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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)

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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 con-versation to make things right." (H2)

Parents' experiences and the needs of vulnerable families

As parents' experiences show, vulnerable families sometimes need cer-tain adjustments or flexible forms of direct practical help. The narration giv-en below, by a mother who lives with her children in a housing support pro-gramme, 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 chil-dren, 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 par-ents 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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