

Univerza v Ljubljani
Fakulteta za socialno delo

Gordana Horvat

The role of a family group conference in child foster care from a social work perspective

Vloga družinske skupinske konference pri rejništvu otrok z vidika socialnega dela

Doctoral Dissertation

Doktorska disertacija

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Study program: Humanities and Social Sciences, Scientific field: Social work

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Mentor: Assoc. Prof. Jana Mali, PhD

Co-mentor: Prof. Vito Flaker, PhD

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The role of a family group conference in child foster care from a social work perspective

ABSTRACT:

The protection of children's rights, the importance of deinstitutionalisation in the field of child protection and the reduction of institutionalisation of children, including the right of the child to grow up in an environment as close as possible to the family-like, are the strategic orientations of Croatian policy. Foster care system has a long tradition in Croatia, which represents a potential for the development of quality foster care and an important resource for social work with children. The stagnation of the deinstitutionalisation process, the insufficient number of foster parents and the increasing number of children removed from their primary families make it clear that research on foster care and the development of social work methods are necessary. Social work does not have adequate responses to the increasingly complex needs of users in the foster care system and the support processes do not involve all participants in the foster care. Changes in the foster care system can be designed with the help of ecological systems theory, which makes it possible to understand the foster care system on several levels, on the micro, meso and macro level. The change in the child's life at the micro level should also be reflected at all other levels. Inclusion in the community and the ability to make independent decisions about life require a different approach to users in social work, as well as the development of new methods adapted to social changes and the real needs of users. One such method, which is not known in social work in Croatia, is the family group conference. It is based on the principles of social work such as respect for human and children's rights, social justice and empowerment of users and families for independent and complex problem solving. The family group conference reduces the risk of a power imbalance between the family and the professionals and aims to normalise the child's life in the new family. It is based on the theory of empowerment and the creation of opportunities where the family acquires new knowledge and skills to mobilise their own resources. The values of the family group conference are based on social work values, such as the active and equal participation of users in decisions about their lives and linking them to resources in the community. The involvement of the wider family and professional network in family work is important for the transition from individual to collective responsibility and provides new resources for family support. The basic form of conducting family group conference is group work as one of the methods of social work practise, which requires the application of group work principles and knowledge of group dynamics. The family group conference is a good example of co-operation and achieving a balance of power between social workers and families, respecting the principles of participation and emancipation of all users involved. Emancipation is a core value in social work and in the foster care it enables liberation from negative systemic influences. Respect, equality and the mobilisation of each individual's potential to overcome difficulties are elements of emancipation in social work, for which space must be created when working with users so that they can make autonomous decisions about their own lives. In Croatia, there is no clear model for foster care and the methods of social work in foster care are not developed for work with all users involved. The child, his or her well-being, protection and safety are the most important aspects of support that are at the centre of both foster care and the family group conference method. The method enables the child to participate on an equal footing and reduces the risks to the child. Despite strategies, plans, laws and protocols at the political level aimed at developing the foster care, the practise of foster care in Croatia has not evolved for many years. On the contrary, institutionalization is increasing again and seems to be a reaction to problems in social work practise, namely the lack of placement capacity, which points to the need for research in the field

of foster care on a theoretical and practical level. Research data shows that the number of children placed in institutions for children rather than alternative care has increased in recent years. This is at odds with national strategies that advocate continuing the process of deinstitutionalisation, preventing institutionalisation and strengthening communities in the provision of help and support. Increasing bureaucratisation is also contributing to the burden on the welfare system and its effects are also visible in the foster care.

The dissertation pursues several objectives. The first is to analyse the foster care process with the aim of understanding how all participants are involved in the help process and to provide a transparent presentation of the process and the way of working with everyone involved. The second objective is to analyse the potential contribution of the family group conference method in bringing all participants together, engaging the community and create a space for joint collaboration. The third objective is to develop new knowledge needed for change in the foster care system. By identifying barriers and opportunities at the family, institutional, community and social policy levels, the aim is to determine what is needed to implement the family group conference method at a theoretical and practical level. In accordance with the aims of dissertation, the thesis (T) and research questions (RQ) are formulated:

T1: Due to the bureaucratisation of the work and the lack of knowledge, experience and resources, social workers rarely practise the method of group work, which includes principles of emancipation and participation, when working with foster families. RQ1: What social work practises currently exist in the field of foster care? RQ2: How do social workers understand the principles of emancipation and participation of family members in the foster care process? RQ3: How do social workers organise work with foster families and how are the child, the primary family and the foster family involved in important decisions? RQ4: What current circumstances in social work and foster care practise limit the potential for developing supportive networks in the community?

T2: Elements of family group conference are present in foster care process in current social work, as social workers are familiar with the principles of empowerment, equal participation, the importance of taking control of one's life, co-operation and engaging the wider community network. RQ1: What characteristics of family group conference are present in current social work practise? RQ2: How do social workers ensure that the child's voice is heard throughout the care process? RQ3: How do social workers involve community networks and services to support the child and family to gain more control over their lives?

T3: The application of family group conference leads to less institutionalisation of the child, normalisation of community support networks, the formation of theories for working with families and changes at system level. RQ1: How does the family group conference contribute to the alternative, non-institutional placement of the child and the deinstitutionalisation of the foster care? RQ2: How do the experiences of all participants in the family group conference process shape social work knowledge in foster care? RQ3: How do we link the reflection on practise with the family group conference method and establish participatory and emancipatory social work in foster care? RQ4: What actions are needed in the community, in institutions and in politics to implement the family group conference in the foster care process?

The research approach of the dissertation is action-orientated and manifests itself in a cyclical action process of an action group of social workers and myself as researcher, which constitutes professional action research. Before starting the research, the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Ljubljana was obtained. The research started with unstructured interviews with the counselling group of social workers in order to train the researcher and to obtain data on the fostering process, as required by the thesis and the research questions. The population of social workers working in the field of foster care in the regional offices of the Croatian Institute of Social Work was included in the study. The enrolled participants received training in family group conference at the beginning of the research, after which an action group of six social workers, including myself, was formed. The research design consists of three research phases, with each phase addressing one of the theses and the associated research questions. The qualitative approach consists of several different methods of data collection, including observation with participation, semi-structured interviews, discussions, diary notes and training. The triangulation of qualitative methods in the research enabled a better understanding of the research area, different insights into the participants' experiences and lived realities of working in foster care. In the final phase of the research, foster parents, primary families and children took part in a family group conference training where they shared their impressions and opinions on the applicability of the method in foster care practise. The empirical data is analysed qualitatively, using methods to summarise and group into thematic units and to identify codes and concepts, which are interpreted narratively and summarised in the results and discussion.

The results of the analysis of foster care practise show that foster care is a complex and demanding process with different paths. Group work, which involves the participation and emancipation of all users involved, is not included in the practise of social work in foster care, mainly due to the bureaucratisation of social services. The method of personalised planning has become an administrative part of the foster care process in which not all users involved. Decision-making in the fostering process is tied to the way in which all participants are involved, which shows the lack of emancipation of users and the lack of understanding of emancipation on the part of social workers. The decision-making power lies with the social workers, while the other participants are occasionally involved, but mostly for administrative reasons. The practise of foster care differs in the regional offices, as do the possibilities for social workers to take a different approach and greater involvement of participants, depending mainly on the time available for social workers to work with the users. The involvement of participants in the foster care is partial, depending on the stage of the fostering process and the commitment of the social worker. Community and social support networks are rarely involved in the foster care process, depending on the resources available in the community, the services developed, and the size of the family's social network. Connection to resources in the community is influenced by elements at three levels: the institutional level, i.e., how well the social worker is informed about and connected to resources in the community; the personal level, i.e., how motivated and committed the social worker is to connecting to resources in the community; and the social worker's knowledge required to understand the transition from individual to collective and community support.

The analysis of fostering has provided the basis for identifying the elements of the family group conference that are present, absent or partially present in the fostering process. The elements that are not present include the equal participation of the primary family and the person representing the child. Elements that are present include the child's voice and right to express their opinion, respect for cultural differences, transparency, building a positive relationship with all participants and language that is understandable to users. Most of the elements of the family group conference

are partially present, influenced by the different practises in the regional offices and by the situations and possibilities of the social workers to apply each element in their work. The practise of joint planning varies, because sometimes the planning is done with each participant individually, sometimes the participants are only involved in the planning of the phases that concern them, or no one is involved except the social workers who draw up the plan themselves. The research focusses in particular on the search for practises for the active participation of children in help processes. The findings point to three dimensions that influence a child's involvement in the foster care process. The first dimension is the place where the meeting and discussion with the child takes place, which is most often the regional office and less often the child's home. The second dimension is the phase of the foster care process in which the child is spoken to. This is usually the case before the child is separated from primary family, when the child is informed that they will be placed in a foster care, during the planning phase and during visits to the foster family. The topics of conversation are the third dimension and show that it is mostly about the child's daily routine, friends, mum and dad and how they spend their time or what they do together. Although the child has the space to express their opinion, their voice has no influence on the decision to separate from the family. The child's voice is an important part of the family group conference, while the voice of the wider social support network is also included. The results of our research show that families most often rely on informal social support networks represented by friends, relatives or neighbours, while formal support networks are often not available or uninvolved, so collaboration with the primary family is not evident.

The findings of the first and second theses form the basis for the results of the third thesis, which analyses the possibilities of using family group conferencing, its contribution to preventing institutionalisation and the resources required to apply the method in practise. The analysis of research in this area shows that the method reduces institutionalisation in several ways: it increases the likelihood of a child being placed in kinship care, fewer children leave foster care and are placed in residential care and a greater number of children return to their primary family. The results of training for foster carers, children and primary parents show that the method is useful in two ways: as a preventative measure against the removal of the child from the family and during the foster care process. In the foster care process, it can be used at the time of the child's removal from the family, in the planning phase or during the foster care process, for example, to improve the relationship between the primary and the foster family. The results also show that the method is suitable for both kinships foster carers and foster carers with support needs.

In order to put the method into practise, several levels must be mobilised, such as the political level, the legislative level, the institutional level of regional offices and the education system, in order to introduce the method. The results of the dissertation show that the foster care system is legally and professionally defined in such a way that the active role of the participants is not desired. The family group conference method is a good way for social work to ensure an active role of the participants in the foster care system by creating a social network from the community that helps to solve problems. It is important for social work to bring all participants together to solve family problems. All participants need to be connected to other levels, such as systems that can provide the resources needed by the family and the community. It is precisely this connection that the family group conference method offers, which is a good solution for social work, whose role is precisely that of a link between the system and the family. The family group conference creates a space for the participation and emancipation of the participants, a balance of power between professionals and the family and the right of the family to actively participate in decisions about their own lives. It changes the way of working with families, moving from the usual work

with families to work with families in the community. It enables the expansion of the support network for families in the community and networking with multidisciplinary professionals. Social work does not have enough knowledge and methods to bring together all participants involved in the foster care process. Therefore, the family group conference represents a new theoretical concept for social work.

Existing social work methods for working with users do not meet people's needs. New methods for working with people need to be researched and developed to keep pace with social change, through the synergy of social work practise and science. The family group conference method creates new knowledge about teamwork, including the connection between the system and the real life of the family, which social workers lack in their work with families. Introducing change in the foster care system must involve actors at all three levels - policy at the macro level, institutions and professionals at the meso level and users at the micro level - and aim for a bottom-up approach to change. In social work, the interpretation of people's lifeworld and realities opens up the space for the development of new theoretical concepts. A grounded theory has been developed, the Theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in foster care, which is based on a multidisciplinary approach to family, justice and a democratic approach. The methodological approach in the dissertation, which is based on action research, is a recommendation for democratic social work research by involving the actors about and for whom we are researching.

Keywords: deinstitutionalisation, emancipation, participation, group work, family, empowerment

Vloga družinske skupinske konference pri rejništvu otrok z vidika socialnega dela

POVZETEK:

Zaščita otrokovih pravic, pomen dezinstitutionalizacije na področju zaščite otrok in zmanjšanje institucionalizacije otrok, kar vključuje pravico otroka do odraščanja v okolju, ki je najbolj podobno družinskemu, so strateške usmeritve Hrvaške politike. Rejništvo ima na Hrvaškem dolgo tradicijo, kar predstavlja potencial za razvoj kakovostnega rejništva in pomemben vir za socialno delo z otroki. Stagnacija procesa dezinstitutionalizacije, nezadostno število rejnikov in vedno večje število otrok, ki so izločeni iz primarnih družin, kažejo na potrebo po raziskovanju rejništva in razvoju metod socialnega dela. Socialno delo nima ustreznih odgovorov na vse bolj kompleksne potrebe uporabnikov na področju rejništva in ne vključuje v procese pomoči vseh udeležencev, ki tvorijo proces rejništva. Spremembe v procesu rejništva lahko načrtujemo s pomočjo ekološke sistemske teorije, ki omogoča razumevanje rejništva na več ravneh, na mikro, mezo in makro ravni. Življenjska sprememba za otroka na mikro ravni bi se morala odraziti tudi v vseh ostalih ravneh. Povezovanje s skupnostjo in možnost samostojnega odločanja o življenju zahtevata drugačen pristop do uporabnikov v socialnem delu, kakor tudi razvoj novih metod, prilagojenih družbenim spremembam in dejanskim potrebam uporabnikov. Ena takšnih metod, ki je socialno delo na Hrvaškem ne pozna, je družinska skupinska konferenca. Temelji na načelih socialnega dela, kot so spoštovanje človekovih in otrokovih pravic, socialna pravičnost, krepitev moči uporabnikov in družin za samostojno in kompleksno reševanje problemov. Družinska skupinska konferenca zmanjšuje tveganje za razlike v moči med družino in strokovnjaki, in si prizadeva za normalizacijo otrokovega življenja v novi družini. Temelji na teoriji krepitve moči in ustvarjanju priložnosti, v katerih družina pridobiva nova znanja in kompetence za mobilizacijo lastnih virov. Navedene vrednote družinske skupinske konference temeljijo na vrednotah socialnega dela, kot so denimo aktivno in enakopravno vključevanje uporabnikov v odločanje o svojem življenju in povezovanje z viri v skupnosti. Vključevanje širše družinske mreže in mreže strokovnjakov v delo z družino je pomembno za prehod od individualne h kolektivni odgovornosti in predstavlja nove vire za podporo družini. Temeljna oblika izvajanja družinske skupinske konference je skupinsko delo kot ena od metod dela v socialnem delu, ki zahteva uporabo načel skupinskega dela in poznavanje dinamike v skupini. Družinska skupinska konferenca je dober primer sodelovanja in doseganja ravnovesja moči med socialnimi delavci in družinami ob spoštovanju načel participacije in emancipacije udeležencev. Emancipacija je v socialnem delu ključna vrednota, v rejništvu pa omogoča osvoboditev od negativnih sistemskih vplivov. Spoštovanje, enakopravnost in mobilizacija virov moči sleherne osebe za soočanje s težavami, so elementi emancipacije v socialnem delu, za katere je treba ustvariti prostor pri delu z uporabniki, da bi avtonomno sprejemali odločitve o lastnem življenju. Na Hrvaškem ni jasnega modela rejništva, metode socialnega dela v rejništvu pa niso razvite za delo z vsemi vključenimi uporabniki. Otrok, njegova dobrobit, zaščita in varnost so najpomembnejši vidiki pomoči, na katere je usmerjeno tako rejništvo kot tudi metoda družinske skupinske konference. Metoda omogoča enakopravno sodelovanje otroka in zmanjšanje otrokove izpostavljenosti tveganjem.

Kljub strategijam, načrtom, zakonom in protokolom na politični ravni, ki so usmerjeni v razvoj rejništva, se v praksi rejništvo na Hrvaškem že vrsto let ne razvija. Prav nasprotno, institucionalizacija se ponovno krepi in pojavlja kot odziv na probleme v praksi socialnega dela, prisotno je pomanjkanje nastanitvenih kapacitet, kar kaže na potrebo po raziskovanju področja rejništva na teoretični in praktični ravni. Podatki raziskav kažejo, da se povečuje število otrok, ki

so v zadnjih letih nameščeni v institucije za otroke, namesto v alternativne oblike varstva. To je v nasprotju z nacionalnimi strategijami, ki zagovarjajo nadaljevanje procesa dezinstitutionalizacije, preprečevanje institucionalizacije in krepitev skupnosti pri zagotavljanju pomoči in podpore. Sistem socialnega varstva dodatno obremenjuje tudi vse večja birokratizacija, njeni učinki pa so vidni tudi v rejništvu.

Disertacija ima več ciljev. Prvi je analiza rejniškega procesa z namenom razumevanja načinov vključevanja vseh udeležencev v procese pomoči ter transparentna predstavitev procesa in načina dela z vsemi vpletenimi. Drugi cilj je analizirati možen prispevek metode družinske skupinske konference pri povezovanju vseh udeležencev, vključevanju skupnosti in ustvarjanju prostora za skupno sodelovanje. Tretji cilj je razvoj novega znanja, ki je potrebno za spremembe v rejništvu. Z ugotavljanjem ovir in možnosti na ravni družine, institucije, skupnosti in socialnih politik, je cilj spoznati, kaj je potrebno za implementacijo metode družinske skupinske konference na teoretični in praktični ravni. V skladu s cilji so v disertaciji oblikovane teze (T) in raziskovalna vprašanja (RV):

T1: Zaradi birokratiziranosti dela ter pomanjkanja znanja, izkušenj in sredstev, socialni delavci le redko prakticirajo metodo skupinskega dela, ki vključuje principe emancipacije in participacije pri delu z rejniškimi družinami.

RV1: Katere prakse socialnega dela so trenutno prisotne na področju rejništva? RV2: Kako socialni delavci razumejo načela emancipacije in sodelovanja družinskih članov v procesu rejništva? RV3: Na kakšen način socialni delavci organizirajo delo z rejniškimi družinami in kako so otrok, primarna družina in rejniška družina vključeni v pomembne odločitve? RV4: Katere trenutne okoliščine na področju rejništva omejujejo možnosti za razvoj podpornih mrež v skupnosti?

T2: Elementi družinske skupinske konference obstajajo v procesu rejništva v sedanjih praksah socialnega dela, glede na to, da so socialni delavci seznanjeni z načeli krepitev moči, enakopravnega sodelovanja, pomena prevzemanja nadzora nad lastnim življenjem, sodelovanja in vključevanja v širšo mrežo v skupnosti.

RV1: Katere značilnosti družinske skupinske konference so prisotne v dosednji praksi socialnega dela? RV2: Kako socialni delavci poskrbijo, da se glas otroka sliši skozi celoten proces rejništva? RV3: Kako socialni delavci vključujejo socialne mreže in storitve v skupnosti, da bi podprli otroka in družine pri prevzemanju večjega nadzora nad svojim življenjem?

T3: Uporaba družinske skupinske konference prispeva k zmanjšanju institucionalizacije otrok, normalizaciji podpornih mrež v skupnosti ter formiranju teorij za delo z družinami in spremembami na sistemski ravni.

RV1: Kako družinska skupinska konferenca prispeva k alternativni neinstitucionalni namestitvi otroka in dezinstitutionalizaciji rejništva? RV2: Kako izkušnje vseh udeležencev v procesu družinske skupinske konference oblikujejo znanje o socialnem delu v rejništvu? RV3: Kako povezati refleksijo prakse z metodo družinske skupinske konference in vzpostaviti participativno in emancipatorno socialno delo v rejništvu? RV4: Kakšni ukrepi so potrebni na ravni skupnosti, instituciji in politike za realizacijo skupinske družinske konference v procesu rejništva?

Raziskovalni pristop doktorske disertacije je akcijski in je oblikovan kot ciklični proces delovanja akcijske skupine socialnih delavk in mene kot raziskovalke. Pred začetkom raziskave je bilo pridobljeno soglasje Etične komisije na Fakulteti za socialno delo na Univerzi v Ljubljani. Začetek

raziskovanja predstavljajo nestrukturirani pogovori s svetovalno skupino socialnih delavk z namenom izobraževanja raziskovalca in da bi pridobili podatke o procesu rejništva, ki jih narekujejo teze in raziskovalna vprašanja. V raziskavo je bila vključena populacija socialnih delavcev zaposlenih v regionalnih uradih Hrvaškega inštituta za socialno delo, ki delajo na področju rejništva. Prijavljeni udeleženci so se na začetku raziskave udeležili usposabljanja s področja družinske skupinske konference, zatem pa je bila oblikovana akcijska skupina šestih socialnih delavcev, v katero sem bila vključena tudi sama.

Raziskovalni načrt je sestavljen iz treh raziskovalnih faz, pri čemer se vsaka faza nanaša na eno od tez in z njo povezanimi raziskovalnimi vprašanji. Kvalitativni pristop je sestavljen iz več različnih metod zbiranja podatkov, kar vključuje opazovanje s sodelovanjem, pol-strukturirane intervjuje, razprave, dnevniške zapiske in usposabljanje. Triangulacija kvalitativnih metod v raziskavi je omogočila boljše razumevanje raziskovanega področja, različna spoznanja o izkušnjah udeležencev in doživljanje življenjskih situacij pri delu v rejništvu. V zadnji fazi raziskave so sodelovali rejniki, primarne družine in otroci, za katere je potekalo izobraževanje na temo družinske skupinske konference, kjer so delili svoje vtise in mnenja o uporabnosti metode v rejništvu. Empirični podatki so kvalitativno analizirani, z metodami povzemanja in združevanja v tematske enote ter določanjem kod in izrazov, ki so narativno interpretirani in predstavljeni strnjeno v rezultatih in razpravi.

Rezultati kažejo, da je rejništvo kompleksen in zahteven proces z različnimi poteki. Skupinsko delo, ki vključuje sodelovanje in emancipacijo vseh vključenih uporabnikov, v praksi socialnega dela v rejništvu ni prisotno, kar je v veliki meri posledica birokratizacije sistema socialnega varstva. Metoda osebnega načrtovanja je administrativni del procesa rejništva, v katerem ne sodelujejo vsi vključeni uporabniki. Prevzemanje odločitev v procesu rejništva je povezano z načini sodelovanja in vključenostjo vsakega posameznega udeleženca, kar kaže na odsotnost emancipacije uporabnikov in nerazumevanje emancipacije s strani socialnih delavcev. Moč odločanja imajo socialni delavci, medtem ko so ostali udeleženci vključeni občasno, vendar večinoma iz administrativnih razlogov. Izvajanje rejništva se na območnih uradih razlikuje, prav tako se razlikujejo možnosti socialnih delavcev za drugačen pristop in večjo vključenost udeležencev, kar je večinoma odvisno od časa, ki ga imajo socialni delavci na voljo za delo z uporabniki. Participacija udeležencev je parcialno prisotna, odvisna je od faze rejniškega procesa in angažiranosti socialnega delavca. Skupnost in socialne mreže opore družini so redko vključene v proces rejništva, odvisno od dostopnih virov v skupnosti, razvitih storitev in velikosti socialne mreže družine. Na povezovanje z obstoječimi viri v skupnosti vplivajo elementi na treh ravneh: institucionalna raven, tj. kako dobro je socialni delavec obveščen o virih v skupnosti in povezan z njimi; osebna raven, tj. kako motiviran in predan je socialni delavec, da se želi povezati z viri v skupnosti; in znanje socialnega delavca, ki je potrebno za razumevanje prehoda od individualne k skupni in skupnostni podpori.

Analiza rejništva je pokazala, da so elementi družinske skupinske konference v procesu rejništva različno prisotni, bodisi, da niso prisotni ali pa so delno prisotni. Med elementi, ki niso prisotni, naj omenimo enakopravno vključenost primarne družine in osebe, ki zastopa otroka. Elementi, ki so prisotni so glas otroka in pravica, da izrazi svoje mnenje, spoštovanje kulturnih razlik, transparentnost, izgradnja pozitivnega odnosa z vsemi udeleženci in jezik, ki je uporabnikom razumljiv. Večina elementov družinske skupinske konference je delno prisotnih, na kar vplivajo različne prakse v regionalnih uradih, kakor tudi situacije in možnosti socialnega delavca, da posamezne elemente uporabi pri svojem delu. Različne so prakse skupnega načrtovanja sprememb, ker načrtovanje včasih poteka z vsakim udeležencem posebej, včasih so udeleženci vključeni v

načrtovanje le tistih faz, ki se tičejo njih samih, ali pa ne sodeluje nihče, razen socialne delavke, ki sama izdelava načrt. V raziskavi je poseben poudarek na iskanju praks otrokovega aktivnega sodelovanja v procesih pomoči. Rezultati kažejo na tri dimenzije, ki vplivajo na vključitev otroka v proces rejništva. Prva dimenzija je kraj in se nanaša na kraj srečanja in pogovora z otrokom, ki je največkrat pisarna regionalnega centra, redkeje pa otrokov dom. Druga dimenzija je faza v rejniškem procesu, v kateri se z otrokom pogovarjamo še preden je ločen od primarne družine, ko je otrok obveščen o odhodu v rejništvo, med načrtovanjem in med obiski rejniške družine. Teme pogovorov so tretja dimenzija, ki kaže, da gre največkrat za pogovor o otrokovi dnevni rutini, prijateljih, mami in očetu ter o tem, kako preživljajo čas oziroma kaj skupaj počnejo. Ne glede na to, da ima otrok prostor za izražanje svojega mnenja, njegov glas ne vpliva na odločitev o izločitvi iz družine. Otrokov glas je pomemben del družinske skupinske konference, vključen pa je tudi glas širše vključene socialne podporne mreže. Rezultati naše raziskave kažejo, da se družine najpogosteje opirajo na neformalne podporne socialne mreže, ki jih predstavljajo prijatelji, sorodniki ali sosedje, medtem ko je formalna podpora mreža pogosto nedosegljiva oziroma ni vključena, zato delo s primarno družino ni razvidno.

Rezultati prve in druge teze so osnova za rezultate tretje teze, v kateri so analizirane možnosti uporabe družinske skupinske konference, doprinos k preprečevanju institucionalizacije in potrebnih virov za uporabo metode v praksi. Analiza raziskav na tem področju kaže, da metoda zmanjšuje institucionalizacijo na več načinov: poveča verjetnost namestitve otroka v sorodstveno rejništvo, manj otrok izloča iz rejništva in namešča v institucijo, večje število otrok vrača v primarno družino. Rezultati po izvedenem izobraževanju za rejnike, otroke in primarne starše kažejo, da je metoda uporabna na dva načina: kot preventiva izločitve otroka iz družine in v procesu rejništva. V procesu rejništva je možna uporaba v trenutku izločitve otroka iz družine, v fazi načrtovanja ali med procesom rejništva, na primer za izboljšanje odnosov med primarno in rejniško družino. Rezultati kažejo da je metoda primerna tako za sorodniška rejništva kot tudi za rejnike, ki potrebujejo podporo. Za uporabo metode v praksi so potrebne spremembe na več ravneh, denimo na politični ravni, zakonodajni, institucionalni ravni regionalnih uradov in v izobraževalnem sistemu za izvedbo metode.

Ugotovitve raziskave kažejo, da je rejništvo opredeljeno zakonodajno in strokovno na način, da aktivna vloga udeležencev ni zaželeno. Metoda družinske skupinske konference je dober način, da socialno delo zagotovi aktivno vlogo udeležencev v sistemu rejništva z vzpostavitvijo socialne mreže iz skupnosti, ki pomaga pri reševanju težav. Za socialno delo je pomembno, da se vsi udeleženci povežejo pri reševanju družinskih težav. Vse udeležence je treba povezati tudi z drugimi ravnmi, kot so sistemi, ki lahko zagotovijo vire, ki jih potrebujeta družina in skupnost. Prav to povezavo vzpostavlja metoda družinske skupinske konference, kar je dobra rešitev za socialno delo, katerega vloga je prav povezava med sistemom in družino.

Družinska skupinska konferenca ustvarja prostor za participacijo in emancipacijo udeležencev, ravnovesje moči med strokovnjaki in družino ter pravico družine, da z aktivnim sodelovanjem odloča o svojem življenju. Spreminja način dela z družinami in vodi od običajnega dela z družinami k delu z družinami v skupnosti. Omogoča širjenje podporne mreže za družine v skupnosti in povezovanje z različnimi strokovnjaki. Socialno delo nima dovolj znanja in metod za povezovanje vseh udeležencev v rejniškem procesu, zato družinska skupinska konferenca predstavlja nov teoretični koncept za socialno delo. Obstoječe metode socialnega dela za delo z uporabniki ne zadovoljujejo v celoti potreb ljudi. Treba je raziskati in razviti nove metode dela z ljudmi, ki bodo sledile družbenim spremembam s pomočjo sinergije prakse socialnega dela in znanosti.

Metoda družinske skupinske konference ustvarja novo znanje o timskem delu, tudi povezavo med sistemom in resničnim življenjem družine, ki jo socialni delavci, ki delajo z družinami, pogrešajo. V uvajanje sprememb na področju rejništva je potrebno vključiti akterje na vseh treh ravneh – politiko na makro ravni, institucije in strokovnjake na mezo ravni in uporabnike na mikro ravni - in si prizadevati za pristop uvajanja sprememb od spodaj navzgor. V socialnem delu interpretacija življenjskega sveta in realnosti ljudi odpira prostor za oblikovanje novih teoretičnih konceptov. Rezultat doktorske disertacije je Teorija emancipacije in vključujoče participacije v rejništvu, katere koncepti temeljijo na multidisciplinarnem pristopu k družini, pravičnosti in demokratičnem pristopu. Metodološki pristop v disertaciji, ki temelji na akcijskem raziskovanju, se je izkazal za uporabnega pri nadaljnjem raziskovanju v socialnem delu, ker poteka na demokratičen način z vključevanjem akterjev, o katerih in za katere raziskujemo.

Ključne besede: dezinstitutionalizacija, emancipacija, participacija, skupinsko delo, družina, krepitev moči

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1. INTRODUCTION

Working with families in the field of social work is becoming an increasingly crucial topic in discussions on childcare because there are more and more difficulties in the functioning of the family, but also increasingly more demands for the separation of children from the family. More children are being removed from their families, partly due to more complex challenges in the lives of families, partly as a preventive measure to protect children by social workers. Accommodating a child¹ outside the family is one of the most demanding jobs of a social worker, especially when referring to the lack of accommodation capacities in Croatia over the last few years (Kletečki Radović, 2008). Slower development of community services, a stagnating deinstitutionalisation process and increasing demands for the care of children outside the family emphasise the requirements for developing alternative forms of care in the community and, thus, foster care. The strategic determinant of Croatia is the focus on protecting children's rights, the importance of the deinstitutionalisation process in terms of child protection, and the placement of children in alternative and non-institutional forms of care (Miharija and Belamarić, 2017, p. 4), which includes the right of children to grow up in an environment most similar to a family (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). The centuries-old tradition of foster care in Croatia has its beginnings after the First World War, from which it becomes evident that a long tradition provides good potential for the development of quality foster care, as a necessary resource in social work practice. Nonetheless, foster care is developing more slowly, the number of foster parents is declining, and the motivation to engage in foster care is weakening. The first law that refers only to foster care was passed quite late, as late as 2007 (Buljevac, Milić Babić and Leutar, 2016, p. 1), after which it was amended several times, until the most recent Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22), which aims to increase the quality of foster care and encourage the development of foster care in Croatia. Despite attempts to improve the legal regulation of the foster care system, the development of the foster care is weakening. This situation indicates the need to research social work practice and identify obstacles to quality foster care as one of the motives for dealing with this topic in the doctoral

¹ In the dissertation, the word "child" is used to describe the process of foster care, as well as in all other topics related to the child's activity. The child is treated in this dissertation as a subject, as a singular, as an individual who participates in the foster care process on an equal footing with the other actors. The child is an active subject, not passive, whereas the plural would represent an indeterminate and inactive group of children. The plural of child is occasionally used when appropriate to the context of the text.

dissertation. Furthermore, the reform of the social protection system in Croatia is a long-term process and the question arises as to what extent it actually meets the needs of users. Representatives of ecological theory emphasise that social work lacks methods of support, that new approaches are not being created and developed and that social work has no answers to the increasingly complex needs of users (Henderson and Scannapieco, 2006). Both support and empowerment are important for social work, and the current paradigm shift in social work also emphasises the importance of partnership and participation (Mitchell, 2020, p. 213). Accordingly, there is a need to constantly review social work practise and explore how the concepts of empowerment, partnership and emancipation are implemented and utilised in order to develop new theoretical insights. Community-based practise, based on a holistic approach and the empowerment of users, introduces a democratic helping process (Grebenc and Žganec, 2016), which is based on the participatory involvement of people to develop independent living in the community (Fulcher, 2008). The democratic helping process and the possibility of making decisions about life in the community require social work to explore and reflect on the possibilities in the work of social workers that contribute to such a holistic understanding of working with users.

