doubtful, as the results of studies to date tend to indicate the importance of cooperation between the parents and the school (and any other support) as a means of avoiding educational disadvantages (see Büchner & Wahl, 2005). The results of my study show that separating children from their families does not (alone) encourage them to become involved in school-focused educational processes; instead, the children still feel a part of their parents. This is why, as well as supporting the children, professionals also need to work with parents, focusing on the child, encouraging processes of family education and helping families cope with their difficult situations in life. Then, and only then, will educational processes – meaning successful access to mainstream schooling and formal school qualifications – become more achievable even for children from vulnerable families with mentally ill parents.

Education policy can oblige children to take part in school-focused educational contexts outside the family, such as those at full-service community

schools. However, it cannot prevent them from processing what they learn in pedagogical contexts on the basis of familial experiences of learning (even when physically separated from their family). Nonetheless, one thing that pedagogical professionals and school social workers can do – if they succeed in recognising the contributions that families make to education – is to help children and parents shape processes of familial education. Among other things, this requires them to think of coping as an everyday reality for children in education. This would lead to pedagogical provisions being offered by schools and youth welfare services that are more closely aligned than previously to the needs of marginalised clients. Children, young people and their parents would then less frequently be placed in the situation of having to choose between their families and school. Children and young people can be helped to find a balance between their family loyalties and formal educational requirements by offering them inclusive perspectives on how to process differences (see Sting & Wakounig, 2008, p. 8). This presumes that daycare facilities and schools also see it as their task to promote informal education, an understanding of their task that can be derived from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Children have a right to their families and a right to education, and this needs to be taken into account when designing formal and informal educational schemes. Enforcing children's rights requires responsible cooperation between the formal education system, the child and youth welfare services and families, all on an equal footing. In practice, this needs to take into account all of the parties' resources and hierarchies, while simultaneously enabling them to participate. Only then can families and schools become equal places of informal education; only then can schools become democratic places of formal education.

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Lifeworld-Oriented Family Support

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∿   Since the spring of 2014, the authors of this article, joined by a wider group of students, have been dedicated to researching vulnerable families and their involvement with education systems. In the initial phase, we explored the experiences and challenges that these families face and how they understand and address these challenges. Next, we were interested in the forms of support that these families receive, how the network of educational and social welfare services responds to their needs, and the quality of their cooperation. We found that both the families and the expert services experience dissatisfaction when it comes to their cooperation: families often feel that they are being sent from one door to another with their problems, which remain unaddressed, while expert services feel that they cannot cope with the problems of vulnerable families, problems that they view as insoluble. Our pivotal finding is therefore that it is vital to develop more flexible and consistent forms of support that respond to the concerns and challenges of the daily lives of vulnerable families (Razpotnik et al. 2015).

In the action research reported on in the present article, we have focused on investigating the development of a newly emerging flexible and comprehensive form of family support that was co-initiated by ourselves (the researchers) and primarily implemented by volunteers and NGO workers. The main characteristics of this support are flexibility, presence in the daily lives of the family, building a cooperative relationship, and prioritising the dynamics and needs of the family rather than the formal demands of organisations and institutions. The article delineates the emerging approach of lifeworld-oriented support, which is implemented and reported on first and foremost by the volunteers involved. Lifeworld-oriented support is a supplementary addition to conventional forms of family support, represented and reported on predominantly by representatives of educational and social welfare organisations.

Keywords: vulnerable families, social pedagogy, lifeworld orientation, family conference, voluntary work, flexible family care

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Podporno vstopanje v življenjski prostor družin

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～ Skupina avtoric tega članka skupaj s širšo skupino sodelujočih študentk in študentov se od spomladi 2014 posveča raziskovanju ranljivih družin in njihove vpetosti v podporne vzgojno-izobraževalne sisteme. V prvi fazi smo raziskovale predvsem to, s katerimi izkušnjami in izzivi se te družne srečujejo ter kako jih razumejo in rešujejo. V nadaljevanju nas je zanimalo, katere oblike podpore so te družine deležne in kako se mreža podpornih ustanov odziva na potrebe teh družin oz. kakšna je kakovost njihovega vzajemnega sodelovanja. Posebej smo osvetlile obstoječe podporne ponudbe z vidikov vzgoje in izobraževanja ter socialnega varstva. Ugotovile smo, da v družinah in v njihovo podporo vključenih strokovnih službah obstaja velika stopnja nezadovoljstva v povezavi s sodelovanjem: družine se pogosto počutijo, kot da hodijo od vrat do vrat s svojimi težavami, ki ostajajo nenaslovljene, strokovne službe na drugi strani pa imajo v povezavi z ranljivimi družinami občutek, da njihovim težavam niso kos, da so nerešljive. Obe strani pogosto izražata tudi nezadovoljstvo nad neusklajenim pristopom pri delu z ranljivimi družinami, ki ga imajo različne strokovne službe, saj od družin pogosto pričakujejo zelo raznolike in pogosto tudi nezdružljive izide. Naša ključna ugotovitev je bila, da obstoječe podporne ponudbe potreb ranljivih družin pogosto ne dosežejo ter da bi bilo za dosego in naslovitev njihovih potreb nujno razviti prožnejše in usklajenejše oblike podpore, ki bi se odzivale na zaznane stiske ter izzive v njihovem vsakodnevnem življenju (Razpotnik, Turnšek, Rapuš Pavel in Poljšak Škraban, 2015).

V naslednji fazi raziskovanja, v akcijski raziskavi, o kateri poročamo na tem mestu, smo se usmerile v raziskovanje pa tudi podporo razvoju že obstoječih, porajajočih se alternativnih oblik podpore, katerih temeljne značilnosti so: prožnost, prisotnost v vsakodnevnem življenju družine, čim bolj sprotno odzivanje na potrebe, grajenje sodelujočega odnosa, dajanje prednosti dinamiki in potrebam družine pred formalnimi institucionalnimi/organizacijskimi zahtevami.

V članku utemeljujemo akcijski razvoj prožnejše in celostnejše oblike podpore družini, katere soiniciatorke smo raziskovalke same, njeni glavni nosilci pa prostovoljke in prostovoljci ter delavke in delavci

NVO, ki vstopajo v vsakodnevno življenje družin. V članku opredeljujemo porajajoči se pristop prožne, v vsakodnevno življenje usmerjene podpore, ki jo udejanjajo in o njej poročajo predvsem prostovoljke in prostovoljci, predstavlja pa komplementarno dopolnitev konvencionalnim oblikam podpore družini, ki jo zastopajo in o njej poročajo predvsem predstavnice in predstavniki vzgojno-izobraževalnih in socialnovarstvenih organizacij.

Ključne besede: ranljive družine, podpora, socialna pedagogika, usmerjenost v življenjsko polje, družinska konferenca

Theoretical introduction

Lifeworld-oriented support

One of the key principles in social pedagogy is its orientation towards the lifeworld (Mollenhauer, 1972); in an effort to deinstitutionalise pedagogical thought and practice, as well as to maintain its commitment to immediate practical tasks that stem from people's attempts to cope with life's difficulties, Mollenhauer introduced the concept of "*lebeneswelt*", which can be translated as "lifeworld". This paradigm was later developed by Thiersch (1992), who formulated the "bottom-up" approach. At its core, this means starting with the individual and, in line with the phenomenological tradition, their subjective perception of the reality in which they find themselves. It also entails utilising resources found in their environment. This paradigm is here joined by the discourse of resources. In contrast to the deficit mindset, which focuses on shortcomings, the discourse of resources dictates that the profession draw from what the individual, family or community do in fact possess, rather than defining their service users in advance as somehow deficient, problematic or disruptive. The "lifeworld-oriented social pedagogy" paradigm has already become established in Slovenia (Zorc-Maver, 2006). Particular attention is paid to the fact that professional work always runs the risk of either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., in the form of expectations concerning the desired outcome of the work) transferring its value system onto the service user. With a method that stipulates approaching the individual in his/her own environment and responding to his/her challenges here and now, this danger is at least somewhat reduced, as lifeworld-oriented approaches eliminate the institutional aspect and its implications of a specific value system, particular methods of solving problems and specific relationship hierarchies and perimeters (Razpotnik, 2014). Consequently, lifeworld-oriented approaches should, in this respect, have greater potential for battling the various socioeconomic frameworks of both the user and the employee, as entering the lifeworld of vulnerable families unsettles the hierarchical institutional distribution of power and destabilises preconceived notions that employees often have about service users. Lifeworld-oriented support should thus not foreground the need to meet the goals of specific institutions (whether educational, social welfare or another type), but of the individual and of the network that develops through professional intervention. Such support should be fuelled by the various areas of expertise demonstrated by people facing challenges in their daily lives. This is the source of another key premise of social pedagogy (as well as social work and other related professions): users

themselves should be understood as experts, as they have the most experience when it comes to their own lives. Their experiential expertise should present a key point of orientation for professionals entering their lifeworld, whose role is often merely to bolster the individual's pre-existing endeavours and resources in his/her lifeworld (ibid.). One of the paradigm shifts triggered by the lifeworld-oriented approach and the opening up and democratisation of conventional institutions is the introduction of voluntary work as an intermediate structure. In education and social welfare, the introduction of voluntary work was designed to reshape institutions and respond to areas in which institutions were ineffective (Mikuš-Kos, 1979; Stritih, 1995). Therefore, voluntary work was not only an implicit criticism of what institutions provided, but also a way to implement changes. Volunteer projects have at least partly affected the relationships in institutions (Flaker, 2012). Such projects involve the cooperation and participation of professionals, researchers and the student population with socially devalued groups of people, working towards reducing stigma and creating new, less stigmatising identities.

Drawing on family resources and family empowerment

When it comes to utilising the family's strengths, and even its vulnerabilities, it is important to keep in mind the individual family's specific socioeconomic situation and developmental priorities (Walsh, 2016). One must always remember that informal social support can be understood as a "central helping system" of a family (Canavan, Pinkerton and Dolan, 2006).

A comprehensive approach to working with vulnerable families includes informal support for the family and consideration of its needs as a whole, as well as the needs of each individual member, both in terms of programme policy and available assistance programmes. It also includes the participation of family members in planning and decision-making processes. The paradigm of co-creating processes in working with families also emphasises building on empowerment and the strength perspective, enabling the users' participation in the solutions they need and can realise (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2016).

The following forms of working with families, on which our research draws, are relevant in this context: family group conferencing, family care planning and families leading planning (Morris, Burford and Barnes, 2009). What all three of these approaches have in common is that they give a central role to family members both in care planning and in making important decisions. The active inclusion of the family has the following characteristics: a broad definition of the notion of family; planning changes headed by family members; and

decision-making with a professional who is first and foremost a coordinator and moderator of resources and services, and who fulfils a formal role in accordance with regulations and stipulations, if necessary (ibid.).

Chaffin et al. (2001, in Sousa, 2005) conducted a study reviewing programmes for vulnerable families in crisis who were included in various community care and support programmes. The results show that such approaches respond to concrete needs in the lives of families and their members, and are more effective than approaches primarily targeted at developmental needs and parenting support. The authors explain that a comprehensive approach requires the consideration of various stress factors – factors of poverty and the aetiology of neglect – that should be taken into account when determining care planning. Closeness, reciprocity and durability are also considered important qualities of support (Canavan, Pinkerton & Dolan, 2006).

Study results (Sousa, 2005) show that the active involvement of families contributes to a significantly higher level of active participation in families who are otherwise isolated from social welfare programmes. The involvement of families in services planning initially encounters obstacles and resistance on the part of professionals, but over a longer period such involvement yields good results and leads the professionals to alter their views.

In the opinion of some experts, the comprehensive approach to support and cooperation is established mainly in preventive work with families, where problems are usually not yet extreme (Doolan, 2007). In Slovenia, assisting families at home within the framework of social welfare is a fairly underdeveloped area, a fact that we have addressed through the (action) research. Important theoretical input is, however, available regarding a holistic and systemic approach to families based in their lifeworld, such as that of Bouwkamp, Bouwkamp (2014).

Case conferences and family conferences

Our research includes the case conference method, which centres on a particular aspect or problem, and takes the form of an organised meeting of everyone involved in the vulnerable families study, with the purpose of presenting findings, comparing professional opinions, perspectives and approaches, co-creating the conditions for team-based methods, and encouraging coordination and compatibility in order to find more flexible and comprehensive responses to the challenges and needs of the families.

The main principle of family conferences is to engage families as systems in making decisions on social and general protection and welfare. By

introducing this method, we prioritise the family's power and the practice of cooperation, rather than the usual practices of social welfare (Ney, Stoltz & Maloney, 2011). Another important aspect of this approach is the "principle of family empowerment and participation, which is juxtaposed against conventional child welfare practices that focus on the rescue and protection of children" (ibid.). Merkel-Holguin (2004, p. 155) argues that family group conferencing has democratising potential to promote "the sharing of power for decision making between family, kin, professionals, state and community, while balancing responsibility and accountability among these groups". The findings of Merkel-Holguin's study (which is comparable to ours) show how legalistic and formalised discourse creates a power imbalance, putting family members in a disadvantageous position. Democratic discourse, based on empowering families, is able to diminish this, even though the inherent values of both approaches (family-based and traditional) remain incompatible with each other. This indicates the transformative nature of approaches such as family group conferencing, which can be used to achieve social justice, a particularly pressing concern in the current neoliberal system.

Participatory action research (PAR) with the vulnerable family

At this point, we briefly introduce participatory action research (PAR), which forms the background of the present article, in which we focus on one specific case. The aim of the participatory action research was to develop and implement the model of family-based, flexible and lifeworld-oriented family support. By definition, PAR is an empowering process that strives to create situations in which participants can increase their sense of control, their involvement in decision-making, and their critical awareness (Zimmerman, 2000). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) revealed that PAR can also transform the practitioner's knowledge and practice; the perspectives of the practitioner may help to improve conditions of life and work in particular local settings.

Our research was predominantly conducted in 2014 and 2015 and developed in various phases. First, communication was established with individual participants and families, as well as with formal and informal family support networks, and our research objectives were presented to them. The research instrument was prepared and tested, and key content points were defined and formulated. This was followed by a period of data collection. Some responses regarding how a participant viewed the family situation and his/her own embeddedness in it were given in writing, while others emerged in conversation or through action. Both types of response were given by the volunteers. A group

conversation was conducted with the employees of the NGO involved and an in-depth conversation was carried out with the parents of the family. Furthermore, anecdotal records from family visits or common events connected with the family were also collected. A case conference was then convened and a family conference was organised.

The participatory action research was monitored through anecdotal notes, minutes and other documents. In accordance with the principles of qualitative research (e.g. Creswell, 2014), we worked towards painting a complex, holistic picture; we analysed texts, absorbed the acquired information and conducted the study in a "natural environment", predominantly within the family itself or in directly related contexts. Comparable research (Ney, Stoltz & Maloney, 2011) points out that such analysis requires a sharp eye for the articulation of both contradiction and complexity.

At the case conference, we examined the potential for bringing together all of the participants involved in supporting the family, with the family itself present and at the forefront. At the family conference, we particularly wanted to discuss the research process with the family, as well as their overall experience of participation.

