

# *Participatory action research with vulnerable families*

*“You just come over, we’re home all day.”*

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# The research context

## 3 Research projects

*Situation analysis and needs assessment among vulnerable families (2014)*

*Study of the coordination among the parties involved in supporting vulnerable families and action development of the flexible forms of support (2015)*

*Experiences of children and adolescents from vulnerable families about the sources their strenght and the support (2016)*

The development of flexible models of support

Students – volunteers involvement

Participation: many modes and levels

## Who are the participants and the actors?

**Vulnerable families** (presentation based on one family - parents & 7 children from Ljubljana)

### **Researchers/volunteers**

**Students – volunteers** from Faculty of Education in Ljubljana (Social pedagogy; Preschool education; Special and rehabilitation pedagogy-  
Speech and language therapy)

**Kings of the Street Association** (providing support for families who experience housing risk or homelessness)

**Other professionals** from the institutions associated with the family/members

## Hans Thiersch: Lifeworld orientation

working in the field of people's life

Thiersch, H. 1992. *Lebensweltorientierte Soziale Arbeit*,  
7. ed., Weinheim and München: 2009, Juventa.

*“[...]we need to start with the problems and the needs of the people and their own interpretation of their situation in their own situation.”*

*“[...] users of social work services are in between the ‘system’ and ‘everyday life’, and social work institutions are always at risk of colonizing the ‘everyday world’ .... “*

*“[...]we should immerse ourselves in the places where social problems occur, in the complex realities and not just in theories, in the context of the rules of organizations and institutions that serve them.”*

From interview with Thiersch (2014), *The International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, vol.3 (1)

## Immersion, what does it means in everyday life?

*„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."*

*(Volunteer 1)*

# Immersion, what does it means in everyday life?

*to participate in people's lives... to be present  
and involved*



*to celebrate...*



*... in their home...*





*Vacations and free time events...*





*sharing fun...*

*and more fun...*



*Lifting up...*



# Immersion, what does it mean in terms of support/promoting change in the family?

## Dialogical and participative nature of interventions

- Family situations imply further steps  
...directions of change are set and established through negotiation  
... and continuous encountering of different views and perspectives of all the participants
- Challenges are open and set to the family  
... while supporting the family's/the member's own resources.

Continuously accompanied by:

- reflection and dealing with uncertainty and dilemmas (eg. on child-centeredness)

# Immersion, what does it mean in terms of research?

## Continuous exchange of reflection and action

**Reflection:** to understand, to explain, to reveal ... in the context of everyday situations (ethnographic approach; many sources of information and methods, qualitative analysis of the meaning)

**Participation (indirect)** of the family (members) in the research: through sharing everyday experiences, talking and negotiating the directions of the research are influenced.

**Action:** to introduce family/case conferences and other forms of (flexible) support

**Participation (direct)** of the family (members) in the research: by expressing suggestions, visions, further steps... the goals of the research are modified.

## Family group conferencing...

- ... has democratising potential
- ... prioritizes the family's power and the practice of cooperation
- ... has transformative potential as it is able to diminish power imbalance

## Family group/case conferences - topics and discussions

- Child's entry in the school with a special program, despite the fact that the opinion issued by the kindergarten experts differed from the Commission's decision.
- The possibilities of further schooling of children after completing primary level education with a special program.
- Enrollment of youngest child to kindergarten, which was blocked bureaucratically due to unpaid care allowance for kindergarten from the past.
- The wellbeing of the child (externally declared as mood swings, lethargy and learning difficulties) and discussion on diverse treatments (including psychiatric) of those involved.

# Participatory action research is...

- a social process
- participatory
- practical and collaborative
- emancipatory
- critical
- reflexive
- aims to transform both theory and practice

Kemmis and Mc Taggart (2005)

**The opportunities for more accurate and authentic research**  
getting closer, respectfulness, resource-based, search for  
balance ...

*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. Because 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 that we can get something done.*

*(Volunteer 2)*

The active role of family members and other participants in defining, analyzing and solving identified research problems  
non-invasiveness, flexibility, the risk of paternalism

...

*Some of the children are much more open and say a lot more, are more proactive, which was also observed by childcare workers and pedagogues 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 workers started thinking about the suitability of the existing lines of specialized schooling for the children etc. ... It's difficult to say what the positive effects of our participation were, but things are changing.  
(Volunteer, 3)*

## Process of making connections ...

- **awareness of the context** - the use of variety and the flexibility of approaches, and developing new one
- **bringing different perspectives together** - the family should have the central role
- **creative innovative solutions that arise from dialogue between the various actors** (the family and its support network)
- **constant search for a balance**
- **the benefits of the mutual collaboration**

*Supporting the elevated perspectives of the world...*



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