The development of social work methods must necessarily be orientated towards the needs of users and develop ways of working that can provide answers to the new challenges faced by users. One method that does not exist in social work practise in Croatia is the family group conference method. The existence of the family group conference method, which is used in working with families in many other countries, represents an opportunity for change in social work practise in the field of foster care in Croatia. With the help of the method, we can analyse the core values of existing social work in the field of foster care and identify the existence of principles and approaches for new paradigm shifts. The family group conference method encompasses the principles of working with families (Edwards and Parkinson, 2018), such as respect for children's and human rights, social justice (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009), family participation in decision-making, family empowerment (Saleebey, 2013), focus on the potential of the family system and willingness to address future problems more autonomously (Levine, 2000). The principles of the family group conference method relate to a participatory approach to families, but also to a number of principles that underpin social work. From the perspective of foster care, the family group conference approaches families in a way that reduces the risk of a power imbalance between the family and professionals (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009) and aims to normalise the child's

life in the new family. The principles of normalisation include taking control of one's life, which is one of the key elements of the method to ensure a life with minimal restrictions on freedom. These elements are in line with social work values but are often not present in practise, which presents an opportunity and a challenge to explore the application of the family group conference method in social work. Family group conference and the process of deinstitutionalisation have similar values of actively involving users in the helping process and equal participation in deciding how someone wants to live in their community (Nirje, 1970; O' Brien, 2011). Involving a wider social network in the process of working with families allows the family to be supported in the community rather than placing children in an institution, thus supporting deinstitutionalisation. It is important for social workers to understand and know the process of deinstitutionalisation and the changes involved. Understanding deinstitutionalisation as a transition from institutional to non-institutional living arrangements is a general understanding of the process, but a true understanding of the process, which is much more than that, requires ongoing work and research in this area. The family group conference approach is based on change in the family and the community through the inclusion and creation of space for dialogue (Flaker, 2016), which according to Freire (2002) is the most important tool for emancipatory practises. Participation in a family group conference is complex due to the relational dynamics between participants, and the principle of reciprocity (Bourdieu, 2000) must be considered as it contributes to the understanding of social relationships and dynamics between participants. To further develop social work and achieve change at the level of relationships between users and social workers, it is necessary to focus on the reciprocal dialogue of participants in order to achieve the full participation and emancipation of users. Understanding these notions of participation and emancipation in the context of social work is important in order to understand what needs to be done to achieve the desired changes. The family group conference method can be a good way to introduce the concepts of co-operation, balance of power, participation and emancipation of the participants, both for the users and the social workers. A review of the professional and scientific literature and research results on family group conference shows that the method does not exist in Croatian social work practise and therefore represents a potentially new theoretical concept that could be well applied in social work in the field of foster care.

The dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first part contains a theoretical presentation of the topic and the scientific views on foster care and family group conference as well as their connection and grounding in theoretical premises. The second part is a

presentation of the empirical research and the results of the qualitative research. The conclusion presents the main findings and guidelines resulting from the analysis of the theoretical and empirical parts of the dissertation.

In order to understand the topic of the dissertation, the second chapter of the dissertation introduces the system of foster care, starting with its historical development from the First World War to the present day in Croatia. The tradition of foster care in Croatian society is illustrated by historical events and the care of children and starving people, especially after wars (Jolić, 2020). The need for foster care as a form of childcare was also advocated by politicians in the 1960s when they focussed on better care for children with various and numerous problems (Maglajlić, 1994). Parallel to the development of the foster care system in Croatia, various models of foster care were developed in other countries that sought more appropriate approaches to working with families in the complex process of foster care (Caw and Sebba, 2014). In Croatia, there is not much information on the development or use of a specific model of foster care, but the model used in practise is still not clearly defined, despite the legal regulations that have been amended and adapted to the needs of foster care practise in recent years. In addition, the situation in practise is complicated by the current situation of foster care in Croatia, which indicates a shortage of foster families, insufficient development and recruitment of new foster parents and an increasing number of children being removed from their primary families² (World Bank, 2019). The lack of placements for children is a major obstacle to the work of social workers. Foster care is identified as a priority in the development of social services to increase capacity for alternative forms of childcare. Foster care is linked to the process of deinstitutionalisation in terms of the need to develop non-institutional placements and in terms of the approach and way of working with users, while the fundamental values of social work, such as emancipation and participation of all actors in the process, are embedded in both processes. The process of deinstitutionalisation offers people normalised living conditions (Appathurai, Lowery and

² In this dissertation, the term "primary family" is used to refer to the family from which the child is removed. As the term biological family is associated with only one component of the family, the biological, it is necessary to include the functional dimension, which is a necessary component of the family (Kane, 2019; Medalie and Cole-Kelly, 2022). In this dissertation, we focus on a functional definition of family that considers the importance of the various functions of family in addition to the blood definition (More, 2022). Fateful ties are also seen as a form of commitment to care and solidarity in a relationship that sometimes goes beyond contractual relationships or kinship. The primary family is the joint household from which the child is removed and may include parents, stepparents or stepfathers, adoptive families, foster families, single-parent families, grandparent families, same-sex families, etc.

Sullivan, 1986, p. 50), while placement in foster care potentially offers many opportunities for placement in the community (Wolfensberger, 1972, p. 20). The need to combine these two concepts is unavoidable. Considering the strategic orientation of Croatia and the national documents adopted with regard to the further development of social care and deinstitutionalisation and the transition to community-based care, it is important to point out the need for research in this area. Given the process of deinstitutionalisation and the need for change in the development of social work, we have analysed foster care practise from the perspective of participation and emancipation as basic prerequisites for a democratic approach which is in line with the guidelines and policies of Croatian social care. Emancipation is a core value in social work, and in foster care it enables liberation from negative systemic influences (Bognar and Simel, 2013). Social work creates a space for the emancipation of each person, which means that it facilitates the development of a person's potential to deal with structural pressures and the acquisition of skills and knowledge to make independent decisions about their own lives (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela, 2015).

The Family Group Conference is described in Chapter 3 as one of the ways of working with families. The method has its origins in social work and is illustrated through the historical development of the method, from its first use with Māori families in New Zealand to its spread and adaptation in other countries, in order to understand its context and purpose. In Croatia, the method is not clearly defined as a form of social work with users (Kletečki Radović, 2008; Ajduković and Urbanc, 2009), and in particular there is no recorded data on the method in the foster care system. Since family group conference is defined partly as a method and partly as a model for working with users, the validity of the notion that family group conference is a method that demonstrates a way of working in social work practise with families is clarified. The development of new methods in social work is a necessary part of social work practise, as current methods may no longer have an impact on people's lives (Flaker, 2016), which is an additional reason for exploring the use of the family group conference method in foster care. Furthermore, the concept of family group conference is based on collaboration between the family and the wider social network, which includes the family network and the professionals' network. This aspect of family group conference developed from the fact that work with Māori children was failing because it did not take into account the cultural perspective of Māori problem solving in the community. The right of the family to make its own decisions and to involve people who can contribute with their own resources to solve the problem is an approach that allows

the family emancipation in the sense of freedom from the system and the right to autonomy in matters that affect them and to participation, which is a prerequisite for a co-operative relationship (Marsh and Crow, 1998). The role of the child as an equal participant in the family group conference process is particularly emphasised in the concept of the method. The child is protected, safe and the risk for the child in the help process is minimised. The requirements for holding family group conferences primarily take into account the safety of the child, followed by the voluntariness of the family and the evaluation of the method by the social worker (Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković and Stams, 2016). Family group conference is not applicable in all cases and therefore requires the assessment of the social worker and the family and a mutual agreement on the possibility of implementing the method. A feature of conferencing is its adaptability to the social and cultural environment in which it takes place (Adams and Chandler, 2004), and a number of models have been developed to suit the cultures in which it is conducted (Lupton and Nixon, 1999; Morris and Connolly, 2012; Fox, 2018). The family group conference generally takes place in three phases, which may differ depending on the method adapted, but the basic phases are: 1) the preparation and planning, where the meeting and participation of all identified participants is organised, 2) the implementation of the conference, which includes the mutual exchange of information at the beginning of the conference, the time when the family develops the plan and the final part, where the plan is presented to everyone and reviewed by the social worker, and 3) the evaluation of the results achieved and the fulfilment of the plan (Božić, 2017). Group work as one of the working methods in social work is a fundamental form of work in the process of implementing family group conferences as one of the ways of working with families.

The theory refers to foster care in the context of the changes that take place in a child's life when they are placed in foster care, or the micro-level changes and the impact on other system levels. The theoretical frameworks of foster care and family group conference are linked by their grounding in the theoretical concepts of empowerment and ecological systems theory, as well as other approaches and theories to the family in social work. Attachment theory needs to be separated from other theoretical approaches in order to focus attention in foster care work on the significance of the changes in a child's life that result from the removal of the child from the primary family (Cameron, Reimer and Smith, 2015). It is important for social work to link the changes in a child's life to the need for attachment, especially with frequent changes of placement and difficulties connecting the child to new people. The theoretical framework of the family group conference shows the link to the

theoretical framework of foster care, so that the method can be linked to the approach in working with families and anchored in social work theories.

Chapter 5 of the dissertation outlines the need for new knowledge and research on foster care in relation to the application of the family group conference method and the existing knowledge in this area of research. Social work with families is a complex process, and foster care is a process involving two families and a child whose needs must be met, so research in this area is extremely important. Furthermore, despite national and legislative frameworks aimed at expanding foster care, there are no noticeable changes in the practise of foster care in Croatia, while institutionalisation is being revitalised as a possible solution, which is another reason for researching this area. The role of social work is to ensure good outcomes in foster care placements and the complexity of the task of social workers and their role in this process is evident (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995). Previous research on foster care in Croatia has not been concerned with analysing the process itself and possible changes or the development of methods, but rather with the views of professionals, foster carers or children. Moreover, most of the research has been presenting the same guidelines and recommendations for many years. The foster care system has become increasingly bureaucratised (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015) and the deinstitutionalisation process has stagnated (Grozđanić and Rittossa, 2017). Since there is no clear model for foster care that can be applied in practise in Croatia, and since there are no developed methods for working with all participants in the foster care process, as well as insufficient knowledge about group work, the aims of the doctoral dissertation focus on analysing the foster care process, the ways of involving the participants in the foster care process and the possible contribution of the family group conference method to working with all participants. Accordingly, chapters five, six and seven present the theses and research questions for the empirical part of the research, the data collection and the presentation of the research findings in the dissertation.

The methodological framework of the research is described in the sixth chapter of the dissertation. The strategy of action research is applied in the research plan in the dissertation, while the same indicates the need for social action and change in the researched area that the approach advocates (Lewin, 1948). Action research is an approach that involves a group of researchers who work together on the researched topic through cyclical repetition of encounters and constant analysis of the collected knowledge and planning of further actions in the research. Professional action research is applied in the dissertation and refers to the gathering of researchers from the same profession, in this case,

social workers, to explore and deepen knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Mesec, 1994). The research was conducted in three phases, where each phase relates to one thesis and the collected data directed the further course of research in the next phase. A qualitative approach and the use of several different methods in the research were applied in the dissertation and represented the approach to gain a better understanding of the researched area by analysing collected textual material about the experiences of participants, their thoughts and feelings, and how they experience certain situations (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In defining the methods of work, the population incorporating social workers employed in regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work³ and the planned course of research are elements of the research plan. At the beginning of the research, the registered participants took part in the family group conference training, after which an action group was formed, consisting of six researchers from the social work field and myself. In addition to the action group, the participants of the third phase of the research were primary families, foster carers and children who voluntarily participated in the family group conference training and shared their impressions and opinions about the application of the method in the practise of foster care. In addition, the chapter presents the course of the research process, from the phase of preliminary research and the generation of knowledge about the foster care process as a guide for the formation of theses and research plans to the last of the three research phases. An analysis of the findings is given in the chapter on each of the methods used for data collection, while the results are presented descriptively and furthermore shown in tabular or pictorial form to gain a better understanding and to better monitor the data collected and understand the findings.

The results of the research and discussion are presented in chapter seven based on four basic subchapters. Each subchapter relates to the research phase and the associated dissertation thesis, including associating with the literature used.

The pre-phase of research requires some of the generated knowledge and activities carried out by researchers as preparation for researching the topic which in turn requires more knowledge. The pre-phase, which was carried out with a group of social workers as an

³ The dissertation was written at the time of the restructuring of the social welfare system in Croatia. According to the new organizational system of social welfare in Croatia, Social Welfare Centres and their branches became regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work (hereinafter: regional office) from 1 January 2023 in accordance with the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18 /22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23). In the dissertation, the term Center or Social Welfare Centres appears as a term in part of the research and in the statements of respondents. The reason for this is that the research was conducted before the name of the Office was changed and the term was identical to the regional office at the time the dissertation was completed.

advisory group through an unstructured conversation on the topic of foster care, provided insight into results that are significant for the further direction of research and the clear formation of theses and research issues. Furthermore, the approach to involving an advisory group made it possible to reduce the researchers' errors and observe the researched topic using assumptions that do not necessarily have to be correct (Alston and Bowles, 2003).

The first phase of the research requires collecting answers from the first dissertation thesis and analysing current foster care practices by presenting processes and different outcomes or directions. Given that foster care is a complex process and requires understanding the preliminary actions in the family even before it happens, elements in working with the family that precede the separation of the child from the family have been included, with the aim of understanding the approach to the primary family and the child, but also the factors that affect the way the child is separated from the family. Group work is identified in individual segments of the foster care process and is associated with users who participate in it or are excluded. The same emphasis is placed on the participation and involvement of each participant in decision-making within the foster care process and is a basic prerequisite for the emancipatory and democratic practice in social work. The principles of emancipation and participation are described in the chapter as elements that are present or absent when working with all participants in the foster process and how social workers comprehend them when working with users. Furthermore, foster care is connected to the community and support network, which is an indispensable part of working with families. Three key areas are identified as affecting the possibility of connecting the community and foster care: 1) the institutional level with its advantages and disadvantages for the development of community support, 2) the personal level of social workers, and 3) knowledge as a prerequisite for developing a community support network.

The results of the first phase of the research and the first thesis of the dissertation provide an overview of the foster process and its progress, which served as a continuation of the research in the second phase relating to the second thesis of the dissertation and which involves identifying elements of the family group conference in current foster care practice. Most of the elements of the family group conference observed in foster care practice as partially present, meaning that the practices in regional offices differ, and the presence of an element depends on the way the social worker implements the foster care process. Access to the child and ensuring the child's participation throughout the process is highlighted in the chapter in order to comprehend how social workers hear and respect the child's voice, along with the fact that three areas are important for ensuring the child's voice

have been identified: 1) the place where the child has spoken, 2) the time and stage of the foster care process in which the child is discussed, and 3) the topics covered in the conversation. Given that the family group conference is focused on the child's protection and safety, the aspect of the child's voice and the possibility of influencing the outcome and decisions are important for understanding the actual inclusion of the child as an equal participant in the process. A support network that is available to the family and that can be included in the process of helping the family overcome difficulties is of utmost importance when working with families, which is the main feature of the family group conference method. In the foster care process, an informal support network is the most common source of support families rely on, while formal support is more difficult to reach and does not involve all participants, like the primary family is often excluded.

The third phase of the research refers to the third thesis of the dissertation, and the results of this phase were valorised over the results of the first and second theses. In this phase, the research direction changed and training was organised for primary families, foster parents and children, as the planned implementation of the family group conference is difficult to implement without participants knowledge of the method by all participants. The sequential data collection and expansion of existing knowledge as the research progressed and through each subsequent thesis and research phase in the final section helped to triangulate the research findings and combine the data collected to ensure greater credibility of the data. The final section describes the main findings of the thesis and provides concluding reflections, a contribution to science and guidelines for further research.

2. THE FIELD OF FOSTER CARE IN SOCIAL WORK

Throughout history, the foster care system has had its roots in the voluntary movement and has been characterised mainly by families who voluntarily care for children outside their homes without receiving payment. Initially, foster families relied on their existing parenting skills and support from their own family, which was considered sufficient to care for any child (Unrau, 1994). As the science of social work further developed, various authors began defining the concept of foster care in similar ways. Triseliotis, Sellick and Short (1995, p. 1) describe foster care as the care of a child from another family for a few days, weeks or longer within the foster family. As part of alternative care for children and adults, foster care is described by Pecora and Maluccio (2000, p. 142), who define it as the temporary placement of a person in foster care due to current adverse life circumstances. Foster care can also be seen as a planned, desirable and short-term substitute for the primary family and aims to provide family care for a child who cannot live adequately in their own home (McKenzie, 1994). Furthermore, Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003, p. 234) define a foster family as a family that cares for children who do not have the conditions for adequate upbringing in their own family. Čaćinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019) add another dimension to foster care, namely the role of the state and the social work profession, which should provide the child with proper conditions for growth and development because every child has a right to it. They describe foster care as a form of help for the child as well as his or her primary family. Foster care can also be seen as a non-institutional form of care, i.e., a placement of a person within a stimulating environment to receive support and care in a family environment (Štambuk and Penava Šimac, 2021, p. 125). Ivković and Žižak (2010) point out that only in a family environment can a child learn everything that makes up a normal family life routine and feel belonging and support. They describe foster care as a form of care for children in which the child can develop a new form of attachment to the foster parents. In Croatia, the adoption of the recent Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22) regulates foster care as a service for people who can no longer live in their own homes. In addition, the Act regulates the relationship between those involved in the process and the foster care process itself, emphasising that support and assistance to the person should be provided in line with the individual care plan for the user (Foster Care Act, 115/18, 18/22). The competent institutions implementing the foster care process are regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work and assigned the task of coordinating and monitoring the foster care process, training and preparing foster families,

as well as planning and providing professional assistance and support to the child, foster parents and primary family (Foster Care Act, 115/18, 18/22).

2.1. Historical development and tradition of foster care in Croatia

In Croatia, foster care has existed for more than a hundred years (Kronstein and Škrabić-Aničić, 2010). Interest in foster care remains strong in the Croatian social system; therefore, clarifying the development and tradition of foster care in Croatian society is necessary. Throughout history, the development of social services in Croatia has primarily focused on childcare, such as foster care (Šućur, 2003). The first informal form of foster care is the mass emigration of children from the territory of Herzegovina to Slavonia after the First World War. Over 10,000 children were sent to Croatia, mainly to Slavonia and parts of Srijem, to be cared for (Jolić, 2020, p. 172). Children who were living on the brink of starvation were taken in by Slavonian families to survive, which is one of the factors that shaped Croatia's profile as a traditional foster country. The work and contribution of Croatian humanists who, through their personal and political commitment, have directed their work and actions to the care of socially disadvantaged children and the fight against social deviations is significant. In their work in child protection in the early 1920s, they highlighted the need to not care for children in institutions but place them into the care of a family. They were directly involved in the care of children from Bosnia and Herzegovina and organised the placement of children from Dalmatia, Istria and Slovenia in the more prosperous central and Slavonian regions of Croatia (Szabo, 2015, p. 57). Moreover, the foster care system in Croatia evolved through several phases: from placement in a family without any compensation to covering the basic financial needs of caring for a foster person to paying for the special needs of people placed in foster care (Galaway, 1989). Triseliotis, Sellick and Short (1995, p. 7) note that until the period after the Second World War, it was common practise in European countries to place children in colonial areas, where labour was needed, or in rural areas. The author refers to this period as semi-formal foster care, and due to poor laws, this approach disregarded children's rights, and children were often assigned to the forced labour. What is typical in this period is that a large number of displaced children were never returned to their primary families.

Maglajlić (1994) describes the further development of foster care in Croatia. She refers to a large number of people with mental disabilities who were housed and settled between the 1960s and 1980s, mainly in the town of Split. In the Dalmatian region of Croatia, four institutions cared for persons with intellectual disabilities. One of these institutions began applying the principle of normalisation and developing foster care as a family type of placement for children with various and multiple disabilities (Maglajlić, 1994, p.42). The

transitioning of children from institutional placement to family-type placement was gradual, but very quickly, foster care was recognised as a possible form of long-term care for children with multiple difficulties. Laklija (2011a) notes that more serious progress in the development of foster care also began in Croatia after the Second World War.

In recent decades, further development of the social welfare system in the Republic of Croatia followed societal changes, which is why the Social Welfare Centres (called regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work since 1 January 2023) were established as an institution with the mission of responding to the needs of vulnerable members of the population and which strives to improve the way of life in society and the community (Šućur, 2003). The development of social care services, throughout history, was aimed at providing better services and developing different forms of care for children. One of these services is foster care, considered a desirable form of alternative care for children.

Although the term foster care exists in Croatia, it was first mentioned in Croatia in 1902 in the Mandatory Juvenile Upbringing Act (Štambuk and Penava Šimac, 2021, p. 125). More than a hundred years later, in 2007, the first Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 79/07) was adopted for the first time in Croatia to regulate better care for users placed outside their own family, but also in response to the growing need for placement of children outside the family and recognition of foster care as a good alternative solution (Buljevac, Milić Babić and Leutar, 2016, p. 1). Since 2007, the Act has been amended, supplemented and adapted several times to European and national strategic documents, as well as to the deinstitutionalisation process that started in Croatia 16 years ago (in 1997). The last amendments to the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette 115/18, 18/22) were adopted in 2022, but despite attempts to better define the legal process of foster care, there are no positive changes in the development of foster care in Croatia. In addition to the legal regulations, there has been more intensive reform of the social welfare system in Croatia in recent years. Deinstitutionalisation and transformation are part of the process of reforming the social welfare system. It focuses on supporting people who want to live within the community and on the needs of socially sensitive groups such as children (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2021). In addition, the process of deinstitutionalisation focuses on measures to prevent the institutionalisation of children, on developing other alternative ways and models of caring for children in the community, and on providing better conditions for children placed in institutions (Sovar, 2015). According to the Operational Plan for Deinstitutionalisation, Prevention of Institutionalisation and Transformation of Social Service Providers in the Republic of Croatia from 2022 to 2027

(Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022b), deinstitutionalisation is described as the process of replacing placement in an institution with some form of care in the community in such a way that allows users to live in their primary, adoptive or foster families with the support provided. According to the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2022b, p. 5-6), the right to live in a community is highlighted in several European Union and United Nations documents, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child with its protocols, the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict or the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. In addition, documents such as the Recommendation of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child of 22 June 2022, declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly emphasise the importance of living in the community and a person's right to access to community services. The Recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child from June 2022 (United Nations, 2022, p. 8) indicates that the process of deinstitutionalisation needs to be accelerated, as well as the development of community services and sufficient capacity for alternative forms of placement for children outside the family so that more resources need to be allocated to foster care. According to the data from the Register of Social Welfare Institutions from October 2022 (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022b, p. 8), there were a total of 49 institutions established by the Republic of Croatia that provide accommodation and social services for children. Of the total number of institutions, 13 are social care homes for children and young adults without parents or adequate parental care, 26 are social care homes for children with developmental difficulties and persons with disabilities, and 10 are social care homes for children and young adults with behavioural problems. The total number of foster families in the Republic of Croatia is 2,323, of which 1,095 are foster parents for children, for a total of 2,060 children in foster care (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2023b, p. 21). The number of children in institutional accommodation at the end of 2021 was 2,120 children, placed in state homes for children and young adults without parents or adequate parental care or in homes for children and young adults with behavioural problems. The total number of children placed in institutional care does not include the number of children placed in state homes for children with developmental disabilities, as the number of placements is reported together with adults in homes for children and adults

with physical, mental and sensory impairments (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2023, p. 53). Deinstitutionalisation and the transfer of children from institutions to foster families are seen as an opportunity to improve the quality of life of children and foster parents while ensuring adequate support for their development (Leder, 2015). The close link between the process of deinstitutionalisation and foster care is evident in all European and national documents, as well as the emphasis on the need to develop foster care at the national level to create the conditions for achieving the deinstitutionalisation process.

2.1.1. Deinstitutionalisation and the development of the foster care system in Croatia

The process of deinstitutionalisation can be seen as one that ensures the normalisation of living conditions (Appathurai, Lowery and Sullivan, 1986, p. 50), and foster care can be seen as an inexhaustible resource, potentially offering capacity for providing community accommodation for the institutionalised population (Wolfensberger, 1972, p. 20). Furthermore, the normalisation of the child's life in foster care ensures better quality services for the child and is a prerequisite for a successful alternative form of placement of the child with the aim of preventing institutionalisation. In Croatia, one of the goals of deinstitutionalisation is the prevention of institutional placement and the development of available services in the community, such as foster care (Štambuk and Penava Šimac, 2021).

The role of foster families in social work is linked to the deinstitutionalisation process in Croatia, which aims to ensure foster care placement and the right of children to grow up in an environment most similar to the family environment. Achieving this goal requires an increase in the number of foster families and a higher quality of foster care, which in turn requires investing in additional foster care resources (Ivković and Žižak 2010). Moreover, more intensive development of deinstitutionalisation and a greater number of activities were initiated in Croatia with the adoption of the Plan for Deinstitutionalisation and Transformation of Social Welfare Institutions and Other Legal Entities in the Republic of Croatia 2011-2016 (Official Gazette, 36/11), directing deinstitutionalisation activities primarily to children and young people without adequate parental care and with behavioural problems, as well as children with developmental disabilities. In addition, the transformation and deinstitutionalisation processes continued, resulting in the adoption in 2018 of the Plan of Deinstitutionalisation, Transformation, and Prevention of

Institutionalisation 2018-2020 (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2018). An analysis of the implemented plans showed that social services in the community have been further developed, but not to a satisfactory extent, and large regional differences in the availability of services were also noted (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022a, p. 17). The goals not fulfilled in the plans relate to foster care and increasing the number of foster parents, which is an obstacle to the further development of foster care in Croatia, functioning as support for the process of deinstitutionalisation and prevention of institutionalisation of children. In other words, the stagnation of the foster care system also leads to stagnation of the planned progress of the deinstitutionalisation process in the field of childcare. Moreover, the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2021) has adopted the National Plan for the Development of Social Services for the period from 2021 to 2027, which set the first priority as the expansion of foster care and support for foster families. Croatia's accession to the European Union further promoted Croatia's focus on foster care and the process of deinstitutionalisation by adopting guidelines for the transition from institutional care to alternative forms of care and support in the family and community for children and other users' groups (Laklija, 2011a). However, strategic plans and other documents are not sufficient in discussing deinstitutionalisation as a process. Ćirić Milovanović (2017, p. 7) describes the process of deinstitutionalisation as providing support adapted to the individual in their natural environment. It should be seen as a complex process that implies an alternative approach to supporting people, including prevention and the expansion of services in the community to reduce the need for institutional protection. Mali (2012, p. 92) notes that deinstitutionalisation is much more than transformation and organisational change, describing the process as multi-layered changes across the social care system but also the need for integrated care that includes the joint work of several experts from different fields. It also focuses on changing the relationship between professionals and users, on participation and inclusion, and on aligning power relations (Flaker, 2012a, p.13). According to Basaglia (Rafaelič, Ficko and Flaker, 2017), the process of deinstitutionalisation involves the restoration of civil rights to persons who have been disenfranchised, which is also one of the elements of emancipation as defined by Prpić (1987). He sees emancipation as liberation from social guardianship, liberation from oppression, dependency and political, mental or social control (Prpić, 1987, p. 14). If we consider foster care as a form of care in terms of understanding deinstitutionalisation, we are able to link these two processes, which are based on the same or similar principles of

emancipation, participation and the right to a self-determined life. The child needs to have control over his or her own life in the foster family, all parties have to be equally involved in the process, and equal participation of all parties should be possible.

2.2. Emancipation and participation in the foster care process

Understanding the concept of emancipation in foster care requires clarifying the deeper meaning of the word and its brief historical evolution in society. Emancipation comes from the Latin word *emancipatio*, which has several meanings, such as the separation of the son from the family and the father's authority, liberation from dependence and oppression, or the attainment of independence (Prpić, 1987, p. 13). The concept of emancipation has long been discussed under the legal aspect of Roman law, but nowadays, it has a much broader and more profound meaning, such as the freedom and equality of a person and the right that all people are equal as far as the regulation of relations in the community is concerned. Prpić (1987, p.16) emphasises that equality between people is precisely what springs from human nature and, at the same time, means a person's liberation from all forms of dependency, but he notes that emancipation cannot be given or received, but must be fought for as a person's self-liberation. Furthermore, Bognar and Simel (2013, p. 159) assert that emancipation is not given if the potential of each person are not developed and expressed. They explain this in terms of each person's potentials, which, if the person does not use them, lead to discrimination and limit the person's development. Furthermore, Bognar and Simel (2013, p. 160) state that we can only speak of a free and democratic society if its people are emancipated.

From a social work perspective, the phenomenon of emancipation refers to an awareness of external sources of oppression but also to potentially positive aspects such as the strengthening of self-esteem and the courage to confront the structures acting as the source of oppression or marginalisation (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela, 2015). In social work, an important focus is emancipation, i.e., liberation from domination, be it historical, gender-based, cultural or political. The focus is on interconnecting with others and re-exploring one's reality (Dominelli, 2002). In working with users, this means creating the conditions for a person to free themselves from the limitations imposed by society and supporting the user in addressing injustice in society and the violation of their rights. Sewpaul and Larsen (2014, p. 240) emphasise the importance of emancipation in community social work, which should be guided by an emancipatory approach based on empowerment, participation and ecological development principles. In particular, the authors emphasise the importance of the social worker as a public person who must educate the community in this area, drawing on the work of Freire (1973) on education and the

method of literacy and educating people in the community, but also based on dialogue with people in the community.

Education in communities creates the predisposition for freedom from authoritarianism, human adaptation to society and manipulation (Freire, 2002). Education should be a humanistic practise and include emancipatory and democratic goals. The liberation of people from domination requires a struggle for emancipation. Freire (2002, p. 54) explains that problem-based learning presents students and the teacher as subjects of the educational process rather than passive objects subordinated to the oppressors' norms and rules, who thus gain control over the oppressed.

Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela (2015, p. 56) explain that social workers are creators of the world which can be cultural, political or economic, whose ideas they transfer to the family, education, culture or politics, which, if aware of their role, gives them the mandate to facilitate the transformation of users from subordinate objects to free subjects responsible for their actions. Furthermore, Flaker (2023) explains the concept of responsibility in the context of virtual but unfulfilled expectations and also in the context of a position in which the person is subordinate to the bearer of responsibility. The author explains that the social worker has no accountability if he or she is not responsible for the goals that the user needs to achieve for his or her well-being. This situation means not in the way that the social worker assumes the role of a guardian and a person who knows best what the user needs but instead advocates for, respects, trusts and collaborates with the user. However, an important question is to whom are social workers responsible for their work? The social worker's responsibility is seen as being responsible for representing the user and enabling the user's voice to be heard by everyone, rather than changing and adapting the user to meet needs because the social worker is responsible for themselves, the user and the team with which they work. Freire (1973, p. 116) explains that the development of critical consciousness and self-awareness is a prerequisite for social workers to use their actions and skills to initiate change and development. By helping users to identify their values, they can gain control over their lives and the oppressive system (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela, 2015), but in a way that works with people rather than for them, as Freire (1973, p. 14) describes the power of reflection leading to greater decision-making capacity for each individual. Critical reflection leads to an emancipatory process based on critique and action (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela, 2015). Freire (2000, p. 7) describes the term "culture of silence", which he uses to describe people who are unaware of having the opportunity to act in society, have the right to choose, and can be a part of the change,

while he sees education for liberation as an opportunity for people to become masters of their thinking through dialogue in cooperation with the disenfranchised, which is emancipation and the democratic process.