Due to the fact that we focused on one specific family (A), it is necessary to present this family at least to some degree; however, the family is intentionally not presented in more detail in order to protect its privacy. The family consists of the parents and a larger number of children. The parents have been unemployed for a prolonged period of time, and most of the children are at different levels in various educational institutions. The family is socioeconomically underprivileged, at risk of eviction, and has in the past been threatened with eviction and the removal of children. The NGO and our volunteer initiative, on which the action part of the research is based, have been working with the family since the beginning of 2014. Considering the large number of volunteers involved in the family's care (by way of flexible volunteer care), we can say that the frequency of contact with the family is constant and relatively high; however, it is not structured, organised or exactly predictable, particularly because it is volunteer-based and because the participation and its format are being simultaneously established and developed.

According to the action development of flexible forms of support, we describe two practical frameworks of the present research. One is the model of *volunteer-based family support*, which emerged in parallel with our research as its action component. The other is the model of *housing support* provided by the NGO, which represents a semi-formal framework of the described volunteer-based family support. Both practices represent the foundation and framework

for understanding the next steps in our research, and are therefore described further below. It should also be said that the process of establishing a flexible form of vulnerable family care continues as this article is being written.

The model of volunteer-based family support

We began these activities in 2014. Since then, a group of student volunteers and employees of the Faculty of Education have been continually visiting families who are experiencing social exclusion and who have expressed a desire to work with us. It is predominantly the students who are the regular visitors and companions (individual volunteers) to individual children. Our initial connection with the family who form the basis of the present study was an NGO that had begun offering assistance to the family and found that additional support could contribute to more effectively resolving the family's challenges, which at the time had been accumulating. We approached the family with an offer of volunteer-based support for the children and the family in their home.

The family is visited in their home, while individual children who have been placed in educational institutions and associated residential care facilities, or who attend kindergarten, are also regularly visited. Some volunteers focus on working with a particular child, whom they accompany regularly, while others focus more on contact with the family as a whole. Most volunteers find a balance between the two. The following quotation outlines both aspects – entering the educational institutions and the family – and the dynamics between the two:

> *And now, when we only visit the family, we are more a part of the family, whereas before we represented more kind of outside workers, even to the parents. That's my feeling. But I can't definitively say which I prefer. I think going to school is great, because things are more stable there and you can focus more on one child. But in the family, the fact that you can intervene on the spot in a chaotic situation, or have the opportunity to observe and to contribute in some way, speaks in favour of working in the family. It's very valuable, but sometimes difficult. The first [school visitation] is easier, and the second [family visitation] can be richer, but it's also more difficult. (V1)[5]*

Individual volunteers decide to use a variety of activities, which fall within the scope of socialising, playing, facilitating new experiences, providing upbringing support, help in meeting formal requirements, learning, and even participating in daily activities (preparing meals, brushing teeth). We sporadically

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5   The abbreviations V, PW, GO and NGO refer to volunteers, professional workers, governmental organisations, and non-governmental organisations.

organise group events for the family and the group of volunteers. The latter regularly gather for intervision sessions, at which they exchange information about current activities, discuss dilemmas, and share their vision and ideas for future work. Due to the fact that it is currently not institutionalised, the nature of this work also means finding a balance between the formal and the informal. This form of working has been initiated in several families, but has taken place continuously and intensively throughout all of these years within only one family. The family conference that the article refers to was organised in an informal setting, while the case conference took place in an institutional setting in order to encourage a collective attempt to resolve a particular issue.

The model of housing support conducted by the NGO

The non-governmental organisation began to develop housing support in 2008, and has since been evolving and improving this support in reference to recognised needs. This means expanding to new, specific populations (single individuals, families and people with complex needs). Housing exclusion is usually a consequence of accumulated difficulties or exclusion from various areas of life. Support in maintaining housing means comprehensive and lifeworld-oriented support, the goal of which is not only preventing eviction but also improving the quality of life in all areas that are significant to either the individual or the family. The family on which our study is based was also included in the housing support programme led by the NGO.

Objectives and research questions

In this article, we mainly focus on a presentation of convergence and divergence in definitions of conventional support actors, on the one hand, and volunteers, on the other. On this basis, we construct the content of the flexible support that is conducted and developed through participatory action research.

The research questions are as follows:

- How do participants in the family support network view the individual aspects of the support? What do they view as the resources, and what do they see as the main challenges? Throughout, emphasis is placed on comparing the flexible approach, grounded in participatory action research, with conventional methods of support.
- To what degree do the views of the participants provide support in agreement, and in which areas do their definitions and approaches differ?
- Which forms of vulnerable family support would more effectively address

the family's needs and steer the support spiral in a positive direction?
- How can flexible forms of support be developed through time?

Sampling, methods and data collection

Our findings are based on a study involving approximately 24 people. In addition to family members, the participants included five volunteers, four NGO workers and eight GO workers.

The methods used for data collection were: observation with participation, collecting miscellanea (various anecdotal records, journals, reports and minutes of meetings, intervision conferences), writing reports, and conducting semi-structured and open individual and group interviews. The data gathering tools were:
- five individual semi-structured interviews with volunteers (a list of open questions served as a basis for reflecting on work with the family);
- the transcript of a group conversation with the volunteers and the employees of the NGO (based on the topics gathered via the written interviews);
- the transcript of semi-structured interviews with four professionals from various state organisations offering family support (mainly in the educational context);
- the transcript of an interview with the parents;
- the minutes of the case conference;
- the minutes of the family conference; and
- miscellanea (various anecdotal records, journals, reports and minutes of meetings, intervision sessions, etc.).

The results and conclusions are mainly based on the quotations of volunteers, followed by workers in the NGO, as their answers were more comprehensive in comparison to some other sources (e.g., workers in the traditional organisation of support).

Most of the documents included in the analysis were conversation transcriptions or written responses to open questions. The volunteers' anecdotal notes and various minutes were also included. The key themes were identified using the iterative approach (Ney, Stoltz & Maloney, 2011), comprising consecutive phases of global reading of the material, preliminary identification of the main themes, and repeated delving into the literature, which informed subsequent readings and clarified key themes. This was followed by identifying a number of paragraphs that illustrate the key themes. A combination of the

inductive and the deductive approach was used. The key themes identified were prominent in the conversations and reports of the participants offering flexible care, on the one hand, and of the representatives of conventional, governmental institutions, on the other. As a result, one of the key focal points of the analysis was the comparison of both sides, mainly with the intention of defining the outlines of the developing flexible and lifeworld-oriented form of family support. Elements of critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993) were also used in the analysis. This approach assisted us in understanding the meaning shaping the speech, discourse and practices of the individual participants. Based on all of the above, we formulated several key contradictions – or, to use Freirean terminology (Freire, 1972), generative themes – that are expressed in the analysis of both the conventional and the flexible approach.

Findings

What follows is an exposition of the key themes that emerged through an analysis of the documents collected in the process of participatory action research, and according to the research questions set in the present article.

Between structure and flexibility

The volunteers entering the family describe this sort of support as unstructured and inconsistent, noting inconsistency in reporting, unreflected objectives, and support frameworks that are being developed and interpreted at the same time. At first glance, this is in contrast with conventional, formalised and bureaucratic forms of state care, whether in social service centres or within the context of education. The volunteers describe their approaches, as well as their role, as dispersed and context-specific. Their role is described in the following range: a volunteer who visits the family; someone who alleviates the family's burdens; someone who offers parents support in childrearing, teaches them about upbringing practices and reduces their burdens; someone who serves as an advocate for the family and protects them in relation to the other institutions involved, or even with regard to public opinion:

> My visits to Family A. There's a whole range: from a quick cup of coffee to walks in the woods with another volunteer, the cinema, a mountain hike. Then there are the trips we take together. I do a lot of different things. I decide spontaneously. Maybe the problem is that I'm not being very consistent. For example, it's not a case of coming over regularly every Tuesday, but I definitely always call first, about a day in advance. (V2)

Although the volunteers point out that the global objectives of working with the family are unreflected, it is possible to detect a high level of self-reflection in the conversations with them (in terms of how they see and contemplate their own work). This is certainly galvanised by the fact that the model is developing, that the group is expected to have reflected on what they report about their visits, and that the intervision sessions enable the group to discuss dilemmas, report on visits and exchange their opinions.

One of the aspects brought to the forefront due to the model's flexibility is that the volunteers see a need to strive for consistency:

> *I decide based on the needs I see are there, based on how many children are at home and what the dynamics and atmosphere are like. One of the children needs a bit more attention, or if the home is untidy and I see that it'd suit the mother if the children went away for a while so she could tidy the place up a bit ... the week before last, because I was there a lot, I tried to divide my attention as evenly as possible, so everyone gets at least some, and so that I stick to any arrangements. If I've made an arrangement: "Right, we're going on a trip the day after tomorrow," I'll stick to it. I think this is essential, so they feel that I am consistent." (V2)*

When the volunteers describe meeting with the children individually, they often mention socialising, relaxing, fun and learning. Another important aspect in this case is adjusting and responding to the needs perceived at that moment:

> *There's a lot of adjustment on my side, more and more acknowledgement, listening and making compromises on his [the child's] side. (V5)*

It would appear that this form of work is often incompatible with pursuing objectives. This is because the situation in the family, reflected also by each member, is extremely changeable, fragile and uncertain. It seems to require a larger measure of flexibility and ingenuity, as well as a willingness to abandon any predetermined goals for a specific meeting and to deal with what is possible in a given situation:

> *But it seems that again and again I struggle with anything I set as a goal because something completely new happens, and then these goals become a bit less important. So it seems to me that you're always looking for some ... that you're always finding a balance. (V5)*

The key axis around which the opposition between structure, which is recognised as necessary in working with the family, and flexibility, as the basic principle of the model we describe, continues to revolve, is exactly that:

constantly finding a balance between both aspects. This requires the volunteer to show autonomy, professional judgement and an ability to reflect; the opportunity to discuss this with the group is a big advantage. The need is expressed for a clearer structure of the entire family care model enterprise, which in these first few years has been rather vague, changing and uncertain. The most frequently emphasised drawback of the developing model (its lack of structure and links to formalised objectives) is at the same time its significant advantage: by being one of the aspects that sets it apart from existing conventional forms of support, it brings the support closer to the family and makes it more accessible, and, finally, enables it to endure despite changes.

Despite expressing dissatisfaction with conventional, established forms of vulnerable family care (demonstrated, for example, by the following quote) and striving to surmount the subordination of family dynamics to pre-established formalised objectives, there was also significant awareness of the difficulty of finding the correct course of action in complex family situations, and of the heavy burden of responsibility carried by the person making important decisions:

> *No individual plan can be written so that it would encompass the user's existing needs in their entirety. It can result in a simplified understanding of the user, reflecting a predetermined collection of bullet points and reducing the complexity and uniqueness of the individual to a set of sociological or psychological constructs. (V3)*
>
> *I often don't know what would be best for their children, and I'm glad I'm not the one who has to make the decisions. (V2)*

An important subtheme is the volunteers' waiving of their own expectations and their increased competence in doing so. This is linked to the aspect of blending into family life and having increased knowledge of the context in which the family exists, as well as to the ability to make a subtle distinction regarding which family tasks and themes should have priority:

> *I was thinking that I also have this huge dilemma when it comes to swearing. We insist so strongly that swearing is bad and that we won't stand for it [...]. I feel like you have the assumption that when you raise children, you try to raise them not to swear, even though most adults will still swear. But if you look at Family A, the probability is so high that I really don't know whether it's worth starting a conflict just because I feel like my principles have been a bit morally violated if an eight-year-old swears in front of me. Things like that. There is a lot of inner struggle about what is really important from their perspective... (V1)*

Resource-based versus deficit-based approaches

The volunteers noticed and reported how their role in the family changed over time, and how various aspects of family life also changed:

> I'd say that we've gone from having the status of a guest, someone who comes over and is served coffee, to being sort of a friend, or let's say acquaintance, who comes over and does some activities, primarily with the children, but afterwards they'll say: "Sit down for a while." (V3)

One of the volunteers presents his role in the family in terms of a deepening relationship, and points out the nature of certain relationships:

> From spontaneous socialising, getting to know each other and talking, the relationship has progressed in the direction of more frequent socialising and a more personal connection with certain family members. (V4)

Representatives of the NGO also point out that a continual presence in the family is of central importance when it comes to understanding the complexities of family life and the dynamics of individual relationships. They reveal how entering the family can change the focus from a deficit-based approach to a different understanding, one that is able to encompass complexity:

> If you look at it from the outside, you think "oh no", but when you visit the family, you see that there is a lot of love between these people. For example, I've been touched by the relationship between children and mothers, regardless of what was happening. Most of these mothers have developed a strong relationship with their children, a sort of bond, irrespective of the difficult circumstances they live in. And you don't see that if you don't go and make contact, if you're not present. (PW of NGO1)

One of our participants stresses the aspect of variability, the family's ability to create new situations, and also emphasises the non-linearity of the process of entering the family. On the one hand, this is due to new and unpredictable circumstances, but, on the other hand, it is a result of the inconsistency of the visits themselves. She also describes experiencing a shift in roles, forming a telling spectrum on the proximity-distance continuum. We can also talk about shifts on the formal-informal spectrum:

> You start tentatively delving into it a little again, and then you get used to it again, so I felt that we were getting back to being friends, and then acquaintances, and then friends again and then family again. It fluctuates. It depends very much on how many of us come over and how we participate.

> *Maybe it's also the fact that we go to school [to accompany individual chil-*
> *dren] that has diminished some of the family feeling. (V1)*

One participant describes an increasing feeling of her own authority over time when it comes to guiding parents on issues of upbringing:

> *I see that lately, now that I know the family better, the atmosphere is more*
> *relaxed and I'm comfortable with performing with a little more authority.*
> *I'm not so careful about treading on their toes in terms of parental rights,*
> *I already have a confidence that comes from feeling that what I do is okay.*
> *I've become more, let's say, confident. (V2)*

The volunteers also report the increasingly active role of the parents in the children's upbringing, observing that they are managing better and that over time they have successfully begun voicing their opinions or delegating tasks more confidently; in short, they are expressing their needs. Part of the process is perceiving positive changes, from the subtle to the more visible; this inspires the volunteers and gives them encouragement in their work. While the observations about gradual changes are phrased delicately because they are not based on any measurable indicators, they still add a note of optimism to the volunteers' reports.

