

EuSARF2025

TRANSFORMATION, TRANSITION AND INNOVATION IN CHILD WELFARE

Date

**8-12 September
2025**

Preconferences

**8-9 September
2025**

Main conference

**10-12 September
2025**

**University of Zagreb Faculty of Education
and Rehabilitation Sciences
Zagreb, Croatia**

Organizers: European Scientific Association on residential and Family Care for Children and Adolescents (EuSARF) and University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences
EUSARF2025 is under the auspices of the University of Zagreb



 **EuSARF**
EUROPEAN SCIENTIFIC ASSOCIATION
ON RESIDENTIAL AND FAMILY CARE
FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS



CREATING SPACE FOR LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCES

Embedding experiential knowledge in child welfare and protection in Flanders

Mieke Gesquiere & Chris Swerts

HOGENT University of Applied Sciences & Arts
Zagreb, Croatia, 10-09-25

EuSARF2025
TRANSFORMATION,
TRANSITION AND
INNOVATION IN
CHILD WELFARE

EQUALITY

ResearchCollective

Engaged

Questioning power and privilege

Unconventional

Action-oriented & participatory

Lived experience

Interwoven

Transformative

Yes, to critical collaboration



CONTEXT POLICY & PRACTICE



- Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Youth Care Action Plan: recognition of experiential knowledge
- Structural funding for client organizations

RESEARCH DESIGN

experiential knowledge

noun

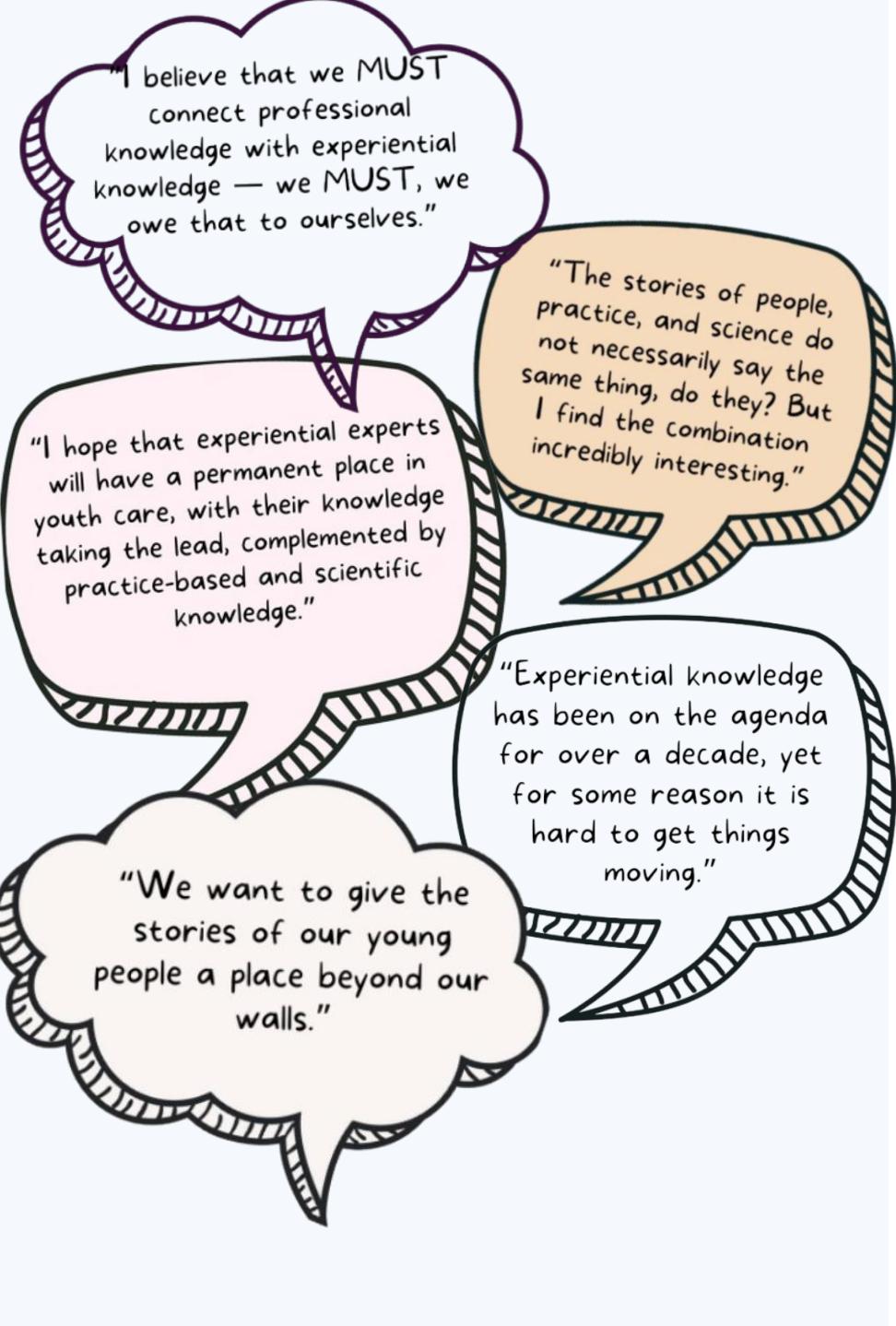
knowledge developed through reflection on personal experiences in socially vulnerable life situations.