The importance of critical thinking in social work manifests itself precisely in emancipation, in people's ability to think critically. Pulla (2017, p. 98) emphasises the importance of empowerment, dialogue, cooperation, power sharing and the presentation of users in social work. Freire (2002, p. 71) explains dialogue as an act that involves critical thinking, encounter and reflection, and co-creation. In this way, the author describes the possibility of finding the meaning of each person, the humanisation and transformation that a person needs. Furthermore, genuine dialogue cannot take place if one person is not accepted or dominated over another, i.e., dialogue cannot be realised as long as there are oppressed and oppressors because the right of the oppressed to speak is restricted. By raising the awareness of the user, we empower the person, contributing to their liberation and the realisation that the person has the capacity to think and act but also to understand how external factors contribute to oppression (Freire, 1973). Sewpaul and Larsen (2014, p. 241) explain that understanding external factors is a prerequisite for changing people's beliefs so that they can independently deal with environmental challenges.

Emancipation in foster care is mostly associated with the process of the child leaving the foster care system and becoming independent, meaning that the concept of emancipation is still primarily associated with the process of independence, as in Roman law and the emancipation a son receives through his father's will, separating from the family and acquiring property (Prpić, 1987, p. 14). The emancipation of a young person leaving foster care is associated with a lack of support in their ongoing life and a lack of community services (Martin, Nause, Greiner and Beal, 2022). The concept of responsibility is not a simple one and its interpretation must be considered from different angles. Flaker (2023) speaks of emancipation as maturation in the context of responsibility and as a socio-legal process in which people automatically acquire responsibility when they come of age. Responsibility is not only acquired through learning, but also through experiences and life situations, while Flaker (2023) states that the prerequisite for responsibility is emancipation. The concept of responsibility, considered in the context of users, points to the need to give back to users the responsibility they have taken on in a way that allows them emancipation, which includes independent decisions about their lives, participation and equality. The second context through which is the concept of responsibility viewed centres on the responsibility of social workers, whose task it is to empower users and create

the conditions for giving them back the responsibility that has been taken away from them. Social workers' understanding of responsibility often boils down to making decisions for the users because they believe that social workers are responsible for the users. Flaker (2023) describes a professional responsibility that goes beyond the role of the social worker as a service provider for the users, so that social workers strengthen the power to transition into the community. From a foster care perspective, social workers should strive for autonomy and professional emancipation in order to achieve a good outcome for all participants in the foster care system. Despite the protocols and legal requirements, this sometimes requires flexibility in the work of social workers, who certainly have a mandate to carry out the helping process according to the principles of social work. However, this approach requires social workers to recognise their role in the emancipation of users and to understand that it is necessary to establish a balance of power and joint cooperation with all participants.

Braithwaite (2004, p. 48), when speaking of collaborative work, explains that in working with families, it is not enough to restore their ties and gather the network they have, but it is also necessary to go further and restore the family's competence for their own lives. Family competences can be seen as property that has been taken from them due to the domination of the experts. Straub (2012, p. 28) emphasises that the family group conference supports family ownership in a way that mobilises the family and the family social network and leaves the problem to those who own it. Flaker (2023) explains that deinstitutionalisation means that a person takes or returns responsibility for his or her actions. Furthermore, responsibility is returned to the person by increasing the level of participation, letting them decide about their lives and actions and expressing their will, whereas emancipation is necessary for personal accountability. The responsibility of social workers is not only reflected in the services provided but also in the fact that they visit the community and strengthen the user power by finding new solutions that lead to quality of service and the professional responsibility of social workers. This situation is covered in the concept of a family group conference based on the creation of a community network and changes within and outside the family.

An important aspect of talking about participation is to describe the scale of participation as defined by Arnstein (1969) to better understand the meaning and practise of participation. Arnstein (1969, p. 217) highlights the different forms of participation, such as participation with or without the power to influence the process outcome and participation without redistribution of power, where everyone participates while only some

benefit. The author divided the scale of power into eight levels and further divided them into three groups: non-participation, tokenism and citizen power. The author refers to the levels of manipulation and therapy as non-participation and explains them by saying that the participants can be educated or treated by powerful structures. Informing, advising and appealing are levels of participation that the author calls tokenism. Participants can raise their voices and express opinions, but they have no power, and the decision ultimately remains with powerful structures. Partnerships, delegation of power and citizen control bring a greater degree of decision-making power and the power to make a difference.

Although Arnstein (1969) presented a scale of participation for the purpose of civic participation and action in public policies, understanding participation in social work requires fathoming the differences in forms of participation. Videmšek (2009, p. 180) explains that user participation, when providing services in social work, is not a novelty but belongs to established practice since the beginning of professional social work and to the basic principles of social work, that is, the ethics of participation and the inclusion of those who do not have power. Mali (2009, p. 151) describes the partnership relationship in social work as an important determinant in working with users, which, according to the scale of participation, Arnstein (1969, p. 217) defined as real participation. Mali (2009) states that equal and joint participation of all participants is necessary to solve the problem, which is possible only if experts believe in the capacities and abilities of users to take control of their lives. Flaker (2023) states that social work cannot take place without a person's presence in a conversation about them. The user must have space for his or her voice and be able to influence the course of events that affect them.

In foster care, in which several participants are involved, the primary emphasis is placed on the participation of children in the foster care process. The complexity of the foster care process creates new challenges for social workers, especially in the domain of participation. Furthermore, satisfying personal needs, personal growth and realizing one's interests represent the independence and freedom of the human person and their need for autonomy (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019). Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp (2014, p. 21-25) emphasise the need for connection, for a person to be loved and to connect and cooperate with others. Relationships with others are demanding for every person, especially if they take into account potential obstacles such as fear, previous bad experiences, possible disappointment or shortcomings of the environment (Constable and Lee, 2015, p. 48). Seen from the perspective of an individual who has the above needs, in a family, the subject becomes much more complex when the needs of each member need to be met. If we add

another family to that relationship, namely the foster family, the complexity of the foster care process becomes clear.

In the social welfare system and the foster care system, there are two social workers who have different roles. One is responsible for the child and his or her primary family, and the other for the foster family (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 83). The most favourable outcome is to place the child in the same environment in which he or she had lived until then because, in this case, the social worker fulfils both roles. Placing a child in a new setting also means working with two social workers to fulfil their roles. The responsibilities of two social workers make the care process an even more complex task, and the involvement of all parties is even more complex. The collaboration between the social worker and the primary family should be positive, honest and supportive to the parents who bear some anger due to separation from their child. Involvement and participation in all processes, such as planning, organising, informing, gives the primary family a sense of control over their lives and a feeling that they are still important people in the child's life (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 32).

A study conducted in the USA by Pasztor and Burgess (1982) shows that foster parents have little involvement in making decisions and creating a individual change plan for their child. This situation is consistent with the findings of the UK study, which shows that plans are part of the official documentation in the offices of social workers and not in foster families (Sinclair, 1984).

The primary family often remains excluded from collaborating in the foster care process. Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019, p. 137-138) state that in practice, families feel the need for information and learning, hence excluding the primary family from education and new learning is an expression of disrespect, often occurring in foster care and preventing the emancipation of the primary family.

Burke (2008, p. 46) refers to specific groups of children who participate less in the processes that directly affect them, such as children from migrant backgrounds, children who are placed outside their primary families or children who are in the justice system. The author explains that the systems are adapted to adults and not to children, and there is no participation by children because decisions and power remain in the hands of adults. Research by Leeson (2007) conducted with children placed outside the primary family shows that children often feel helpless because they are not involved in decision-making, and there is still a problem with child participation in decision-making.

A study conducted in Croatia by Borić and Mataga Tintor (2022) on the participation of children from vulnerable groups shows similar results. It is important to note that the results show the views of experts who emphasise that children's participation is important but express distrust of children, i.e., they do not believe that children are capable of participation. They also describe children's participation as only being heard and having their opinions taken into account but without exerting any influence on the final decision affecting them, which Arnstein (1969) calls tokenism or apparent participation.

The participation of all who are involved in the foster care system is most often mentioned in the process of planning and devising individual plans as a space for involving the users and their families, all done in joint cooperation and partnership (Ajduković and Urbanc, 2009). In addition to the individual and their family, the importance of involvement and collaboration with other experts involved in the process is also emphasised. Despite this, research by Cambridge et al. (2005) shows that the majority of users do not actively participate in the planning process or features, and their involvement has no influence on the final decision. Lupton and Nixon (1999, p. 44) state that participatory decision-making disappears, and the balance between the autonomy required by the family and the state's intervention in the family is established solely on the basis of rights and responsibilities.

Similarly, Juhila, Dall, Hall and Koprowska (2021) present case studies from practise on user participation in multidisciplinary teams, linking the theory and practice, and putting special emphasis on actual participation in the holding of meetings. The authors describe the need for a multidisciplinary approach to user problems, especially when families are involved, and they see this approach as the main task of the social work profession. Social work is a profession that is committed to support processes in working with users that include all users (Mali, 2022, p. 1). Multidisciplinary meetings with users provide an excellent platform for joint work on recognised difficulties, but they can also pose a certain risk that can occur with this form of approach. The actual involvement of users as active participants must be ensured, which is not always the case in practise, as a balance of power between social workers and other professionals in relation to the user has not been established (Juhila, Dall, Hall and Koprowska, 2021). An example of practise from the UK describes meetings between different professionals from child protection, family and extended family networks to better understand all family circumstances. The focus of this type of support is on early access to the family before the child needs to be separated from the family. Hall and Dall (2021) speak of the need for such formal meetings, especially when decisions or plans are made for the user and point out the need to adapt the meetings

to the interaction between the participants and to take into account the complexity of the meeting. On the one hand, this creates space for joint and transparent collaboration, but on the other hand, clarity in determining roles, power relations and responsibilities in the process must not be neglected (Juhila, Dall, Hall and Koprowska, 2021).

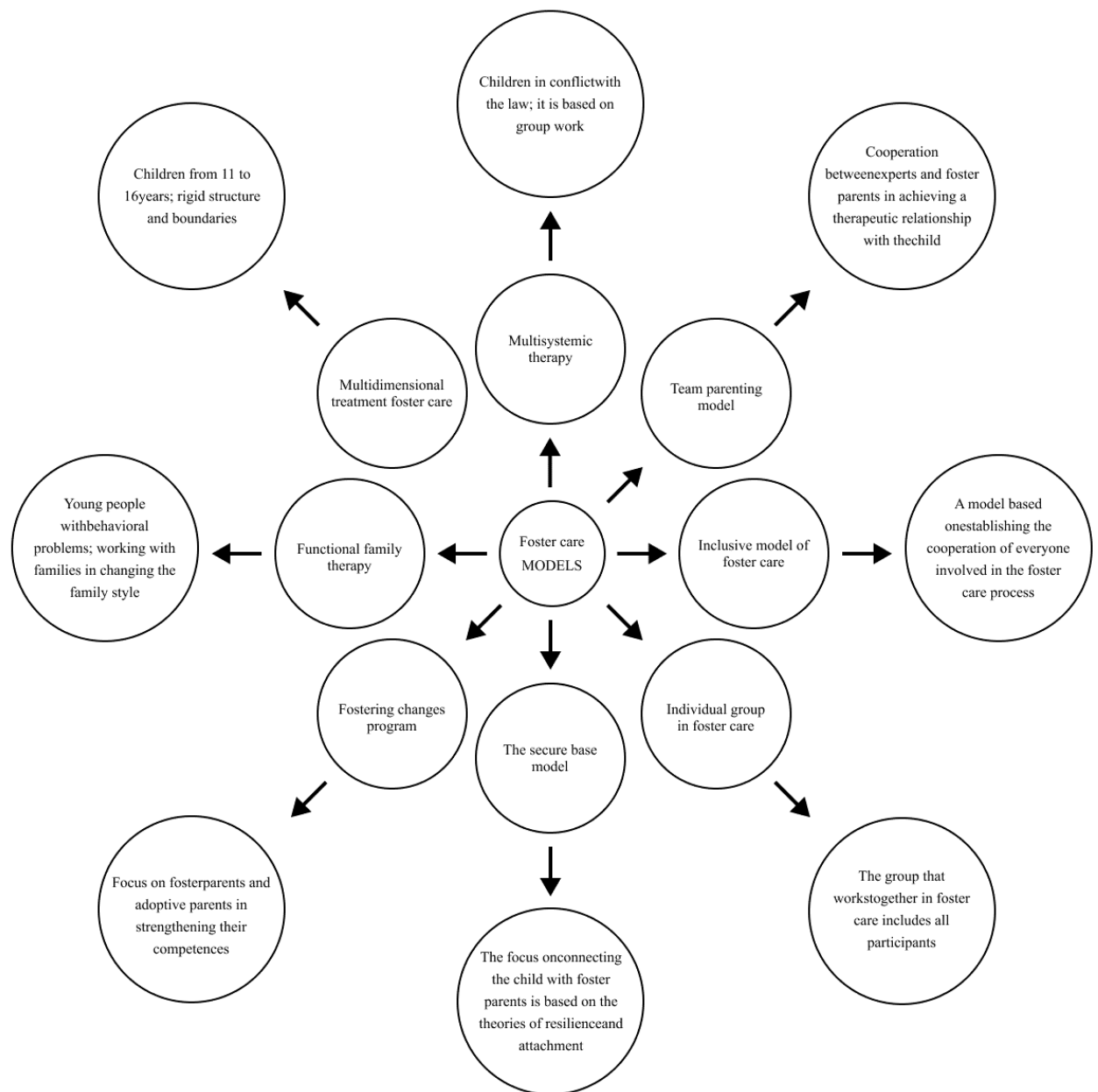
According to Burford and Hudson (2008, p. 60), the family group conference, a multidisciplinary meeting of experts and users, is based on the principle of including all experts needed to support the family and the family network. The participation and equality of all participants are ensured in two ways. Firstly, it is a process that differs from the usual multidisciplinary meetings of experts and users, where the experts are only in the first stage of the conference process, i.e., they are assigned the task of informing the participants. In the second stage, an appointment is made with the family to create a plan that is only for the family, and this happens without the presence and influence of the experts. The family becomes a planning group, opening up space for family participation and action in decision-making (Straub, 2005). Another way to achieve greater participant involvement is to use an independent coordinator who is not an expert and often comes from the community's civil sector. His or her role is to moderate the whole process to preserve the family's voice. The coordinator's role is to support the family in the organisational and implementational aspects without influencing the process and decision-making at the conference. The coordinator's role requires training and education, which provides preparation for working with families (Straub, 2012).

2.3. Models of foster care

As foster care practises have developed, so too have foster care models, especially in the United States of America. Some of the models that were or are still present in social work practice are presented here, but the number of models developed is far greater than the number constantly evolving (Figure 1). One of the models was developed in the late 1980s. It was devised for children aged 11 to 16 with behavioural problems and is called Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (Caw and Sebba, 2014). The aim is to achieve a change in the child's behaviour, and the duration of the placement is a maximum of one year. The model is characterised by high structure and rigid boundaries with intensive support and can be applied by specialised foster parents who have additional knowledge and skills for this specific approach. The theoretical background is based on the principles of behavioural therapy. Research by Biehal, Ellison and Sinclair (2012, p. 22) shows that long-term success is not guaranteed. Many young people revert to their old patterns of behaviour after leaving foster care. The Multisystemic Therapy Model was developed in the 1970s and was initially intended for working with families to protect children in conflict with the law. The concept of the model is based on group work, i.e., joint work among teams of experts and families. This type of group work aims to teach parents how to confront and deal with the inappropriate behaviour of an adolescent child. The goal is inclusion in the education system and changing the child's behaviour, where the approach involves a wider family network. The model has been around for over 40 years, and most studies and research have been conducted in this area. The studies have shown mixed results, positive and negative outcomes (Caw and Sebba, 2014, p. 40). Functional Family Therapy, a model introduced by Alexander and Pearsons in the 1960s, focuses on working with young people with behavioural problems but also on working with families who are helped to change their family style in terms of relationships and communication (Henggeler and Sheidow, 2012). In the UK, a model called the Fostering Changes Programme was introduced in 1999 and is directed exclusively at foster and adoptive parents, working to strengthen their skills and training to respond to the needs of the child (Warman, Pallett and Scott, 2006). The Secure Base Model was created based on ten years of research by authors Beek and Schofield (2004), who defined the elements that influence foster care success. The model was developed based on research showing that the key element is the ability to connect the child with the foster parents, and it is based on the theories of resilience and

attachment (Caw and Sebba, 2014, p. 46). Foster Parenting, as part of the therapeutic process, is a model developed under the name Team Parenting Model, which has been in existence since 2002. It involves professionals and foster parents working together to achieve a therapeutic relationship with the child (Caw and Sebba, 2014, p. 62). According to Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh (1995), the Inclusive Model of foster care is the most desirable model in childcare. This model involves working with the primary family and other participants in the foster care process, and its application is strongly advocated (Maglajlić, 1994). The model is based on cooperation among all participants in the foster care process, where each contributes their skills and knowledge to bring about change and support for the child (Čačinović Vogrinčić, Kobal, Mešl and Možina, 2005). An example of inclusive foster care is seen in Slovenia, where the concept of the Individual Group in foster care was developed (Čačinović Vogrinčić, 2006). Maglajlić (1994, p. 44) describes an inclusive model for providing foster care services that has existed in Croatia since the mid-1960s and has also involved the primary family and other experts needed to assist families in caring for children with intellectual disabilities. Although the model existed for a short time, today's practise shows different results. Laklija and Brkić (2022) point out that in Croatia, the foster care model should be defined more clearly, especially in the context of pairing a child with a foster parent. One of the models, called Specialised Foster Care, which refers to the care of children separated from their families as a form of criminal sanction, has not been established despite attempts to adapt and change the current legal framework (Laklija, Vukelić and Milić Babić, 2012).

Figure 1: Presentation of foster care models in social work



Source: Author's work based on Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh (1995), Warman, Pallett and Scott (2006), Henggeler and Sheidow, (2012) and Caw and Sebba (2014).

A comparison of the models of foster care described (Figure 1) shows that there are different approaches to working in the field of foster care. However, most of them have in common that they are based on psychological theories, psychotherapeutic approaches and the change of the child or family (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative analysis of foster care models

Model	Theoretical framework	Focus	Users
Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care	Behavioural therapy	Change in the child's behavior Model characterized by high structure and rigid boundaries	Children aged 11 to 16 with behavioral problems
Multisystemic Therapy Model	Family therapy and cognitive-behavior therapy	Concept based on group work Group work aims to teach parents how deal with the inappropriate behavior of an adolescent child The goal is changing the child's behavior	Children in conflict with the law or problem in behaviour
Functional Family Therapy	Therapeutic model - family counselling	Working with young people with behavioral problems Working with families who are helped to change their family style	Young people with behavioral problems
Fostering Changes Program	Social cognitive theory	Directed at foster and adoptive parents, working to strengthen their skills	Foster family and the child
Secure Base Model	Resilience and attachment theory	Focus on success foster care Goal is the ability to connect the child with the foster parents	Foster family and the child
Team Parenting Model	Psychoanalytic concept	Involves professionals and foster parents working together to achieve a therapeutic relationship with the child	Foster family and young people in foster care
Inclusive Model of foster care	System theory and theory of inclusive care.	Working with the primary family and other participants in the foster care process Co-operation among all participants in the foster care process	All participants involved in foster care

Source: Author's work based on Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh (1995), Warman, Pallett and Scott (2006), Henggeler and Sheidow, (2012) and Caw and Sebba (2014).

The analysis of the models and their theoretical framework clearly shows that the behavioural or cognitive-behavioural approach is the basis of most models aim at changing the child's behaviour. For example, the responsibility for placing the child in foster care is attributed to the child as a family member who is to blame for the difficulties in the family. Some of the models focus on specific age groups of children or specific behaviours of children, particularly adolescents, which excludes work with other children and all those involved. Most models focus on therapeutic work and view the child or family as something that needs to be fixed and adjusted. When looking for a solution, social work should focus on adapting the system and the type of support for the child or family according to their needs, which the models do not show. On the contrary, most models show the least amount of participation or manipulation (Arnstein, 1969), with no opportunity for participants to

influence decisions or establish a balance of power. The parents or children are passive participants in the process, they are the object of the teaching that needs to be changed in order to resolve difficulties. In addition, the secure base model aims to strengthen the connection between the foster parents and the child, which is not negative in foster care, but lacks the involvement of the primary family. The emphasis is on a successful foster care, but not as short-term care, because without the involvement of the primary family there is no prospect of the child returning to the primary family. The model does not ask what happens to the child's connection to primary family and the relationships that need to be maintained because they are important to the child's identity.

A model that includes all participants in the foster care and is aimed equally at the child, the primary family and the foster parents is the Inclusive Model of Foster Care, which Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh (1995) described and presented in their study. They described the development of the concept of inclusive care as the need for such an approach in the foster care system, while the role of social work is to create a complex network of relationships between all participants in the foster care process, respecting the active role of children and the need to preserve the identity to which they belong. Despite the development of models in the field of foster care, hardly any model includes the primary family in the joint work, while the theoretical framework focuses on the psychological aspects of human activity. No model includes a broader network of community support, transitions to community support, and building links between all participants and the system.

2.4. Conclusion of the chapter: Meaning, development and principles of foster care in social work

The term foster care is defined in different ways, but the common determinants of the definitions include the placement of a person outside their own home due to current unfavourable circumstances. The placement of a child in a foster family means a temporary stay away from the primary family until a change in the primary family occurs and the conditions for the child's return are met. Children, adults, people with disabilities, people with mental disabilities or older people can be placed in a foster family. As an alternative form of care, non-institutional placement offers an environment that is most similar to a family environment. For the child, this type of placement offers a personalised approach to the child's needs and a family-like environment. According to the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette 115/18, 18/22), children up to the age of seven are placed in foster families. Despite good legislation and several amendments to the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette 115/18, 18/22) in recent years, no positive changes have been observed in foster care practices. This trend is typical of Croatia as a traditional foster care country, with a history of foster care beginning almost 100 years ago, in the period after the First World War, when children from Herzegovina were relocated to richer regions due to hunger. Even then, it was deemed essential to place children in families and not in institutions. Also worth mentioning is the development of the foster care system in the Split region, where a large number of people with mental disabilities were placed in foster care after the Second World War. During that time, children with difficulties began to be placed in foster families. Despite the long tradition of foster care, the first law on foster care in Croatia was passed in 2007, and since then, it has been amended and supplemented several times. Coinciding with reforms to social care in recent years, the process of deinstitutionalisation and transformation has been evolving in Croatia in line with national strategic documents and European directives. Deinstitutionalisation aims to normalise the living conditions of persons placed in an institutional form and prevent institutionalisation through the development of adequate services and necessary community support. Although all the necessary strategies and plans for the deinstitutionalisation process have been developed, the process itself is slow or stagnant in terms of achieving the goals. Analysing the results of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2022a) has shown big differences in the regions, in terms of available services, especially foster care, with a slower transition to community-based support. Furthermore, deinstitutionalisation is a complex process that involves not

only the inclusion of users or the reorganisation of institutions, but also the necessary changes in society at several levels. Particular emphasis is placed on joint work with users, which involves changing the positions of power, changing the mindset of social workers, and also creating conditions for letting deprived people exercise their rights. Deinstitutionalisation and foster care have intertwined objectives and focus on participation, active involvement of users, emancipation and the right of each person to normalise their living conditions, i.e., to live similarly to people who do not have difficulties. Emancipation is precisely one of the key elements that social workers should understand when working with users. Emancipation becomes evident not only in terms of independence but also freedom from all forms of oppression, all of which are achievable only by activating and developing a person's potential. Emancipation in social work means addressing oppressive structures, while social work aims to strengthen the ability to deal with such structures. When working with users, social workers should not assume that they know best what is good for them because that is not what the emancipation of the users is about. The social worker's relationship should be based on trust, belief in each user's abilities and mutual co-operation. Ultimately, the social worker is responsible to the user, themselves and the team in which they work. Dialogue is a basic prerequisite to achieving cooperation with the users. Dialogue opens up a space for users to reflect critically and gain control over their own lives. The role of social workers is to raise the awareness of users, who can then empower themselves, share their thoughts, liberate themselves and take action. Emancipation in foster care is usually associated with the child leaving the foster family after reaching adulthood. However, it should be associated with learning and taking responsibility for one's own life. Furthermore, decisions must always be made in the presence of the person about whom the decision is made, never without them. Participation has been part of the profession since the beginning of social work and the principles of social work even to this day. Furthermore, participation is when all parties are involved and requires the social worker to believe in the users. Foster care is a complex process involving various parties. Working with one family is already a complex situation, but foster care involves two families and a child. The complexity of foster care becomes even greater when the child is relocated outside his or her home town, and two social workers must be involved, i.e., one responsible for the child and the other responsible for the foster family. There is also a team of experts working with the family. Overall, there are numerous people with different roles involved in the foster care process. In the process, the task of collaborative group work is planning, but previous research has shown that planning is

often only part of the bureaucracy. Another challenge of the foster care system is the participation of the child, given that the system is primarily designed for adults. The child has the right to participate, express his or her opinion and be involved in the decision-making process, which previous research has shown is also evident in social work practice. Although the child's participation is usually guaranteed, it is an apparent participation (Arnstein, 1969), as the child's opinion and voice are heard but not respected, and he or she has no influence on the decision-making process. The family group conference, by the way it is conducted, can be a method that combines important elements of foster care, such as the inclusion of all participants, the emancipation of the family and the adoption of the plan by the same family, evenly distributed authority throughout the process, but also the recognition of the new role that experts play in this approach. A number of models have been developed in the foster care system, some of which are still in use today, but most are focused on the specific difficulties of the child. The development of the foster care model adapted to the difficulties of the child, such as behavioural problems, a child in conflict with the law, and working with families to change parenting styles, all have a common focus on therapeutic work with the child or the whole family. The inclusive model, briefly used in Croatia in the 1960s, was developed on the basis of social work principles such as participation, equal involvement of all parties and a focus on working with the primary family. The model targets all those involved and possessing specific skills and abilities they can utilise in working with children. In Croatia, there is currently no clear model of foster care; however, attempts have been made to develop specific models suitable for children with certain difficulties, such as specialised foster care for children with behavioural problems. Although specialised foster care has been regulated by law over the last four years, the model has not yet become established within foster care practice.

3. THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE METHOD AND WORKING WITH FAMILIES

3.1. Social work methods and development of the family group conference

The family group conference is mentioned in much of the literature as a working model in social work, but a smaller part of the literature describes it as a method (Thørnblad, Strandbu, Holtan and Jenssen, 2016, p. 996). The various interpretations are not clear enough, and a deeper analysis of the methods and models in social work is needed. The analysis of Croatian literature that writes about methods or models in social work leads to the conclusion that there are few academic articles describing working methods in social work or describing specific models in working with users (Kletečki Radović, 2008; Ajduković and Urbanc, 2009). However, even in the existing literature, the distinction between method and model in working with users is not clear. Understanding the family group conference in social work also requires a proper understanding of the methods and models. The methods of social work in Croatia are not yet fully developed, especially in the area of foster care. Therefore, the further development and implementation of new approaches and working methods in social work practise is necessary. The Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) mentions three methods: case management, individual planning and supervision, but makes no mention of models for working with users. An analysis of the literature on family group conference in New Zealand found that the method was described as a model of the restorative approach or Restorative Justice (Fox, 2018, p. 18) prior to minor changes in its implementation. According to the Croatian Encyclopaedia (2021), the word model comes from the Latin word *modulus*, meaning measure or sample, and in science, it is a theoretically described system. Flaker (2003, p. 8) describes the method as intertwined with behavioural theory, placing importance on human behaviour within specific situations, and he defines it as a path to a set goal and the key to social work science. According to the Croatian Encyclopaedia (2021), the word method comes from the Greek word *méthodos*, meaning a way of research, a manner or procedure or a planned approach to achieve a particular goal. The literal translation is way to the goal, *hodos* - way and *meta* - over or between. In social work, in order to work effectively and help people, theories and methods focused on working with people are useful (Stepney and Ford, 2000, p. 9). Furthermore, Stepney

and Ford (2000) emphasise the importance and need to apply theoretical foundations for good social work practice. Proper application of practical theories, models, and methods in working with users contributes to good practice. In contrast to theory, which focuses on practical functioning (Flaker, 2003, p. 18), Thompson (2000, p. 22) defines a model of social work to describe how certain factors are interrelated but fails to explain why it is so. Furthermore, another important question for the social work profession is how to collaborate with social work users, which is important for the practice and the profession of social work. From an important perspective in social work and in working with people, it is better to talk and write about the family group conference as a working method that directs the process towards answering the question of how. Some authors (Marsh and Crow, 1998; Lupton and Nixon, 1999; Frost, Abram and Burges, 2014) argue that the family group conference is a model, while others (Doolan, 2004; Huntsman, 2006; Burford and Hudson, 2008) consider it a method. High-quality work with users in social work essentially requires developing new working methods, especially methods in the field of foster care, which entails complex work with all participants and guidelines for working with people. Social work in Croatia has no developed methods for working with foster families. For this particular reason, the family group conference is seen as a method for working with families in the foster care process and a possible approach showing how to work with all participants in the foster care process.

As distinct from the methods, well-known models exist for working with users in social work. An example of using the model in social work is the medical model, which focuses on the user's inadequacies or the so-called sick part. In addition, a social model has been developed that includes people's experience as an important element in working with people and is oriented towards the rights of people and users who are seen as the experts in their lives (Ajduković and Urbanc, 2009, p. 530). In working with users, Mali (2009, p. 156) describes an integrative model of working with older people and people with dementia, while Kletečki Radović (2008, p. 230) describes models of representation, models of psychological empowerment and social action in working with disadvantaged groups in society.

In terms of user groups and approaches in social work, classical methods involve working with an individual, a group, a family or a community (Flaker, 2016, p. 13). Furthermore, the working methods are fieldwork, conversation and negotiation, writing and reporting or teamwork, while Flaker (2016, p. 197) additionally mentions rapid needs assessment or personal planning. Flaker (2003, p. 8) defines methods as a procedure that leads to a goal

in working with users and when experts possess sufficient skills to achieve the desired effect. Ajduković and Urbanc (2009, p. 525) speak of methods as mediators of significant positive effects in the lives of people needing social system services, but only when experts use these methods creatively. Stepney and Ford (2000, p. 9) describe methods in social work as formal accounts of how a social worker does their job, which in practice means concretising a single or several theories and applying them.

Another reason a family group conference is named a method is its process. This same process has a unique flow, is based on theory, focuses on achieving the goal, and gives instructions and answers on how to work with people. Current methods for working with families have been poorly developed in Croatia (Aras Kramar, 2021), while little has been written or spoken about such developments and applications. Flaker (2016, p. 195) speaks of the need to develop new methods due to the ineffectiveness of existing ones. Developing social work in the era of social transformations and relationships requires innovative methods and approaches to working with users.