The volunteers attribute an increased level of initiative to family members, and recognise that they are competent and trustworthy agents in their own lives. Concrete changes were detected particularly in terms of the children's upbringing; for example, in the parents' clearly expressing their wishes and demands:

> *I get the impression that the parents are slowly becoming susceptible to*
> *[our] endeavours and are a bit clearer and more resolute in their upbring-*
> *ing practices with the children. (V2)*

Further changes were noted in terms of the children's greater openness over time, and their willingness to express their own wishes and expectations:

> *Some of the children are much more open and say a lot more; they are*
> *more proactive, which was also observed by childcare workers and peda-*
> *gogues in residential care. The parents began to ask questions and talk*
> *about methods of upbringing, the mother emerged from the background,*
> *the dining table was moved away from the television, some childcare work-*
> *ers started thinking about the suitability of the existing lines of specialised*
> *schooling for the children, etc. It's difficult to say what the positive effects of*
> *our participation have been, but things are changing. (V3)*

A comparison of the reports of the volunteers and the NGO, on the one hand, and those made by representatives of conventional, state programmes or services, on the other, shows that the former note many more strengths and resources, and much more progress. This is particularly noticeable in the attitude towards the parents. There is a tendency for conventional services to focus on deficits and be more critical towards the parents. For example:

> *I think the mother needs someone to be with her to see where she isn't coping, where she isn't organised, to prepare a plan for her, something that she could rely on. (PW of NGO 3)*

In contrast, the volunteers find that progress has been made both with the parents and the children:

> *I see the parents trying to do the best they can ... They participate, they listen to advice, they persevere and invite [us] into the family, to work together. (V3)*

The existing conventional services often operate by stepping in when there are problems in the family, but during "quiet periods" they usually do not see the need to visit the family, which in itself directs the focus onto deficits. On the other hand, a more or less continual presence enables volunteers or professionals to observe the family in very different situations, from entirely ordinary daily life, to particularly enjoyable occasions (e.g., celebrations) or even more difficult situations (when problems occur). Being present in the family means being in an environment where the family are in command, where they feel confident. Unlike the environments to which they are invited by the various services, families have more power in their own environment, starting with the power to invite someone into their home. The volunteers are aware of their role as guests, which they adhere to by always calling the family before visiting to make sure the timing is suitable. With the specific family of the present study, it is worth noting that, with the exception of one example at the very beginning of our work together when they cancelled a planned arrangement, they have always openly accepted visits from the volunteers, as well as accepting all of the other suggested group activities. Either parent will typically end a telephone conversation with:

> *You just come over, we're home all day.*

Focusing on the family's resources and strengths is related to the theme of trust, a significant theme for the volunteers as well as for the NGO and the conventional organisations. The quotation below relates the feeling that the children's

upbringing is the area where the parents need the most support, while other areas (taking care of the finances and the home) are more under their control. However, even here the presence of volunteers can have an unburdening effect:

> *I trust both parents, that they can handle things if we give them support with the children's upbringing. This is the area where they are the most powerless. This is where they don't have control. In terms of the finances, they aren't perfect, but they can manage ... that's the feeling I get. That they need some of the load to be taken off their shoulders. Sometimes they will tell us to take the children somewhere because they have to take care of something. Or they say, take them there so we can tidy up, so we can get something done. In that sense. (V2)*

The theme of trust is significantly expressed, particularly by the NGO, in another respect: when it comes to coordinating, assessing and determining how to intervene in the family (sometimes in the interest of child safety) in a way that is non-invasive, sensitive and appropriate:

> *It seems to me that you have to tread very carefully the whole time because trust can very quickly be lost. These are the kinds of dilemmas we face, being split between family members, I don't know, the family, the child, the spouses, and then these outside institutions ... (PW of NGO 2)*

All of the contributors attach great importance to trust, and they draw professional encouragement from the fact that it is an ongoing process and that they see progress. This is much easier to notice if you are close to the family, if you share various experiences with them and if you have an opportunity to see them in their own environment, one they know and are in control of. This makes it easier to identify and support those resources that already exist in the family's environment and utilise them in a professional capacity.

Flexible care for families within their living environment

From conversations with the parents, family conferences and analysis of anecdotal records, it is clear that the family expresses satisfaction with the developing form of flexible care in their everyday lives. This is expressed both on a declarative level as well as through behaviour, with the family showing a great deal of trust and initiative, making suggestions and particularly by always keeping their door open to the volunteers. In particular, the family (the parents) appreciate the non-invasive nature of this type of support, because, as a rule, the volunteers follow the parents' initiative, ask for permission and do not

introduce changes without first obtaining the parents' consent. Furthermore, they are flexible and, because their involvement is voluntary in nature, they can adapt to the current needs of the family.

A common thread in the volunteers' responses is that there is a lot of deliberation on how to go about their work, what kind of goals they are pursuing as a group, whether they are acting correctly, and how they could optimise their work to be more in tune with the needs of the family. They also note that they have become more assertive in their attempts to address various subjects with the family over time. A key theme that they scrutinise is flexibility: the advantages it offers, as well as its limitations. Another important aspect is that this developing form of volunteer care is on the border between the formal and the informal, which gives rise to many questions in terms of establishing boundaries, reciprocity and so on.

The care and support offered by the non-governmental organisation is also flexible, yet remains more formalised than the developing model described above. One similarity is its dialogue-based approach to the work, which follows the dialectics of comprehensive care and, at the same time, individualised treatment. An additional contradiction inherent in both approaches is the dialectics of being oriented entirely towards the practical aspects of people's lives and needs, while at the same time taking into account the deeper psychosocial needs of individuals and attempting to respond to them.

The governmental organisations that work with the family in one way or another (the children take part in their programmes) are noticeably more sparing in their answers concerning the family than the volunteers or NGO workers. This can be attributed to the interaction of various factors: the research group had less access to these individuals and they possibly have less involvement with the particular family. Furthermore, the research is set up in such a way that there is significantly more focus on researching the developing a flexible form of family support. Nevertheless, we can point out some key and common themes based on the answers of the representatives of conventional institutions, and on our interaction with them. The responses cited below are those that occur more frequently and can be considered more relevant.

GO workers report that, before the child's admission, they had no information about the child or the family, something that would have made their work easier, more targeted and more effective. They also link this with poor interconnections and lack of trust between organisations, which is another important key theme in their responses:

> *In my estimation, there is not enough cooperation and connection with other services. Until now, I can only recall being in contact once with another*

organisation that was also working with the family. As a professional, I'd like there to be more interconnection, more exchange of ideas, dilemmas, experiences that individual services notice with this family. (PW of GO 1)

Another worker pointed out the fact that teams only meet when serious difficulties arise (not on a regular basis), and even then there are obstacles when it comes to sharing information. While data protection serves to protect the family, the question remains as to how far this is substantiated and at what point it becomes counterproductive. In certain cases, these security regulations can cripple any cooperation between organisations, which may result in urgent problems remaining unsolved and the failure to provide the necessary support. As an example, one of the workers says that, because she does not have the boy's paperwork, she does not know why the responsible authority is not working with him on speech development.

When experts in conventional services talk about the family, many things are based on assumptions rather than experience, because they either have no experience of home visits or such visits are very rare. They are aware of the fact that their perspective on the family is based only on suppositions, and they point this out on a number of occasions. They express the need and desire to be informed and more connected with the family, particularly because this family is very specific in its combination of various forms of vulnerability, as well as past experiences of exclusion and stigmatisation. The services representatives often mention a particular social welfare body that has a great deal of of jurisdiction when it comes to the family, but they express doubt as to whether this form of cooperation is sufficient for the family's needs:

They probably do what is urgent and don't go into too much detail, it's more superficial. They go and see them just so they can tick all of the boxes on their forms ... I have the feeling that we need something else, something more, which we can't offer them within the framework of social assistance systems in this country. The girls [her co-workers at the institution] here have been thinking that we need someone who is really with them, the way you visit them, but you can't place that kind of responsibility on volunteer and non-governmental organisations. (PW of GO 1)

The above quotation also addresses the commonly expressed theme of the family's needs, with the participants recognising significant potential in our developing form of flexible support in the family:

I value – and we've been talking about it here – the method you use, that you go into the battlefield, because it's really the most valuable and most

effective, I think. We've also got a wealth of information from you that we otherwise wouldn't have. I don't know anything about anyone else working with the family. (PW of GO 2)

The need to support the family in its lifeworld in a professional capacity is thus one of the key themes. The idea of what that support should be like is centred on its professionalisation:

We feel the lack of having someone who has worked with the family in the home. This is needed to complete the circle of assistance, because there is a gap here. (PW of GO 3)

This quote also indicates the theme of the perceived disparity between the world of institutions (kindergarten, school, etc.) and the home world. This is particularly noticeable in the demands of upbringing and the structure of daily life and routine, as well as in the supposed "cultural differences" between the two environments, i.e., different attitudes to gender roles, sexuality and alike. The professional workers feel that an intermediate, flexible form of family care in the home could bridge the gap between the home and the children's educational institutions.

This view addresses the polarity between two approaches: one that focuses on the importance and autonomy of the family environment irrespective of cultural differences with regard to the situation prevailing in educational institutions, and one that advocates the earliest possible inclusion of children from vulnerable families or underprivileged cultural environments in the education system in a compensatory role. Approaching families in their daily environment and recognising, acknowledging and respecting the family's reality as it is can build a bridge between the family world and the world of outside institutions, thus opening dialogue between them and reducing potential discord and misconception.

Conclusions

The crucial dimensions of flexible support for vulnerable families can be defined as: continuous awareness of the context, the use of variety and the flexibility of approaches, and developing new, innovative solutions that arise from dialogue between the various actors (the family and its support network). The challenges of the family can be addressed more comprehensively and promptly through flexible support, whereby support is based on experience and not assumptions. Due to its life-orientation, the support offered is not invasive; it can

adapt to the current needs of the family more easily and provide the family with practical everyday support. Targeting family resources and weakening the deficit-based approach can be seen as one of the main benefits of flexible support in comparison to conventional family support (Sousa, 2008). In addition, we can define certain obstacles to the effective support for vulnerable families that lie within existing services/institutions: an approach that is oriented towards deficits and difficulties instead of towards the power and resources of the family; and the controlling and supervising role of institutions, which is incompatible with the supportive role they are mandated to offer. It should, however, be noted that the flexibility of the lifeworld-oriented approach, which can be seen as its greatest advantage, can also be seen as a limitation, as it lacks the structure and durability of conventional services.

One related topic, also highlighted in other relevant research, is the tension between the principle of family empowerment and participation, on the one hand, and the principles of conventional child welfare practices that focus on rescuing and protecting children, on the other. This tension, interpreted as "one of the most complex and sensitive aspects of social work practice" (Healy & Darlington, 2009, in Ney, Stolz & Maloney, 2011), can also be seen in our case.

Our example illustrates the opposition between the bureaucratic organisation of the conventional support system available to the family and the democratic system of family empowerment represented and bolstered by a flexible approach to supporting the family within its own environment. The thesis has been confirmed in conversation with the parents and by the viewpoints of the volunteers, as well as by both governmental and non-governmental support services. All of the participants from the various institutional frameworks recognise the benefit of support that is in close proximity to the family and has an opportunity to support its real-life situations.

The future development of support services for vulnerable families therefore lies in increased flexibility and intensified supportive entering the family. This can be conceived in at least two ways. The first is the strengthening and gradual professionalisation of the voluntary models of family support within the family environment, as presented in our research. The second involves transforming conventional services, making them more flexible and family-centred, and resolving the contradiction of their supervisory and support role.

Our research clearly shows the benefits of the mutual collaboration of everyone involved, of bringing different perspectives together through dialogue and leading them forwards in accordance with the main actor who should have the central role: the family that needs support (see also Rodrigues & Sousa, 2008). The advantage of the conferencing approach (see Merkel-Holguin, 2004)

that our research reveals is that case or family conferences are a suitable form of raising topics around families, of exercising democratic and non-hierarchical ways of collaboration. Conferences are not only a means of addressing problems, they can become a regular co-creative practice for family members and for the experts involved in the life of the family.

The main future challenge regarding this kind of practice lies in finding an ongoing balance between the formal and the informal, the structured and the spontaneous. Flexible support for vulnerable families certainly is a field that needs further professional and research attention.

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University Teachers' Opinions about Higher Education Pedagogical Training Courses in Slovenia

Katarina Aškerc Veniger[1]

∼ Pedagogical training courses (PTCs) for university teachers have often been discussed and have become a widespread trend in recent years in many countries. Many university teachers consider pedagogical training (PT) as a valuable tool in their teaching practice. In Slovenia, however, there is little evidence of teachers' opinions and beliefs regarding PTCs.[2] Many authors consider the effect of PTCs in higher education (HE) on teaching questionable, but there is also evidence of the positive impact of PTCs on university teaching. The results of the present survey show that there are statistically significant differences in teachers' opinions on initial and sustained PTCs. Formal education for teaching in primary and/or secondary schools is often considered as appropriate for teaching in HE. The respondents with higher titles attributed the lowest importance to sustained PTCs. Those involved in (short) PTCs attributed less importance to PT, as well as to the certificate of participation in PT in comparison to the respondents who were not involved in PTCs. On the other hand, the respondents with the highest participation in PT (51 hours and more) are more in favour of PTCs, which confirms the preliminary findings that courses of longer duration provide more opportunities to affect teachers' pedagogical thinking and conceptions of teaching and learning in comparison to shorter courses.

Keywords: initial pedagogical training, habilitation procedures, sustained pedagogical training, university teaching

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2   In this paper, when talking about PTCs and pedagogical training (PT), courses for higher education teaching staff are meant.

Mnenja univerzitetnih učiteljev o visokošolskih pedagoških usposabljanjih v Sloveniji

KATARINA AŠKERC VENIGER

∿   Pedagoška usposabljanja za univerzitetne učitelje so v preteklih letih pogosta tema diskusij in so postala široko razširjen trend v številnih državah. Veliko univerzitetnih učiteljev pedagoška usposabljanja obravnava kot uporabno orodje v svoji učni praksi, malo pa je dokazov o mnenjih in prepričanjih učiteljev glede pedagoških usposabljanj v Sloveniji.[3] Številni avtorji učinek pedagoških usposabljanj v visokem šolstvu (VŠ) obravnavajo kot vprašljiv, vendar obstajajo tudi dokazi o pozitivnem učinku pedagoških usposabljanj na univerzitetno poučevanje. Rezultati te raziskave kažejo, da obstajajo statistično značilne razlike v mnenju učiteljev glede začetnih in stalnih pedagoških usposabljanj. Formalna izobrazba za poučevanje na primarni in/ali sekundarni ravni je pogosto obravnavana kot ustrezna za poučevanje v VŠ. Respondenti z višjimi nazivi pripisujejo najnižji pomen stalnim pedagoškim usposabljanjem. Tisti, ki so bili vključeni v (kratka) pedagoška usposabljanja, pripisujejo manj pomembnosti pedagoškim usposabljanjem pa tudi potrdilom o udeležbi v pedagoških usposabljanjih v primerjavi z respondenti, ki niso bili vključeni v pedagoška usposabljanja. Na drugi strani pa so respondenti z največjo udeležbo v pedagoških usposabljanjih (51 ur in več) bolj naklonjeni pedagoškim usposabljanjem, kar potrjuje predhodne ugotovitve, da daljša usposabljanja zagotavljajo več priložnosti za vplivanje na pedagoško mišljenje ter pojmovanje poučevanja in učenja v primerjavi s krajšimi usposabljanji.

Ključne besede: začetna pedagoška usposabljanja, habilitacijski postopki, stalna pedagoška usposabljanja, univerzitetno poučevanje

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3   Ko v prispevku omenjamo pedagoška usposabljanja, so mišljena usposabljanja za visokošolsko učno osebje.