- “How can experiential knowledge contribute to supporting young people in youth care as they take the step towards independent living?”
- 23 qualitative interviews - thematic analysis
 - youth care organizations
 - advocacy groups
 - policymakers

RECURRING TENSIONS?



1. Paradox of recognition without action
2. Conceptual ambiguity
3. Tokenism & box-ticking
4. Struggles with structural embedding

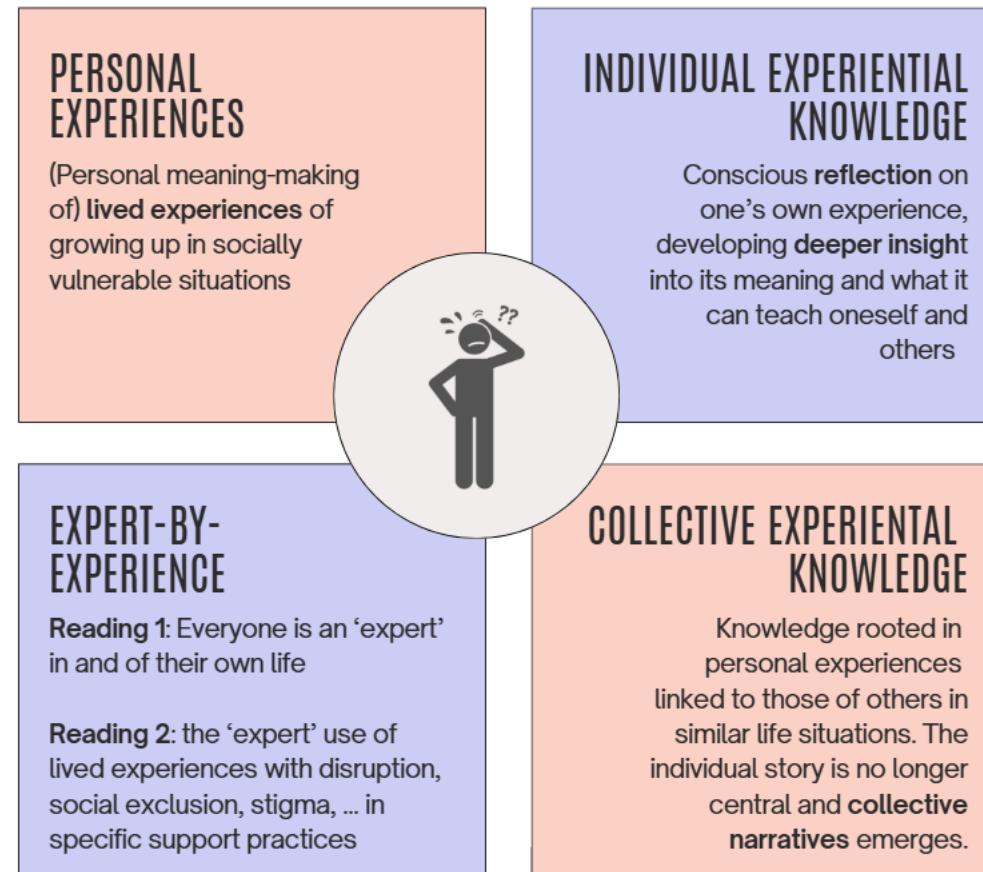
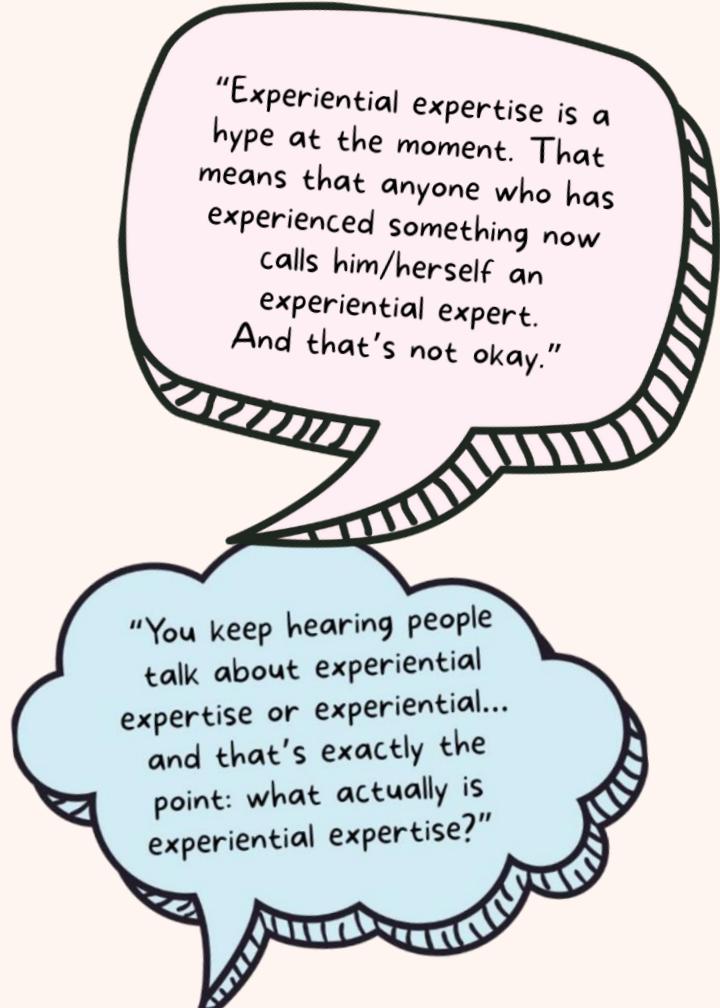