The method of family group conferences was developed in New Zealand in the 1980s as a possible form of assistance in the needs of Māori children and youth who found themselves in the social care system (Burford and Hudson, 2008). Social welfare interventions for Māori children failed to show results; hence, the New Zealand Government began promoting dialogue with the Māori community to find a solution. They collectively found that when working with young people from the Māori community, the specific cultural aspects and Māori habits associated with the addressed problems were not taken into account (Dijkstra, 2019). The impression was that current practices were racist and discriminatory, and that the overall policy was monocultural (Burford and Hudson, 2008, p. 16). The Māori emphasised that added value required the involvement of the extended family, who should have more power in deciding about the child. Based on specific Māori needs, a family group conference method was developed to work with families and the community to protect children's rights and enable shared decision-making within families that respect different cultural values (Dijkstra, 2019). Given that the model proved to be a successful response to existing difficulties in working with children, New Zealand incorporated the family group conference method into the legislative framework based on the data collected and subsequently passed the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act (1989). Following the passage of the Act, the family group conference was further developed, providing a new dimension to working with and the approach to families (Levine, 2000).

Almost forty years later, the family group conference is present in a number of countries as the original approach to implementing the method or as an adapted model in certain countries (Straub, 2012). In Western European countries, the use of the method is concentrated on working with young people at risk, where the focus is on justice for young people (Ashley and Nixon, 2007). An example of a country where the use of family group conference has taken significant root in working with families is the development of the family group conference in the Netherlands, which started in 2001 under the name "*Eigen Kracht-conferentie*", which translates as "a conference of one's own power". The implementation and application of the family group conference in the Netherlands is one of the non-governmental organisations that has recorded many conducted conferences, even exceeding 5.000 in different areas of social work (Straub, 2012). Research has shown that good acceptance and the spread of family group conference in the Netherlands is partly due to emphasising the need for family participation and autonomy (Maluccio, Ainsworth and Thoburn, 2000).

3.2. The concept and special features of the family group conference

The family group conference method aims to empower families to work together as partners based on legally defined services to solve problems that require addressing. The approach is based on family and community change (Fox, 2018) by engaging and creating space for dialogue (Flaker, 2016), which, according to Freire (2002), is the main tool for emancipatory practices. Advocacy is one of the fundamental principles, especially when working with vulnerable groups in society whose voices are rarely heard or who do not have the opportunity to participate in decisions about themselves (Dalrymple and Burke, 2006, p.74). Fox (2018, p. 2) defines a family group conference as a voluntary meeting imbued with an empowering and partnership approach, aiming to involve children and families in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the author describes the method as a holistic intervention that focuses on problem-solving, power sharing and meeting the needs of the child or family. Mirsky (2003) makes similar points and places additional emphasis on cooperation and participation. Social work recognises that families should be more involved in decisions made within the family and when the state intervenes in the family (Marsh and Crow, 1998). The aim of the method is to increase the well-being of children and their safety, as well as reducing the need for help from experts and their interventions (Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković and Stams, 2016). Collaboration and shared power with the family can strengthen the necessary networks that provides safety for the child at risk, and this can be achieved through the family group conference method (Morris and Connolly, 2012, p. 43). The family group conference method encompasses important principles of working with families (Edwards and Parkinson, 2018), such as respect for children and human rights, social justice (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009), family participation in decision-making, family empowerment (Saleebey, 2013), a focus on the healthy potential of the family system and a willingness to address future problems more independently (Levine, 2000).

The concept behind the method is based on the coming together of families and people who are important in the life of the family as a source of support and experts who support and empower the family throughout the process. The joint work of the family and the social worker leads to decisions about who will be invited, where everyone will meet, the central issue to be discussed and how to create an effective plan that will lead to change in the family. In addition to the family, two other people are present to help with the implementation, namely the initiator, a social worker, who has the role of support with joint

cooperation throughout the process, and the independent coordinator, whose role is to prepare the participating members and organise the meeting (Božić, 2017). Three parties participate in the family group conference: 1) the child, 2) the family network, which includes immediate family, extended family, and members of the family's social network, and 3) professionals (Marsh and Crow, 1998, p. 14), placing them in focus as key people for decision-making (Doolan, 2004). The method aims to resolve difficulties in the family associated with child protection to find a solution, create a plan for the necessary changes and implement the activities identified in the plan implementing the necessary actions (Burford and Hudson, 2008, p. 2). Family group conference is based on several fundamental assumptions, such as the family's right to make decisions about their lives, the belief that the family is competent to make decisions if properly guided, and the presumption that decisions made within the family will be implemented more successfully than decisions imposed on the family (Levine, 2000).

The child's right to participate and express his or her opinion throughout the family group conference process is respected (Doolan, 2004). The Convention on the Rights of the Child says that the child should be encouraged and enabled to participate in education in his or her life, and the child should be respected as an equal human being (Barnes, 2011). The appointment of a representative for the child is important and specific to the family group conference process. The aim is to have the child's active participation and space to ensure the child's voice in the conference (Frost, Abram and Burgess, 2014, p. 487). In their research, Barker and Barker (1995) show that conference participants are often concerned that their voice will not be heard and appreciated, but also that the child may be influenced by adults and not given space to express their views. If the child does not feel safe, does not want to express his or her opinion in front of everyone or believes that someone else would do it better, he or she can choose a representative to speak for him or her (Marsh and Crow, 1998). In addition, the representative protects the child's interests, can only support or speak for them, and ultimately, the child has the right to determine who will be their representative (Frost, Abram and Burgess, 2014, p. 487). Research by Marsh and Crow (1998) has shown that, in most cases, children under the age of ten want to participate. Lupton and Nixon (1999) reviewed the research findings and concluded that some of the children who chose to participate in the family group conference were passive, i.e., they did not play an active role and did not participate in expressing their opinions. Similar results appear in the research of Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings (1995), who concluded that only about a quarter of the children who attended family group conference participated

fully. Custody is present in other areas of social work where decisions are made about the child when the child has a legal representative who takes care of the child's interests (Fox, 2018, p. 59).

An important concept in the family group conference is the time the family has to discuss and decide what steps should be taken to change the current situation (Fox, 2018). What is important to emphasise and what differentiates the family group conference method from the institutional approach is family time, where the family finds a solution without the participation of an expert. The family has the opportunity to request the presence of an expert during family time, but only if the family deems it necessary (Fox, 2018, p. 181).

One of the features of the family group conference method is its modularity and adaptability to the family's needs and opportunities. The method can be conducted in a place designated by the family, in the family's home or in a neutral space that is comfortable for all. A family group conference can also be held over the telephone or using audio and video applications that help people who live far from the conference location communicate (Vincent, Collard and Patel, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic was a good example and provided a good experience, showing that the mentioned form of communication was a good way to continue to provide families with the support they needed, and the adaptability of social work practice came to the fore (Mitchell and Ali, 2020). Juhila, Dall, Hall and Koprowska (2021) note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, most meetings and assemblies were postponed, and different countries had different practices. Turner (2022, p. 61) describes holding meetings with users while maintaining social distancing. In such exceptional circumstances, practice shows that holding a virtual family group conference had the greatest success when working with young people and with families whose children are at risk of neglect and exploitation, as well as in family crises (Roberts, Pavlakis and Richards, 2021). Certain disadvantages are evident in families without access to the necessary technology and the Internet, but the conference coordinator can help the family overcome these barriers.

Another variation of the family group conference, based on the New Zealand model, has, in some cases, been modulated and adapted to different cultural environments and also to the needs of users when implemented within the social systems of the countries where it has spread. Different conference names have also been given. For example, in North America, family group conference is called Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) (Morris and Connolly, 2012) or community conference, which has been further developed in Western countries (Fox, 2018). Sweden has introduced Family Advisory Forums tailored

to Swedish communities nationwide (Lupton and Nixon, 1999, p. 96). By law, families in Sweden are given the opportunity and must be supported to make decisions independently before intervening in the family or separating the child from the family (Mitchel, 2020). Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković and Stams (2016, p. 101) list various terms, such as Family Unity Meeting (FUM), Family Decision-Making Meeting (FDM), Team Decision-Making Meeting (TDM) and Family Team Meeting (FTM). The most common differences are how the meetings are conducted, the participants invited, and the difficulties discussed at the conferences. Differences are also observed in the powers to implement the method. Civil society organisations or agencies are responsible for this in some countries, while in others, it is the state social system (Fox, 2018). Different variations of the family group conference can be an advantage when adapting to local conditions and different cultures (Adams and Chandler, 2004).

The use of family group conference is most frequent in working with children with behavioural problems, children in the school system who are excluded or experiencing difficulties, when working with adults, older people, young offenders and people with intellectual disabilities (Doolan, 2004). Božić (2017, p. 36) also mentions other applications such as foster care, in situations where the primary family is unable to care for children independently, in divorce proceedings, before family court proceedings, in cases of peer violence, adolescent developmental crises or difficulties in the family, such as loss of work. The family group conference has been widely accepted in social work practice and is applicable when working with all user groups.

3.3. Prerequisites for holding a family group conference and stages of holding a family group conference

Several conditions must be met before holding a family group conference. One of the most important prerequisites is the presence of trained experts who have undergone training for one of the two roles in conducting the conference: the initiator or independent coordinator (Božić, 2017). The independent coordinator has a facilitating role in the family group conference process, and he or she is not an expert in family problems, but the main focus is on organising and running the conference (McKillop, 2016). The initiator is a social worker and is the first person to offer the family the opportunity of a family group conference, where the prerequisite for conducting the conference is the family's willingness to participate (Fox, 2018). One of the prerequisites is the location of the family group conference. The family and the initiator agree upon the conference location, and it is important that the family feels safe and comfortable in that location. Huntsman (2006) points out that the conference should not be held in the formal offices of social workers but in less formal settings such as community centres, local community halls, church halls, schools or family homes. In addition, the author points out that the choice of premises is an important aspect of the process and that, in addition to holding the meeting, food should be prepared to create a relaxed atmosphere, as conferences are often emotionally charged (Huntsman, 2006). Social workers and other professionals involved in running the conference also need to be trained in approaching families, which relates particularly to the power position in the relationship. Changing the power and role relationship during the process means experts have to be aware of what they are doing and be willing to create a cooperative relationship with the family and a desire to work together (Čačinović Vogrinić and Mešl, 2019).

There are three stages of a family group conference: 1) preparation and planning, 2) implementation of the conference, and 3) evaluation of the results achieved (Figure 2) (Božić, 2017).

Preparation and planning.

In the preparation and planning stage of the conference, sufficient time and resources should be planned to create the conditions for successfully holding the conference (Liebman, 2007). The preparation stage requires determining whether all participants are ready and want to participate, starting with the family and the child and then including all

other participants from the family network. The family's motivation is very important at this stage. The aim is to recruit as many participants as possible from the family network who have specific resources, which also allows the family to recognise the potential in their environment (Fox, 2018). An independent coordinator is appointed whose role is to organise and manage the whole process, coordinate with the initiator, act as a social worker, and involve the family in joint planning (Huntsman, 2006). When inviting participants, the independent coordinator explains the reason for the meeting so that everyone can focus on the goal of the meeting and, in consultation with the family, involves other necessary experts who have resources to support the family, such as schoolteachers and doctors (Božić, 2017). The family and the experts involved in the process should prepare well at this stage. In the preparation stage, all necessary information is shared, and participants can reflect on how they can contribute to the solutions (Mitchel, 2020). It is essential that the family, in consultation with the initiator, decides which people to invite to the family group conference. If the child is the focus of the conference, they can suggest whom they would like to invite, such as a friend or teacher, and they can also ask for someone to represent them and speak on their behalf, such as a grandparent (Huntsman, 2006). Some studies show that the preparation stage takes six to eight weeks, depending on how well the independent coordinator can contact all participants and organise their participation (Fox, 2018).

Meeting / Family Group Conference.

The actual meeting and gathering of all participants take place at a location chosen by the family in consultation with an independent coordinator (Huntsman, 2006). The conference is held in three phases:

- (a) All participants assemble and are informed by an independent coordinator about the meeting process and tasks. The initiator explains the reason for the meeting, describes the current situation, informs the group about the need for change, and says everyone can contribute their resources (Mitchell, 2020). In this part of the meeting, everyone also receives information from experts on how they can help and in what way (Huntsman, 2006). All participants can ask questions and make comments or suggestions to pool all the resources available to the family transparently.
- (b) After receiving information and the joint discussion in the group, the second part of the conference requires the family's private time, in which experts and the initiator do not participate (Božić, 2017). The family agrees on the plan and the division of activities, after which everyone jointly presents the plan to the rest of the group (Huntsman, 2006). The

initiator, i.e., the social worker, helps finalise the plan in discussion with the family and checks that everything agrees with the necessary legal framework and is in the best interest of the child, after which the plan is finalised, signed and handed out to all participants (Mitchel, 2020).

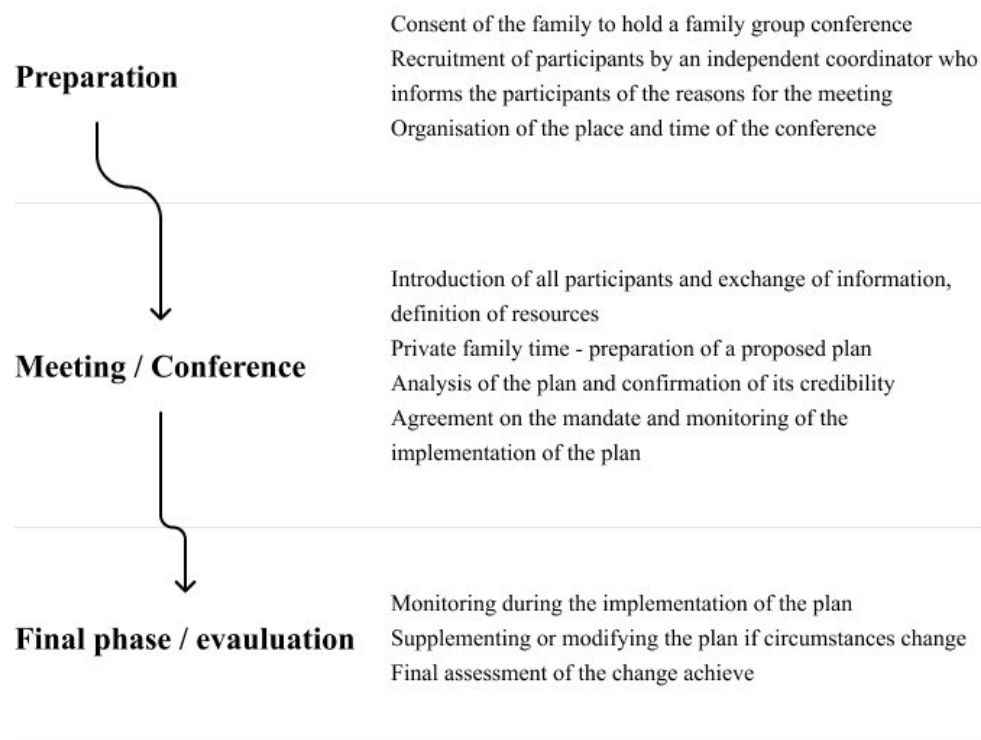
(c) At the end of the conference, in the final phase, the procedures for monitoring the implementation of the plan are agreed, and the person responsible for this is selected. It is important to establish the time frame and the way in which the implementation of the plan will be monitored (Mitchel, 2020).

The stage of holding a family group conference or meeting is a space for all interested parties to help the family and child. The value behind having this type of conversation with the family is explained in the information provided to all participants, the emancipation and time given only to the family while respecting their autonomy, the participation of all participants who share their resources with the family, and the involvement of the community (Huntsman, 2006).

The final stage.

In the final stage of the family group conference process, an assessment is made of the goals achieved and the changes that have taken place in the family (Božić, 2017). The family and the experts discuss the progress made and the plan, the need to add to the plan or make changes, and the current situation in the family. The assessment is agreed upon at the meeting, where the necessary time to implement the plan is determined. The recommendation is that it be between two and six months (Mitchell, 2020).

Figure 2: Stages of the family group conference process



Source: Author's work based on Huntsman (2006), Liebman (2007), Božić (2017), Fox (2018) and Mitchel (2020).

Working with families using family group conference is divided into several stages. Each stage requires a good, detailed preparation, on which the success of the conference largely depends. Given that family relationships and working with families are part of a complex process, it becomes even more important to properly prepare the family for the involvement of the wider family, the family network and other professionals. The planning stage is a vital part of the family group conference process, as a well-planned process leads to effective outcomes (Chapman, Gellin and Anderson, 2015), and which is also important when selecting an independent coordinator whose organisational and communication skills should be well developed (Marsh and Crow, 1998, p. 14). The most important role in the first stage of the family group conference is played by the independent coordinator, who acts at the invitation of a social worker who, in talking with the family, determines whether the family voluntarily wants to organise a meeting and this type of problem-solving. The

social worker who has agreed with the family to hold a family group conference visits the family at home and determines a common central theme to be discussed at the meeting. The family selects the participants they want in their family group conference. In this part of the process, listening to the child and weighing their suggestions for participants is important. Often these people can be the child's best friend or an important person in their life who they trust and feel safe with, and sometimes, for example, a teacher or sports coach (Edwards, 2018). In the conversation between the social worker and the family, the role of the independent coordinator, who will contact all potential participants, is thoroughly explained. The role of the independent coordinator is most intense at this stage of the work, as it is necessary to motivate and activate the participants to get involved while explaining the reason for the meeting to each participant. The independent coordinator explains to all participants that after outlining the reason for the meeting, they should think about how they can contribute and help the family before the meeting. One of the tasks of the independent coordinator is to set the place and time and coordinate with all other participants the possibility of them attending. After all participants have been invited to attend and informed, the independent coordinator takes care of the food and drinks that will be available for the participants. The preparation stage also aims to show the family what resources are available to them to activate the family's resources and the family's supportive networks. Prior to then, the family network had not been activated in this way in the family's life, and families are often unaware of the resources they have at their disposal and the potential their network offers (Munro, Meetoo, Quy and Simon, 2017).

The meeting or conference is the central event of the family group conference and is conducted in three steps. Each step of the central part is important for all participants, and the facilitator of the first part is an independent coordinator who ensures all participants are well informed, all experts present their resources to help the family, and there is enough time for all participants to ask questions (Edwards, 2018, p. 44). Information sharing between all participants and transparent communication allow all participants to participate equally, understand everything and understand what is needed in the process. The family network has more freedom to express its possibilities, be interactive, and assume some of the responsibility for helping the family. In contrast, this is not the case when it comes to procedures in the regional offices and dealing with the family, where most decisions are made by the social worker, while the family network is only sometimes involved (Munro, Meetoo, Quy and Simon, 2017). Great importance is given to exchanging information between professionals who support are present with the family in one place and can get

from each other any information they may not have had before, as well as possible sources of support for the family. The social gathering of the participants in the first part of the meeting is similar to the everyday life of a family, as they talk around the table with food and drinks, the atmosphere is less formal and communication is easier. The key concept of the family group conference is noticeable in the family's private time, when the family separates from other participants and experts, has private conversations, and devises a plan. This ensures that the family, not experts, lead the process and that decision-making stays within the family.

The final part of the conference is the closing phase, where the family returns to the other participants to present the plan, get their support to accept it and have all participants sign it. The social worker's role is to help the family so that the plan complies with the law and that the child is protected in the process (Edwards, 2018, p. 46). The independent coordinator prepares the plan and assigns it to individual participants. After that, his or her role is to monitor the implementation of the plan and to assist if changes to the plan are required. The achieved objectives are evaluated after the agreed time has elapsed.

3.3.1. An example of a case study on the implementation of a family group conference

A case study of a family is used as an example to facilitate and better understand the process of implementing the family group conference method. The example from working with families, the preparation, process and phases of a family group conference are further clarified so that the process can be interpreted more clearly.

Description of the family situation. A young 19-year-old girl, Marija (name changed for the case description), is at an advanced stage of pregnancy and currently living in a homeless hostel provided by the local authorities for people with disabilities or homeless people. The accommodation was neither adequate nor safe for the young mother-to-be, and Marija expressed concern for her safety and that of the child. She left her parents' home because she did not get along with her mother, was often in bad company and took drugs. Marija's parents are divorced, and her father lives in another place. She rarely sees him, though she has always had a good relationship with her father's mother, her grandmother. The child's father, Ivan (name changed for the case description), is a homeless man who lives on the city streets, mostly in a tent, and whose mental health is not good because he worries a lot about the child's birth. He has had no contact with his parents, rarely with his father.

Support for Marija and Ivan is needed immediately and continuously; otherwise, there is a risk that the child will be taken away from the parents by the courts because the young parents are not able to take care of the child. The family needs support and a network from the extended family who can help, as well as professionals to assist the young family through community resources, information and empowerment to prevent separation of the child from the family.

Organising and conducting a family group conference:

Marija approached the Daybreak organisation for help because she was becoming increasingly worried about the impending birth of her child and the deteriorating mental health of her partner, Ivan. The Daybreak organisation provides a family group conference service and collaborates closely with social workers and other professionals who protect children and vulnerable groups in society. At the invitation of social workers, the independent coordinators of the Daybreak organisation take all the necessary measures to organise and conduct the family group conference. In Marija's case, the first contact was with Daybreak's independent coordinator, Ana (name changed for the case description). Ana interviewed Marija, collected all the necessary information and informed the social worker about the first contact with Marija and Ivan. Along with Marija and Ivan, Ana concluded that it was not time for a family group conference until basic conditions were clarified, namely Ivan achieving stability and receiving support from the mental health crisis team and social workers, including adequate accommodation for the two young people. Ana contacted Ivan's father, who offered financial support for accommodation and Marija and Ivan started living together.

1. Phases – preparing for the family group conference

Ana, the independent coordinator, arranged a meeting with Marija and Ivan after they had stated they were ready and needed further help, especially regarding the care and maintenance of the child. The social worker spoke with Marija and Ivan, and together, they identified the central issue – providing help and support for Marija and Ivan to take care of the child and their health, as well as identifying the people they wanted to invite to their family group conference. Ana, as the independent coordinator, began inviting people based on the people that had been chosen and informed them about the reason behind calling the family group conference, its date and venue, and how they could contribute to supporting the young family.

2. Meeting – phase of holding the family group conference

a) Gathering and informing

The conference took place in the home of a young family. Marija's mother and grandmother, Ivan's father and his partner, a social worker, and the independent coordinator, Ana, were present. The tone for the social gathering was set with the food brought by the participants. Everyone noted what they would bring to eat and drink. After the social worker informed everyone present about the support they could receive in the community, such as attending support groups for people with mental health problems like Ivan, Marija could participate in support groups for addicts and workshops for parenting issues. The other participants indicated how they would help the family with their resources. For example, Marija's grandmother and mother will visit the family regularly and maintain a positive relationship and help in caring for the child, while Ivan's father will pay the rent for the house where they currently live and he will visit his son more often.

b) Private family time

During the rest of the conference, the family had time to draw up a plan. Marija and Ivan withdrew to a separate room from where the other participants and experts had been to reach an agreement and draw up the plan. They scheduled family visits and how to contact the family, but also the need for them to inform family members if Ivan's mental health deteriorated or if Marija underwent an addiction crisis. They decided to join support groups for people with mental health problems and drug addicts and were particularly interested in workshops on developing parenting skills. Marija and Ivan talked in another room, alone, without the presence of the others.

c) Final phase.

Having developed the plan, Marija and Ivan returned to where the others were and were presented with the plan. The social worker reviewed it and found that the family and child protection elements were in place and that the other participants agreed with their given tasks. As the independent coordinator, Ana put the plan in writing, and all participants signed the plan and received a copy. They agreed together that Ana would regularly monitor the implementation of the plan. The evaluation would take place after three months, which is the time they estimated the family would need to achieve the planned goals.

3. Evaluation

An evaluation was conducted after three months when Marija gave birth to a healthy baby girl and decided to spend the first three months of the child's life with the baby in a shelter for young mothers with children. She did this to have all the conditions necessary to take care of her child. The independent coordinator and the social worker saw that the family was making progress and that Marija had permanently stopped taking drugs and regularly

attended support groups. So, too, did Ivan, who found a job and continues to participate in support groups for people with mental disabilities because he feels much better. The parents care of the child and give him lots of love. The whole family is involved and has a regular relationship, and communication is much better.

Source: <https://www.daybreakfgc.org.uk/case-studies>

A case study example is described using a report from the Daybreak Family Group Conferences organization (<https://www.daybreakfgc.org.uk/family-group-conferences>) in the UK. This charity runs a family group conference and bases its activities on involving young people, children, and their families in resolving family problems. The organization began its work in 2000 with prior approval from New Zealand's Māori community to put the method into practice (Munro, Meetoo, Quay and Simon, 2017). The organisation has gained experience in practising family group conferences in the area of family abuse, involving adults and older people from the family (Fisher, Mooney and Papworth, 2018, p. 202).

3.4. Group work as a principle of the family group conference and its application in the foster care system

Flaker (2016, p. 16) describes social work with a group as one of the possible methods of working with users. Throughout history, group work has been associated with developing a community where social change was sought (Žganec, 1995, p. 143), while Papell (2015) additionally suggested focusing on the combination of individual and community work. The group work method offers social work space for social change and the fulfilment of the profession's social mission by advocating for a democratic approach, advocacy, and connection (Lee, 1994). The group work method in social work focuses on collective action and the group as a whole (Giacomucci, 2021), while Shakil (2015, p. 565) described group work in the 1960s when the method began to be used in clinical practice and psychotherapeutic approaches focusing on the individual and their behaviour in the group. The medical model focused on the individual as the source of the problem, while the source of the problem was not sought in society (Giacomucci, 2021). The development of group work in foster care is mostly related to education and groups formed for training foster parents or undertaking group work with children placed in foster care, but they are mostly educational in nature or stem from the field of behavioural psychology (Triseliotis, 1988, p. 13). In the United States of America in the 1960s, there existed groups in which foster parents could share their experiences and children who had been placed in foster care could reflect on their experiences of being placed in a new family (Triseliotis, 1988, p. 14). Group work in foster care has been used for a variety of purposes, e.g., as a task-oriented group to resolve possible difficulties in the foster care process, as a group to prepare foster parents for children with special needs prior to the adoption decision, or as a group to prepare children who are placed in foster care. Triseliotis (1988, p. 15) emphasizes that for group work to be successful, passive group participants should be transformed into active ones, and that space for group work is needed in the pre-fostering phase, during the fostering period and after the end of the care process. Levin (1992, p. 471) emphasizes the importance of group work with families, especially primary families, and explains it as a space for the learning and growth of each individual. Having the primary goal of working with primary families to return the child to the family is important for social work because, in addition to the common goal, primary families gain new information through group work, they are

empowered to mobilize their skills, and an environment is created where there is no judgment and no shame (Levin, 1992).

The use of group work in social work has slowly declined in importance, as has its widespread use in family work practice (Drumm, 2006). Although the family is the first group a person comes into contact with, several other groups emerge and pass in the course of each person's life, which have their purpose and in which people fulfil their needs (Janković, 2012). Social support, social change, connection and learning in social work are the main characteristics of group work (Giacomucci, 2021), while Shulman (1996, p. 144) extends the meaning of group work to the space that enables users to create the potential for mutual help. Furthermore, group work focuses on the support that users need, understanding and dialogue, and developing skills through learning to solve problems (Jacobs, Masson, Harvill and Schimmel, 2011). The democratic leadership style in group work is considered the most humane and allows all participants to be engaged on an equal footing (Lang, 2016). This democratic approach was also described by Randall and Southgate (1980, p. 24), who view group work as a process in which a creative cycle takes place based on group work dynamics. A democratic approach allows all participants to contribute equally, and everyone has the opportunity to express their opinions, regardless of whether disagreement is expected in the group work (Bion, 1983). A particular form of group work based on a democratic approach to leadership and participation is the family group conference (Holland, Scourfield, O'Neill and Pithouse, 2005). The facilitator of the family group conference is an independent coordinator whose role is to organise and shape the group and ensure that the voices of all participants are heard in the conference (McKillop, 2016). The family group conference allows all participants to voice their opinions and present possible resources they have to support the family. This is especially true for the participation of children, who can express their opinions the same way as all other participants. In a family group conference, anyone the family wishes to invite from their social network can join the group, and it also includes experts who can help the family with resources, i.e., a select and closed group of participants who attend voluntarily (Flaker, 2022, p. 14). The aim of the group is the same for everyone, that is, to actively help the family overcome current difficulties and find a solution. Flaker (2022, p. 44) describes this as the wishes of the group becoming a common desire of the group, i.e., the wishes of the individual merge into a common group wish. The institutional goal does not always have to coincide with the desires of the group, but the cohesion that arises within the group creates a force for social change, which Flaker (2022, p. 44) describes as the transformative

effect of desires. The family group conference aims to transform the life of the family, and change and activate both the family members and the community. Family group conference aim to empower families to take control of their lives and make independent decisions that affect them. From a social work perspective, empowerment theory is associated with group work in a way that empowers group participants to change their life situation to how it should be, for example, through sharing experiences, empathy in the group, support or participation of members (Shakil, 2015). The family group conference holds the view that everyone in the group is the best source of knowledge about themselves (Kletečki Radović, 2008). The family support network that comes together in a group family conference and is otherwise dispersed also provides a link with the community and other systems in the environment at the level of group work that ecological systems theory requires. The experts present in the family group conference are the link to the support systems that the family needs, such as education, health care, and social care. The experts have their role, which is highlighted at the beginning of the conference when all assembled members are informed about the problem, and everyone can say which resources they have to help the family (Edwards, 2018). The role of the experts, the social workers as initiators of the conference, can be observed in the first part of the conference as leaders and caregivers in the organizational phase of the creative cycle (Flaker, 2022, p. 54). Private family time, where the family separates from the rest of the group and creates a plan, is the most dynamic part of the conference, where energy is needed to create and reach the peak in the creative cycle (Randall and Southgate, 1980). The family presents the prepared plan to the rest of the group, and the social worker confirms or completes it, which may be associated with a phase of emotions (Flaker, 2022, p. 54), empowerment and support of the family. The family group conference is based on group work, whereas in the foster care system, group work is only used as educational measures or occasional forms of support for foster parents.

3.5. Possibilities of applying the family group conference in social work practise

Despite extensive research and uses, the question remains as to the effectiveness of the family group conference method and its application. While some authors agree that the method has multiple effects, others are unsure about the effectiveness of the method, and they approach the research results cautiously, suggesting more extensive and further research (Frost, Abram and Burgess, 2014). The available research focuses mainly on the outcomes of the plans, participant satisfaction with attending the conference and changes that occurred after the conference. In their research, Oosterkamp-Szwajcer and de Swart (2012) found that the majority of participants described an improvement in the family situation after the family group conference. In all, 87 % of them stated that they were successful or partially successful in implementing the defined plan in the family and emphasised a feeling of empowerment. In a Dutch study, Schuurman (Edwards, 2018) shows the results of defining plans and states that 95 % of family group conferences resulted in creating a plan, while participants expressed satisfaction with participation. Mitchell (2020) describes the different results shown by research on the effectiveness of family group conference, depending on what is to be studied and the methodology used. Metze, Kwekkeboom and Abma (2015) described the positive effects of family group conference. They found that respondents were very satisfied with the way the conference was conducted, that family ties were strengthened and that cooperation between social workers and families was much better.

Like any method, the family group conference is not applicable in all situations. Professional judgment and discretion are important when deciding to offer this type of support to the family. Data from practice and research findings differ when trying to determine the appropriateness of the method, but even this is not a rule because each family is different and unique and should be observed separately. Crampton (2000, p. 14) states that practitioners and researchers have defined areas where family group conference is not the most appropriate method, such as when working with parents with more severe intellectual disabilities, in situations where families do not have a well-developed support network, or where there are major conflicts. On the contrary, it is precisely in these situations that, with a certain adaptation of the implementation of the method, it would be possible to provide important support and a network that these people do not have.