Introduction

Quality and effective university teaching has received increased attention in recent years, and training of university teachers has become quite a widespread trend in many countries (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi, 2007). Traditionally, however, research carries more weight at universities, while teaching is considered a secondary preoccupation of teaching staff (Leitner, 1998; Pleschová et al., 2012). Consequently, professional development in teaching practice has not been a priority for new university teachers to date (Lisewski, 2006). Quality teaching in HE is vital for learning, but university teaching staff in Europe are not as well prepared for their teaching career as for research (Pleschová et al., 2012). However, through proper steering, simulation and evaluation of the learning process of students, teaching is becoming increasingly important (Leitner,1998). Fry (2006) writes that, in the last decade of the 20th century, there were two factors (in the UK) that pushed the government towards taking greater interest in teaching quality: increased pressure on resources, and rising student numbers at universities. Perhaps due to the latter, "initial training programmes for university teachers are now widespread in many institutions both in the UK and internationally" (Coffey & Gibbs, 2000, p. 385).

In Slovenia, too, PTCs for university teachers have become more common in recent years. There is nonetheless little evidence concerning teachers' opinions and beliefs regarding PTCs and their placement in habilitation procedures. The present study attempts to explore PTCs with an emphasis on Slovenian university teachers' opinions and beliefs regarding initial and sustained PT and assessment of the pedagogical qualification of the individual, with regard to which student evaluation of teaching (SET) *can be* considered as an important source of information. Although, in Slovenia, as in most European countries, teachers are not required to obtain a certificate of teaching competencies in habilitation procedures, this study presents the level of importance that teachers attribute to PTCs, the "probationary lecture" and SET with regard to the process of habilitation.

Background

Current efforts focus on making PT a standard part of the required qualifications of university teachers (Leitner, 1998). Professional teaching that meets student needs and academic standards has historically been "perhaps regarded as mainly the preserve of the individual" (Fry, 2006, p. 96). Nowadays, training of university teachers is essential for excellent teaching (High Level Group …, 2013), as, without PT teaching, decisions are based on know-how accumulated

during the teaching career, and on imitating those with more experience (Rosado Pinto, 2008). If the university seeks to educate better graduates and reduce drop-out rates, it should appropriately encourage teachers to improve their teaching, not just their research (Marentič Požarnik, 1998).

Leitner (1998, p. 342–343) presents Elton's recommendation (1993, p. 69): teachers who have never been taught how to teach must receive some PT, and "if good teachers work with institutions of academic pedagogy[,] they will improve their work. The results will be known and will also influence those who perhaps are not so good". However, if teachers are expected to attend PTCs, courses should be clearly defined (Marentič Požarnik, 1998). Furthermore, pedagogical competencies are subject to evaluation, which necessitates providing opportunities to acquire such competencies (Leitner, 1998). Leitner (ibid.) writes that a university or college should offer an adequate pedagogical qualification and in-service PTCs to *each* young teacher in order to help fill in the gaps that have been found as a result of an evaluation process. Otherwise, the data obtained through evaluation can be nothing more than "the construction with data of a tower of Babel" (ibid., p. 342). In addition, certificates of participation in PTCs should be recognised as an important element of assessment of pedagogical qualification in the process of habilitation (Marentič Požarnik, 1998).

In Slovenia, attending PTCs still does not confer any benefits, or is allocated minimal points, in the process of habilitation, despite the fact that the Resolution on the National HE Programme 2011–2020 (OG RS, 2011, hereinafter: NHEP) devotes special attention to teaching excellence and teaching. In this regard, HEIs should offer teaching support to teaching staff; they should establish special development centres on HE learning and teaching, which should also provide research on this topic. The NHEP also determines that the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) should review institutional teaching support from 2012 onwards. In the process of habilitation, however, only one out of four Slovenian universities requires proof of participation in PT. Two Slovenian universities allocate only one point for attending PTCs, which is the lowest maximum number of points achievable in all of the relevant categories within pedagogical activity. The habilitation criteria of the remaining universities do not contain a category for participation in PT. One shared characteristic of the habilitation criteria of Slovenian universities is that the most important evidence of teacher excellence is a "probationary lecture" for new teachers (OG RS, 2010; UL, 2012; UM, 2012; UNG, 2013; UPR, 2014a; UPR, 2014b; UPR 2014c; Aškerc, 2013). However, it is not officially known whether the specially appointed commissions for assessing pedagogical skills have ever rejected a candidate on the basis of not meeting the "criteria" for passing the "probationary lecture".

Given that *a single* "probationary lecture" is inadequate for assessing pedagogical skills and insufficient for improving teaching competencies, the impact of PTCs on teaching as a basis for properly assuring the anticipated level of teaching skills will be presented in the continuation.

The impact of PTCs on university teaching

Although many authors consider the effect of teachers' training in HE on their teaching questionable (Coffey & Gibbs, 2000; Norton et al., 2005; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi, 2007), there is evidence of the positive impact of PTCs on teaching. Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi (2007) found that training has positive effects on teachers' approach to teaching and on their teaching methods. Sustained programmes of longer duration (e.g. one year or at least 30 ECTS) ensure more opportunities to affect teachers' pedagogical thinking and conceptions of teaching and learning in comparison to shorter courses, which may cause uncertainty among teachers about their teaching skills. Furthermore, teachers report only positive effects of PT on teaching; it is, however, possible that PTCs are more frequently taken by teachers who are more motivated to improve their teaching (ibid.). Gibbs and Coffey (2004, p. 98) found that teachers became more student-centred and less teacher-centred after a period of 4–18 months of PT, and their teaching skills, as judged by students, improved significantly. In addition, the superficial approach of students declined after their teachers had undergone PTCs. The authors nonetheless state that "we are still not in a position to demonstrate that it was the training that resulted in the positive changes […]". Norton et al. (2005) found that there was no significant difference in teachers' beliefs and intentions between a group of UK teachers who had taken their institution's programme on teaching and learning, and a group who had no PT. Furthermore, "an effect of training was masked by [the] effect of lack of experience" (ibid., p. 560).

Nevertheless, Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi (2007) found that PT enhances the shift from an "information transmission/teacher-focused" approach, to a "conceptual change/student-focused" approach. Teachers who adopted a "student-focused approach" used a wider repertoire of teaching methods in comparison to teachers with a "teacher-focused approach" (Coffey & Gibbs, 2002). After one semester of two- and three-semester long initial PTCs, UK university teachers showed significant improvements in scores measuring learning, enthusiasm, organisation and rapport (Coffey & Gibbs, 2000); again, the difficulty of distinguishing the effects of training from the effects of experience in teaching must be highlighted.

The path to quality university teaching

Pleschová et al. (2012) describe how to best prepare academics for teaching and enhance teaching and learning:

1)   Professional educational developers should work with individual teachers; professionals with qualifications in primary and secondary education may not be the right candidates for educational developers. "The expert in academic pedagogy who conduct[s] initial and in-service training should ideally be a university teacher who stands in the lecture hall every day and who interacts with students through the elaboration of their graduation papers. Additionally, he or she needs to have earned an adequate pedagogical qualification with a serious focus on academic pedagogy" (Leitner, 1998, p. 347).

2)   Academics must be encouraged to experiment with student-centred curricula and teaching methods; educational developers should transfer information and innovations in teaching across disciplinary boundaries.

3)   SET is an important way of ensuring student input into teaching enhancement; educational developers can help with the related interpretation and action planning.

4)   Regular evaluation of the impact of educational development programmes and their subsequent restructuring is also essential (Pleschová et al., 2012).

Marentič Požarnik (1998) presents seven models of *didactic training* of university teachers: i) initial training programmes for assistants with at least one year of teaching experience; ii) mentorship of a novice by an experienced university teacher, not only in research but also in teaching; iii) (mono)thematic seminars and courses of various fields; iv) pedagogical workshops; v) action research projects; vi) network of experts; and vii) peer training. Other areas of great importance include: training for professional educational developers, which should be organised in teaching and learning centres or in human resource units; the establishment of educational development programmes; and the creation of educational development units that offer teacher development programmes (Pleschová et al., 2012). The High Level Group on the Modernisation of HE (2013) recommends, inter alia: the establishment of a European Academy for Teaching and Learning; continuous professionalisation and development of HE teaching staff with mandatory certified training (by 2020, all teachers should have received certified PT); decisions on entrance, progression and habilitation should take into account the assessment of teaching

competence; and researchers should be given an opportunity to gain professional teaching qualifications. Last but not least, HEIs should encourage "student feed-back which could detect problems in the teaching and learning environment early on and lead to faster, more effective improvement" (ibid., p. 64).

Connection between SET and PT

The quality of teaching is inseparably linked to the quality of learning: the reputation of a university is to a great extent based on the quality of its graduates. The final goal of academic pedagogy is not to satisfy the teacher, but to satisfy the student as well (Leitner, 1998). "In many countries, universities have introduced SET as a way of introducing student input into teaching enhancement" (Pleschová et al., 2012, p. 17). SET is seen "as a valuable tool to improve teaching and student learning outcomes" (Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher & Hellyer, 2010), assuming that students learn more from good teachers (Cohen, 1981) and that they know best whether the teaching they receive is adequate for them (Clayson & Haley, 1990 in Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher & Hellyer, 2010).

However, according to various authors (Clayson, 2009; Cohen, 1981; Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher & Hellyer, 2010; Lumsden & Scott, 1984; Stark & Freihstat 2014, p. 2; Zabaleta 2007), several studies argue that SET does not actually evaluate teaching. It is an open issue whether the students' or teachers' characteristics are the main factors in determining the students' opinion of a teacher, and whether students opinion of teachers is effected by (higher) grades (Lumsden & Scott, 1984, p. 648; Stark & Freihstat, 2014). Cohen (1981, p. 281) adds that "the most critical question about student ratings of instruction is whether /…/ they actually measure teaching effectiveness"; if so, there should be a strong positive correlation between students' learning and SET. Due to various external influences, the question of the reliability, validity and usability of student evaluations has been raised, as well as the question of what exactly students evaluate (ibid.). On the other hand, Seldin (1997) claims that SET presents the most common method of gathering evidence on the quality and effectiveness of teaching, study programmes and HEIs in general. Although SET can be a valuable tool for improving teaching and learning outcomes, the collection of data and information alone is not sufficient; evidence on the quality of teaching should also be collected from other sources (Pleschová et al., 2012; Stark & Freihstat, 2014) and combined with other methods, i.e., teaching portfolios, student interviews for the elimination of anonymity, introduction of students' accountability, class observations, unbiased peer evaluations, self-evaluations, etc. (Zabaleta, 2007). In order to create educational change (Pleschová et al.,

2012, p. 17; Stark & Freihstat, 2014), teachers need access and opportunities to discuss evaluation results with colleagues, thus enabling them to address weaknesses and build on strengths.

As regards the Slovenian HE system, we agree with Marentič Požarnik (2009) that the introduction of compulsory SET may represent one of the most important developments in recent years in the field of teaching. It is believed that SET has been an important complement *to the conditions* of assessing pedagogical qualification in the process of habilitation in Slovenia, i.e., mentoring and co-mentoring, the number and quality of master's and doctoral theses, preparation of textbooks and similar materials, initial and sustained PTCs, etc. In the process of the first habilitation, an important role is also attributed to the "probationary lecture". In Article 11 of the national Minimum Standards for the Appointment of HE Teachers, Researchers and Faculty Assistants at HEIs (OG RS, 2010), it is stated that, in every habilitation of teachers or faculty assistants to a higher position or re-habilitation to the position currently held, the candidate must submit an opinion of the student council based on the results of a student survey or other instruments for verifying pedagogical work. The results of SET are obligatory in the process of habilitation at all four Slovenian universities; conversely, in habilitation procedures, only two Slovenian universities require the submission of a certificate of participation in PT programmes. As the survey results described below indicate, university teachers hold different opinions and beliefs regarding the importance of initial and sustained PTCs, regarding SET in the process of habilitation, and regarding the "probationary lecture" as a way of assessing one's pedagogical qualification.

Method

Data collection instrument and data collection methods

The data collection of the quantitative empirical research, undertaken in 2013, was based on an online questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale in five core questions. The initial questionnaire was tested on a sample of 24 university teachers and associates. The questionnaire results were sensibly transformed with the aid of univariate statistics.

Population and sample

The link to the online questionnaire was sent to 5,650 teachers' e-mail addresses, which had been found on the webpages of all Slovenian HEIs (nearly

70% of the Slovenian HE teaching population). After a second e-invitation, 513 respondents (slightly less than 10% of all contacted individuals) from all four Slovenian universities and some private HEIs answered the questionnaire. The respondents held various academic titles and belonged to various ISCED groups of work,[4] thus covering a representative sample of the population. We urge additional caution when interpreting or using the survey data due to the low response rate. However, in accordance with some researchers who claim that data acquired with a lower response rate can still provide accurate measurements (Horta, 2013), we argue that the acquired data still constitutes an overview of the current situation in Slovenia. The data was analysed with SPSS software (version 19), and the analysis was mostly based on comparing the calculated univariate and bivariate statistics, as well as ANOVA analysis and the Chi-square test.

Results

The respondents answered questions and expressed their opinions regarding university teachers' pedagogical education/qualification, based on statements regarding:

a)   *initial PTCs, which should be given to all candidates on the first habilitation to the position of university teacher;*

b)   *initial PTCs (on the first habilitation to the position of university teacher), which should be given to all teachers who have no prior pedagogical and/or adult education;*

c)   *sustained PTCs (every five years) for all university teachers;*

d)   *evidence/certificates of completion of PTCs as a compulsory part of the documentation in the process of habilitation;*

e)   *involvement in sustained PTCs for all university teachers whose SET show poor results;*

f)   *SET as an appropriate tool for assessing the pedagogical qualification of an*

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4   The International Standard Classification of Education – ISCED 1997 (UNESCO 2012) has 25 fields of education organised within nine broad groups. In the survey, nine groups were merged into six as follows, with the percentages of the respondents being added: 1) Education – 10.7% (14 Teacher Training and Education Science), 2) Humanities and Arts – 15.6% (21 Arts, 22 Humanities), 3) Social Sciences – 26.1% (31 Social and Behavioural Science, 32 Journalism and Information, 34 Business and Administration, 38 Law, 81 Personal Services, 84 Transport Services, 86 Security Services), 4) Natural Sciences – 19.3% (42 Life Sciences, 44 Physical Sciences, 46 Mathematics and Statistics, 48 Computing, 6 Agriculture, 62 Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, 64 Veterinary, 85 Environmental Protection), 5) Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction – 18.3% (52 Engineering and Engineering Trades, 54 Manufacturing and Processing, 58 Architecture and Building) and 6) Health and Welfare – 9.9% (72 Health, 76 Social Services).

individual in the habilitation process;

g) *the "probationary lecture" as crucial in assessing the pedagogical qualifica-*
    tion of an individual; and

h) *the quality of the work of the specially appointed commission at the "pro-*
    bationary lecture" that an individual has to pass in the process of the first
    habilitation.

The results showed statistically significant differences in the responses to the above statements (see statements: *a–d*) regardless of different ISCED groups, academic titles and whether or not the respondents had been involved in PTCs (Table 1). The respondents attributed greater importance to (*b*) initial PTCs in the case of no prior pedagogical education and less importance to (*a*) initial training for all university teachers (private HEIs and lectors/language teachers (N=12) are excluded). At the same time, respondents (with the exception of lectors/language teachers (N=12)) attributed less importance to (*c*) sustained PTCs every five years than to initial training (*a and b*).