CHALLENGE 1: BRIDGING THE GAP Recognition__embedding



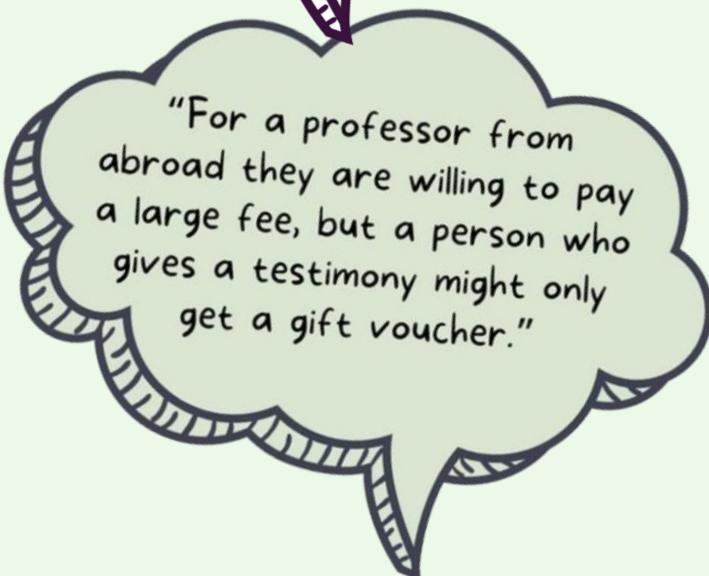
recognize → value → apply → embed

CHALLENGE 2: CONCEPTUAL CLARITY





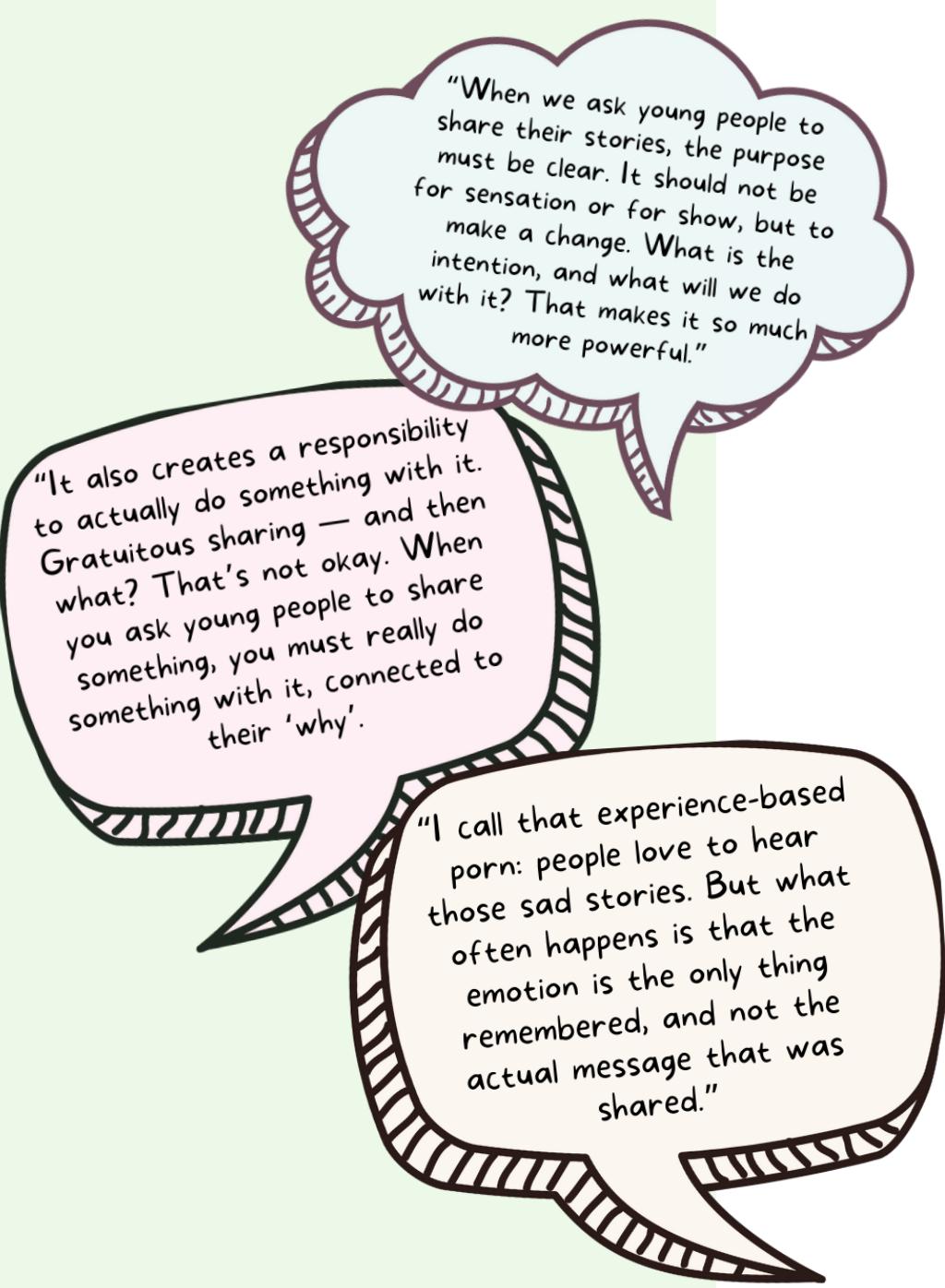
"They say they want to involve experiential experts... but there is nothing said about payment. That is not included in the reform agenda."



