

# 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*

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Zagreb, Croatia, 10-09-25

# 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

"Experiential expertise is a hype at the moment. That means that anyone who has experienced something now calls him/herself an experiential expert. And that's not okay."

"You keep hearing people talk about experiential expertise or experiential... and that's exactly the point: what actually is experiential expertise?"

### PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

(Personal meaning-making of) lived experiences of growing up in socially vulnerable situations

### INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

Conscious **reflection** on one's own experience, developing **deeper insight** into its meaning and what it can teach oneself and others



### EXPERT-BY-EXPERIENCE


**Reading 1:** Everyone is an 'expert' in and of their own life

**Reading 2:** the 'expert' use of lived experiences with disruption, social exclusion, stigma, ... in specific support practices

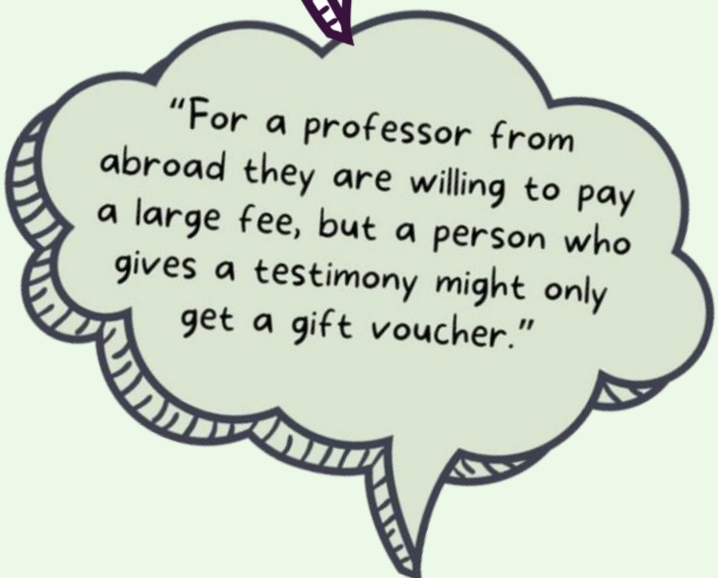
### COLLECTIVE EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge rooted in personal experiences linked to those of others in similar life situations. The individual story is no longer central and **collective narratives** emerges.





"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




"When we ask young people to share their stories, the purpose must be clear. It should not be for sensation or for show, but to make a change. What is the intention, and what will we do with it? That makes it so much more powerful."

"It also creates a responsibility to actually do something with it. Gratuitous sharing — and then what? That's not okay. When you ask young people to share something, you must really do something with it, connected to their 'why'."

"I call that experience-based porn: people love to hear those sad stories. But what often happens is that the emotion is the only thing remembered, and not the actual message that was shared."

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It's nice that you're asked to think along. But in reality, you are just briefly invited, you say a few words, and then they check the box: 'experiential experts were consulted.'

"If you really want to do something with experiential knowledge, then include us from the very beginning in your process. It is of no use to us to only read a report at the end and then be asked to comment."

"A lot of input is asked for, but too often there is no feedback."

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"You can really align your work with how young people experience it. In fact, it seems only logical to ask them, but that step is often skipped."

We have former residents who would be more than willing to share their experiences. Letting them speak to young people who are now taking their first steps toward independent living could be incredibly valuable — and yet, we often don't think of it."

"After five years, we finally put our vision on paper. We had twenty flowers. Five have died, five did not fit. Now we have a beautiful bouquet of ten flowers that we believe deserve to bloom."

"There is no fixed method — it is a movement of people, emancipation, and change, which collides with the logic of rigid structures."

## 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*

"For me, this is about belonging, being seen... about humanity, equality and vulnerability."

"You can listen very carefully, but you can never feel what the other person feels."

"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*

"Experiential knowledge offers a different kind of wisdom than scientific knowledge. A practical wisdom that should inform policy."

## 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.