Furthermore, Crampton (2000, p. 15) states that even these situations mentioned should not be excluded but each case should be considered individually.

Some studies show that even in the most challenging cases, it was possible to hold a conference and make a plan (Thoennes, 2005). For example, Mirsky (2003, p. 6) points out that a family group conference can be held just as successfully in cases of intoxication. The benefits of the conference are seen in the ability to care for the child within the extended family while the primary parent is in treatment. Crampton (2000, p. 14) notes that a family group conference is often organised in cases of child neglect, but that domestic violence or sexual abuse is also often identified during the conference. Jones and Finnegan (2003, p. 26) state that family group conferences have shown good results in cases of domestic violence, especially because the victim of violence receives broader and more comprehensive support outside the family.

The attitude of professionals who have experience attending a family group conference for using the conference in work is positive, especially in child protection (Holland, Scourfield, O'Neill and Pithouse, 2005). Mandell, Sullivan and Meredith (2001) indicate that experts are more satisfied with the plans established in family group conference and that practice in working with families has improved. In contrast, some experts have less positive attitudes and the criticism relates to feeling increased responsibility under the set plans because the experts did not have confidence in the family and they would have to complete the planned tasks (Lupton and Nixon, 1999).

A possible weaker introduction of family group conference by social work professionals would require a change in their approach to families, where social work professionals cede complete control and share power with the family, which is not easy for either party. Walton, McKenzie and Connolly (2005, p. 19) explain this in two ways. First, the authors state that there is no habit of reciprocity in families, i.e., sharing responsibilities with social workers, but that families are used to the power and control wielded by experts and do not anticipate any balance of power. This is supported by the research findings of Sundell and Vinnerljung (2004), who describe the example of Sweden, where the proposal to involve families in family group conference was rejected by 85% of the families. Another possibility is that social workers avoid family group conference precisely due to the fear of sharing power and possible feelings of guilt if something unexpected happens.

Huntsman (2006, p. 18) defined the main benefits of family group conference as conference participants showing high satisfaction with the process, plans are created that are the responsibility of the family and not experts, the family cooperation in creating the plan with

better communication among members, and fewer children are placed in an environment unfamiliar to them but remain in the extended family. In addition, Huntsman (2006, p. 13) identified three main negative aspects, namely the issue of confidentiality given that several participants are involved, lack of clarity from the conference process, which is not always adequately explained in terms of participants or responsibilities, and monitoring of the plan outcomes and the frequent change of staff, which leads to repeating parts of the process.

3.6. Conclusion of the chapter: The value of using the family group conference in working with the families

The foster care model used in Croatia is not clearly defined, nor have the social work methods been sufficiently developed, especially in foster care work. Models and methods in social work have not been sufficiently researched and described in Croatia, and it is unclear when and how they are applied in social work practice. Developing methods for working with users is a necessary part of the ongoing development of the profession and science of social work, guiding us in approaching users to meet their needs. The family group conference is a significant method developed for working with families in social work over the last forty years. However, it is referred to as a model rather than a method for working with families. The term originates from the initial use of the method in New Zealand when working with young people from Māori communities for restorative justice. Forty years later, the method is found in social work practice in over thirty countries worldwide, but it has also changed and been adapted to cultures and communities. Well-known approaches based on family group conference include Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and Community Conferencing in the United States, Family Consultation Forums in Sweden, Family Unity Meeting (FUM), Family Decision Meeting (FDM), Team Decision Meeting (TDM) and Family Team Meeting (FTM) in the UK. Despite its categorization as a model used for working with families, the family group conference as a working method demonstrates the implementation process, which aligns the procedure with clear procedural steps leading towards the goal of how to work with families. In social work, a method is the basis for working with the users, and it is better to refer to the family group conference as such, mainly because it focuses on the goal and process of working with families.

The family group conference originated in social work when the Māori in New Zealand expressed dissatisfaction with how their children's problems were addressed. The reason was that social workers failed to find solutions for Māori children's problems while respecting the Māori's cultural differences. As part of the restorative approach, family group conference were introduced in New Zealand to solve family problems with the involvement of the wider family network and community, giving the family the right to decide on how to solve problems. Similarly, the example of the Netherlands shows how a legal framework protects the family's right to make independent decisions about their lives, helping to respect the family's autonomy. The family group conference is a method

whereby families mobilize their resources to care for the child. Family group conference are based on principles important to social work, such as equal participation, changing the power paradigm, and restoring the family's capacity to develop problem-solving skills. Although experts are present when a family group conference is conducted, the decision-making rests with the family, while the role of the expert is purely collaborative, i.e., the expert works with the family on the problem, informing the family of all options and helping to strengthen the family's problem-solving skills. The role of the social workers has changed completely in practice and poses some difficulties. In addition to having the right to make decisions, the family also takes responsibility for implementing the plan set out at the family group conference, meaning that accountability lies not only with social workers but also with family members. An important characteristic of a family group conference is the democratic approach to the whole process, from the family's right to decide on their participation to voluntary decisions by all invited to the conference. Moreover, during the conference, everyone is entitled to express an opinion and list the resources they have at their disposal for supporting the family. At the same time, special attention is paid to the child's voice, which everyone must hear. The child's voice and protection of the child is important throughout the entire process. If the child feels unsafe and does not want to speak up, conference attendees can choose a trusted person to represent the child and protect the child's views. The family group conference is the link between the system, family and community, where participation, community connection and emancipation of participants are the most important factors of the method.

The process of holding a family group conference is divided into three parts once the family has decided to participate. The first part is the preparation phase, in which most of the activities are carried out by the independent coordinator, the person who assists the family in organizing and running the conference. The role of the independent coordinator is to organize the meeting among all participants, i.e., to decide with the family who will be invited, then invite all potential participants and motivate them to attend, determine with the family the place and time (venue) where the conference will take place, and to ensure that the conference takes place unhindered. The second phase is to hold a family group conference as a meeting of all participants in one single place, in a less formal setting and in a place the family finds comfortable for talking. At the beginning of the conference, all present participants get to know each other while the initiator or social worker explains the reason for the meeting to the participants and shares the information he or she has. As the conference progresses, all participants from the family's network and participating experts

express their opinions and list their resources to help the family possibly. The second part of the conference relates to the family's private time, i.e. the family separates itself from the other participants and creates their plan using all the information gathered at the beginning of the conference. The family presents the plan to all other participants in the last part. The plan is checked with the social worker to determine whether it meets all legal requirements, and with the social worker's approval, the plan is confirmed and signed. The third phase consists of evaluating the plan, usually carried out two to six months after the conference, with the help of an independent coordinator and a social worker. The plan can be modified, or the time to achieve the set goals can be extended if necessary.

Conducting a family group conference is a form of group work and requires forming a group consisting of the family, a wider network of families and experts from various fields. A group of participants gathers and creates a common group goal: to help and support the family in solving difficulties. Although the participants in a family group conference are a group of people who meet once or sometimes twice, the characteristics of group work, such as dynamics and the creative cycle, are present in the process. Aside from the elements of group work, the family group conference has the same goals as group work when working with users, such as providing social support, connecting participants, focusing on solutions and change, and providing space for dialogue. However, group work is used less and less in social work but more and more in other professions, such as psychotherapeutic approaches. The importance of group work in social work is an indispensable part of working with families. In the foster care system, group work is most commonly used for training foster parents or preparing children for placement in a foster family. However, there are also groups for foster parents to share their experiences. Group work does not exist in the work with primary families, although it could provide an opportunity for primary families to learn and strengthen growth and development. The principles of a democratic approach are reflected in group work. The situation is similar in a family group conference, where a democratic approach is the basic principle in the work with all participants.

Holding a successful family group conference requires social workers to assess which family would be well suited to this method to resolve identified difficulties. The method is not suitable for all families. Such circumstances are families where family relationships have become more disturbed and families without a good social network that could get involved. Sometimes, the reason for the poor use of the method lies with the social workers, who find it difficult and have gotten used to approaching families from a position of power,

which in this situation, is no longer the case, or they are forced to accept joint responsibility with families for solving their problems. Numerous studies in different areas of application, from domestic violence, foster care, conflicts with the law or addiction, have shown promising results. Good results have been found in the successful creation and implementation of family plans, better communication and family bonding, community involvement as a form of support for the family and a positive family experience.

4. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF FOSTER CARE AND THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE METHOD

4.1. The theory of empowerment in foster care

The social work profession, assisting vulnerable and disenfranchised persons to meet their daily needs, is by its very nature a theory and practice of empowerment (Kletečki Radović, 2008). Gutiérrez, Parsons and Cox (2003) identified empowerment goals in providing support and assistance to users. The authors considered several levels of empowerment when working with users in the social care system, such as empowering the user to have a cooperative relationship and a relationship at the same level of power as social workers. In addition, users possess knowledge that social workers can find out, but these same users need support to see themselves as someone who can solve their problems.

Freire (2002, p. 11) describes empowerment as a concept and theory in his work dealing with the empowerment of oppressed and marginalized Brazilian communities. The author highlights the need to promote social action and a greater awareness of the oppressed using the education system. He describes empowerment through the prism of pedagogy, pointing out that the pedagogy of the oppressed is also a struggle for liberation from oppressors, showing liberation as an example of an oppressed person fighting for himself (Freire, 2002).

Payne (2014, p. 294) describes empowerment as the ability of social workers to facilitate change in the lives of users when working with them, mobilise decision-making power, and strengthen their self-confidence and abilities. Marginalized people, excluded from life and the community and who face difficulties in life, are at the centre of empowerment theories when it comes to discrimination and oppression (Robbins, Chatterjee and Canda, 1998). Furthermore, Solomon (1976, p. 28) emphasizes that society has failed to meet the needs of its members and that this failure cannot be attributed to the individual. The well-being of an individual also implies collective well-being, which is the primary goal in the social work profession (Kletečki Radović, 2008). Saleebey (2013, p. 3) explains that focusing on the user's strengths means the social worker should focus on helping the person to identify their strengths and available resources. Furthermore, the author states that when working with users, the focus should not be on the problem but on opportunities and solutions. User empowerment requires discovering and expanding resources found in the user's

environment, but also an awareness that the person has resources, a legitimate right to use them and to act, leading to the conclusion that empowerment is a practice in which change only occurs when it is secured through dialogue and action (Saleebey, 2013, p. 13).

Although empowerment is a commonly used word in social practice, it has different definitions. Zimmerman (2000, p. 44) describes empowerment theory as a model for understanding the process of taking control of decisions in one's life, in community life and in organisations. Similarly, Perkins (2010, p. 207) defined empowerment as a community-centred process in which respect, caring and group action are promoted so everyone has equal rights, access to resources and control. Cattaneo and Chapman (2010, p. 647) note that there are two parties involved in the empowerment process: one who has no power but needs to develop skills and knowledge to achieve a goal, and the other who has power and is tasked with empowering the party with no power. Payne (2014, p. 296) analyses empowerment as an approach to social work and states that, in practice, social workers use empowerment principles to break down social barriers when connecting with users. Moreover, joint work, participation and self-help are the main elements that should be realised for practical joint work with users, which requires social workers to think differently and use different approaches. Flaker and Rafaelič (2023, p. 120) state that the difference in power between the social worker and the user is reduced precisely to working with people where they live. Grebenc and Žganec (2016, p. 39) state that a return to solidarity and trust between people in the community, a focus on power relations and an orientation towards empowerment are necessary to ensure effective social work. Saleebey (2013, p. 8) notes that two attitudes are important for empowerment and social work practice. One focuses on the empowerment of the user, where social work has a role in helping the user to utilise personal and community resources. The second setting is user participation, meaning that the user is respected and accepted as an equal member of the community.

Empowerment can be viewed from different angles and at different levels. Payne (2014, p. 13) mentions the individual, family and environmental levels, while Perkins and Zimmerman (1995, p. 571) describe the community, organisational and individual levels. Community-level empowerment refers to the action of groups of people to improve the overall living conditions in a community; organisational-level empowerment aims to strengthen processes and actions; individual-level empowerment includes rights, awareness and mobilisation of competencies and skills (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995).

In the foster care system, empowerment of all those involved in the process is essential for a good outcome in caring for the child. Research shows that empowerment is needed in all areas of the process, from working with the children, the foster parents, the professionals and the community. A study by Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor and Pithouse (2004), showing children's views of foster care, shows that most children express a need for empowerment, respect or a desire for normal family life. A study conducted in Croatia by Žižak et al. (2012) shows that children express a need for self-determination when thinking about security in their future and contact with their primary family. Chapman, Wall and Barth (2004, p. 303) emphasise the need to empower foster parents to care for the children appropriately, adding importance to a positive relationship between the social worker and foster parents. Participation and decision-making by the child require empowerment and permission for the child to express his or her opinion. This is important for the child's development because by taking responsibility, the child learns to be actively involved in solving problems that affect his or her life (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles, 2004, p. 15). Empowerment, along with participation and cooperation, is considered the most important element and aspiration of a family group conference (Mirsky, 2003). Furthermore, Mirsky (2003) argues that empowerment helps to solve family difficulties when families are empowered to solve their problems. A child or young person involved in making their family plan takes more responsibility for their future, well-being, and the whole family. The right to voice one's vote and to express one's opinion about the services the child will receive contributes to empowerment (Sherman and Strang, 2007). In the family group conference process, empowerment is viewed through the prism of transferring power from the expert to the family and child. Burke and Harrison (2002) follow up with this by arguing that a power shift can be linked to an orientation against discrimination and oppression. They explain it as empowerment directed against the abuse of structural power that affects people's lives. Cleaver (2006) adds involvement and participation through partnership as important determinants of empowerment in family group conference and describes person orientation as central to decision-making.

Importantly, as Frost (2011, p. 8) notes, family group conference can be limited when it comes to the process of empowerment in the state-family relationship, while Levine (2000) describes cases where the social worker has the right to veto the family plan and interprets this as power still being in the hands of the state. Frost, Abram and Burges (2014, p. 488) describe another possible situation, the role of the child in a family group conference when the parents engage in behaviour that is harmful to the child, and state that it is important to

understand empowerment in the context of the state's connection and responsibility, i.e., the social worker's responsibility to fear the outcome of the situation, where fear is a limiting factor for participation in a family group conference.

4.2. The ecological systems theory in foster care

Removing a child from his or her primary family and placing the child in foster care means living in a new environment with unfamiliar people and changing the child's natural environment (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995). Social work takes into account two perspectives - the person and the environment, to better understand the difficulties and focus on the necessary solutions (Kondrat, 2002). It is not enough to observe a person without including the environment in which they live, their interaction with that environment and the social processes that affect them (Parkinson, 2018). This means that social work requires observing all the interactions a person has, relationships within and outside the family and influencing policies that define the needs of the individual.

The focus on the individual has long been the foundation of social work, primarily due to the lack of information about the environment, but also due to the realisation that the environment is difficult to change (Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy, 2008). By combining environmental knowledge and systems theory, a perspective has been developed that incorporates people and the environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979), the founder of ecological systems theory, observed in his studies changes in children that occur under the influence of the environment in which they grow up and defined the systems that are present in the environment and influence each person. Bronfenbrenner (1979) began studying the ecological approach to understanding humans and in the following decades further developed the concept of the effects of ecology by linking ecology to systems between which interactions and transactions constantly occur. The ecological model contained fundamental concepts and features. One of these is that early human development takes place through complex reciprocal processes between the human organism and persons, symbols and objects (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). The second characteristic refers to the forces that influence the course of the process, including the direction, strength, form and content that affect the person's development in the immediate or wider environment, and the outcomes that result. Following Lewin's theory of psychological fields (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994), the environment is conceptualised as levels that run concentrically from the centre and in which there are different structures depending on the distance.

For social work, it is important to understand the functioning of systems that may be limited in their mutual permeability, which means a limitation of opportunities for the development of users (Payne, 2014). The systems defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) are interconnected

and interact with each other (Figure 3). He identified four systems depending on their distance from the individual and later added a fifth. The systems were labelled and described by Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 25) as four interconnected systems: 1) microsystem, 2) mesosystem, 3) exosystem and 4) macrosystem. The microsystem is closest to the person and comprises the immediate environment, which includes the person's home, family, religious groups, peers and personal characteristics. This system encompasses the person's social roles and development through interactions and interpersonal relationships as well as through the immediate environment. The processes that take place at the microsystem level are aimed at self-preservation, which depends on the structure of the system itself (Bronfenbrenner 1994). The microsystem is the deepest level that directly affects all aspects of a person's development, it is the most intense and influential level (Popa, Rus, Lee and Parris, 2020). Individual learning, personal growth and development, but also emotional development within the family take place in the microsystem.

A mesosystem is a space in which interactions between different systems take place, while new activities and various social interactions influence a person's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Within the mesosystem, interpersonal relationships can take place, indicating the creation of connections between the individual and members of different microsystems, but also other connections in which the individual is not involved (Popa, Rus, Lee and Parris, 2020).

The exosystem includes people in the environment who are not participants in the person's life, but who influence the person through their decisions or behaviour. This includes all external networks that influence the microsystem, such as the educational network, the social system, the media, the community or the health system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). There is no direct interaction between the person and the exosystem, but the person's development and experiences are indirectly influenced by the exosystem by creating certain attitudes in society such as values or resources (Popa, Rus, Lee and Parris, 2020).

The macrosystem includes everything outside the individual's environment, such as political, broader social or economic changes to which the individual reacts and adapts. The macrosystem usually includes an ideology that influences a person's traditions and behaviour. Values, laws, culture, society or national identity are examples of elements of the macrosystem.

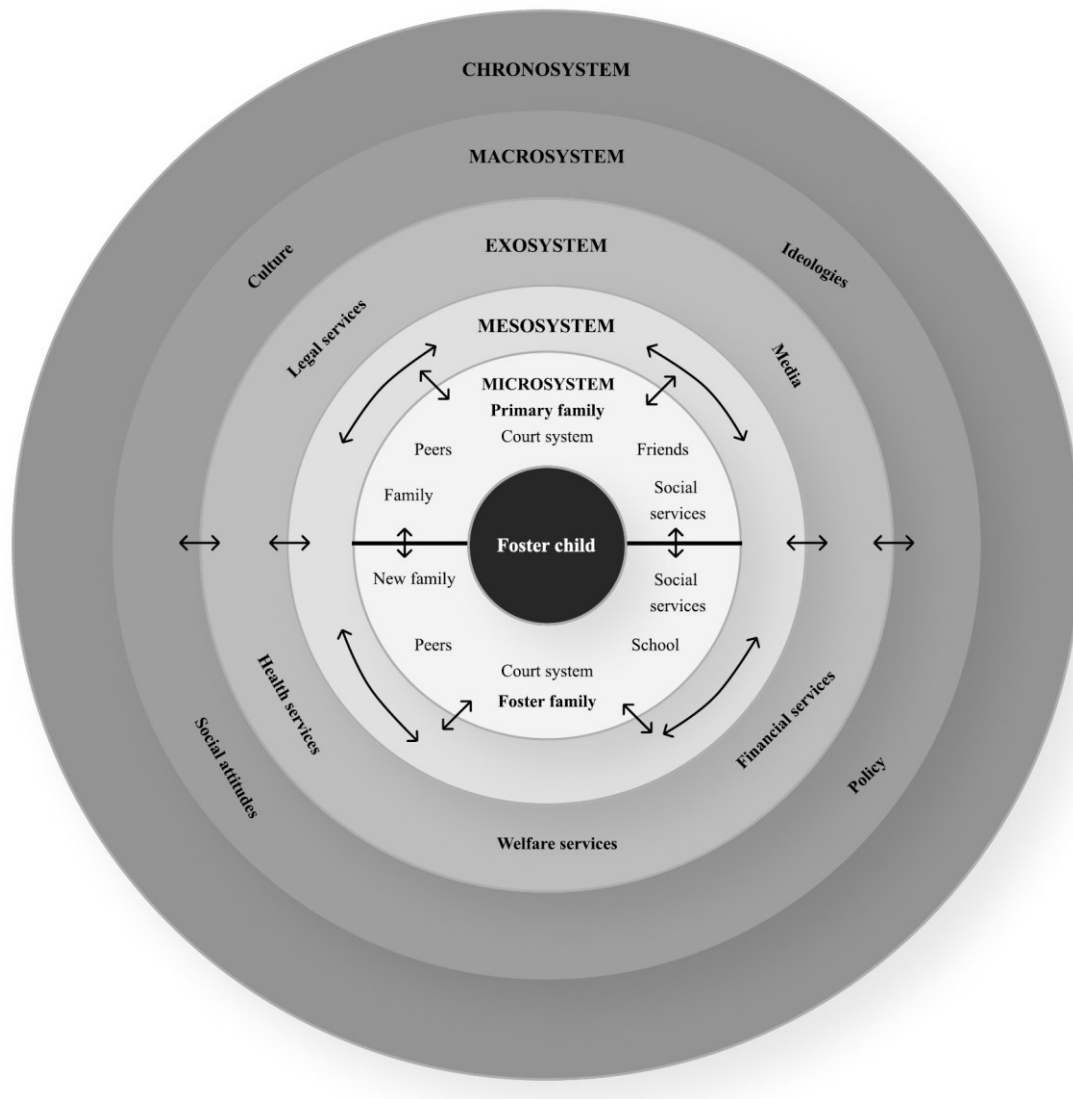
Mali (2014, p. 114) emphasises the need to include multiple levels in the social work profession, particularly the micro, meso and macro levels, and additionally highlights the interdisciplinary nature of social work. Furthermore, the author clarifies that the micro level

includes an individual, family or group, while the meso level includes the community and the environment in which new services are developed. The macro level is considered to be the level of society as a whole where policies and systems are created. Users who work with a social worker to achieve change in their lives at the micro level will instigate change at both the meso and macro levels (Mali, 2014, p. 127). Payne (2014, p. 209) further illustrates how change at one level can influence momentum, resilience or change upon which the community and family can build support for the individual. In addition, the author describes ecological systems theory as a good source of knowledge about individual resilience, which has a direct impact on stress tolerance and coping with stressful situations. The relationships between ecological systems and persons are not static, as they influence each other, which leads to dynamics in exchange and relationships (Popa, Rus, Lee and Parris, 2020). The transactions between systems and within systems are ongoing and aim at sustainable change rather than short-term change. Staub-Bernasconi (2009) states that the problem arises when there is no harmony between the environment and the person's needs, thus compromising the necessary positive environment for the person's development and growth. Social work focuses on an active partnership with users in the transition from one system to another, based on reciprocity and a mutual relationship. The transactions that take place between the system, i.e. the user and the environment, are at the centre of social work, which plays a role in identifying and creating support networks in the community. Advocacy work that focuses on users and policy positions social work as the link that connects systems in a way that advocates for the changes that users need to realise their potential (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009). Social work connects multiple levels of life and says that it is impossible to limit itself to one level or dimension (Flaker, 2012b).

Ecological systems theory contributed to social work by linking the person to the family, the wider network and the community through a holistic view of the complexity of the problem and focussing on the adaptation of the social environment (Payne 184). Community development, the creation and renewal of interpersonal bonds and a focus on service users' strengths are emphasised by Nash (2005) as fundamental contributions to social work theories. Nevertheless, ecological system theory conceptually focuses equally on the need to change a user or a user's response to the environment and service users are expected to adapt to the system or environment, which is the main criticism of ecological systems theory (Payne, 189). In contrast, Flaker and Rafaelič (2023, p. 111) describe normalisation as the adaptation of the situation to the person and not the adaptation of the

person to the situation so that they can manage their everyday life independently, which should definitely be taken into account in social work.

Figure 3: Ecological systems theory in foster care



Source: Author's work based on Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Microsystem in foster care

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, foster care can be seen as a theory that offers insights into understanding children's well-being and development when there is interaction between the child and their environment (Figure 3). A child placed in foster care experiences changes in their microsystem through the ecological transitions (Hong, Algood, Chiu and Ai-Ping Lee, 2011). Turney and Wildeman (2017) explain a child's microsystem in foster care using the example of the child's interactions with others

in their own home, such as relationship building, cohabitation, or possible child abuse or neglect. The relocation of a child means a disruption of the microsystem (Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Ai-Ping Lee Hong, 2011) and a separation from the primary family, their networks or friends and caregivers. This does not always have to be negative, as change offer the child the opportunity to build new relationships, connections and interactions (Chapman, Wall and Barth, 2004). The child comes to a new family and a new environment to which it must first become accustomed. It takes time to adjust and get to know the foster family, but also to work through any associated feelings such as sadness or loneliness (Chapman, Wall and Barth, 2004). Looking at micro-level support for foster families within the framework of ecological systems theory, this is available through spouses, neighbours, biological children, extended family or friends. The resources that this type of support network represents can be positive factors that impact a successful and quality foster care placement.

Mesosystem in foster care

Bronfenbrenner (1979) establishes a connection at the mesosystem level, which includes the interactions between systems, i.e. microsystems such as the interaction between a child and peers at school or between family and teachers. The connections between systems at the micro level are the interactions between the primary family and the foster family or the child and the primary family (Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Ai-Ping Lee, 2011). In foster care, special attention is paid to microsystem interactions at the mesosystem level because the relationships the child establishes, achieves, or maintains affect the foster care's outcome and the maintenance of ties with the primary family, as well as the child's sense of belonging and identity.

At the mesosystem level, microsystemic interactions take place, for example between the child and their primary family, but also other important people in the child's life (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Often a child changes the community in which he or she lives, as research in Croatia shows, where a large number of children are placed outside their home and district due to the lack of foster families (Laklija, 2011b). Maintaining the relationship with the primary family is important for the child unless it is defined differently by the court or poses a threat to the child. Social work always tries to maintain the relationship, so the child retains a sense of belonging and identity. The results of a study conducted by Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor and Pithouse (2004) show that children who have had positive experiences in relationships with the primary family are more satisfied with foster care placement. The lack of contact and poor relationship between the primary family and the

child is also evidenced in the research conducted in Croatia by Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović and Jelača (2005). The authors present the results of a study conducted on a sample of 79 foster families in the Republic of Croatia who completed a questionnaire about the difficulties they encounter in foster care. The results show that poor communication between the primary family and the child or the foster family ranks third on the scale for frequency of difficulties. Foster parents report difficulties communicating with primary families, about whom they do not have enough information and who they describe as uninterested in their children. They also report difficulties in communication between the child and the primary family in the form of aggressive communication with the child and the foster parents.

Exosystem in foster care

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), interaction with the wider environment, including the neighbourhood and the social or health system, constitutes the exosystem. This system refers to everything outside the family that affects the child's adjustment to the environment. It includes resources and services available to the child, as well as stigmatisation within the environment (Chambers, Zielewski and Malm, 2008). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) describes the macrosystem as a system that does not directly contact the child but influences his or her environment by adapting to laws, culture or society, and policies that shape the foster care system. In addition, the author defines the last system, the chronosystem, which includes a longer period of time, historical and environmental factors during life and the development of society, in this case, the development of the foster care system.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), interaction with the wider environment, including the social or health system, social services or employment, forms the exosystem. This system refers to everything outside the family that influences the child's adaptation to the environment. This includes the resources and services available to the child, which may be more or less available depending on the community. Stigmatisation within the environment is also part of the exosystem and includes the primary family social workers, the community or other professionals towards the child or primary family (Chambers, Zielewski and Malm, 2008).

Macrosystem in foster care

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) describes the macrosystem as a system that does not come into direct contact with the child, but influences their environment through the legal regulations, culture, society or policies that shape the foster care system. At the macro level,

differences in the foster care system may arise in relation to racial differences, with experiences in the foster care system not being the same for children from Roma families, for example. The final system is the chronosystem, which encompasses a longer period of time, historical and environmental factors during the life and development of society, in this case the development of the foster care system.

The applicability of ecological system theory in the foster care

In analysing the ecological approach, Payne (2014, p. 195) explains its importance by experiencing users in their natural environment, focusing on sustainability in relation to the care of the immediate environment, e.g. neighbours, and emphasising the need for a multidisciplinary approach involving different experts to solve problems. From the perspective of ecological system theory, support and empowerment through different approaches is very important, such as group support for foster carers through professional teams or individual work with foster carers (Henderson and Scannapieco, 2006), while Mitchell (2020, p. 213) adds dimensions that are important for change in social work, namely partnership and cooperation. The connection of individual, group and society is a natural process inherent to the social work profession (Janković, 2008, p. 138). In foster care, support is needed on several levels, through informal or natural networks, formal networks and emotional support that provides a sense of security.

Furthermore, Voisin, DiClemente, Salazar, Crosby and Yarber (2006) emphasise certain strengths of ecological systems theory, such as its focus on the interaction and change that people require in their social environment. In addition, the author notes that ecological systems theory helps social workers to see beyond the identified problem, consider the broader social context and recognise the value of formal and informal social resources. Fox (2018) points out certain limitations to the application of ecological systems theory, such as that changes in one system do not necessarily cause changes in another or that the interaction between a social worker and a family has no boundaries and can last a long time. The foster care system can be viewed through the concept of ecological systems theory as the above benefits of the theory are helpful when working with all participants in the foster care system. In contrast, there are conceptual aspects that are not applicable in the foster care system, such as the adapting of the child to the system and the environment, i.e. changing the child in accordance with societal norms, regardless of the child's needs.

4.3. The link between social work theories and the family group conference method

Given the presence and prevalence of the family group conference in social work practice, the method should be grounded in the theoretical concepts of social work so that practitioners understand the theoretical basis and its practical connection to social work action. The credibility of the method rests on the theoretical foundations of social work, creating space for it to become an alternative or complementary to the existing processes of social work practice (Parkinson, 2018, p. 15).

One of the approaches found in the family group conference is task-oriented work, which Gambrill (1994, p. 578) defines as an approach the user implements in jointly defining and consulting with the social worker to solve problems. It is a short-term approach to solving problems and goals leading to change (Parkinson, 2018, p. 19). The approach is based on the belief that everyone can be motivated to solve their problems. Accordingly, the problem needs to be broken down into smaller elements (Perlman, 1970). To solve their problems, users sometimes need confidence, resources and a predefined structure provided by social workers while also harbouring a vision of how to resolve the problem (Reid and Shyne, 1969). The role of social work is precisely to empower and motivate the user, and activate their potential, which the social worker should recognise and support (Howe, 2009), contributing to the user's increased self-esteem and confidence with the aim of making changes in their lives.

Healy (2005, p. 112) defined the principles of the task-based approach, while Parkinson (2018, p. 20) linked the principles embodied in the family group conference. The principle of seeking clarity in the process between all participants in the family group conference method happens before the conference, in the family's preparation and defining the central question. The central question is the problem on which the conference will focus. The social worker and the family jointly identify it, and it should be simple and clear. In addition, the principle of goal setting, which must focus on small successes rather than big changes, relates to the tasks that each conference participant has in a family group conference. Indeed, the change that the family needs can be achieved if the support network delegates tasks among themselves at the conference and defines their roles in the process of providing help. The sum of smaller activities leads to bigger changes, sometimes more far-reaching and lasting changes in the family's life. The principle of focusing on the here and now is described by Healy (2005) as being present in the moment without going back to the history and origin of the problems that can distract the family and reduce their capacity to change.

The independent coordinator of the family group conference does not have information about the family's past events but focuses on the current situation and the family's needs. As the initiator, the social worker does not present information from the family's past life but focuses on the central issue, meaning the current problem that has led everyone to come together at the conference (Ashley, 2006). The principle of cooperation between the social worker and the family is a joint active role in working with the family. Čačinović Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019, p. 24) also talk about the joint working process. They state that it is necessary to work with the family to co-create new life situations and solutions and accompany the family throughout the assistance process. The social worker's role is moderating and advisory, whereas in the family group conference, this role is adopted by an independent coordinator. His or her role is to familiarise all participants with the reason for the meeting and the method of implementing the family group conference, to be supportive during the conference and to coordinate all activities (Barnsdale and Walker, 2007). Building a capacity for action is the next principle, which Healy (2005) explains as the ability and resources of the family's strengths to solve problems independently. A criticism of this approach is expressed in shifting the responsibility for one's difficulties to the family, emphasising that in this way, some structural facts such as poverty, inequality, oppression or discrimination are ignored (Oak and Campling, 2008). There is a risk that experts take responsibility for solving problems instead of providing professional support and advice. Family group conference help the family find and mobilise their strengths and resources (Frost, Abram and Burges, 2014).