It is interesting that, when taking into account ISCED groups, teachers from Health and Welfare seem to attribute the greatest importance to (*a*) initial PTCs (4.10) and to (*d*) the mandatory submission of a certificate on PTCs (3.44). In the case of (*a*) initial PTCs, a Games-Howell post-hoc test later revealed that Health and Welfare teachers attribute greater importance to initial PTCs than teachers from Humanities and Arts (p = 0.007), as well as Natural Sciences (p < 0.001) and Engineering (p = 0.036) teachers. For the mandatory submission of a certificate on PTCs *(d)*, a Gabriel post-hoc test showed that again Health and Welfare teachers attribute greater importance to certificates than teachers from the Humanities and Arts (p = 0.042) and the Natural Sciences (p = 0.006) groups. At the same time, many of the respondents from the Health and Welfare group had been involved in PTCs.[5] Teachers from the Education group (who were likely to have finished a pedagogical study programme for teaching at the primary and/or secondary level of education) are most likely to consider initial PTCs as obligatory only for university teachers who have no prior formal pedagogical education. However, formal education for teaching in primary and secondary schools cannot be considered as sufficient for teaching in HE. The respondents with higher titles (full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, as well as assistants) seem to attribute the lowest importance to statements *a, c* and *d*, with sustained PTCs every five years (*c*)

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5   The respondents' participation in PTCs, according to ISCED groups (percentage and mean): total (31.4%, 37.4); Education (21.8%, 53.8); Humanities and Arts (26.3%, 42.1); Social Sciences (40.3%, 42.1); Natural Sciences (21.2%, 40.7); Engineering, Manufacturing, Construction (20.2%, 28.1); Health and Welfare (66.7%, 24.6).

standing out in particular. Post-hoc tests later revealed that those four groups of respondents attribute significantly less importance to *a* and *c* courses than Higher Lecturers and Lecturers, as well as Lectors (p values lower than 0.05).

Table 1. *University teachers opinions on PTCs.*

		a	b	c	d
	Total	3.70	4.01	3.14	3.19
HEI	UL	3.74	4.08	3.13	3.14
	UM	3.48	3.87	3.09	3.04
	UPR	3.76	4.17	2.95	3.43
	UNG	3.44	3.94	2.94	3.38
	Private HEIs	3.90	3.89	3.40	3.44
	Significance of mean differences (HEI)	0.085	0.307	0.262	0.107
ISCED GROUP	Education	3.89	4.44	3.40	3.45
	Humanities and Arts	3.45	4.00	2.99	2.95
	Social Sciences	3.93	4.04	3.47	3.38
	Natural Sciences	3.36	3.84	2.61	2.87
	Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	3.63	3.74	3.05	3.11
	Health and Welfare	4.10	4.33	3.43	3.57
	Significance of mean differences (ISCED groups)	<0.001	0.001	<0.001	<0.001
ACADEMIC TITLE	Full Professor	3.39	3.80	2.97	3.18
	Associate Professor	3.74	4.01	2.92	3.05
	Assistant Professor	3.56	3.94	2.96	2.96
	Higher Lecturer	4.14	4.18	3.66	3.59
	Lecturer	4.28	4.39	3.72	3.81
	Lector (language teacher) (N=12)	4.58	4.42	4.42	3.75
	Assistant	3.61	4.01	3.13	3.19
	Instructor (N=2)	4.00	5.00	3.50	4.50
	Significance of mean differences (Academic titles)	<0.001	0.085	<0.001	<0.001
Participation	Participation in PT	3.48	3.91	2.94	2.99
	No participation	4.18	4.24	3.58	3.64
	Significance of mean differences (participation)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

The ANOVA model is statistically significant at the level of 0.05 (if p value is lower than 0.05)

LEGEND: a) initial PTCs for all teachers; b) initial PTCs for teachers with no prior pedagogical education; c) sustained PTCs for all teachers; d) certificates of PTCs as a compulsory part of the habilitation process

According to Table 1, the respondents who had been involved in PTCs attributed less importance to initial (*a, b*) and sustained PTCs (*c*), as well as to a certificate of participation in PTCs (*d*) in comparison to respondents who had not been involved in PTCs (p < 0.05). This may point to the findings of Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi (2007), who found that shorter courses (fewer than 30 ECTS) may make teachers more uncertain about their teaching skills. Our study shows that respondents had participated in PTCs for an average of only 37.4 hours (footnote 3), which we regard as limited participation, considering that one ECTS represents 25–30 hours of candidate workload.

In this context, we verified whether the respondents' opinions vary depending on the duration of their PT. Due to the short duration of the courses, we were unable to verify the differences in their opinions on extensive participation in PT, such as a one-year training programme (ibid.). Consequently, in calculating differences in our research, the limit was established at 50 hours, whereby the first group of respondents consisted of participants included in PTCs of up to 50 hours and the second group of participants in PTCs of 51 hours or more (Table 2). The respondents of the second group (23.6% of the respondents involved in PT) were more in favour of PTCs: the t-test results showed that there are statistically significant differences between these two groups in the case of initial PTCs for all university teachers (*a*) and in the case of mandatory submission of certificates of training (*d*). This could indicate that teachers with greater participation in PTCs have already gained greater confidence in their teaching abilities and in PTCs as such. However, this result could also be explained by teachers' (prior) interest in pedagogical issues in general, and not the length of their participation in PTCs.

Table 2. *University teachers' opinions on the importance of PTCs according to the extent of their participation in courses.*

	a	b	c	d
Total				
1–50 hours of PTCs	4.08	4.18	3.52	3.55
51 and more hours of PTCs	4.59	4.47	3.81	4.00
Significance of mean differences (institutions)	0.003	0.151	0.184	0.037

The differences are statistically significant at the level of 0.05 (if p value is lower than 0.05).

LEGEND: a) initial PTCs for all teachers; b) initial PTCs for teachers with no prior pedagogical education; c) sustained PTCs for all teachers; d) certificates of PTCs as a compulsory part of the habilitation process

Given that SET should not be used for teachers' career decisions, because, according to the aforementioned authors, it does not evaluate (only) teaching, we further considered the respondents' opinion (Table 3) on: *e) involvement in sustained PTCs of all university teachers whose SET shows poor results*, and *f) SET as an appropriate tool for assessing the pedagogical qualification of an individual in the habilitation process*. The ANOVA revealed that there are statistically significant differences in the case of respondents with or without participation in PTCs, whereby those without participation in PT are more convinced that university teachers should be involved in sustained PT in the case of poor results in SET.

Table 3. *University teachers' opinions on SET in the context of PTCs and the process of habilitation.*

	e	f
Participation in PTCs	3.76	2.83
No participation	4.09	2.81
Significance of mean differences (participation)	<0.001	0.831

The differences are statistically significant at the level of 0.05 (if p value is lower than 0.05).

LEGEND: e) all teachers whose SET show poor results involved in sustained PTCs; f) SET as an appropriate tool for assessing pedagogical qualification

Since, in Slovenia, the pedagogical qualification of university teachers is (often) assessed through a "probationary lecture", we were also interested in the respondents' opinions (Table 4) on: *g) the "probationary lecture", which is a condition for the first habilitation, as crucial in assessing the pedagogical qualification of the individual*, and *h) the quality of the work of the members of the specially appointed commission at the "probationary lecture" that the individual passed in the process of the first habilitation*. In the case of statement (*g*), all of the respondents were included in the analysis (N=513), while, in the case of statement (*f*), only data of teachers who themselves gave a "probationary lecture" (N=407) were analysed.

Table 4. *Teachers' opinions on the "probationary lecture".*

	g	h
Total	3.25	4.01
UL	3.23	3.93
UM	3.05	3.84
UPR	3.21	4.03
UNG	3.44	3.93
Private HEIs	3.63	4.34
Significance of mean differences (HEIs)	0.026	0.04
Education	3.16	4.15
Humanities and Arts	3.40	3.87
Social Sciences	3.22	3.96
Natural Sciences	3.21	4.00
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	3.16	3.97
Health and Welfare	3.43	4.11
Significance of mean differences (ISCED groups)	0.615	0.544
Full Professor	3.49	4.01
Associate Professor	3.01	3.83
Assistant Professor	3.29	4.04
Higher Lecturer	3.34	3.93
Lecturer	3.50	4.17
Lector (language teacher) (N=12)	3.58	3.67
Assistant	3.03	4.20
Instructor (N=2)	4.50	3.99
Significance of mean differences (Academic titles)	0.029	0.286

The ANOVA model is statistically significant at the level of 0.05 (if p value is lower than 0.05).

LEGEND: g) the "probationary lecture" as crucial in assessing one's pedagogical qualification; h) quality of the work of the specially appointed commission at the "probationary lecture".

Table 4 shows statistically significant differences in the importance that respondents attributed to the "probationary lecture". In the case of private HEIs, the respondents' opinions on the importance of the "probationary lecture" seem to be the highest (3.63), and they also attributed the highest value to the quality of the commission's work (4.34). A post-hoc test revealed that the perceptions of teachers from private HEIs were statistically different from those of teachers from the largest Slovenian universities, UL and UM (p values lower than 0.05), but not from those of teachers from the other two universities (UNG and UPR). It should be stressed, however, that more than 48% of the

respondents from private HEIs work in the Health group. In comparison to the other ISCED groups, the respondents from Health and Welfare attributed the most importance to the "probationary lecture". The results also revealed that a total of 2.0% of the teachers had never given a "probationary lecture", even though it is obligatory by law.[6] Taking into account the fact that the completion of a PTC is not a prerequisite for habilitation to a university teaching position, this result is undoubtedly worrying, as it raises the question of the individual's pedagogical qualification: only 31.4% of the respondents had completed a PTC (footnote 3), a percentage that is nonetheless surprisingly high. In this context, one shortcoming of our survey should be pointed out, i.e., data on the respondent's own acquisition of knowledge was not collected.

Conclusion and discussion

Pedagogical qualification of university teachers is often taken for granted in academic culture. Why would someone require professionalisation if he or she is already a professional? Academic culture includes specific rules of behaviour and conduct of members of the academic community, which is maintained and transmitted to younger academic generations (Kump, 1994, p. 23). However, the preservation of old habits, such as those in the field of pedagogical skills and competences, should not be (strictly) maintained under the influence of modern changes. Whereas, in the past, university teachers used to teach a handful of talented students who most likely had quite similar interests to the teachers themselves (Marentič Požarnik 2009, p. 342) and possessed a deep approach to learning, nowadays the majority of students have a superficial approach to learning and only achieve a deep approach in the case of the best conditions for teaching and learning (Biggs, 1999, p. 58). The fact is that we are failing to affect the quality of input (i.e., students who massively enter HE). If graduates are to achieve at least the minimal academic level, and if an appropriate level of student knowledge, skills and competences is be maintained, "something" should or must be done during study in order to achieve the highest possible quality of the output (i.e., graduates). Barnett (1992) states that, from the perspective of students, research is quite irrelevant; on the other hand, quality teaching with high-quality, modern and appropriate methods and approaches to pedagogical work *can* lead to quality students and graduates. In the eyes of the students, the undergraduate level should place greater emphasis on

6   Upon their first habilitation, assistants and instructors do not need to demonstrate pedagogical qualification (OG RS 2010); nonetheless, 9.4% of assistants had already given a lecture, which could be a result of being reappointed to the same position.

teaching rather than research, which is why an important role could be given to quality PT of university teachers, and to the assessment of their pedagogical qualification, using the "probationary lecture", SET, portfolios, peer-review systems, etc. However, SET represents feedback on teachers' work post festum, while PTCs offer the possibility of improvement in advance.

Professional PT is still not considered a requirement for entry to a teaching career in Slovenian (or European) HE: almost 70% of the respondents in our survey had never participated in such training. The respondents attributed less importance to *(a)* initial PTCs for all university teachers (Table 1: total 3.70) in comparison to *(b)* PT intended only for those without prior formal education for teaching at primary or secondary level (Table 1: total 4.01). It is not surprising that those who have graduated from a pedagogical study programme are (wrongly) regarded as fully qualified for teaching in HE, as pointed out by Pleschová et al. (2012). Furthermore, teachers with the highest academic titles (full professors, associate professors and assistant professors, as well as assistants) attribute significantly less importance to *(a)* initial PTCs for all teachers and *(c)* sustained PTCs for all teachers. It is assumed that respondents with higher academic titles feel adequately pedagogically qualified (primarily) due to their long teaching experience. At this point, it would be reasonable to further verify teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning according to Coffey and Gibbs (2000, 2002) and Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse (1999). Pleschová et al. (2012) also point to the problem of perpetuating old teaching methods: younger teachers often follow and imitate their senior and more experienced colleagues in their teaching practices. The question is whether more experienced teachers' pedagogical approaches are still adequate, and whether these teachers respond to the needs of contemporary massive HE with an extremely heterogeneous population of students.

However, respondents from the Health and Welfare group in the present research positively stand out with their responses in terms of both initial and sustained PT, as well as with their opinion on the relevance of documents and certificates in habilitation procedures. At the same time, the results showed that these respondents had been involved in PTCs to the greatest extent (66.7%), although their PT had been shorter on average (24.6 hours) and they had mainly participated in informal courses of short duration, largely provided at private HEIs. Despite the short duration of their PT, the respondents' awareness of the importance of acquiring pedagogical knowledge for teaching in HE may have risen. As Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi (2007) found, only positive effects of PTCs on teaching were mentioned by teachers; however, the authors also emphasised that a training process of a long duration results in

more positive effects on teachers' pedagogical thinking and their conceptions of teaching and learning (ibid.). Although our survey cannot be placed in the context of their findings, as our respondents had been involved in PTCs of insufficient duration – only 14 participants had attended PT of more than 100 hours (8.7% of those who had participated in PTCs), which amounts to approximately 5 ECTS – in our research, the group with more hours of PT (51 hours or more) preferred PTCs and the importance of proving one's participation in PTCs for habilitation procedures.

Our study showed that (only) 31.4% of the respondents in Slovenia had been involved in *different* PTCs, which seems adequate according to Marentič Požarnik (2009), who found that approximately 5% of eligible staff had attended *formal* PTCs at the Centre for Educational Development at the Faculty of Arts, UL. It must be emphasised that, in our study, the term PTC includes various forms of HE training courses, i.e., rhetoric, teamwork, didactic, e-learning for university teachers, etc., as well as being connected with SET. Based on the existing practice and its unclear definition in the national Minimum Standards, as well as in institutional criteria, poor participation in PTCs was expected in our research. We therefore verified the share of respondents who had passed the "probationary lecture" as the most important evidence of the pedagogical qualification of new teachers according to minimum standards and institutional criteria. We found that 2% of all respondents had not given a "probationary lecture", even though it is a condition for habilitation according to legal provisions (in this context, the question of internal and external evaluation and control is also relevant). Furthermore, we verified the level of importance respondents attribute to the "probationary lecture", in terms of assessing one's pedagogical qualification. The "probationary lecture" as crucial for assessing pedagogical qualification was scored by the respondents at 3.25 on a 5-point Likert scale. The quality of the commission's work in the "probationary lecture" also scored highly (4.01), which is definitely a positive finding, as anecdotal evidence has often emerged on the unsystematic and unprofessional work of the commission. We believe that the quality implementation of the "probationary lecture" is crucial for the assessment of pedagogical qualification; however, it cannot and should not be the only tool for assessing university teachers' pedagogical qualification. A combination of initial PTCs followed by the "probationary lecture" (or vice versa) could lead to better qualification for university teaching. In addition, higher quality of teaching could be achieved with sustained PTCs combined with other methods.