"For a professor from abroad they are willing to pay a large fee, but a person who gives a testimony might only get a gift voucher."

CHALLENGE 3: MOVING FROM TOKENISM TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

- Recognition often symbolic
- What you share is (not) important (to pay for)
- Unclear purpose
- No feedback
- No genuine place at the decision-making table



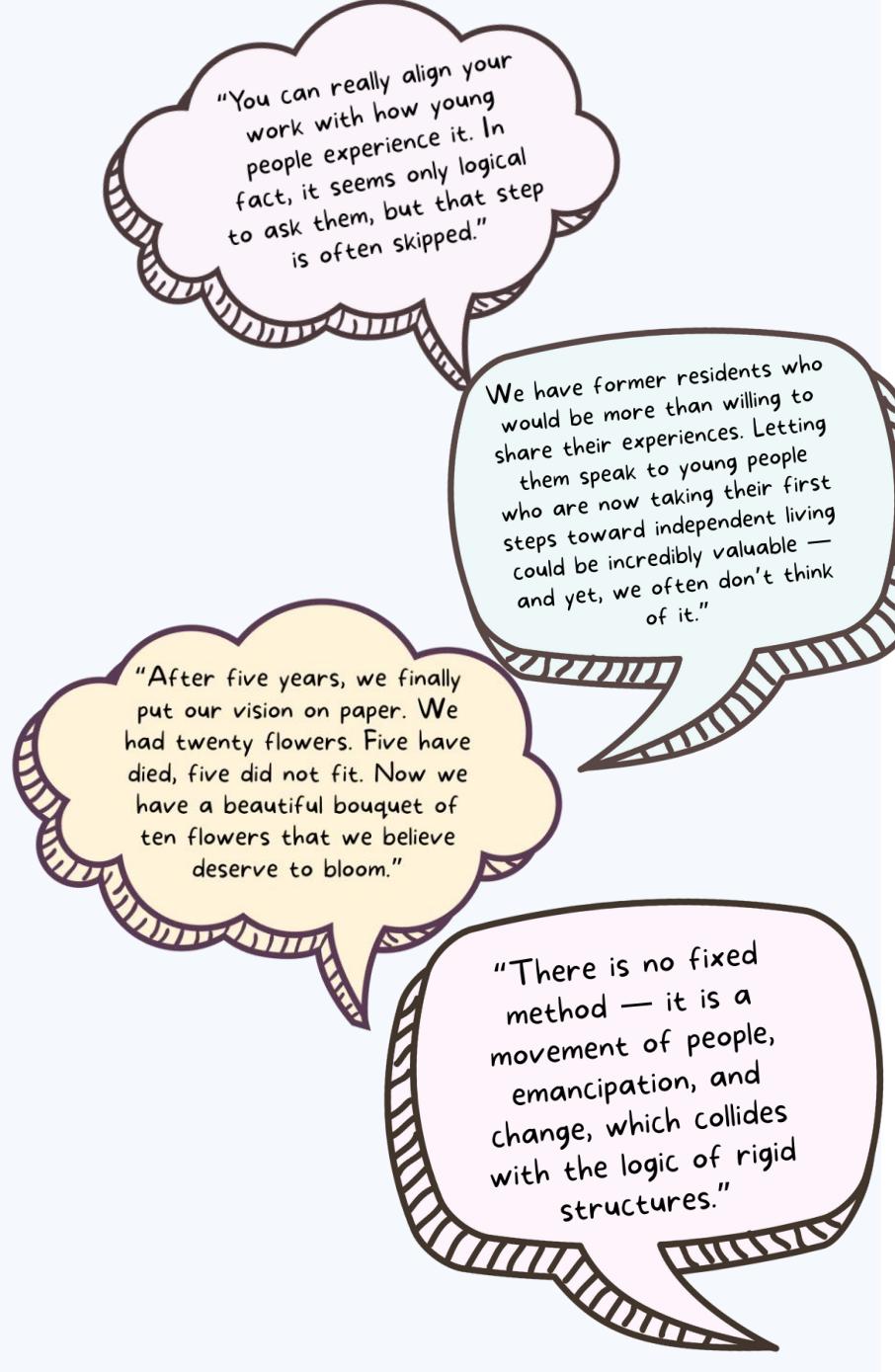
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CHALLENGE 4: STRUCTURAL EMBEDDING