The solution-oriented approach has emerged from several theoretical approaches as one of the possible solutions for working with users. It is very similar to the principles of the strengths-based approach. The concept focuses on a solution, not a problem, and has evolved as a response and a necessity for practices in working with users (Healy, 2005). The approach focuses on user skills and changes that occur when a person focuses on problem-solving. The family group conference is based on the change recognised in the joint work and cooperation of the whole family. The focus is on the language of a solution-focused approach, translated into the family group conference method by being future-oriented and thinking about the change that occurs when the problem is solved (Shennan, 2014).

The strengths-based approach refers to the skills that individuals, families or groups possess and using their strengths and resources to face difficulties and problems. Saleebey (2013, p. 45) states that a shift in thinking and approach to users is needed, especially because

practice is geared towards disadvantaging and stigmatising people with difficulties, which is not good for either the user or the social worker. The approach is based on the assumption that there is strength in every person, family and community, and the role of professionals is to support the mobilisation of these strengths (Pattoni, 2012). Six basic standards are defined that constitute and characterise the strengths-based approach: 1) goal orientation, 2) assessment of strengths, 3) resources from the environment, 4) specific working methods, 5) a relationship that includes hope for success, and 6) meaningful choice that refers to everyone as the best expert for their lives (Rapp, Saleebey and Sullivan, 2005). With these standards in mind, it is evident that the family group conference is based on the strengths-building model. Specifically, during the family group conference, the family focuses on the goal, i.e., devising a plan to define the family's needs, difficulties and goals. The basic premise of the family group conference is its commitment to the family and its strengths and the hope that the family has the capacity and can mobilise its resources to create and implement a safe family plan. The family leads the process, while the specialist's role is to provide the necessary support (Parkinson, 2018, p. 18) and help the family identify their strengths (Iveson 2002, p. 150).

Family group conference have found use in the restorative approach and justice in social work, aiming to repair the harm done to people and solve the problem rather than focusing on the person at fault (McCold and Wachtel 2003). Restorative justice elements and values such as community, dialogue, respect, forgiveness or moral learning are part of the family group conference process when working with the offender, victim, community and professionals (Harris, 2003). Braithwaite (2008) asserts that the process allows participants to agree on how to proceed in a way perceived by all as fair, while Roche (2006, p. 220) states that consequences should be discussed at the meeting and also what can be changed to reduce the harm done. Adams and Chandler (2004) applied the model and concluded that conferences are a restorative process, consistent with restorative justice values, that aims to widen the circle of accountability and create a partnership between the state and the family.

Family group conference has been strongly associated with empowerment theory from its inception to the present day. Lupton and Nixon (1999, p. 35) state that the partnership between the user and the social worker is a process, and the outcome of this process is empowerment. Furthermore, empowerment is much more than collaboration; understanding the term itself requires an entirely different social work perspective and approach (Saleebey, 2013). This means that everyone becomes an expert on their own life,

and the expert should give up his paternalistic role (Parkinson, 2018). Lubin (2009, p. 139) claims that the family can best respond to challenges and difficulties in a familiar social context where an expert does not take the main role of guiding the process.

Holland, Scourfield, O'Neill and Pithouse (2005, p. 2) state that one of the dilemmas that arose in establishing power relations between social workers and families at a family group conference was the leadership provided by the family making decisions. Specifically, the question arose about how the method could fit into the existing bureaucratic system, which is designed so that an expert leads all processes, and disagreements may arise when implementing the method. Furthermore, the author explains that holding a family group conference is completely voluntary, and the family decides whether it wants to hold it. Criticism of the voluntary nature of the family's choice of this method is linked to the parents' possible fear that their children would be taken away from them, which is why the family agrees to participate. Holland, Scourfield, O'Neill and Pithouse (2005, p. 20) claim that despite the criticisms, family group conference tend to produce positive outcomes, creating a balance between the family and the state and a democratic approach to the family. Healy (2005, p. 162) lists the factors that influence empowerment and divides them into emotional, behavioural, interpersonal and cognitive factors. A family group conference creates a new, shared social network, and a group is formed whose goal is to protect the child. It creates a plan to help the family solve problems and observe the relationships between group members created due to the issues discussed. This workflow is how empowerment is understood in a family group conference. Some authors claim that others cannot empower a person, but only they can be empowered (Metze, Abma and Kwekkeboom, 2013). On the other hand, there is evidence that feelings of empowerment are related to the availability of social support and feelings of autonomy (Barringer, Hunter, Salina and Jason, 2017). Each member of the group who participates in the family group conference has autonomy, can express opinions, and receive support when needed, which also describes the participants' involvement in the process. Some authors state that a family group conference can potentially increase a person's self-esteem, helping them realise that others value and support them (Metze, Abma and Kwekkeboom, 2013). Throughout the process, a sense of worth that the person gains and a feeling that they deserve support is important, while emotional support helps to gain control and develop a sense of empowerment.

In the family group conference, the family and the community take responsibility for the behaviour of its members. Accordingly, we understand the connection between ecological

systems theory and the family group conference method, which focuses on the interaction between a person and their social environment (Healy, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (1979) represents the systems in the human environment in terms of concentric rings. Viewed from the family group conference perspective, the microsystem is where the child is connected to the informal environment such as the home, the family, and important people from his or her environment. In terms of the mesosystem position, the family group conference has a formal part that affects the family's life, whereas, at the macrosystem level, the whole society and social institutions are involved. The interaction at the microsystem and mesosystem level is facilitated by an independent coordinator who connects all conference participants and creates a balance between the two systems (Frost, 2011). The family group conference affects the individual's interaction with their mesosystem, social system, or educational system, for example, by altering the decision-making paradigm, resulting in better transactions between the systems (Parkinson, 2018, p. 29). In their research, Ramon (2021) found that better collaboration between social workers and other experts at the family group conference leads to better interaction between the family and the mesosystem, especially in the area of extended family care for the child.

4.3.1. Supporting theories for working with families through a broader view of the complexity of foster care

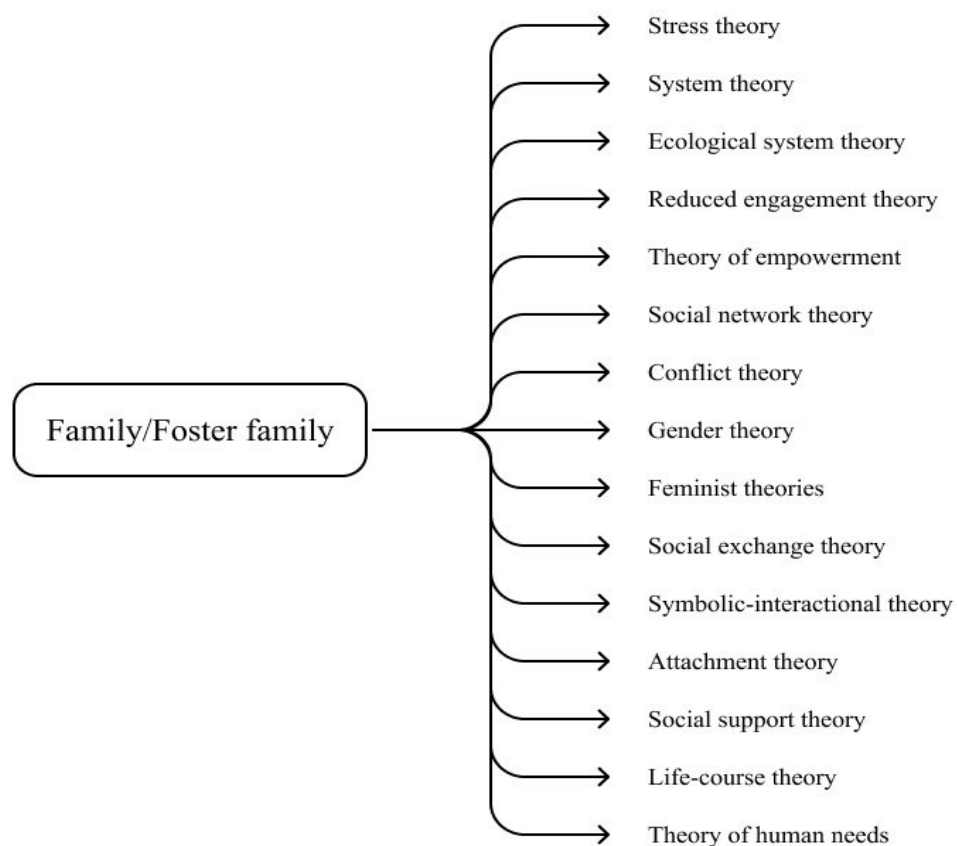
Although the theoretical framework of the dissertation is based on empowerment theory and ecological systems theory, a much broader theoretical framework for understanding and working with the family needs to be considered. Although this is beyond the scope of the dissertation topic, it is important to present the theoretical framework for working with families in an informative and brief way and to recognise that certain theoretical concepts are set as a prerequisite for understanding family life, particularly in foster care were working with two families. Presenting a broader theoretical framework supports the fact that foster care is a complex process and that despite its widespread use, numerous research and academic papers, the role of foster care has not been sufficiently theorised, resulting in a lack of theories about the process of foster care (Cameron, Reimer and Smith, 2015).

Furthermore, the phenomenon examined in the dissertation is analysed based on two fundamental theoretical approaches, namely the theory of empowerment and the ecological systems theory. These two theories are important for understanding the work with families at different levels and the need to achieve a balance of power in order to achieve the emancipation and participation of participants in the foster care system. At the same time, the theories provide the conceptual link between foster care and family group conference and form the underlying theoretical base of the dissertation. Furthermore, the inadequacies of theory are evident in the field of studies on complexity of working with families and the processes that take place between people inside and outside the family, as well as the uniqueness of each family and their lives that theories cannot capture and explain. Ecological systems theory cannot explain everything that happens in the family, and above all, the lack of theory manifests itself in resources that are not necessarily available in the environment. The consequence of the lack of resources in relation to the family's needs is the occurrence of stressors that affect the family (Germain and Gitterman, 2008). In addition, the theory is based on the need for people to adapt to the environment, which can be harmful to people, as the focus is on harmonising the person and the environment, but not always with a reciprocal approach (Knežević, Miljenović and Branica, 2013).

The majority of the literature reviewed on the subject of foster care describes various theoretical directions that can be used to interpret such a complex process. The available theories mostly refer to family theories, group work, psychodynamic theories, sociological, pedagogical, medical and psychological theories. However, none of the theories alone can

explain the complexity of family processes (Constable and Lee, 2015). Different theoretical approaches contribute to the understanding of the family in specific crises or everyday family situations and viewing them through several theoretical prisms gives a holistic view of the family situation (Janković, 2004, p. 10). In social work, the family is viewed on two levels, inside and outside the family with the intention to understand interactions between the person and the environment (Constable and Lee, 2015). Social workers integrate theory and practise in their work with families. Some of the theoretical approaches that are most intertwined and utilised when working with families are illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Theoretical approaches in work with foster families



Source: Author's work based on Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991), Triseliotis (2010), Constable and Lee (2015) and Cameron, Reimer and Smith (2015).

Additional knowledge for the family in a broader theoretical framework

Given the complexity of working with families and the broad theoretical framework required to understand the dynamics of family life, the theories presented are also applicable to foster families. Among a number of theories about the family, some can be categorised as stress theory, systems theory, ecological systems theory, reduced commitment theory, conflict theories, empowerment theories, social network theories, social exchange theories, gender theories, feminist theories, symbolic-interactional theory, needs theory, social support theory, life cycle theory and attachment theory (Figure 4) in relation to the position of the child in the family, which is the common denominator in linking the theoretical framework presented and the foster family. The above theories serve to understand foster care and are focussed on the children and their life situation. They are used to explain the complexities of foster care and a children's life in foster care, such as the child's adjustment to a new life and the people around them, the connection to foster parents, inclusion in the community and the acceptance of the child in a new environment (Moreno, 1973; Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991; Thompson and Walker, 1991; Janković, 2004; Triseliotis, 2010; Constable and Lee, 2015; Cameron, Reimer and Smith, 2015).

The foster family differs from the primary family in terms of the kinship of members within the family and the connection between family members and their roles in the family (Unrau, 1994). Despite the differences, common elements in the functioning of the family as a system are visible when we speak of systems theory because the foster family forms a unique system with the arrival of a child in the family, which is most similar to the primary family (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). Systems theory focuses on both the system functions and the interactions between them. It is based on the boundaries that need to be understood when working with family systems, as well as the interactions between the systems and the relationships that develop in foster care between two families (von Bertalanffy, Juarrero and Rubino, 2008).

Stress theory is applicable in the understanding the life in any family, as it is focused on the processes how to understand and respond stressful relationships and stressful situations in the family (Janković, 2004) while conflict theory also applies to family relationships, especially complex relationships between the child and foster parents or primary family (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995).

Symbolic interactionism explains the communication process between a person and the environment and the way of continuous interpretation through interaction in more detail. The theory clarifies that society consists of the interaction of people and symbols, and it is

important for social workers to understand the development of sensitivity to other cultures (Knežević, Miljenović and Branica, 2013). In the foster care system, it is important to be aware of cultural differences, as the culture of the foster parents and the foster child may be different.

Social exchange theory places an important emphasis on the exchange of resources and reciprocity that is necessary for mutuality in relationships (Janković, 2004). The theory provides a good explanation of people's motivations, which is important for understanding foster families and the need for reciprocity in relationships with formal support. In addition, social support theory includes resources for the family or individual from the environment, such as extended family, friends, associations or organisations in the community, that alleviate the family's stress (Janković, 2004). These influence the family through the family's subjective perception that there are people who are with them and support them (Specht, 1986).

A somewhat narrower concept is the theory of social networks, which illustrates the support of the family through networks in which the dynamics of relationships take place and which are designed for the longer term (Moreno, 1973). In networks, resources are exchanged regardless of system boundaries, and the density of the network is important because it allows the same resource to be obtained from several different actors (Specht, 1986). In foster care, networks are important for the child, both those acquired before separation from the family and those newly created upon arrival in the foster family.

Middle-range theories or micro-theories have been developed to understand certain social phenomena (Marsh, 2010), such as conflict theory or the theory of reduced engagement. These theories allow a better understanding of relationships within the family, but also between two families, the foster family and the family of origin, which in most cases are in conflict, which is important to understand the sources of power in conflict resolution. Reduced involvement of the primary family in relation to the child already occurs when the child is separated from the family and depends on the regulation of the relationship between the primary family and the child (Janković, 2004). It is important for social workers to understand the importance of maintaining the relationship between the child and the primary family.

Feminist and gender theories point to the need to understand gender differences and the division of roles in the family, but also the need to achieve balance in family relationships (Thompson and Walker, 1991). The division of labour and the assignment of the epithet of emotionality to women, who as a result engage in activities that require emotional labour

and care, or are often employed in service activities (Janković, 2004), is important to understand in the field of parenting, where women are most often foster parents and provide most of the care.

In addition, life course theory is important to understand the relationship between the foster family and the child, as the foster family is often at a stage of life where the presence of a young child or young adolescent is not common (Pecora and Maluccio, 2000; Berzin, 2010). It is important for social work to understand the discrepancy between the needs of the foster family and the child in relation to the life stage of the family so that work can be done to fulfil the needs within the foster family.

One of the most important theories is attachment theory, because it is focused on about the quality of the interaction between the child and the person caring for it, the sense of security the child needs, the child's concern for its future life and the child's need for emotional security as a vulnerable person (Bowlby, 1982). From the social work perspective of empowering the children it is essential that a child in a foster family have familiar people with whom they can build a relationship. If we look at the child's situation within a theoretical framework, attachment theory becomes crucial for a good and positive outcome of foster care, helping the child achieve a stable environment for growth and development. Furthermore, the underlying reason for the importance of attachment theory in the foster care system is early attachment, i.e., attachment in infancy, an important prerequisite for a child's development and functioning in adulthood. Given that the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) defines foster care as a form of child placement with a focus on the placement of children under the age of seven, attachment theory gives an important insights in the foster care process due to the age of the children. Attachment theory focuses on the importance of the relationship between the child and the mother from earliest childhood (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). Furthermore, the theory is based on the emotional and social bond between the person caring for the child and the child and emphasises the need to create an early bond, which is a prerequisite for the person's later functioning. Therefore, attachment theory in the context of foster care is important knowledge for social workers and foster carers. Research results by Ajduković, Kregar Orešković and Laklija (2007) shows that breaking off a relationship with a person to whom a child is attached poses a significant risk to the child. Furthermore, the authors note that in foster care, this means that taking a child out of the family means the severance of the child's emotional ties to the primary family and to the person with whom the child has an attachment. However, research shows that foster care placement is less stressful for

the child than other forms of placement. Similarly, frequent changes in a child's placement reduce the chance of secure attachment, bonding with friends and acceptance by society (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor and Pithouse, 2004). Foster placement allows the child to bond with new people, i.e., the foster parents who accept and support the child, which positively impacts the ongoing development of relationships (Štambuk and Penava Šimac, 2021). Developing a child's attachment to a new family requires building a positive relationship between the child, the foster parents and the primary family (Triseliotis, 2010). The relationship the child builds and maintains with the primary family is important for the child's development because regardless of the reason for the child's separation, all children remain mostly attached to their parents (Brajša-Žganec, Keresteš, Kuterovac Jagodić, Šumelj and Žic Grgat, 2005). Adjustment and the establishment of a new bond is facilitated through the relationship the child still has with the primary family (Kronstein and Škrabić–Aničić, 2010). Some authors state that attachment theory has prevailed over other theories in the social care system and in working with children, but it is insufficient for understanding the foster care system, though it can provide necessary insight into certain processes (Cameron, Reimer and Smith, 2015).

In a study conducted in Croatia (Herenčić and Mihanović, 2006, p. 91), the results showed that the development of attachment between a foster parent and a child happens gradually with the establishment of a daily routine and the organisation of life in the foster home. Apart from the fact that the placement is most similar to the family, foster care allows the child to develop personal relationships with the foster parents to whom he or she receives individual access and full attention, the necessary warmth and develops attachment (Ivković and Žižak, 2010). Similarly, Beek and Schofield (2004, p. 9) claim that a child's sense of security develops in a family environment and quality relationships within the foster family contribute to a stronger sense of attachment and connection to the family in which they live. In contrast, Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018, p. 18) emphasise that attachment is difficult, especially in cases where the child is not sufficiently informed or uncertain concerning decisions about his or her life, which also affects the child's sense of safety.

4.4. Conclusion of the chapter: The foundations of the foster care and family group conference method in a common theoretical framework

The two fundamental theoretical concepts that link foster care and the family group conference method are the empowerment theory and ecological systems theory. Empowerment theory is incorporated into social work as the basis for practice and action through joint work with the user. As advocated by social work, the theory relies on establishing a balance of power in relationships as a prerequisite for the partnership relationship. Applying empowerment theory in practice requires raising awareness of disenfranchised people and social action. Furthermore, working with users is about mobilizing user potential, developing awareness of the resource's users have or need, and equalising power relations so that users can make decisions about their lives. The equalisation of power relations between social workers and users is a prerequisite for joint work and realising new opportunities for users to develop new skills, learn and deal with difficulties. Accordingly, social work emphasises the need to work with people where they live and return to values such as solidarity and trust. Believing in the user's potential is necessary in social work and is the only way to create a positive relationship. All those involved in the foster care system must be strengthened because their circumstances change. The child is separated from the primary family, and the same family loses control over their lives and the opportunity to participate in the child's life. The foster parents get to know the child and prepare to build a new relationship within their family. For a child, the uncertainty and the severing of previous social ties is a difficult experience. The family group conference method is based on the theory of empowerment. This means that the method strengthens the family's right to make decisions about their lives, actively participate in decisions that affect them, and take back responsibility for their decisions by changing the power paradigm. Mobilising the family's resources and skills and engaging a support network to help the family implement their plan creates space for learning and developing new family skills in a non-discriminatory and participatory way. The criticism of this approach is directed to the plan the family creates independently, which social workers may not accept and is a limiting factor in applying the method.

Ecological systems theory points to the need to understand processes that take place in foster care and it has an important contribution to understanding the changes in families and the child's life. Bronfenbrenne (1979) described the importance of observing each

person in their environment and the mutual interactions between the environment and the person, which is fundamental to social work observation and action. Social work considers and observes several levels of life which cannot be observed separately. Changes at the micro level of the person and their family are continued at the meso level of the community and at the macro level of society as a whole. Looking at foster care through ecological systems theory is important to understanding changes in a child's life. A child who comes into foster care changes their living environment, and a change takes place at the micro level due to separation from the primary family and entering foster care. Other levels are also linked to the new living circumstances, such as maintaining contact with the primary family, connection to the new community and support systems and even the social environment. The task of social work is to focus on the interactions between the systems and to monitor the wider context of the child's life and the social context impacted by the resulting changes.

Working with the family is complex, and no single theory alone is sufficient to understand what is happening in the family; hence, several theoretical approaches are needed. A broader theoretical approach is helpful for a better understanding of the processes within and outside the family. These include stress theory, systems theory, ecological systems theory, reduced commitment theory, conflict theories, empowerment theories, social network theories, social exchange theories, gender theories, feminist theories, symbolic-interactional theory, needs theory, social support theory, life cycle theory and attachment theory. Of the theories mentioned, attachment theory should be singled out, as the child and their relationship with familiar people are at the heart of the foster care system. Although attachment theory cannot explain all processes, important theoretical elements for the child must be considered, such as fear of the unknown, insecurity, lack of understanding and mistrust. The need for attachment, which provides a sense of security and trust, is essential for a child. Foster placement will be more successful if the child's need for closeness is better understood, as well as the risks that arise when the child is separated from the primary family. The foster parents should build a positive relationship with the child and understand his or her needs to adapt to the new environment and community. A safe environment for the child is crucial, as is maintaining a positive relationship with the primary family. Preparing the child well for separation from their family and placement in foster care can make it easier for the child to understand what is happening and why and reduce feelings of insecurity.

The family group conference method is based on several interwoven theories and approaches throughout the process of implementing the method. The method focuses on the tasks participants will perform after choosing their role in family support. The approach focuses on the solution and the strengths of the family. The strengths-based approach focuses on the family's positive resources and not its deficits. The focus is on the goal of positive change in the family. The method is also used as part of a restorative approach, focusing on repairing the damage and solving the problem rather than on the person at fault. Clarity, focusing on the solution and working with the family here and now are important when conducting the family group conference, which also requires an active social work role. The role of social work is important from the beginning of the process, i.e., empowering and motivating the family for the family group conference, through the process itself and recognising the family's potential, believing in the family and its possibilities. Family group conference is strongly based on the theory of empowerment and achieving a partnership relationship in problem-solving. Allowing the family to lead the process independently, make decisions, and create a family plan must shift the power relationship between professionals and families. This shift in power positions is precisely the dilemma social workers face when conducting family group conference. On the one hand, the system is bureaucratised and rigid, and a way must be found to implement the method in a system that normally holds the power to work with the users. On the other hand, social workers find it difficult to cede responsibility to others, namely the family, who take responsibility for their own decisions. Nevertheless, this method has several advantages. The family group conference facilitates the development of a positive relationship between the family and the state, a democratic approach to working with the family and expanding the support network for the family. The family and the community take responsibility for the care and protection of their members, while the interaction between the family and the environment changes as the family achieves greater autonomy.

5. THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH WORK AND DETERMINATION OF THE GOAL, HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The foster care system in Croatia can be viewed from two important aspects of social work. The first is a structural or practical reason, namely ensuring the capacity to accommodate a child who needs to be cared for outside the primary family. Another aspect is the humane aspect, based on the principles of social work and refers to the development of alternative forms of care for the child in line with the deinstitutionalisation process carried out in Croatia. The focus is on ensuring the best interests of the child, the safety and protection of the child and the prevention of institutionalisation. The development of social care reform in Croatia focuses on providing quality services and the availability of services for all equally, which is currently not the case in Croatia (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022a, p. 17). Similar efforts to develop changes in social work and improve social work services adapted to users' needs can be observed in many other countries worldwide (Ofsted, 2011). At the centre of this is the lack of responsiveness of social work to people's needs and the increasing need to find new ways of working with children and families that are financially constrained by states (Audit Scotland, 2016, p. 6; Ofsted, 2015).

Understanding the foster care process requires fathoming its complexity. Caring for other children is by no means an easy task, and it is particularly challenging to have the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of children. Children differ in temperament, their circumstances, and their unique backgrounds, but focusing on the current situation and the relationships that need to be built is important (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995). Furthermore, Grey (1992; in Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 49) states that foster care is more than just parenting. He says that foster parents should care for the child but also involve the child's primary family and be aware of the rehabilitative role they play in the child's life.

Social workers need to understand the changes and feelings that occur when a child is placed in foster care and the possible difficulties that may arise in order to prepare an appropriate response to potential problems. The arrival of a child in a new, often unfamiliar family is an adjustment process, both for the child and foster family, into which a stranger enters and about whom they know little. Foster parents face the difficult task of getting to know the child, their habits and the areas in which it needs support. Therefore, they should have a good knowledge of the child's developmental process and social and psychological

needs. Understanding the child's past life experience that has affected them is also necessary. The child experiences separation from the primary family and a range of emotions that overwhelm him or her due to previous emotional attachment to the parents. The primary family experiences various emotions, mostly guilt, sadness, and anger, which social workers need to understand (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 50). Several people are involved in the foster care process, and each person who interacts influences the process and outcome. Foster parents should be aware that the child may have had bad experiences in the primary family, such as neglect or abuse, and they should be alert to the relevant signs and symptoms. One of the tasks of foster carers is to provide a sense of security for a child coming into a new home by establishing a daily routine suitable for the child and all family members (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 51).

Education and knowledge are necessary for all involved in the care system. For foster carers in Croatia, the 40 hours provided for in the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette 115/18, 18/22) are often insufficient, and nothing can prepare them for the many challenges that children bring. Training is adapted to the time and resources available to the system, but priority topics that would be useful to include are often missing (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 52). A good practice is the model described by Brown (1988, p. 170), showing that a focus on skills and the teaching method educates foster carers to initiate discussions when a problem arises rather than discussing potential problems. Foster carers need to master a range of skills and knowledge, such as the care, growth and development of children, social problems of families in crisis, legal responsibilities of local government and relationships between people (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 53).

The process of foster care is complex and requires the involvement of many participants who must work together and make decisions to care for the child. The time the child spends away from the primary family is an additional source of stress for the child, who is trying to adjust to the new family's new environment, lifestyle and routine. Foster parents need time and information to provide the child with everything he or she requires and knowledge to help understand the child's complex feelings and problems. Social workers working with families and children in foster care have the complex task of coordinating all parties involved, providing timely information, involving all key people in the process and, of course, finding a foster family willing to accept a child for placement. The decision to separate a child from the family is one of the most difficult tasks for social workers (Kletečki Radović, 2008), while finding a placement is the second most stressful task for

social workers in Croatia, according to a survey by the Croatian Chamber of Social Workers (2019).

In a study on its benefits, foster care is presented as a successful form of non-institutional childcare (Redding, Frieda and Britner, 2000) which, compared to institutional care, and with an alternatively stable foster family relationship, has a more favourable outcome on children's psychological development (Nowacki and Schoelmerich, 2010). Research on certain aspects of foster care (Laklija, 2011b) indicates difficulties in the care planning process, especially in support of primary family and foster families and their cooperation. Organisational and conceptual difficulties were observed in developing the plan as a method of social work in foster care, and it is not clear who should participate and how (Urbanc and Ajduković, 2010, p. 355). Research on the coordination of social workers and foster families has pointed to problems such as the lack of support for foster parents, children and primary family parents in the foster care process (Fuentes, Bernedo, Salas and García-Martín, 2019). According to Rice and Semmelroth (1968), foster parents who do not fully utilize community resources are more likely to return the children entrusted to them to the institution. The topic of foster care has been explored from several perspectives: children, foster parents, primary families and, less frequently, social workers (Laklija, 2011a). Social workers also expressed the need for additional education in the field of foster care (Urbanc and Ajduković, 2010, p. 355). The attitudes of social workers towards the application and evaluation of the family group conference in Sweden and the UK were examined on a sample of 219 social workers, and the results show a positive attitude among social workers towards the method in both countries (Sundell, Vinnerljung and Ryburn, 2001). Research on applying family group conference shows positive results in family empowerment (Lupton and Nixon, 1999) and general family satisfaction with the process, development planning and family involvement.

5.1. Defining the problem, objectives and research questions

Several difficulties in the foster care system impact the quality of the care system and the quality of experts' work with users. In the field of foster care, there is an uneven territorial distribution of foster families in Croatia (World Bank, 2019, p. 16), which entails the problem of placing a child in an environment that is not close to their previous social network. The insufficient number of trained professionals who could professionally carry out the foster care process, as well as insufficiently trained foster parents and the complete lack of work with primary families, point to the need to provide social workers with knowledge for work in this area. The foster care system in Croatia has not yet been sufficiently researched, nor has the question of what needs to be done. Most of the research to date relates to foster carers' attitudes and satisfaction with the provision of care, children's attitudes towards fostering or satisfaction with support (Urbanc and Ajduković, 2010; Ivković and Žižak, 2010; Laklija, 2011a; Laklija 2011b; Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). No study deals with the foster care process and the possibilities of changing it. An analysis of empirical material in Croatia reveals that several studies were conducted in the last 20 years to observe the outcomes of foster care relationships and participant satisfaction with the same guidelines and recommendations, suggesting that little has changed over time in the field of foster care and a lack of knowledge is still evident. The attempted changes are solely legal without including practices and the development of methods that would otherwise assist the foster care system. With the passing of a new law in 2018 and its amendment in 2022 (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22), the development of the foster care system continues to stagnate, and there have been no significant developments in the development of the foster care system. In recent years, more children have been placed in residential care than in alternative forms of care (World Bank, 2019, p. 35). This situation is contrary to all national strategies that emphasise the importance of alternative forms of care, the implementation of the deinstitutionalisation process while strengthening the community and the appropriate care of a child who has the right to live, if not in his or her family, then in an environment that is as close to a family as possible. In recent years, the process of deinstitutionalisation has stagnated or developed slowly (Grozđanić and Rittossa, 2017, p. 949), while the role of social workers in the Croatian Institute for Social Work is becoming increasingly bureaucratised (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). Children placed in foster care find themselves between the primary family and the foster family, whose relationships are often disturbed (Chateaufneuf, Turcotte and Drapeau, 2017, p. 77).

Social work does not have a fully adequate response to the complexity of the foster care process (Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl, 2019), and the question arises as to what the social work profession needs in foster care and whether there are social work methods that involve all participants equally in a way that leads to participation, emancipation and autonomy of those involved in the process.

Understanding the relationships in the foster care process requires knowledge of working with all participants and a change in approach to working with service users in a way that sees primary families, children and foster carers as partners in finding solutions (Morris and Featherstone, 2010). Mitchell (2020, p. 212) describes the need to balance the conflicting roles of those involved in the foster care process as a necessity of partnership in social work and part of the problem of child protection. When social work focuses on the outcome and the changes needed for the child, the family group conference method can be a good way to work in the foster care system. In this way, primary families, foster carers, children and social workers can gain new insights through sharing experiences and equal participation from a power perspective (Saleebey, 2013), which facilitates user emancipation. The family group conference reduces the differences in power positions between participants, especially in the relationship between experts and other participants (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009), aiming to normalise the child's life. It involves a broader family network and a participatory approach to problem-solving, with the emphasis on the family independently creating a plan and deciding on the necessary changes (O'Brien, 2011).