In the process of habilitation, all Slovenian universities, on the basis of their own institutional criteria, take account of SET, which, according to

Marentič Požarnik (2009), represents important progress in university teaching in Slovenia. Consequently, we were interested in the level of importance attributed to SET by university teachers. A statistically significant majority of the respondents who had not been involved in PTCs, or who had been involved in courses of very short duration, consider that (only) university teachers whose SET shows poor results should be involved in sustained PT. Again, the emphasis of SET as the (only) reason for participation in PTCs could be the consequence of these respondents' nonparticipation – or brief participation (on average 37.4 hours) – in PT, which, according to Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi (2007), may make teachers more uncertain about their teaching skills, and consequently can also affect their opinion on the effectiveness of PT. However, all of the respondents – those who had and had not participated in PTCs – attributed slightly more than 2.8 points on a 5-point Likert scale to SET as an appropriate tool for assessing the pedagogical qualification in habilitation procedures. This undoubtedly indicates that teachers are aware of the external factors that impact students' opinion on the quality of teaching, as is also stressed by Cohen (1981).

With respect to the existing practice and the adopted minimum standards and institutional criteria in Slovenia, which explicitly require only the "probationary lecture" and SET in habilitation procedures, it should be stressed that the respondents do not attribute great importance to the latter two obligations in comparison to various kinds of PTCs. In accordance with this research, we recommend a well-balanced combination of various methods and factors in habilitation procedures in Slovenian HE: in addition to the "probationary lecture" and SET, it would be reasonable to at least introduce various optional PTCs for university teachers, as well as other optional measures, such as teaching portfolios, student interviews for the elimination of anonymity, class observations, unbiased peer evaluations, etc. However, teachers' inclusion in various courses and other methods of pedagogical development should be properly considered and rewarded in habilitation procedures. In this context, a comprehensive consideration and renewal of the habilitation system in Slovenia would be reasonable.

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The Impact of Active Visualisation of High School Students on the Ability to Memorise Verbal Definitions

Anamarija Šmajdek[1] and Jurij Selan*[2]

∼   The era of visual communication influences the cognitive strategies of the individual. Education, too, must adjust to these changes, which raises questions regarding the use of visualisation in teaching. In the present study, we examine the impact of visualisation on the ability of high school students to memorise text. In the theoretical part of the research, we first clarify the concept of visualisation. We define the concept of active visualisation and visualisation as a means of acquiring and conveying knowledge, and we describe the different kinds of visualisation (appearance-based analogies and form-based analogies), specifically defining appearance-based schemata visualisations (where imagery is articulated in a typical culturally trained manner). In the empirical part of the research, we perform an experiment in which we evaluate the effects of visualisation on students' ability to memorise a difficult written definition. According to the theoretical findings, we establish two hypotheses. In the first, we assume that the majority of the visualisations that students form will be appearance-based schemata visualisations. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that, in visualisation, people spontaneously use analogies based on imagery and schemas that are typical of their society. In the second hypothesis, we assume that active visualisation will contribute to the students' ability to memorise text in a statistically significant way. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the combination of verbal and visual experiences enhances cognitive learning. Both hypotheses were confirmed in the research. As our study only dealt with the impact of the most spontaneous type of appearance-based schemata visualisations, we see further possibilities in researching the influence of visualisations that are more complex formally.

Keywords: visualisation, visual recall, active visualisation, appearance-based visualisation, form-based visualisation, appearance-based schemata, memory

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Vpliv aktivne vizualizacije na sposobnost pomnjenja besedne definicije pri dijakih

Anamarija Šmajdek in Jurij Selan

∼   Doba vizualnih komunikacij vpliva na spoznavne strategije posameznika. Temu se mora prilagajati tudi šolstvo, zato se pojavljajo vprašanja, povezana z uporabo vizualizacije v izobraževanju. V raziskavi smo ugotavljali vpliv vizualizacije na sposobnost pomnjenja besedila. V teoretskem delu najprej opredelimo pojem vizualizacije, definiramo pojem aktivne vizualizacije, analiziramo vizualizacijo kot način pridobivanja in posredovanja znanja ter opredelimo oblike vizualizacij (podobotvorne in oblikotvorne analogije), pri čemer največ pozornosti namenimo podobotvornim šablonam. V empirični raziskavi nato izvedemo eksperiment, v katerem pri dijakih merimo učinke vizualizacije na sposobnost pomnjenja težko razumljive besedne definicije. Glede na teoretične ugotovitve si zastavimo dve hipotezi. V prvi predvidevamo, da bo večina vizualizacij, ki jih bodo tvorili učenci, podobotvornih šablon. Hipoteza temelji na predvidevanjih, da ljudje v vizualizaciji spontano uporabljamo podobotvorne analogije in kulturno priučene sheme, torej podobotvorne šablone. V drugi hipotezi pa predvidevamo, da bodo aktivne vizualizacije statistično pomembno pripomogle k pomnjenju besedne definicije. Ta hipoteza temelji na predvidevanjih, da kombinacija čutnih izkustev verbalnega in vizualnega krepi kognitivne sposobnosti pri učenju. Obe hipotezi smo v raziskavi potrdili. Ker smo v preučevali le vpliv najbolj spontanih vizualizacij, to je podobotvornih šablon, se odpirajo nadaljnje možnosti raziskovanja vizualizacij, pri katerih bi bil večji poudarek na kultivaciji likovnega jezika, to je na oblikotvorni kompleksnosti.

Ključne besede: vizualizacija, vizualni priklic, aktivna vizualizacija, podobotvorne analogije, oblikotvorne analogije, podobotvorne šablone, pomnjenje

"Neither feelings nor concepts,
but images are the fundament of human cognition."
(Muhovič, 1998, p. 43)

Introduction: Teaching about, within and with visuality

The era of visual communication affects the cognitive strategies of the individual. People are able to process visual data up to 60,000 times faster than text data (Burmark, 2002), and visual literacy is gaining in force and influence more than ever (Rutar Ilc, 2013). Nowadays, technology enables anyone to access images and image information, to process images, to recycle images and to produce their own images. Education must adapt to these changes, which raises questions regarding the cultivation of visual literacy and visuality in general.

We distinguish between teaching about visuality, teaching within visuality and teaching through visuality. *Teaching about visuality* includes learning (knowledge, understanding, analysis and evaluation) the concepts and content of visual perception theories, art theories, art history, fine art technology and other theoretical knowledge related to visuality. *Teaching within visuality* includes the systematic and continuous acquisition of visual expression knowledge, abilities and skills, and therefore the development of visual thinking, of the imagination and of the handling of artistic materials and tools in different fields of visual art (painting, drawing, photography, design, sculpture, etc.). Finally, *teaching through visuality* refers to how strategies of visualisation are used as a tool to teach other subjects: music, mathematics, language, history, etc. In this case, visuality becomes a mode to deepen understanding in other subject areas. In *teaching through visuality*, the methods and strategies of visual art are used to promote cognitive, emotional, experiential and motivational gain in other subject areas (Tomšič Čerkez et al., 2011, p. 221).

Given that, nowadays, the student's active role in education and constructive learning is emphasised, recognising the significance of visuality is even more important. The contemporary teacher is no longer treated just as a source of knowledge, but as a planner and designer of the learning environment, learning situations and learning processes, thus providing students with a suitable environment for personal development (Biesta, 2008). Hence, the modern teacher should be aware of the visuality of our era and should provide students with visualisation strategies.

In the present study, we therefore sought to evaluate the influence of visualisation, which is stimulated by the teacher, on the students' ability to acquire, understand and memorise knowledge.

Theoretical background

Active visualisation as a means of acquiring and conveying knowledge

Visualisation is the process of shaping thoughts into visual images or pictures, which can also include a physical form of encoding messages into material spatial relations.

For the purposes of the study, we distinguish between two modes of visualisation: passive and active. Generally speaking, all visualisation is active; however, there are two reasons why we find it useful to introduce the dualism of active/passive visualisation.

The first reason is cognitive. The spontaneous process of visualisation whereby images appear in thinking without the person him/herself being particularly aware of this should be distinguished from the active approach whereby the thinker actively involves him/herself in the process of visualisation, thus requiring his/her reflective engagement. Therefore, passive visualisation remains only at the level of spontaneous imagination, while active visualisation requires the visual articulation of the imagined in some material form and physical spatial relations (such as a drawing, a plan, a spatial model, etc.). Poet Paul Valéry described this critical role of active visualisation for cognition a century ago: "There is a big difference between observing an object without a pencil in the hand and seeing it whilst drawing. / … / Even the most well-known object becomes completely different when we try to draw it: we notice that we don't really know it, that we never really had seen it before" (Valéry, 1955, p. 40). Although in this quote Valéry specifically refers to the creative features of the artistic processes that take place while drawing (or painting, sculpting, etc.), this creative activity of visualisation carries a broader cognitive relevance for science and education. Anyone who wants to acquire and invent new knowledge will benefit significantly from "a pencil in the hand". Hence, scientists have always used the different dimensions of visual cognition in the process of inventing new knowledge (Trumbo, 1999, p. 419).

Frelih (2014) discovered that visualisation has a striking cognitive importance for persons with visual deficits, as well. He analysed examples of drawings made by blind persons after tactile observation of an object. The blind persons touched an unknown object (a model of an airplane) and drew (embossed) their concepts of it into a flat wet clay surface. Plaster casts of these drawings were then made to display a tactile relief. Analysing these "drawings", Frelih observes: "The drawing is not only an aesthetic object. Through its use,

we explain to ourselves what and how we see; therefore, it has cognitive potential. The participant received a model of an airplane and identified it as a fish by palpation. We did not disclose to her that she was deluded; we waited for her to draw it in clay and then palpated the cast relief of her embossed drawing. After palpating the cast relief of her clay drawing, the participant suddenly realised that the object she had drawn was not a fish, but an airplane. The drawing that the blind participant had made therefore informed her about the specific differences between the two otherwise structurally similar shapes: an airplane and a fish" (Frelih, 2014, p. 104). Based on these findings, Frelih concludes: "What a person has not yet understood, has not yet discovered and invented, is equally invisible to the blind as to the seeing" (Frelih, 2014, p. 100).

The second reason for differentiating between active and passive visualisation is educational. We distinguish between visualisations that are prepared by a teacher in advance and only communicated to a student in the learning process (and are therefore not an outcome of the student's own creative visual thinking), and visualisations that are constructed by the student him/herself with the intention of learning while articulating them. Whereas the artist is involved in active visualisation with the intention of expressing him/herself, and the scientist with the intention of discovering new scientific knowledge, the student engages in active visualisation in order to learn more successfully and to understand and memorise more deeply what s/he has learned. Since, in contemporary teaching doctrine, knowledge should not only be communicated by the teacher, but should be constructed by the student him/herself, visualisations premade by the teacher should also be replaced by the students' own active visualisations of the learning content: students should make their own drawings, images, models, schemas, diagrams, etc. In the learning process, the student's active engagement in visualisation is linked to his/her individual ability to construct knowledge, and therefore plays a key role in achieving higher levels in learning (e.g., of complex abstract concepts) (Twissel 2014, p. 188). In a similar sense, a passive visualisation, pre-constructed by the teacher, could also activate the student, if s/he reflectively reconstructs it by redrawing or reconstructing it. In the process of translating meaning from one modality to another (from visual to written form or vice versa), "transmediation" occurs in which the knowledge is rearticulated, with this reinterpretation consequently intensifying the conceptual links in knowledge production (Sort, Harst, Burke, 1996), or, as Muhovič puts it: "Through visualisation, a person is actively and constantly involved in the process of the (re)construction and (re)creation of information, or in the process of translating information that had been communicated to him/her in one modality into alternative modalities, thus expanding the scope of man's ability to operate with experience" (Muhovič, 1998, p. 44).

The concept of active visualisation is also closely related to the concept of visual communication and visual literacy. Mendelson (2004) defines visual literacy as an actively acquired ability that enables us to understand and interpret visuality. Complex achievements of visual literacy include visual learning, visual thinking and visual communication (Trumbo, 1999). Visual communication is the process of sending and receiving messages using visual images and representations in order to structure the message (Trumbo, 1999), while visual thinking is the ability of the mind to combine observation and understanding from every area of cognition (learning) (Arnheim, 1969).

Visualisation strategies between appearance-based and form-based analogies

Muhovič (1998) distinguishes between two types of basic visualisation strategies: appearance-based analogies and form-based analogies. Appearance-based analogies connect two phenomena based on the similarity/resemblance of their (superficial) appearance or content; examples are depiction and simulation of appearance, appearance reconstructions (explicit images, imaginative reconstructions of concepts, appearance-based schemata) and visual metaphors. Form-based analogies, on the other hand, bond two phenomena based on their structural equivalence and the spatial relationships of their formal structure; examples include visual metonymies, structural reconstructions, spatial formal models, schematic representations, mind maps, etc. According to Muhovič, form-based analogies are of a higher taxonomic level and are therefore an upgrade of appearance-based analogies.

Within the dualism of appearance-based and form-based visualisations, we further divide visualisations based on the level of their standardisation or schematisation. The presence of standardisation in visualisation partly coincides with the dualism of appearance-based and form-based visualisations: when there is little form-based thinking in progress, visualisation mostly relies on imitational or representational clichés. We therefore call such visualisations *appearance-based schemata visualisations.* These are not inventive visual expressions or inventive visual representations based on attentive observation, but visualisations in which imagery is articulated in a typical culturally trained manner, so little formal invention is present. They are mostly established when people, in their childhood, pick up certain generic (drawing) templates that originate in their society and culture; examples of such appearance-based schemata are spruces made of triangles, houses made of a triangle and a square with rectangles for windows and doors, windows divided by crosses, two arches for

flying birds, clouds made of semicircles, cloudlike trees, the sun represented in the upper corner of the drawing sheet by a line and rays, the sun made of a circle and rays, facial expressions as a smiley, stickmen, etc. In these drawings, stickmen are often accompanied by simple template attributes. Children and adults alike spontaneously use such stereotyped drawings, especially when they are trying to avoid too much effort and are aiming for rapid and economical solutions in visualisation. It is typical of the human mind to spontaneously aspire to such standard thinking patterns for reasons of economy (De Bono, 1989).

Despite such imagery schemata lacking inventiveness and formal ingenuity, they nevertheless represent the most basic, common, standard and widespread way of visualisation. We therefore wanted to test their educational potential in our empirical research.

The role of visualisation in education

In educational psychology, it is considered that learning is made easier and more efficient when information is perceived by multiple senses, which is particularly true for the simultaneous use of vision and hearing. Visuality plays the central role within human multimodal communication competence development (Britisch, 2009). It is the most important way of storing experience and is a springboard for creative thinking (Panić, 2005). Visual images also play a central role in literacy development. Pictures are a tool for learning the letters. A picture – for example, when a child browses through a picture book in his/her parent's lap – becomes a "conversation piece" that serves as a strategy for literacy development. Furthermore, seeing and sensing his/her own fingers is a child's first model for counting and calculating. With the aid of visual materials, the ability to observe is developed amongst students, the acquisition of new information is facilitated, acquired knowledge is made more permanent, etc. There is no subject in school that could not convey its knowledge through visual materials (Furlan & Kobola, 1970, p. 5).