- Goodwill is present, but systematic approaches are missing
- Many initiatives remain fragmented, ad hoc, or project-based.
- Structural change requires time, resources, and cultural shifts.

WHY IT MATTERS?

Micro level

- Strengthens *trust* between youth and professionals
- Offers *peer support* and *recognition* ('I am not alone')
- Makes help *more accessible* and *relatable*

"The mirrors young people hold up to us are invaluable."

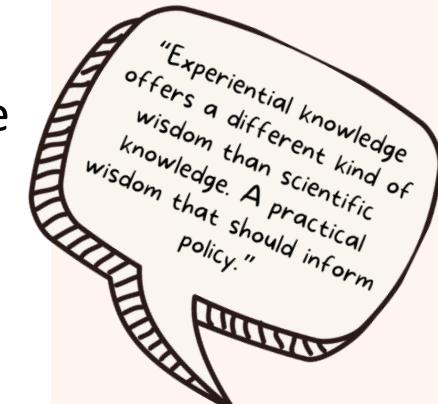
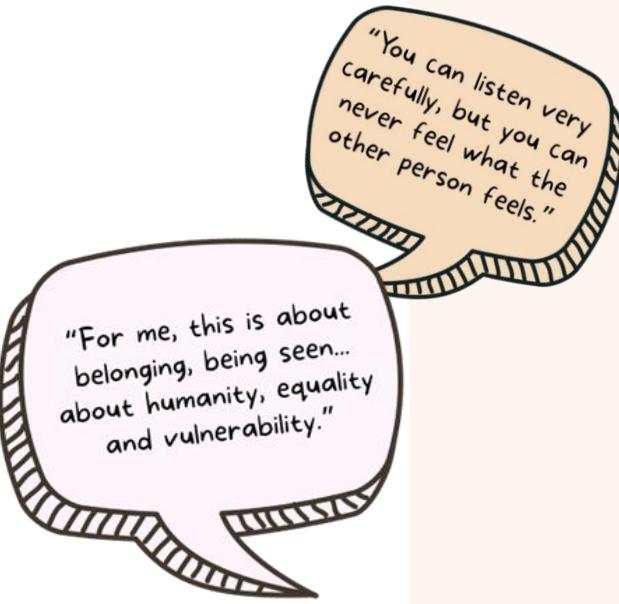
For a very long time, you were only considered professional if you could maintain professional distance. It takes time to unlearn that mindset.

Meso level

- Improves the *quality of services* by aligning them with lived realities
- Encourages participation and *co-creation* within youth care organizations
- Challenges professional routines, fostering *innovation in practice*

Macro level

- *Insider perspective* in policymaking
- Strengthens *legitimacy* and *democratic quality* of decisions
- Exposes *systemic barriers* and *injustices*



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS TO TAKE HOME?



- In what ways do I provide **space** for the lived experiences of people.
- Do I treat a young person's story as material for **learning** in my practice, or as just an anecdote?
- What concrete **changes** in my practice can I trace back to insights gained from young people's experiences?
- What would it look like if **experiential knowledge** was not an addition, but the **starting point** of my work?
- To what extent do I allow my **own practice** to be **questioned** by young people's experiences?

May we all get to taste
real štrukli
and
may we all ensure that
lived experience
becomes the true flavor of
policy.