Considering the practice of foster care in Croatia, which is an extremely important resource in the care of children outside institutions, and the fact that more and more children are being removed from their families, new insights from social work theory and practice are important, to help in developing methods to improve the quality of foster care. The importance and complexity of foster care also confirm that the study of foster care is scientifically relevant to the field of social work in both theoretical and practical terms. It enables the planning and development of methods that adapt the fostering process to the actual needs of the child and all those involved in the fostering process. The knowledge makes it possible to work with a group and understand the principles of social work, such as participation and emancipation, not only in a theoretical sense but also in social work practice by developing a method incorporating these social work values.

Although the foster care system has a strong presence in Croatian practice, there is no clear model or method used in working with all participants. This situation is one of the reasons for defining the research goal, which is related to the development of methods for working

with people in social work, which are especially lacking in the field of foster care. An example of good practice or work on the development of a model in social work is Slovenia, which applies an inclusive model in foster care based on the participatory approach of all participants in foster care and cooperation (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019). Furthermore, the research aims to understand the process of foster care in the Croatian context and the potential contribution of the family group conference as a method of working with all participants. The aim is to share and create new knowledge to achieve change in the practice of foster care despite the existing knowledge, but also the knowledge about institutional barriers to be explored, needs in the community and social policy. The aim is to enter foster care practice and define what is needed to develop a working method useful for social work and users, based on the principles of participation, emancipation and community involvement in users' lives, in order to transfer the knowledge generated into theory.

The theses (T) and research questions (RQ) were formulated in line with the defined problems and objectives of the research:

T1: Due to the bureaucratisation of the work and the lack of knowledge, experience and resources, social workers rarely practise the method of group work, which includes principles of emancipation and participation, when working with foster families.

RQ1: What social work practises currently exist in the field of foster care?

RQ2: How do social workers understand the principles of emancipation and participation of family members in the foster care process?

RQ3: How do social workers organise work with foster families and how are the child, the primary family of origin and the foster family involved in important decisions?

RQ4: What current circumstances in social work and foster care practise limit the potential for developing supportive networks in the community?

T2: Elements of family group conference are present in foster care process in current social work, as social workers are familiar with the principles of empowerment, equal participation, the importance of taking control of one's life, co-operation and engaging the wider community network.

RQ1: What characteristics of family group conference are present in current social work practise?

RQ2: How do social workers ensure that the child's voice is heard throughout the care process?

RQ3: How do social workers involve community networks and services to support the child and family to gain more control over their lives?

T3: The application of family group conference leads to less institutionalisation of the child, normalisation of community support networks, the formation of theories for working with families and changes at system level.

RQ1: How does the family group conference contribute to the alternative, non-institutional placement of the child and the deinstitutionalisation of the foster care?

RQ2: How do the experiences of all participants in the family group conference process shape social work knowledge in foster care?

RQ3: How do we link the reflection on practise with the family group conference method and establish participatory and emancipatory social work in foster care?

RQ4: What actions are needed in the community, in institutions and in politics to implement the family group conference in the foster care process?

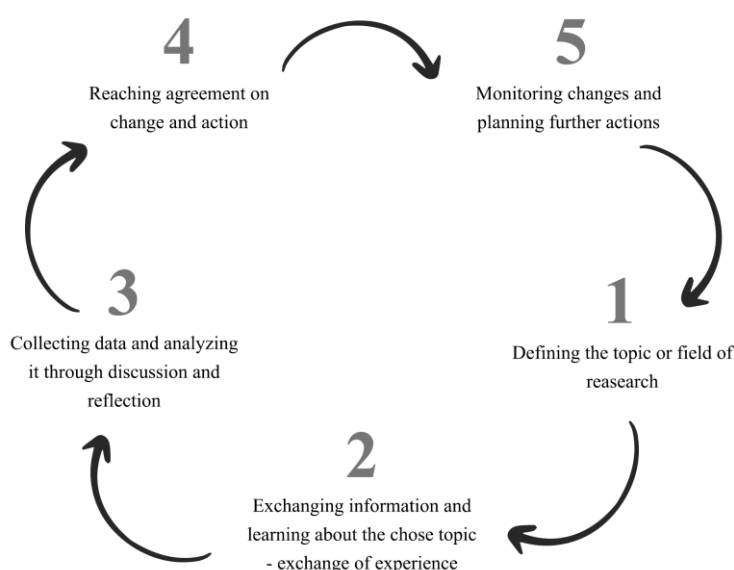
6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Type of research

The nature of the research is action research with an inductive and anti-oppressive approach involving critical conversations and a cyclical process (Fleming and Ward, 2004). Lewin (1946) described action research as a strategy in the research process that includes various research methods. Lewin (1948, p. 202) considered research on the conditions and effects of social action to be important, including research that leads to action or change, viewing them as specific forces in the field of action. These assumptions have guided the research in this dissertation by forming an action group composed of social workers who became researchers because, according to Reason (1994), action research is conducted with people and not on people. In addition, collaborative group research and participatory involvement correspond to Freire's (2002) vision of a process in which everyone learns, teaches and listens together, and everyone is both a participant and a teacher. Although Lewin's definition of action research has been splintered over the course of its development and action research has been explained in different ways (in four directions of action research, then three new approaches), the basic features have remained deeply rooted in more recent action research paradigms and perspectives (Mesec, 2006). There are a number of definitions that describe action research. While some authors, such as Frost (Costello, 2003, p. 3), see it as rethinking professional practice through reflection, research and action, Bell (1999, p. 10) relates action research to the educational process focusing on solving problems and improving educational practice. Hopkins (2002, p. 42) emphasises the personal involvement dimension and the attempt to understand changes that take place in the process participants. The author emphasises that this research approach is an action associated with the research process. Lewin (1946, p. 206) characterised action research as a repetitive cycle, with which Dick (2002, p. 3) agrees, stating that this type of research is a flexible repetitive and cyclic process. The same is emphasised by Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162), who see action research as a cyclical spiral and emphasise that the process is not linear. This dissertation research focuses on the characteristics of the cyclical process in regular spiral intervals in which the phases change. The model of the research cycle most similar to that defined by Bassey (1998) was applied, which refers to a more detailed individual cycle and a model with eight phases of each cycle. For the purposes of the

dissertation research, cycle were adapted in five phases: 1) Starting point - Defining the topic or area of research; 2) Sharing information and learning about the chosen topic – sharing experiences; 3) Collecting data and analysing it through discussion and reflection; 4) Agreeing on changes and actions; 5) Monitoring changes and planning further actions (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Phases of the action research cycle



Source: Author's work based on Bassey (1998).

After each cycle, the collected content was analysed, and further steps, plans and actions were discussed based on Freire's (2002) principle of critical consciousness and the active combination of reflection and action. According to the typology originally described by Hart and Bond (1995), there are experimental, organisational, professional and empowering types of action research. Following the above, the research in this dissertation can be defined as professional action research, which Mesec (1994, p. 216) describes as research conducted by the same group of professionals, i.e., the same professional group, such as social workers, who came together to form an action group for the purposes of this dissertation research. All members of the group worked on a common problem, and my role as an equally contributing researcher was to provide methodological support and advice. Although some authors, such as Gill and Jonson (1991, p. 58), expressed concerns about the dynamics of group work. Lewin's (1946) research on group work emphasised the importance of the power that the group has for change. The approach to group work used

in this doctoral dissertation was a democratically constituted group (Randall and Southgate, 1980). Kemmis et al. (Hart and Bond, 1995, p. 35) emphasise the importance of a democratic spirit in social research. This is also the case with the action group of social workers in this research, who are equal participants in the learning process and have become subjects exploring existing practices, gathering new knowledge, and critically analysing it through group processes to determine the necessary actions to bring about change. This approach points to action research as a model in which the research participant becomes a subject rather than an object through a change of approach. Another important feature that has been attempted to be implemented in research is the creation of a space for dialogue. Freire (2002, p. 56) describes dialogue as a space in which everyone speaks for themselves, and there is no dominance of one person over another. He sees dialogue as an action that creates something new, where one learns from others (Freire, 2002, p. 56), while in action research, such a space is created for the participants in which a real dialogue about the things we see and what we should do is possible (Flaker and Rafaelič, 2023). The emancipation of participants from the dominance of the researcher has also been emphasised and represents the freedom of equal participation (Mesec, 1994). Emancipation was encouraged through group work, where participants were given sufficient time and space to express their own opinions and attitudes. The process of action research was repeated cyclically in the form of a spiral, where the collected data was analysed and the results discussed after each cycle. A participatory approach was adopted in the work of the action group, and all members of the group endeavoured to observe the practices and gain new insights to change them. Setting up an action group and motivating its participants was the beginning of the research and undoubtedly a challenge. The challenge is to form a motivated group of democratically equal social work researchers (Metcalf and Humphreys, 2002, p. 437), even if we speak of social work as a science of action for which it is a natural setting. Action and change are part of everyday social work practice, but it still remains unclear what role social workers play in creating new knowledge and bringing about change, which otherwise makes action research a useful approach in social work research. Qualitative research, which utilises multiple methods, allows the phenomenon to be studied in the natural setting of the respondents and helps to understand the meaning of the phenomenon as interpreted by the respondents. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative methods are based on the analysis of textual material of personal experiences, life stories, individual and group interviews, observations and analyses of other documents. Furthermore, the deeper and more detailed the level of analysis, the

problem is better understood. This approach is possible by describing the participants' inner experiences, thoughts and feelings and how they experience something (Milas, 2009). During our research (our research is named after the action group as a group of researchers), members of the action group had a dual role: they were participants and subjects, assisting in better understanding the data collected and validating the evaluated interpretation of the topic under study. Alston and Bowels (2003, p. 9) emphasise that qualitative research uses various methods to develop theories based on the patterns observed during the research, inductively building grounded theory from specific to general conclusions. The focus is on understanding another person's reality, their experience and the reciprocal relationship between researcher and participant. My role in the research was that of an active participant. It was impossible for me to stand out as a researcher and achieve complete objectivity. However, this is not consistent with qualitative research, in which the researcher contributes knowledge, as well as advocating and promoting the research (Alston and Bowls, 2003, p. 10). My role was to encourage participants to think about the topic and to motivate them to work together, but also to bring about change, which required empowering all participants. The process went both ways. My interaction with other participants outside the action group was encouraged and supported by the action group, giving me additional confidence to talk to people and understand their difficulties. The qualitative research methods used were collecting existing data on conditions in foster care, participant observation, diary keeping and semi-structured interviews. Triangulation of research methods and techniques in action research focuses on different ways of collecting the same or similar data (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 28), while data triangulation focuses on different types of data collected through qualitative analysis (Mali, 2019). The research was conducted successively, in several phases involving several cycles in each phase to increase knowledge about the phenomenon under study (Mesec, 2006). Campbell and Fisk (1959, p. 103) consider triangulation as the need to confirm the results using different methods and support the obtained conclusions, while the process is based on different data sources and methods of researchers or theories. The triangulation of methods and triangulation of data are used in analysing the results to link the data obtained in the different research phases of this dissertation as well as the different combinations of participants. Denzin (1978, p. 21) defines the combination of different approaches through triangulation, e.g., the triangulation of methods, data, research or theoretical aspects. The triangulation of methods was performed sequentially in the present dissertation, given that the temporal determinant is less important in the planned research, while the focus is on the reason for combining the

methods, which means that the data of one method complements and explains the data of other research methods (Lobe, 2006, p. 64). The triangulation of methods and data is introduced in our research in order to better understand the collected data and additionally combine it with different approaches, such as interviews, practise analyses, observations or discussions.

6.2. Measurement instruments

The action research included several qualitative research methods conducted in parallel with the work of the action group. Some of the methods were predetermined, but some of the methods depended on the problem itself and the action group's agreement on what was best to use (Table 2).

Table 2: Measuring instruments and techniques used in the research

Method	Participants	Phase of research
Unstructured dialogue	Social workers	Pre-phase
Inquiry – questionnaire	Population of social workers	Pre-phase
Education – family group conference workshop	All social workers who applied for participation in the research	Phase 1
Observation – during the educational course family group conference workshop	All social workers who participate in education	Phase 1
Semi-structured interview	Six social workers – members of the action group	Phase 1
Diary – during action group meetings	Action group meetings	Phases 1, 2 and 3
Group discussion	Action group meetings	Phase 2
Lectures and workshops - questionnaire and interviews	Social workers, foster parents, primary family and children	Phase 3

In the preliminary phase of the research, unstructured interviews were conducted with four social workers prior to commencing the research component to gather information about the area under study. Alston and Bowles (2003) see this type of research approach by a consultative group of experts as the best way to prepare and deepen knowledge about the topic under investigation. The interview was not structured in advance, but only the topic of the interview was determined, and the participants were free to discuss and express their opinions. The main topics were the foster care system and the organisation of the foster care system, the organisational structure and implementation of the foster care process, while obstacles and advantages in practise for a high-quality foster care system were discussed. Sub-questions were asked during the interview when necessary to deepen knowledge about a specific area of work in practice or to explain the foster care process in more detail. During the interview, notes were taken on the topics that the participants had selected and highlighted as the most important in the foster care system. The data collected was presented in the results section of the dissertation in the form of a SWOT analysis, with the aim of providing guidelines for further research. Issues highlighted as important for

further research included the lack of formal support for foster parents, the lack of involvement of all those involved in the foster care process, the lack of foster families, insufficient work with the primary family or the bureaucratisation of the system. Part of action research is the learning process, and here the research begins. All participants interested in action research took part in a five-day organised training course at a family group conference. During the training, they acquired knowledge on applying the method when working with users, which is the subject of the research in the dissertation. All participants learnt the method and its significance, how to implement and use it in practise through experiential workshops and simulations of the family group conference. The training was divided into two parts, for the initiators and the independent coordinators of the family group conference, and all participants had the opportunity to attend both parts. During the training itself, an observation was conducted involving an unstructured and systematic recording of the topics of conversation, attitudes, opinions and questions of the training participants (Milas, 2009). The observation was carried out by two social work students, who had previously been instructed in the observation method, and myself. We were also involved in the training. All participants were aware that the observation would take place during the training, so the uncovered observation had minimal impact on the participants. The shared observation notes were compared, analysed and narratively interpreted in the discussion chapter of the dissertation. Once the observations had been clarified and analysed, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six social workers who were members of the action group, and information was gathered from existing practices about the foster care process and experiences. Milas (2009, p. 585) describes the interview as a conversation with a specific purpose, while Kahn and Cannell (1957, p. 97) broaden the definition by adding purpose to the interview that also involves collecting information on the research topic. Milas (2009, p. 586) views the interview as a heuristic approach or searching for new facts leading to ideas and research hypotheses with the aim of understanding people's opinions and feelings about a particular problem. The interview as a measurement tool opens up new perspectives in an area that has been little researched (Milas, 2009). The preparation of the interview is in line with the first thesis and the related research questions of the dissertation, while subquestions were prepared for each research question to explore the area in more depth (Appendix 1). A total of twelve basic open-ended subquestions were prepared and supplemented during the interview with additional questions when necessary to expand knowledge or provide a deeper explanation of the answers.

During the work of the action group and the regular meetings, group discussions were held at each meeting. This type of conversation or group discussion is an unstructured way of asking questions and giving answers on a topic in a group of experts (Mesec, 1998, p. 82). My role in such discussions was to stimulate the conversation and raise certain topics for discussion. During the discussions and action group meetings, I kept a diary, which was partly constructed as a tool. For each meeting, I recorded when it took place, how long it lasted, who was present, the agenda and the main conclusions. After the meeting, I wrote down not only everything we had discussed but also my experience of the group work, the observations I had made and my introspective experience of the meeting.

The research findings were collected in two ways in line with the third thesis and the related research questions in the dissertation. Training on the family group conference method was provided to foster parents, children and primary families, and the instrument used to assess satisfaction and interest in the method was a questionnaire prepared for this purpose (Appendix 2). The questionnaire consisted of two types of questions, eleven in total. One part of the questions related to the evaluation of the lectures and workshops for parents, foster parents and children using formulated questions with yes/no answers or a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is poor, 2 is satisfactory, 3 is good, 4 is very good and 5 is excellent) and in which the participants expressed their level of agreement with certain statements. The second part of the question is open-ended in which participants described the reasons for their evaluation of the training and expressed their opinions. The open-ended section for expressing opinions included topics such as expectations of the training, satisfaction with the training, clarity of the training topic, views on the usefulness of the method, and identification of possible areas and situations for use in their families. The questionnaire completed by the participants was supplemented by discussions and interviews with the participants after the lectures and workshops to capture their individual responses or attitudes. The results were analysed and presented in the results chapter of this dissertation.

6.3. Population and sampling

The first phase of the research begins with sampling, i.e., the formation of an action group whose members are social workers employed in the regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work in the field of foster care. The total number of regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work at the time of the survey (as of 31 December 2021) on the territory of the Republic of Croatia was 134, while the total number of social workers employed in the regional offices was 1,214 (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022a), of which 1,146 are female social workers. A total of 134 regional offices were contacted and invited to participate in the survey, of which 118 or 88% of the regional offices received the invitation. According to the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy website, the contact list of regional offices is publicly available, but of the 134 contacts listed, 16 e-mail addresses were incomplete or incorrect. On 17 February 2022, an invitation to participate in the action research was sent to the e-mail addresses of all regional offices for social workers in foster care, together with a description of the aim and purpose of the research (Appendix 3). The exact number of social workers in the foster care system, including social workers who are part of the foster care teams in the regional offices, is not known. The invitation was forwarded as a link to a prepared Google form (Appendix 4) explaining to social workers the purpose and aim of the research, how they could take part in the research and how they could obtain further information about the research to decide whether or not they wanted to take part. Potential participants could leave their details, e-mail address or phone number if they wanted to be contacted, while my contacts were available to anyone who wanted more information or had questions.

The training organised by association Hrabri telefon Zagreb, as part of the implementation of the project and educational program for social workers entitled "After trauma - strengthening the community", on April 7, 2022, was an opportunity for me to join part of the education and the lecture of social worker Rob van Pagée, the founder of *Eigen Kracht Centrale*, who has conducted and organised several thousand family group conferences in the Netherlands. On this occasion, the social workers who had taken part in the training were invited to apply to take part in the action research in which this approach was part of the sampling method.

By 15 April 2022, 47 interested social workers had completed the Google form (Appendix 4). The criteria for selecting a non-probabilistic, intentional sample of participants who

would be members of the action group were established, and the questions about the required data on the applicants were an integral part of the form that the social workers completed.

With regard to the research topic and in order to ensure the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the sample, the criteria for the members of the action group were defined:

- Length of time working in the foster care system (preferably 5 years or more) to ensure the presence of people with more experience;
- Presence of a foster care team in the regional office or not, to gain an insight into the diversity of practices;
- Whether they have undergone additional training in the field of foster care, which indicates an affinity with the topic under study;
- Whether the regional office is located in an urban or rural area and which county they belong to, given that the number of foster parents in Croatia is unevenly distributed and more prevalent in rural areas (World Bank, 2019).

The research should include different respondents to ensure that categories differing in their opinions or experiences on the topic under study are represented.

Table 3: Number of registered participants and willingness to participate

TOTAL N	I'm not interested in participating	I'm not sure	I want to participate
47	16	23	8

After the social workers filled in the applications in the Google form (Appendix 4), the processed data showed that the registered participants came from 18 different counties, out of a total of 21 Croatian counties. Only one person is a male, and the other 46 are women. Of the total 47 registered persons, 16 indicated that they were not interested in participating in the research, 23 indicated that they were not sure and would like to know more before deciding, and eight registered persons indicated that they would like to participate in the research. Table 3 shows the pattern of registered participants in terms of their expressed desire to take part in the research, indicating a dropout rate of 34%. All respondents, regardless of their expressed desire to participate in the research, were invited to the training for licenced users of the family group conference method, which took place in May 2022 at the Faculty of Law in Osijek. A total of 29 people took part in the five-day training: 12 social work students and 17 social workers. Of the 17 social workers, after the training and

discussions about the planned research, six decided to participate further in the action research actively. The criteria for inclusion in the action group were not fully met, such as the length of time working in foster care. Not all members of the action group are social workers with five or more years of experience in foster care. Nevertheless, the action group formed was highly motivated, and an opportunity to share new experiences was offered. Specific differences in the chosen criteria were recognised as learning opportunities.

Table 4: Characteristics of the action group

CRITERIA	STATUS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS n
The county they come from	Primorje-Goran County	1
	Osijek-Baranja County	1
	Vukovar-Srijem County	2
	Koprivnica-Križevci County	1
	Bjelovar-Bilogora County	1
Length of work experience in foster care	5- 10 years	4
	1-2 year	1
	Less than 1 year	1
Part of the foster care team	YES	2
	NO	4
Additional education in the field of foster care	YES	4
	NO	2
Number of foster families in jurisdiction	5-10	2
	10-25	1
	25-50	1
	More than 50	2

The characteristics of the action group members are listed in Table 3, showing similarities and differences. The action group is homogeneous in that all members are employed in the regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work and perform foster care tasks. The sample is heterogeneous in terms of other characteristics, with different counties represented, providing insight into localities in Croatia with more or less developed foster care systems. Some of the action group members are part of the foster care team, while others are not, which is an opportunity for sharing experiences and different perspectives. The foster care team is only formed in the regional offices when the number of foster parents in the area exceeds one hundred (Laklija and Brkić, 2022). In the other regional offices, social workers from the Department of Marriage and Family usually handle the foster care process in addition to their regular workload. Most members of the action group

have undergone additional training in foster care, while the number of foster families per participant varies and ranges from one to 65 families.

In the third phase of the research, in which answers to the research questions of the third thesis of the dissertation were collected, the action group defined the need to educate foster families, children and primary families about the family group conference method. In order to inform and acquaint the families (primary and foster families) with the family group conference and to introduce and explain the method and the process itself, we organised lectures and workshops in each regional office from where the action group members come. The social workers, who are also action group members, invited all foster families and primary families to attend the presentations and workshops that fell within the remit of their regional office so that all families could participate on an equal footing. Families were invited by the social workers they normally interact with, work with and trust, while families suggested who else might attend. In this way, a snowball sample was formed. In addition, nearby regional offices were also included after learning about the organising of this type of training. The result was that five training sessions took place, in which nine regional offices participated. The number and structure of participants who took part in the training sessions is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Number of foster parents, primary families and children at lectures and workshops

LECTURES AND WORKSHOPS	PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS N
Lectures and workshops in Osijek (Osijek regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work)	Primary family	0
	Children	0
	Foster family	6
	Social workers	0
Lectures and workshops in Rijeka (Crikvenica, Opatija, Krk, Rab and Rijeka regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work)	Primary family	1
	Children	1
	Foster family	12
	Social workers	2
Lectures and workshops in Vukovar (Vukovar regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work)	Primary family	0
	Children	2
	Foster family	22
	Social workers	0
Lectures and workshops in Daruvar (Čazma, Daruvar and Grubišno polje regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work)	Primary family	0
	Children	3
	Foster family	16
	Social workers	5
Lectures and workshops in Đurđevac (Đurđevac regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work)	Primary family	3
	Children	3
	Foster family	3
	Social workers	2

The training participants are a non-probabilistic sample of volunteers who decided to volunteer independently at the invitation of social workers. A total of 81 people attended the lectures and workshops, including nine social work professionals, 59 or three quarters of foster carers, four primary parents and nine children from foster care. Of the total number of participants, 62 people, or three quarters, gave feedback or completed questionnaires about their experiences at the talks and workshops.

6.4. Data collection

Prior to commencing the research, during the dissertation plan writing phase, a preliminary investigation was conducted with an advisory group of social workers in order to focus the research on the core issues of the research topic. Four unstructured interviews were conducted with social workers about the introduction of foster care, their practical experiences and the benefits or barriers encountered in their work. The social workers willing to share their experiences were from four different counties, and we had already worked together on project activities relating to foster care when they expressed a desire to say more about it. The interviews collected and expanded on additional knowledge of foster care practice, making it possible to formulate theses and research questions in this dissertation that are important for the area of study. Notes were taken during the interviews with the social workers in the preliminary research phase, on the basis of which a SWOT analysis of the data on the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and obstacles in the foster care system was carried out.

In addition, at the beginning of the research, all consents had to be obtained from the relevant institutions before contacting the potential participants, i.e., the social workers. In December 2021, a letter was sent to the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (Appendix 5) requesting consent from the contacted regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work. Given that all regional offices fall under the governance of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, and with the aim of covering absolutely all social workers, consent is a prerequisite for contacting the regional offices and inviting social workers to participate. Contacting all social workers ensures that all potential participants (population) have an equal opportunity to participate. Attached to the letter are additional documents on conducting the research, explaining the purpose and aim of the research, the plan and structure of the research and its ethical aspects, along with the attached approval from the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana.

The research was divided and carried out in three phases. Each phase represents a specific thesis and its research questions, the results of which successively provide knowledge for the next phase. The first phase and the collection of data to answer the first thesis of the research began with licenced educators organising a training session on the family group conference. All potential participants were invited to the training, i.e., all 47 who had signed

up on the Google form, regardless of their expressed intention to participate further in the research. All interested potential participants attended the training, as did social work students interested in developing and applying new methods in social work. Upon completion of the training, which was conducted in two parts – for the initiators and coordinators of the family group conference – all participants received a certificate of proficiency in applying the family group conference method in practice. The training lasted a total of five days, from 28 May to 1 June 2022, on the premises of the Faculty of Law in Osijek. During and after the training, we talked to the social workers present who were interested in participating in the research as potential members of the action group to assess their motivation and interest. During the training, two students and I conducted an unstructured participant observation and recorded the topics discussed, the participants' interest in the topic and further learning about it, including questions that arose during the discussions and conversations. The observation was conducted to assess the participants' motivation for further participation in the research. After the training, a group of six social workers was formed in which I participated as an equally contributing researcher. The action group met regularly, and each meeting started with analysing the collected data and presenting it, discussing the results, reflecting on the topic, developing a plan for the next period and planning the subsequent action. In all, five meetings of the action group took place: 1 June 2022, 13 July 2022, 31 August 2022, 20 October 2022 and 16 December 2022.

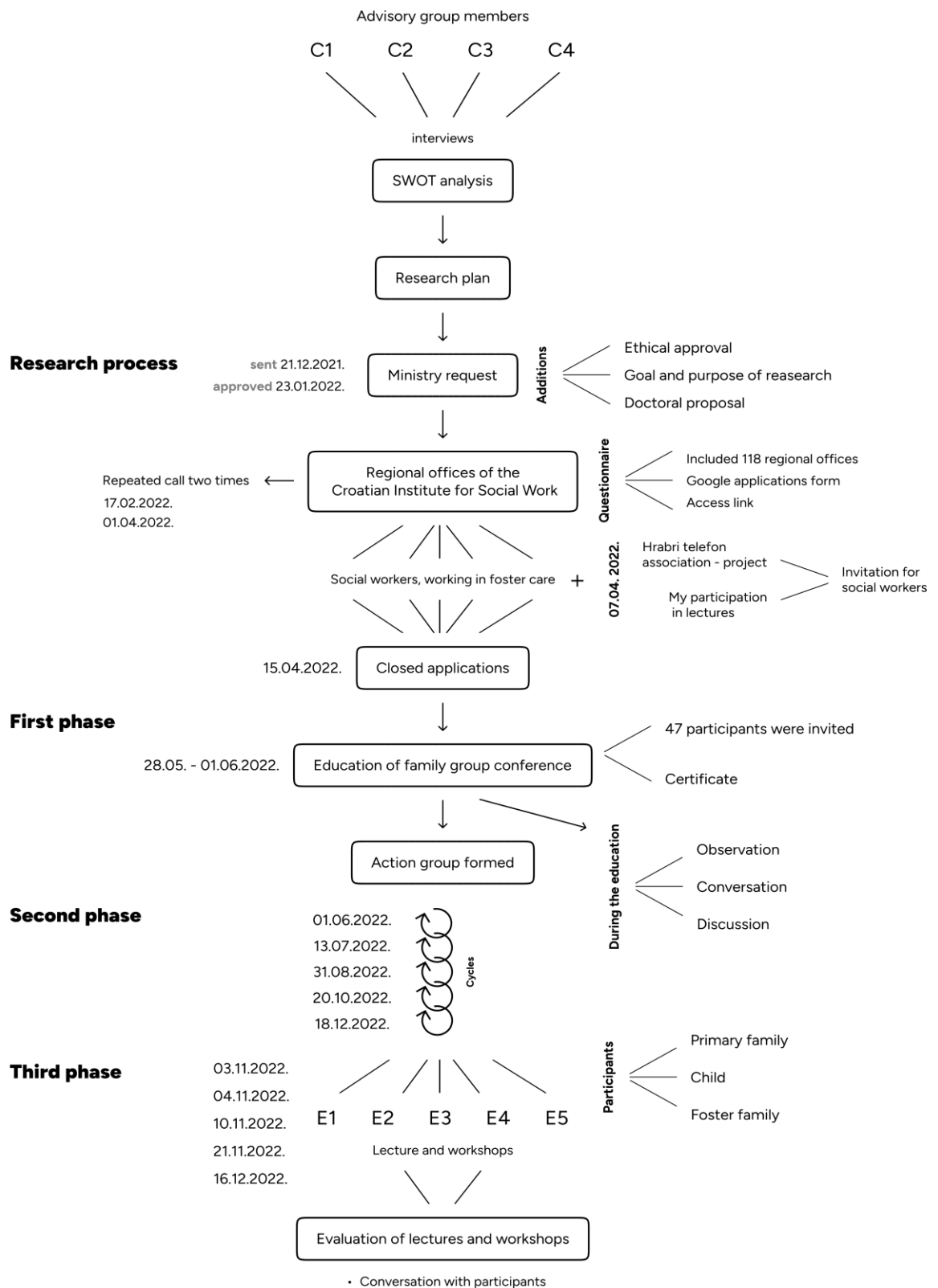
Following the training, research into the responses to the first theses continued with semi-structured interviews surveying members of the action groups who had previously investigated existing foster care practices in their regional offices and analysed examples of such practices.

Once data was collected as part of the first research thesis, the second phase of the research began, in which action group members defined elements of the family group conference and related them to the foster care process that we had defined in the first phase of the research. The second phase of the research is in line with the second thesis and the research questions, which took place mainly at regular action group meetings and debates, and by linking research findings in discussions for which a diary was kept to record all happenings. In the third phase of the research, data was collected to answer the third thesis and research questions. The third phase began by familiarising foster families, children and primary families with the family group conference method at training sessions as well as informing and establishing contact with families. The trainings are organised at each regional office

of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, where the action group members come from. The social workers who were members of the action group invited all foster families, primary families and children who fall under the regional office's jurisdiction to lectures and workshops. The training sessions were held in the regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, which provided large enough spaces and rooms for all families to participate. We decided to invite participants not only from the respective regional office but also from neighbouring regional offices that had expressed interest. Once the families arrived, they were explicitly told that it was part of the research and about the aim and purpose of the training, emphasising voluntary participation and the possibility to withdraw at any time. Families were informed that the talks and workshops were entirely voluntary and that the welfare of the family or child was not dependent on their positive or negative response to the invitation. After the lecture, all participants were asked to complete a questionnaire for feedback on the method. Families were interviewed to assess their motivation to attend a group family conference again. A total of five training events were organised in five cities and five Croatian counties. After each lecture and workshop, we organised a suitable informal meeting with the participants and discussed any further questions participants may have had and the possibility of holding a family group conference in their family.