Visualisation can be used in all stages of the learning process: as an introduction of the topic or to provide motivation; at the core of the lesson, to articulate concepts and illuminate content; and, at the end, to summarise, repeat and reinforce the knowledge and its application. Each subject area has its own characteristics that can benefit from the use of visualisations. Images are an indispensable tool in natural science education, either in the transfer of concepts or as instructions in an experiment, clarifying the procedures. In physics, images can be used for demonstration of the logic of equations for the density of materials, for anticipating the outcome of experiments, for simulating and

monitoring certain states, etc. (Udir, 2013). There are abundant visualisation possibilities for science education, which offer a variety of models embracing complex analogies and metaphors of real science objects. Thus, visual models are a simplified representation of reality and serve as a tool for interpretation and explanation, making it easier for students to understand and remember information (Vogrinc & Devetak, 2007, p. 198).

Abundant visualisation has not always been available, so one must also be aware of the negative aspects and pitfalls of visualisation in education. Whereas, in the past, visuality was largely excluded from education (Furlan & Kobola, 1970), teachers nowadays must be aware that students can be overloaded with images; they should therefore pay attention to carefully selecting images and helping students to extract what is essential from this plurality of images. Our time is marked by the intrusive inundation of images (Prevodnik, 2013); not all visual material is good, simply because it is visual. Therefore, the teacher must help students to process *visual information* out of the multitude of *visual data*. If visual content fails to display the subject in a clear and understandable way, it is incomprehensible and therefore harmful (Panić, 2005, p. 246). The ability to think critically about the images that surround us is one of the key skills today (Tomšič Čerkez, 2013, pp. 30–31). We should also be aware that visual materials can be highly comprehensible to people with previous experience and proper visual knowledge, but incomprehensible to people without the proper visual knowledge. Therefore, every visualisation in the learning process requires triangular verification: from the standpoint of the subject matter, the standpoint of its formal articulation or design, and the standpoint of the student's visual knowledge and abilities (Panić, 2005, p. 246).

Empirical research

Research problem, objectives and hypotheses

Mental visual representations have an impact on cognitive processes in the brain: on the control of movement, attention, perception, planning and memory. Therefore, through visualisations, the brain actually trains for a real action (LeVan, 2009). In order to enhance rapid reading, for instance, the brain uses images of words already known and forms new images of newly learned words. It is possible to locate a specific centre in the brain (VWFA, *visual word form area)* that is responsible for the visualisation of words (Jiang & Riesenhuber, 2015). This means that visual learning style is not a prerequisite for learning by visualisation, but all students can learn by visualisation equally (Mendelson, 2004).

Our brains closely support the memorisation of words in a visual way. Therefore, in the empirical research, we wanted to investigate the impact of active visualisation on the cognitive ability of students to memorise (difficult to understand) verbal definitions,[3] especially the effect of active visualisation on the long-term semantic memory (Tulving, 1972).[4] In addition, we were interested in the types of active visualisations that students spontaneously form for this purpose. We therefore established two hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: The majority of active visualisations that the students in the experimental group form will be appearance-based schemata visualisations. Hypothesis 1 is based on theoretical presuppositions that, in visualisation, people spontaneously use standardised appearance-based analogies, i.e., appearance-based schemata visualisations.
- Hypothesis 2: Active visualisation will have a statistically significant impact on the students' ability to memorise a verbal definition. Hypothesis 2 is based on theoretical expectations that the combination of verbal and visual perceptual experience strengthens cognitive skills in learning, which subsequently implies that visualisations that are added to verbal learning techniques significantly contribute to memorisation.

The sample and the timeframe of the research

In the experiment, four classes (two classes in two high schools) of first-year students were included (a total of 96 students aged 15–16 years). In each of the two schools, one of the two classes represented the experimental group and the other class the control group. The experimental group included 51 students and the control group 45 students. Comparability of the groups was tested with regard to achievements in art history tests. There were no significant differences between the groups (Mann-Whitney U Test p = 0.35).

The experiment was conducted from January 2015 to May 2015.

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3   This idea is based on earlier research (see Šmajdek, 2013) in which we investigated how high school students break down verbal definition by visualisation.

4   Since the person does not remember only the content of visualisation, but also the process of visualisation as an "event", and can therefore relive it in the memory, visualisation also has an impact on episodic memory. By impacting episodic memory, visualisation subsequently has an impact on semantic memory, since recalling the process of visualisation helps the individual to recall the content of what s/he has been memorising through visualisation.

Methodology and conducting of the research

The experiment was conducted at art class lessons. The students in both the control group and the experimental group were first presented with the same verbal definition, which we wanted them to understand and memorise. The following definition by Milan Butina, which defines the nature of a work of art, was presented to the students: "A work of art is a way of material existence of an artist's spiritual responses to the situation in nature and society." (Original in Slovene: "Likovna umetnina je način materialnega bivanja duhovnih odzivov umetnika na stanje v naravi in družbi.") (Butina, 1995, p. 347).

The definition was projected on a screen and the students were set the task of explaining and remembering the definition in two different ways, as described below.

In the control group, the students were, in the first step, asked to understand and remember the definition simply by reading it (reading repetition). In the second step, the projection was turned off and the students were assigned to pairs in which each student presented what s/he had understood and memorised to his/her classmate. In the third step, the students were asked to write down the definition by memory. Finally, in the fourth step, the students made a transcript of the definition from the projection and compared it to the definition written out by memory.

In the experimental group, the key difference in the process was that, besides understanding and memorising by reading repetition, visualisation was added, in the form of drawings. Thus, in the first step, in addition to reading the definition, the students were asked to understand and remember it with the aid of active visualisation, by drawing it. The students had five minutes for visualisation. In the second step, each student shared his/her drawing with a classmate in a pair and told him/her what s/he had understood and memorised. The third and the fourth steps were the same as in the control group. The students were asked to write down the definition by memory, after which they wrote a transcript from the projection and compared it with the definition written by memory.

Three weeks after the lessons, all of the students were tested. The test consisted of three tasks: "draw the definition" (the students had to visualise Butina's definition by memory by drawing it; the students in the control group therefore drew the definition for the first time, whereas the students in the experimental group drew it for the second time); "write the definition" (the students had to write down Butina's definition by memory); and "pick the correct statement" (the students had to circle two correct statements that paraphrased Butina's definition out of six offered).

In order to investigate Hypotheses 1 and 2, qualitative and quantitative methods were used.

Hypothesis 1 – the use of appearance-based schemata – was investigated by the formal visual analysis of the student's lesson drawings in the experimental group. Hypothesis 2 – the impact of visualisation on the ability to memorise and understand a verbal definition – was investigated using the results of the test. The results of the test were analysed qualitatively (using formal visual analysis and codification) and quantitatively (using statistics).

Figure 1

Figure 2

Research results and interpretation

Verification of Hypothesis 1

In order to verify Hypothesis 1, a formal visual analysis of the students' drawings in the experimental group (e.g., Figures 1 and 2) was used to determine the level of appearance-based and form-based visualisations. It was discovered that, in the vast majority of the drawings, the content of the words and phrases is converted into visual form through the use of those metaphorical images (i.e., visual metaphors) that are, predictably, superficially closest to the content expressed by the words, e.g., spirituality à a ghost; an artist à a man with certain attributes or one single attribute (a brush, a palette, etc.); existence à a house; society à a group of people; nature à trees, etc. These visual metaphors are also articulated in a distinctly schematised and standardised mode of appearance (a cliché ghost, a stickman, a box-like house with a triangle roof, trees made of triangles, etc.). We therefore established that, in most of the drawings, appearance-based schemata visualisations dominated.

In our opinion, the reason why the students used appearance-based schemata visualisations is as follows. The students did not receive any instructions to pay attention to the complexity and formal structure of their drawings, nor were they alerted to be attentive to artistic originality in their visualisations. Furthermore, they only had five minutes available for visualisation, so their visualisations had to be produced efficiently and quickly. The students therefore spontaneously resorted to the type of visualisation that enables a semantic message expressed by words to be more easily and quickly transferred into pictures. Consequently, they translated the content of the text into appearance-based analogies based on physical appearance. Due to the time limitation, and because the instructions only suggested the semantic aspect of visualisation, not the aesthetic and creative aspect, the students made appearance-based analogies requiring the least effort possible, leading them to use culturally trained clichés resulting in appearance-based schemata drawings. It can also be observed that many of the students' drawings are relatively small, positioned on the upper left-hand corner of the A4 paper, and drawn as a linear sequence from left to right. In this sense, the visualisations mimic the logic of a text, which, together with their appearance-based and schematic nature, gives them a kind of hieroglyphic character.

Based on the formal visual analyses of the students' visualisations, we concluded that our presuppositions in Hypothesis 1 – that, in visualisation, students spontaneously use appearance-based schemata visualisations – are confirmed.

Verification of Hypothesis 2

In order to investigate Hypothesis 2, we qualitatively (using formal visual analysis and codification) and quantitatively (statistically) analysed the results of the tasks in the test.

Task 1: "Draw the definition"

In the first task, we were interested in three things. First, we observed the visual memory (the visual recall) of the students in the experimental group, i.e., the extent to which the visualisations in the test matched the visualisations previously made during the lesson in class. Second, we wanted to give the students of the control group, who had not made visualisations during the lesson in class, an opportunity to make visualisations. We could subsequently observe how their visualisations differed from those of the students in the experimental group. Third, we were interested in the correlations between the control group and the experimental group in relation to the first task ("draw the definition") and the second task ("write the definition"). We were especially interested in whether any students in the control group would successfully visualise the definition (the first task), but would nonetheless have difficulties writing it down properly (the second task).

In the control group, 30 students (out of 45) solved the first task, meaning that 15 students in this group left the task unsolved. A formal visual analysis of the drawings made by the students in the control group revealed the following interesting findings. Most of the drawings are appearance-based schemata visualisations, and therefore analogous to the drawings of the experimental group. The most interesting finding, however, is that a small but significant number of drawings (11 out of 30) visualise the text itself and not the content of the text. These students obviously (mis)understood the instructions as requiring them to draw a picture of the text itself; for instance: a large or a small blank frame (Figure 3); wavy or straight lines that simulate text (Figure 4); the actual writing (word by word) of the definition (which means that the student obviously understood an inscription of a word as a picture of it) (Figure 5); pictures of notebooks or books with lines, while we simultaneously see the student's head drawn from behind and the brain inside (Figure 6).

Obviously, this suggests that many of the students in the control group memorised the picture of the text itself (e.g., how the text was projected on the screen), which is probably a consequence of the fact that, in the control group, the focus during the lesson was placed solely on verbal learning, hence the visual recall also adhered to the "image of the text".
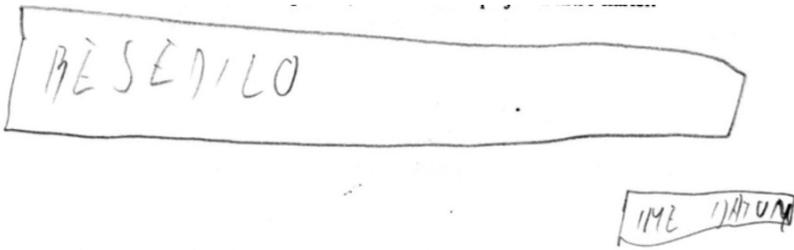
Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

The test drawings of the students in the experimental group were compared using formal visual analysis to the drawings that the same students had made during the research procedure in the lesson. This led us to the following conclusions: first, like the lesson drawings, the test drawings are appearance-based schemata visualisations; and second, there is a clear traceability between the lesson drawing and the test drawing of the same student. This means that most

of the students in the experimental group "visually quoted" their lesson drawings, which implies an easy and effective visual recall. However, when comparing the lesson drawings and the test drawings, certain modifications are also noticeable (see Figures 1 and 7 by the same student): in comparison to the lesson drawings, the test drawings reflect a tendency towards simplification (simplification of composition, adding or deleting frames, abandoning signs and adding others, abandoning or adding details, etc.) and unification with the drawings of other students; in general, there is a tendency towards abandoning individual, divergent elements and adding convergent, common elements. This can be explained by adaptation to the group, as, in the second step of the research procedure during the lesson, the students were engaged in social learning when discussing the definition in pairs and viewing each other's drawings. For example, if we compare drawings by the same student (Figures 2 and 8), we can observe the following: the perspective changes from first-person narrative (which is highly divergent) to third-person narrative (which converges with the group); in the test drawing, the details become more elaborate, with each concept gaining its own visual sign, and the whole drawing is more of a word for word illustration of the definition; a new smiley character appears, which visually symbolises the emotional responses of artists. It is also instructive to notice that the same student makes a successful literal, word by word transcription of the definition in the second task in the test ("write the definition"; see below, "Code 3" in Table 2).

Visualisations thereby prove to be a way to research and study the interaction between the process of individual learning and learning within the group as a learning community.
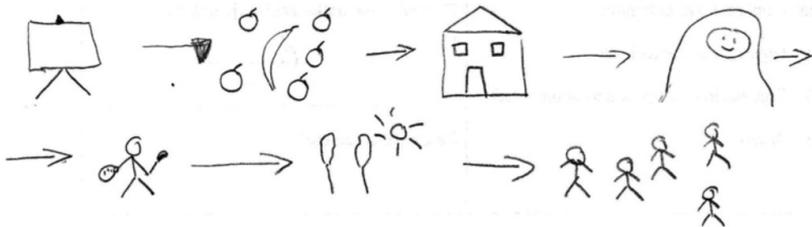
Figure 7
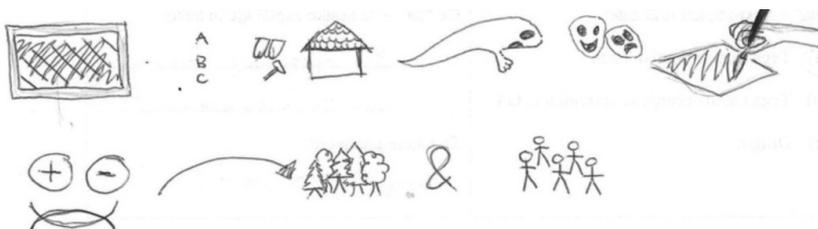
Figure 8

Next, we analysed the correlations between the first task, "draw the definition", and the second task, "write the definition", between the control group and the experimental group. The findings are as follows (Table 1):

Nine students (20%) in the control group did not solve either of the tasks, whereas there was only one such student (2%) in the experimental group. Therefore, 92% of the students in the experimental group solved both tasks, compared to only 56% of the students in the control group.

Six students (13%) in the control group only solved the second task, whereas there were no such students in the experimental group. This means that, in the experimental group, the visual experience complemented the verbal experience in every case, which confirms the assumption of the mutual reinforcing of multisensory experiences in memorising.

Five students (11%) in the control group solved the first task but did not solve the second task, whereas there were three (6%) such students in the experimental group. Two of these students in the control group made a correct and complex drawing (Figure 9 and 10), although they were not able to "write a definition" in the second task. In both groups together, there is a higher percentage (8%) of students who solved the first task only ("draw the definition") than students (6%) who solved the second task only ("write the definition"). This perhaps mirrors a characteristic of the contemporary generation of youngsters, who are more confident in expressing themselves in visual than in verbal media. Since taking the test was not obligatory in any way, the students could leave tasks that they found too difficult unsolved without any consequences; they therefore invested as much effort in the test as they wanted to. Thus, the fact that some students, when taking the test, were not able to express their knowledge verbally does not necessarily mean that they did not acquire the knowledge; on the contrary, it could indicate that they merely need another medium to express their knowledge. Based on the analysis of the drawings of both groups, it was concluded that even those students who have difficulties in forming meaningful written messages can visualise quite effortlessly. This indicates that contemporary students need alternative forms of expressing their knowledge in schools.

Table 1. *Correlations between the first task "draw the definition" and the second task "write the definition" in the test*

Group	Drawing and writing	No drawing – no writing	No drawing – writing	Drawing – no writing	Together
Control	25 (56%)	9 (20%)	6 (13%)	5 (11%)	45 (100%)
Experimental	47 (92%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	51 (100%)
Total	72 (75%)	10 (10%)	6 (6%)	8 (8%)	96 (100%)
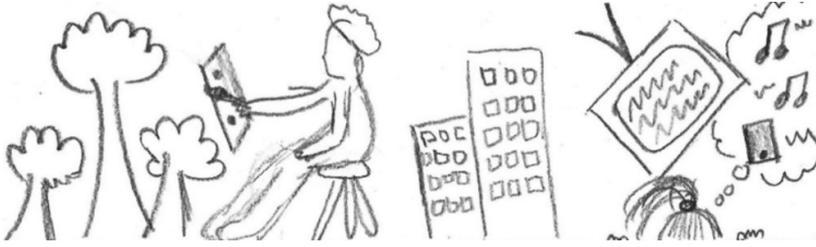
Figure 9

Figure 10

Task 2: "Write the definition"

The objective of the second task was to examine whether and to what extent the experimental group improved in their ability to memorise and understand the verbal definition in the long term in comparison to the control group. If a significant difference was found in this regard, it could be attributed to the impact of visualisation, as that was the only variable between the groups.

The students' answers were coded into six categories in relation to the degree of understanding and accuracy of the written definition (Table 2). In each example of the student's writing of the definition, we counted the number of concepts/terms that matched the concepts/terms in the original definition (we considered the concept/term to be correct even if it was used in a different declination or if the sequence of words was different from the original; however, we did not consider synonyms correct). The maximum possible number of concepts/terms is 11, which matches the number of concepts/terms in the original definition in Slovenian.

Table 2. *Categorisation and coding of the students' writings in the second task*

Level of memorisation	Categorisation and coding of writings	
	Literal accuracy	Understanding
High	**Code 3** Accurate record (tolerance of 1 error)	**Code 4** Proper understanding expressed in the student's own words (revealing internalised knowledge and its integration into the student's cognitive system)
Medium	**Code 2** Accurate with some errors (tolerance of 2–3 errors)	**Code 5** partial understanding
Low	**Code 1** Incomplete understanding or very inadequate record (more than 3 errors)	
Zero	**Code 0** No answer or only a few words that do not form a sentence	

Some interesting and illustrative examples of the students' writings in the second task are given below according to the different codes:

- Code 0: "Art, Society... I don't remember anything else."
- Code 1: "He drew a free composition, geometrical shapes with different colour shades and contrasts."; "Painting is a way of life in nature and society – the artist is drawing something..."; "A work of art affects the artist's society and the environment in which he is."; "Art is associated with spirituality."
- Code 2: "A work of art is a materially existential and spiritual response of an artist to the situation in nature and society."; "A work of art is a way of expressing the artist's existence and spiritual responses to the situation in nature."
- Code 3: "A work of art is a material existence of the artist's spiritual responses to the situation in nature and society."
- Code 4: "A work of art comes to life when an artist transfers his thoughts, impressions from nature and the relations between nature and society into some material form."
- Code 5: "A work of art is the author's expression in a material and spiritual way. It impacts society and nature."

Based on these categories, the students' answers were grouped as shown in Table 3. It was found that, in the experimental group in comparison to the control group, there is a statistically significant higher number of literally accurate records (Code 3) and records showing understanding (Code 4), and a

statistically significant lower number of tasks left unanswered (Code 0): (χ2) = 10 , 8 (p = 0.01). Comparing the number of concepts/terms used in the writings, we discovered that the students in the experimental group used a statistically significant higher number of concepts/terms from the definition (7 ± 3) than students in the control group (4 ± 4, Mann-Whitney U test p <0.01).

Table 3. *Number of student writings by category for the second task.*

Level of memorisation	Category	Number of student writings	
		Experimental group	Control group
High	Code 3 and Code 4	25	11
Medium	Code 2 and Code 5	15	14
Low	Code 1	7	6
Zero	Code 0	4	14

Task 3: *"Pick the correct statement"*

The results of the third task are presented in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 gives an overview of the number of correct statements chosen by the students in each group, while the Table 5 provides an overview of the number of incorrect statements chosen by the students in each group.

Table 4. *Overview of the number of correct statements per group*

Number of correct statements	Number of students	
	Experimental group	Control group
0	0	3
1	20	21
2	31	21
Total	51	45

Table 5. *Overview of the number of incorrect statements per group*

Number of incorrect statements	Number of students	
	Experimental group	Control group
0	37	39
1	14	3
≥ 2	0	3
Total	51	45

Table 4 shows that the students in the experimental group chose more correct statements (all of the students in the experimental group marked at least one correct statement). A total of 31 of the 52 students in the experimental group (61%) marked both correct statements, while the number of such students in the control group was only 21 out of 45 (47%); however, an χ^2 test shows no statistically significant differences. The number of incorrect statements per group (Table 5) reveals that the students in the experimental group chose statistically significantly fewer wrong statements than the students in the control group ($\chi^2 = 9.8$, p <0.01).

Conclusion

In our research, both of our hypotheses were confirmed: it was confirmed that the active visualisations that students use spontaneously are appearance-based schemata visualisations; it was also confirmed that the memorising of a verbal definition by students in the experimental group, where visualisation was added to verbal learning techniques, was better than in the control group, where students only used verbal learning techniques. Therefore, we can confirm that visualisation significantly contributes to memorising and understanding verbal definitions.

The type of visualisation investigated in our empirical research was appearance-based analogy; we therefore see two ways of further investigating the problem. Despite the fact that most of the students spontaneously acquired appearance-based schemata in their visualisations, we discovered that a higher level of formal awareness and ingenuity was present amongst individual students (e.g., Figure 11). Further research could therefore examine what type of visualisation students would acquire (and how it would impact memory and understanding) if they were more systematically encouraged to delve into the formal and aesthetic dimensions of visualisation. This also opens up the problem of the relationship between the artistic and the visual, a problem to which various degrees of importance are attributed by different authors. Authors who are not artists themselves (Barry, 1997; Plantinga, 1995; Williams, 2007) define artistic/visual literacy as one and the same, mainly placing importance on appearance-based visualisations. On the other hand, authors who are themselves artists (Butina, 1995; Muhovič, 1998; Selan, 2012) understand artistic literacy as formally more complex than visual literacy, thus differentiating between form-based and appearance-based visualisations. The question then arises as to how visualisations that are formally and aesthetically more complex (perhaps even artistic) influence memorisation and understanding in comparison to the spontaneous use of appearance-based schemata visualisations.
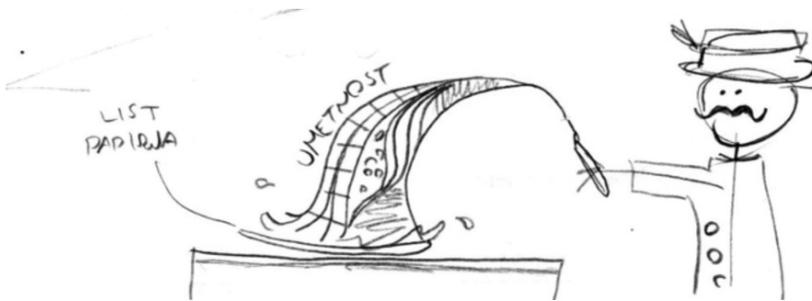
Figure 11

We can sum up as follows. Since visualisation obviously provides general cognitive benefits for students in memorising and understanding different school subjects, the education system should cultivate artistic/visual literacy in a similar way to verbal and mathematical literacy. In order to achieve this, teachers (not only art teachers, but all teachers) should themselves first master visual literacy and be trained in visualisation (just as they master verbal literacy). There are already some established practices of training teachers of different subject areas in visual literacy and the introduction of artistic practices into general educational use.[5]

Acknowledgements

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5   For instance, the programme of *Purdue University* (USA) for the professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language and for students of education is designed to strengthen the visual literacy of teachers, enabling them to use visualisation for the planning and implementation of their classroom practices (Britisch, 2009). In a similar way, the project *Boston High School Renewal Initiative* encourages teachers to actively introduce visual literacy into different classes. Also, at *Lesley University* (USA) the *Institute for the Use of Graphic Expression in the School System - GRAFIC Center for Design and Education* was established for promoting visual literacy amongst teachers (Myatt, 2008).

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Biographical note

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Roel Bowkamp and Sonja Bowkamp in collaboration with Clara Bartelds (2014). Blizu doma [Close to Home]. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, Pedagoška fakulteta, Inštitut za družinsko terapijo, 386 pp. ISBN 978-961-237-650-5.

Reviewed by Nina Mešl

The publication of this book by Dutch authors Roel Bowkamp and Sonja Bowkamp in the Slovenian sphere contributes valuable new knowledge about processes of support and help to families. The authors, who are the founders of the Kempler Institute in the Netherlands, have trained new generations of gestalt experiential family therapists in Slovenia for more than two decades. However, their work, now translated into Slovenian, reaches beyond psychotherapy and family therapy, as the book opens topics relevant to the diverse professions involved with people who need help at some point in their lives. The book is also welcome for the lay public, as readers can find answers to the many challenges faced in everyday personal life.

There are some points of emphasis that can be considered as particular strengths of the book. Throughout, the authors take a clear professional stance on collaboration with the family and others involved who can contribute to the desired outcomes. In this way, the work surpasses the often dominant way of thinking and acting when people need help. Although knowledge of systems theory entered the helping professions several decades ago, working with individuals is still rooted in everyday practice (the authors present research results according to which 85 percent of cases within the process of help and support deal with individual contacts, while only 3 percent deal with the family (p. 204)). The authors claim that professionals may choose to work with individuals because it seems easier (p. 203), but they also offer a clear invitation to move forward: "it is not true that we do not dare because things are difficult, but things become difficult, because we do not dare" (ibid.).

The authors draw attention to the problem of existing ways of helping multi-challenged families; specifically, to the numerous entries of various professionals into the family. Every professional is primarily focused on solving the part of the problem that has prompted him/her to enter into collaboration with the family. Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp (p. 301) address the problem of dispersion in the process of support and help to multi-challenged families with the metaphor of a broken car that is repaired part by part in different workshops, in the hope that the problem will be solved when the car is reassembled. Various professionals who deal with family problems in different areas, but separately, can represent a burden for the family, who too often remain without the support and help needed.

This emphasis is closely connected to the basic starting point of the authors' approach of being personally engaged as a professional when collaborating with families. The importance of the relationship established with people in the process of support and help is shifted to the fore. The reader can perceive a respectful attitude towards family members and a deep trust in people, who are competent and full of resources to achieve the desired changes. The professional also brings new experiences to the relationship, which can only materialise here and now, when we establish a personal relationship with people. In order to provide new learning about how to care for oneself and for each other, as well as for the relationship, it is important that the professional, through ongoing self-reflection, acts on the basis of taking his/her needs into account, as this will present the model for the interlocutor.

The basic thematic emphasis of the book is fresh. The authors do not write about so-called disorders, diagnosis, etc., which can quickly lead us in the wrong direction: we begin to silence the siren indicating a fire, while the house burns to the ground. They stress that the symptoms are not the focus of the fire, but a warning of its existence (p. 17). Patterns of family interactions are foregrounded, as they can lead to the development of many of the problems that cause people to seek help. Special value is added to the book with the segments of stories in which the authors illustrate the theory and show possible ways of acting through practical examples.

In three thematic sections, the book is structured in eleven chapters, with an appendix entitled *Towards a Pattern-Oriented Model of Intervision* as a support for team intervision based on the premises of the book. The Slovenian translation begins with a foreword by the Slovenian editor, which importantly bridges the Dutch book with Slovenian context. The challenges of adjustments and of the search for appropriate terminology for the Slovenian translation are also presented in this introduction. The editor's footnotes throughout the book,

which extend understanding and help to put the Dutch authors' writing in the Slovenian context, are also a great help for the reader.

In the first part of the book, entitled *Patterns of Interactions in Families*, the authors illustrate possible patterns of interactions between parents and children, which are formed on a synthesis of the theoretical starting points of attachment theory and a model of structural analysis of social behaviour, supported by rich practical experiences of collaboration with families.

The second part of the book, entitled *Patterns in the Processes of Support and Help*, is structured in three chapters, in which the authors present patterns of interactions between professionals and people who need support or help. Throughout the chapters, there is a detailed description of patterns of interactions that can be provoked by the person in need or by the professional, while possible professional traps are presented along with support for professionals to overcome these traps.

Patterns in the Field of Psychosocial Acting is the title of the third, most extensive part of the book. Through six chapters, behavioural patterns are presented that may be encountered in different areas of psychosocial acting. Various areas are covered: so-called outpatient treatment, the mental health field, child and adolescent protection, and institutional care for children and adolescents. In all of the chapters, the authors work from an interdisciplinary approach aimed at connecting the various professions that can contribute their share to the desired changes in people's lives. The eleventh and final chapter offers guidance for ongoing, effective help to overcome the problem of families and professionals being caught in the vicious circle that inevitably leads to paralysing and suspending the processes of support and help (p. 313).

The publication of the book *Blizu doma* in Slovenian is very welcome. It must have been a challenging task for the translator Stana Anželj to adapt the terminology to the Slovenian context. In several parts of the book, the translator and the editor have successfully contributed to the careful development of language that reflects the contemporary understanding of concepts of help. In some parts, however, the terminology is somehow still rigid and for the language-sensitive reader may raise questions about a consistent understanding of the role of the professional as a respectful co-creator of help *with* people, as opposed to possessing the truth and the right answers for a person (e.g., the denomination of healthy and unhealthy adults and children). Nonetheless, this undoubtedly substantive thematic contribution offers an opportunity for further discussion and the development of a contemporary, collaborative understanding of processes of support and help, and with this the development of related terminology.

I understand *Blizu doma* as a professionally and personally engaged invitation for the reader to step closer to home in the processes of support and help or in personal life (being personally engaged in a collaborative community supports people to co-create the desired outcomes and enables them to begin to write new, desired personal stories). The merit of the book lies in the fact that the writing does not merely offer an invitation; it is a work that theoretically and practically shows possible ways and suggests possible answers to the often overlooked question of the helping professions: how to act.

List of Referees in Year 2016

The members of the editorial board would like to thank the reviewers for their professional review of the contributions.

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