Figure 6: Research procedure matrix

Pre research process



Source: Author's work based on Lewin (1946), Mesec (1994), Bassey (1998), Fleming and Ward (2004) and Mesec (2006).

The research procedure matrix (Figure 6) illustrates the action research process, from the preliminary phase of the research and the collection of information for writing up the thesis to the end of the research process. The research plan was created in accordance with the theses and research questions, which means that each phase of the research represents a thesis containing associated research questions and is thus presented in the Results and Discussion chapter (Chapter 7). The planned steps of the action research start with the bureaucratic aspect and obtaining the necessary permissions to conduct the research, while the next step is to establish the population of respondents and invite social workers to participate in the research. After clarifying the dissertation topic and forming the action group, the research begins in three phases involving different methods of data collection. The action group met five times, always analysing and discussing the previously collected results and drawing up a plan for the next activities. Although action research sometimes seems like a series of disconnected activities, and the researchers may find it difficult to see the results of their work, the approach differs in many ways from classical research methods. The main feature is the group of experts who become researchers, adding a completely new dimension and perspective to the research process.

6.5. Data processing and analysis

Pre-research phase. The use of various methods and instruments in the research process led to a large amount of collected data, which had to be processed systematically and in regular cycles for the next phase of the research work. The notes collected before the start of the research, in the preliminary phase, are presented in tabular form, which summarises the collected data. The data collected from four unstructured interviews on the topic of foster care were summarised, and commonly observed terms from four categories were identified: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The data is presented in the form of a SWOT analysis and interpreted in the Results and Discussion chapter of the dissertation.

Registering the participants. The form for registering participants and forming an action group, prepared as a Google form (Appendix 4), was edited in Excel to sort the data as elements for selecting the members of the action group. In the methodology chapter, they are tabulated and interpreted in the section describing the population and sample.

Observations on family group conference education for social workers. Based on the preliminary data, three theses and research questions for further research were established for each thesis. In the first phase of the research, to answer the first research thesis, the data collected during the observation of family group conference education was written up by two students and myself. The observational data was edited together to recognise key elements and recurring themes related to the research topic from the notes taken during the observation. The data was described narratively, which helped to formulate a theme for the action group that was formed for further discussion.

Notes and diary. The action group met regularly, with regular notes and a diary kept of the meeting. Notes were taken of participants' views, reflections, conclusions, criticisms and suggestions, as well as agreed actions and changes. All meetings were held via the Zoom application, in which the action group meetings were recorded, with the consent of all participants at the start of each meeting. In this way, the data was recorded in two ways, and the transcripts of the discussions were used to supplement the notes and diaries. During the action group meeting, I took notes on my impressions, experiences and changes I noticed happened in the group work. The data collected in this way was processed in using qualitative thematic analysis in relation to the action research cycle, where terms and codes

were defined and were linked to the data collected through other methods through data triangulation in the Results and Discussion chapter.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with action group members, and each interview was recorded. The recorded data was transcribed, and interviewee responses were summarised in a table based on research questions in the first thesis. The data was then grouped thematically, the terms identified, and the codes defined by linking similar terms to a particular code. An example of qualitative data processing and coding is shown in Table 6, as an example for analysing the responses of primary families, the foster parents and the children after the educational training, which are interpreted narratively in chapter 7.4. of the dissertation. The data is interpreted narratively in the Research Results and Discussion chapter (Chapter 7.2, Chapter 7.3. and Chapter 7.4).

Table 6: Example of coding in research

QUESTION	THEME	INTERVIEW MARK	STATEMENT - user response	CODE/TERM
1	What expectations did you have of the educational course on the family group conference?	E1	How to qualitatively and efficiently solve problems and conflicts in the family or conflicts with foster children who have come into our family. Hear something new. Learn new methods to solve problems we face. Learn something new. That it will be instructive. None because I did not know what it was exactly. Everything that was talked about. Interesting, but doable if possible. I have no expectations because I would always be disappointed after having expectations. I learnt something new. Learnt something new, new ways of raising, caring for and helping foster children. Interesting and appealing topics. Yes, to supporting families with difficulties.	Something new, learn, know, new possibilities, topics that interesting us, qualitatively and efficiently help = education Helping, solve the problem, raising, caring, helping foster children, conflict = support No expectations, disappointed, none = distrust

			Clarification of the broader concept of the method and its role in the foster care system. I wanted to hear how the method can be applied and what it is. That I find out something and learn something new.	
		E2	I have no expectations . That I will hear and learn some new methods related to solving problems . I was expecting some new knowledge . Find out something new that has not been known before. What I expected was something new that delighted me. Learn something new. Find out what is a family group conference. Some advice that is practically applicable .	No expectations = mistrust New knowledge, learn, new method = education Advice, practically, applicable, solving problems = support

Discussion. The data collected in the second phase of the research, relating to the second thesis and research questions, were processed in a table comparing the elements of the family group conference and existing foster care practices side by side (Table 9). The action group defined the elements of the family group conference that had come to the attention of members during the training session and in group discussions as additional knowledge on this topic. A table was created containing the defined elements of the family group conference. The action group members then spoke to their colleagues in the field and collected data on experiences with foster care. At a joint meeting, all action group members analysed the collected data, created a table (Table 9) to distinguish between similarities and differences in practice, and then linked the elements to the identified stages of the foster care process in practice. The results are presented in a Table 9 linking the findings of the first and second phases of the research.

Training questionnaire for primary families, foster parents and children. In the third phase of the research, educational courses on the family group conference method were held for foster families, primary families and children, after which participants were asked to complete evaluation questionnaires. After the training, time was set aside to interview the participants and get feedback on their experience in participating and possible wishes for implementing the family group conference. During the interview, notes were taken and subsequently analysed together with the evaluation questionnaire. The questionnaire for the

training participants consisted of closed yes/no questions and the participants' ratings on a Likert scale. The data was processed using Excel tables, placed in a table, and descriptive statistics were used to interpret the results. The second part of the questions in the questionnaire were open questions, which participants could answer in detail and justify the chosen answer on a rating scale. All the participants' answers and interview notes were processed using qualitative analysis so that their answers could be transcribed into a table in which terms and codes were added from all the answers to interpret participants' views of the family group conference method.

Triangulation of methods. In dissertation research, different methods of data collection were used to investigate the same topic, with the aim of extending the results to the problem under investigation, but also for different approaches among the participants in the research. In the dissertation, for example, the process of foster care was defined using the semi-structured interview method. Subsequently, the practise of foster care was analysed using the method of discussion within the action group and the analysis of the practice of foster care in the regional offices investigated by the members of the action group. Based on the collected data, the elements of the family group conference that occur in practice were defined through the group discussion at the action group meeting. The combination of action and qualitative research made it possible to extend the findings on the foster care process through in-depth analysis, as the data obtained from the interview could not provide all the answers to the questions on the subject of the study. O'Brien (2001, p. 6) explains that action research is a holistic approach using various methods commonly found in qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative research is like an evolving spiral, where each circle expands with new knowledge and creates new discoveries; this approach to expanding specific knowledge about a problem is called a hermeneutic circle (Mesec, 1997). The results of one method served as a basis to complement the results of the other method. Gradually, the methods were linked together, and the results can be combined into research data that more reliably described the area under investigation. Sequential data collection and analysis can steer research in the right direction during implementation, but it also facilitates consolidation of knowledge about an investigated phenomenon (Mesec, 1997).

The dissertation utilised a sequential research strategy and triangulation of results and triangulation of methods, focusing on the combination of methods rather than the timing of the application of the methods, meaning that they were not conducted in parallel but at different stages of the research (Lobe, 2006, p. 66). In addition, a transformative strategy

was applied to the data collection, using mixed methods in all phases of the research. It refers to changing the consciousness of the action group researchers by giving them a voice and equality in the research and empowering them to change and take action. An example of this is the decision of one member of the action group to change their previous work with foster carers and organise group work for foster carers (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The research strategy focuses on the aim of the research rather than the methods, which were shaped or changed during the research phases, such as the change in method choice in the third research phase of the thesis (Chapter 7.4.), where the method of education for foster carers, primary families and children was used instead of conducting a group family conference and interviewing participants about their experience at the conference. The research approach in conducting the education included several research methods such as observation, questionnaires and discussions. During the training, notes were taken on the observations and informal discussions with all participants. In addition, the focus is on understanding the phenomena and changes in the process that was studied in the transformative framework.

In the dissertation, triangulation as a strategic approach to data collection had three goals: 1) to gain a broader and deeper insight into the reality of the researched world of foster care (Mali and Grebenc, 2021), 2) to deepen the knowledge of the researched phenomenon of foster care by complementing data collected with different methods on the same issue and 3) gaining different perspectives on the investigated problem for more reliable conclusions (Mali, Flaker, Urek and Rafaelič, 2018).

The use of methods can be simultaneous or sequential, when the data collection comes from different data sources (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). For example, in the dissertation, data were collected sequentially from social workers as members of the action group, from other employees in the regional offices of the Croatian Institute of Social Work, from whom the members of the action group collected data on foster care, and from foster families and primary families. After conducting the interviews with social workers in action group, on the basis of which the questions for the next phase of the research were prepared, the members of the action group collected data on site in the regional offices in order to supplement the results obtained from the interviews. In this way, same interview method was used repeatedly, however in different situations and with different participants – thus producing intrinsically different data sets. In addition, different techniques of data collection on the same research topic, such as discussions, observations and interviews, were used in order to be able to better understand and analyse the data on the problem under

investigation. Triangulation of methods not only provided more reliability and validity of the research outcome, but also steered the research process, as, for instance, change of direction of research on the contribution of group family conference to the non-institutional placement of a child, development of theory on working with families and changes in the system, in the third thesis of the dissertation. Instead of a group family conference planned with the foster parents, education of foster parents, the primary families and the children were conducted about the method and its effects.

With regard to the method of data collection and methodological triangulation, as defined by Denzin (1978, p. 22), he explains the collection of data on the same subject using different methods, in the dissertation for example by observation and discussion during the training and then by interviews after the training. The data obtained in this way was compared and similarities and differences were identified and interpreted.

For example, most of the data collected in the dissertation on the possibility of using family group conferences in foster care are similar, while only a small portion of the data presents differences, for example, the amount of time spent working with families when a child enters foster care differs. In the discussion at the beginning of research during education, the experts note that there is time for the primary family, the child and the foster carer to get to know each other, until a court decision is made. In the discussion, the experts explained that during the period in which the court decision is awaited, a certain amount of time is available to get to know and prepare the families and the child. In the subsequent interview, the other experts said that it is not possible to use this time to prepare the families and the child. The two sets of data collected indicate differences due to two possible reasons: 1) some experts have less experience with foster care and a lack of knowledge about the legal process and 2) some experts believe it is possible to use the time to prepare the family and child for foster care despite the interruption in the legal process because they see the potential for working with the family in the time gained. The two sets of data collected suggest that there is a need for a deeper analysis of the foster care system and the potential in terms of time spent working with the family that can be utilised in practise if the system is changed and adapted to the needs of the foster care system. The data were similar regardless of whether collected through interviews, discussion or observation of the training (of foster carers, primary families and children) (Table 7). In three different situations the topic of the use of family group conference was explored and the results show the same orientation and attitudes towards the possibilities of their use – thus confirming the value of the conferences. The table below shows an example of the triangulation of data

sets and sequential data collection on the topic of implementing the family group conference in practise, in relation to the respondents and the research method. The data collected as one data set when researching and collecting responses to the first thesis of the dissertation was used to complement the findings in the second data set collected for the purpose of the second thesis of the dissertation. The same procedure was used to supplement the findings of the third thesis of the dissertation (Table 7).

Table 7: Triangulation of data sets – an example of data collection on the possibilities of using the family group conference method

Research phase	Participants	Technique	Results (sequential difference emphasized)
1. Thesis: due to bureaucratisation of social work and lack of resources social workers rarely practice the method of group work	Interested experts and potential research participants, social workers	Discussion	- Before the separation of the child from the family - At the time of separation with the aim of connecting the foster parents and the primary family – divided opinion on the possibilities of application - During the planning phase in the foster care - During the child's exit from the foster care
2. Theses: elements of family group conference are present in foster care process and social workers are familiar with the main principles of social work	Social workers, members of action group	Interview	- Before the separation of the child from the family - At the time of separation with the aim of connecting the foster parents and the primary family – supplemented with knowledge of legal guidelines and possibilities for application of family group conference - During the planning phase in the foster care - During foster care - During the child's exit from the foster care
3. Thesis: application of family group conference leads to less institutionalization of the child, the formation of theories for working with families and changes at system level.	Foster families, primary families and children	Discussion	- Before the separation of the child from the family - At the time of separation with the aim of connecting the foster parents and the primary family – supplemented with knowledge of legal guidelines and possibilities for application - During the planning phase in the foster care - During foster care - During the child's exit from the foster care - In kinship foster care

Source: Author's work based on Denzin (1978), Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Mesec (1997), Lobe (2006), Mali, Flaker, Urek and Rafaelič (2018) and Mali and Grebenc (2021).

Table 7 presents an example of the sequential triangulation of data collection and comparison – on the topic of the application of the family group conference method. The discussions and interviews were used as different methods to expand and complement the

data and knowledge on the application of family group conference. In the first phase of the research and the collection of response to the first thesis of the dissertation, a discussion was held with the experts who had participated in the first training on family group conference. In the discussion, the phases of foster care in which the application of family group conference would be useful were presented from the perspective of the social workers and experts.

In the further course of the study, interviews were conducted with social workers who identified the existing elements of the family group conference in practise and defined the possibilities for implementing the method in practise in the discussion based on new findings and observations from practice. The results coincided with the results of the discussion during the training course and thus confirmed them but were simultaneously supplemented by new data and insights about the foster care process, thus upgrading and complementing the initial data. In the third phase of the research, i.e. when collecting the answers to the research questions of the third thesis about experiences of all participants in the family group conference, the training of foster families, primary families and children was conducted. During the training, a discussion took place, in which the participants defined and suggested when and in which situations a family group conference would be necessary. This was in line with the data collected so far, but also expanded the knowledge to the use in kinship foster families, which indicated the actual need of the participants and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied.

More than the data collection by different techniques, the sequential investigation has enabled access to different data sources and the inclusion of participants relevant to the foster care process, on the one hand social workers and on the other foster parents, the foster children and the primary families. This deepened the focus on the researched phenomenon and not only led to greater data relevance.

In particular, the triangulation of the data provided a deeper and broader picture of the possibilities of applying the method in working with families, but only when the families affected by this type of service were included. The perspective of an expert is not enough to fully understand the topic. It is necessary to review and compare the results with the people for whom the service is intended in order to obtain a comprehensive picture and to be able to draw conclusions or make recommendations. Since the research topic of the dissertation is unknown and does not occur in social work in Croatia, the application of triangulation was useful in order to collect data from all sources and this has contributed to a better understanding of the research problem.

6.6. The process of the action approach in research and the changes achieved

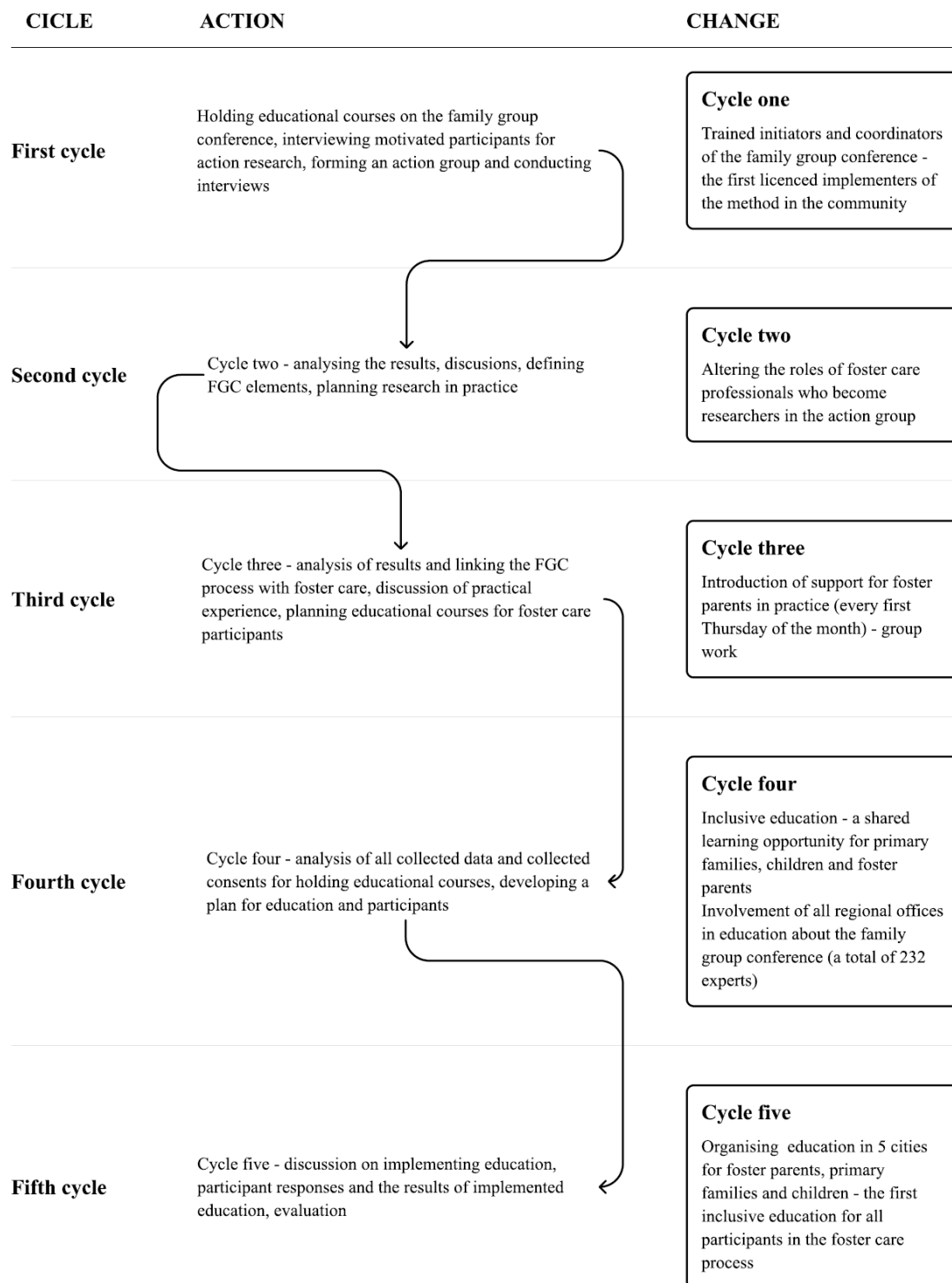
The group that comes together as an action group of experts, which until recently was an invisible part of the institution and dispersed in practise, has become visible in everyday life and in the community (Campbell, 1995, p. 10). Campbell describes self-help groups that organise under the influence of neglected voices and disseminate insights and knowledge about human behaviour and the need for visibility in the community. User groups were formed to achieve something and to find out how to achieve it. The action group formed for the research had a dual role: to explore and to bring about change. Despite the demanding action research and a process that took quite a while, the group remained compact and complete from start to finish. To maintain enthusiasm and a desire to participate, a common goal was important to the action group, namely a belief in the practise of foster care and the ability to effect change. The members of the group had similar yet different experiences of working in the foster care system; therefore, the cohesion of the group grew with each meeting and sharing of experiences.

The group reached its peak at the third meeting when the energy of the group increased enormously and all were empowered to bring about change at a social level, as described by Randall and Southgate (1980) who see the peak as part of the creative cycle and the moment of realising a goal or idea. They had to do something, say something and change something. The fact that they independently decided to set themselves tasks, develop actions and dwell on changes further strengthened the participants. At the beginning of each meeting, the previous and completed actions were analysed, followed by an ongoing analysis of the newly collected materials and data (Campbell, 1995, p. 18). The results were discussed subject to a critical review of the data, with the topic being discussed again and corrected if necessary. All members of the group had to perceive the meetings as a safe space for discussion. The group was not overwhelmed by deadlines; they collectively agreed on how long the research and implementation of the plan would take in preparation. The time available to the participants, the energy and effort they invested was respected and special care was taken to ensure that the research did not become an additional imposition, but a space in which the participants were happy to participate. For this reason, most meetings took place via the Zoom app, usually in the afternoon when everyone had finished their work, taking into account the possibilities of the participants.

The cyclical nature of action research lent a certain dynamism to the meetings of the action group and ensured that the plan agreed by the group at each meeting could be realised

within the given time. At the same time, it enabled the group to gradually analyse the research results, generate new knowledge and re-plan subsequent actions (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Action research and noted changes in social work practice



Source: Author's work based on Lewin (1946), Mesec (1994), Bassey (1998), Fleming and Ward (2004) and Mesec (2006).

The results of the action group's work during the research were not always clear and the action survey did not appear to be finalised. An analysis of the overall results shows the changes that occurred, planned and unplanned. The aim of the initial action research was to educate all potential participants who wanted to know more about the method and the actual research. After the training, participants were encouraged to think about how they could link the family group conference method to current practise, which for social workers is a complex and complicated process with an always uncertain outcome. The first change that occurred was the creation of the first licenced implementers of the family group conference method in Croatia, who are able to implement the method in their regional centres and communities. Although the knowledge of the family group conference helped the action group to design and decide on the research in practise, the principles of the method and what distinguishes it from other approaches currently practised remained unclear. Linking method and practise provided a clear picture of the whole process as well as the principles of the method identified in the foster care process. The involvement of social workers in the action research as equal researchers is the second change that took place. The action group gradually understood their role, but also the principles of participation, the autonomy of the participants and the shortcomings that require changes in practise. The third cycle was the most intense, where the energy of the group was high and there was no shortage of ideas for change. In one regional office, a change in foster care practise occurred when a group member decided to organise group meetings of foster parents on the first Thursday of every month to facilitate the sharing of experiences, informal conversations and, similar to an action group, critical reflection on the needs and opportunities of foster parents. In addition, the action group decided to first introduce the family group conference method to foster parents and inform them about it before attempting to put it into practise. The idea of involving both primary families and the children also emerged, albeit in a discussion about the motivation and reaction of the same participants. Although the action group had some scepticism about the reactions of the primary families, they came to the conclusion that something had to change in the work with primary families and the educational courses seemed to be a good place to involve them. For the first time in social work practise in Croatia, inclusive education was organised for all participants in the foster care system. There was another change in the community, namely the involvement of the association Hrabri telefon (Brave Phone), which organised training courses on family group conference for all social workers in Croatia via the Zoom app. This was an opportunity to introduce the method to other social workers who

participated in the training, 232 in total (Hrabri telefon, 2022). The last cycle of action research included the results and experiences of the educational courses conducted and a discussion on how the participants experienced the courses. The action group again discussed the possibilities of putting the method into practise and defined the areas in which it could be applied, as well as the prerequisites for its implementation in institutions, the community and politics.

My personal experiences with action research have become part of my personal growth and development as a researcher, and they are also part of who I am. The value I have received from the group is really hard to estimate, i.e. it is an unlimited source of knowledge, the objective and real experiences of people who were willing to share them with me and who had the patience to answer my questions and clarify any issues. I also had the opportunity to observe different phases, e.g. group work, from the organisation of the group to the completion of the group dynamic process. Following and observing how someone thinks and engages in change, moving from a negative to a positive attitude, reflecting and drawing conclusions, broadening everyone's horizons and creating a kind of emotional connection between us all is the result. Campbell (1995) sees this as a personal support and a joint development of social action. Action research has brought to light another important fact, namely that social workers in practise have enormous potential for growth and development if they are given the opportunity to work without boundaries and if they are allowed autonomy and participation. In line with our research on the theses, we found the same result in our group. I have noticed this development and connection, the changes at the personal and group level. What I believe is essential and of great importance to the group's efforts is humour (Campbell, 1995, p.21). There was no lack of humour, it became a motivating factor for the reunion. In the beginning, a group leader was expected, someone who gave instructions on how to do the tasks and how to divide the tasks. But after a while, it became important to speak up in the group. Everyone wanted to speak up, discuss, say something and the like, regardless of who came from where and what status they had in the group. Perhaps my description and experience of this research approach is somewhat idealistic and perhaps also because it was the first time I had experienced this kind of work. However, I would attribute it more to the commitment of the participants and my strong desire and belief in the topic I was researching.

7. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research results in the dissertation are presented according to the implemented phases, where each phase of the research represents a thesis of the dissertation. Four chapters and fourteen sub-chapters describe the results obtained in our research, relating them to theoretical concepts and previous research data. The first chapter describes the preliminary phase of the research, i.e., the preparation that preceded defining other research phases and defining clear theses using research questions (Chapter 7.1). As a way of addressing the research topic, the advisory group proved to be a good choice because, despite the available theory, a deeper knowledge of the foster care process in practice was necessary in order to direct the research to the research topic and identify the key elements that helped get answers to the research questions.

After the preliminary research phase and having drawn up the research plan, implementation was divided into three phases for the assigned theses, as described in separate chapters. Each phase provides the necessary knowledge and results for understanding and undertaking action in the next phase. The first phase of the research and getting answers to the four research questions of the first thesis (Chapter 7.2), initially required instructing all action group members about the family group conference and reflecting on the themes and issues that emerged from the discussions, with the aim of gaining further insights. Educating action group members is an ethical imperative, given that knowledge of the topic under study is a prerequisite for further research work. In addition, after the interviews, the results were presented descriptively, and the course of the care process, its structure, phases and possible variations in practice were defined (Chapter 7.2.1). The results show possible situations in the process of fostering a child, which was a prerequisite for understanding the complexity of the foster care system and consideration of guidelines in further research. A clear picture of the direction of the foster care process was necessary to create shared knowledge in the action group and to share experiences in foster care practice. In addition, an understanding of the emancipation and inclusion of all participants in the foster care process (Chapter 7.2.2.) and the way of working with all participants in the foster care process (Chapter 7.2.3.) are presented below to deepen the understanding of the foster care process, and adding another dimension of working with users. The outcomes that limit or promote the development of the foster care process are presented as are the needs of social workers for good foster care experience (Chapter 7.2.4).

In the second phase of the research (Chapter 7.3), in which answers to the three research questions of the second thesis were generated, the focus was on the family group conference and its characteristics in order to establish and link the method in social work at the theoretical level. Once the elements of the family group conference are identified, they are relevantly linked to the current practice of foster care in Croatia (Chapter 7.3.1). Further analyses and discussions deepened the findings about the child's participation throughout the foster care process and the role of the child's say in current foster care practices (Chapter 7.3.2). The findings highlight the involvement of the social network and community support in the foster care process as indispensable support is described in detail as important in working with families and affect the outcomes of the foster care process (Chapter 7.3.3). The third phase of the research (Chapter 7.4.), linked to the four research questions of the third thesis, consists mainly of fieldwork and delivering training regarding the family group conference method to foster families, primary families, and children. The direction of the planned research changed at this stage of the research, given that the action group concluded it was necessary to approach families and provide them with information about the research topic so that they could decide whether or not they wanted to participate in a family group conference. Given that the family group conference was not conducted as a pilot study at this stage of the research, the possible contribution of the family group conference and non-institutional placement of children was discussed based on theory and previous research data (Chapter 7.4.1). The attitudes of primary families, foster carers and children towards the family group conference generated additional social work information about and knowledge of foster care practices from the perspective of the participants for whom the method is intended. After the training, the participants were asked about their needs, opportunities and further interest in organising a family group conference (Chapter 7.4.2). The results of the first and second research theses and the views of the foster care participants were summarised by linking the family group conference method with the possibilities of applying emancipatory and participatory social work in foster care practice. Stages of the foster care relationship where the method is applicable were identified and where it would make a difference in current foster care practices in a way that would facilitate participation by understanding the need for the emancipation of all involved (Chapter 7.4.3). The implementation of a family group conference in foster care practice requires a wider range of involved actors and also identifies the needs at institutional, political, and community levels. The key elements necessary for implementing the method

and changing the foster care practices were identified, as well as the elements that need to be taken into account in future undertakings (7.4.4).

7.1. PRE-RESEARCH PHASE

Before embarking on the research, it was important to gain a deeper knowledge of foster care practices and issues surrounding social work, particularly the views of social workers regarding this area. Previous experience of working on the "Home Together" project (World Youth Alliance, 2021), where I was involved in project activities and supported foster families from August to October 2021, enabled me to network with colleagues from regional offices as well as foster carers with whom I was in contact (Appendix 6). During the project activities, I attended training sessions for foster carers and got to know social workers who had been working in the field for a long time and continue to be actively involved in these issues. The experience I had in foster care was insufficient to understand better the area I wanted to research. I wanted to deepen my knowledge and be a well-informed researcher so that I could approach the research design. One of the reasons for this approach is that relying on your own assumptions or reflecting on your own beliefs is not enough; instead, relying on actual user needs, which is the focus of the research, is necessary. Four social workers from different regional services in different counties were contacted and asked to talk about the foster care process, advantages and disadvantages, as well as possible changes they think are necessary. A group formed is seen as an advisory group, leading to better-defined research and fewer ethical dilemmas (Alston and Bowles, 2003). Although the interviews with the social workers were not conducted as a group work or a focus group, they were used as an advisory group based on their function. The collected interview notes were collated, and a SWOT analysis of the data was conducted (Table 8).

Table 8: SWOT analysis of the results of key topics in foster care of the advisory group

STRENGTHS - The most appropriate form of non-institutional childcare - The child's right to live in a family environment - Time for the primary family to create favourable conditions to care for the child - Laws and acts that support deinstitutionalization and alternative forms of placement of children - The possibility of involving civil society - Foster care teams	WEAKNESSES - Lack of foster families - Weak education of foster parents - Lack of support for foster parents, the child and the primary family - Bureaucratization - Not involving all actors in working with the child - Conflicting relationship between primary and foster family - Material resources - Individual assistance plan – usually only formal, not everyone gets involved, it is considered part of the bureaucracy - There is no support for the primary family, a change is expected in the primary family without support
OPPORTUNITIES - Joint collaborative work with all involved actors - Better connection between primary and foster families - Greater focus on the child and the child's real needs - Creation of a joint plan with all voices that need to be heard - A model for social workers to connect all stakeholders in the process - Involvement of the community in the process	THREATS - Refusing the participation of the primary family, child or foster parent - Additional education of social workers is required - Bureaucratization - Weakly developed foster care in certain regions - Foster parents do not want support - Exclusion of the primary family causes a decrease in motivation; they make less effort and become accustomed to the situation

Social workers point to several key concepts (e.g., poor communication) as barriers to collaboration between the primary family and the foster family. Maintaining the child's relationship with the primary family is cited by social work professionals as a challenge, seeing their role as a mediator between the two families. They testify to seeing much intolerance between the primary family and the foster parents, at which point communication takes place without proper intervention. The child is not adequately represented in the process and has difficulty understanding who is responsible when it comes to the consents the child needs. Social workers point out the overloaded bureaucracy and lack of time due to the number of families, which often exceeds 150 families for each single social worker. They see foster care as a complex process with numerous stakeholders, which demands additional knowledge and bureaucracy, hence their reluctance to work on such tasks. The primary family is rarely involved in foster care processes. No one works with them or supports them while the child is separated from the

family, and they are mostly contacted about maintaining personal relationships with the child.

The conversations with the social workers in the advisory group took place in a relaxed atmosphere that gave them a lot of freedom to speak. My role focused more on active listening and note-taking while letting them choose the topics they wanted to address. Given that the conversations were mainly informative in nature, the participants were quite open and honest, and not afraid to express their opinions. Alston and Bowles (2003, p. 30) emphasise that in this approach, attention should be paid to key people who can provide different views on the problem when endeavouring to identify it. The interviewed social workers had different experiences of the foster care system. Therefore, including social workers who had experience in working more intensively with primary and foster families or were members of foster care teams was important in order to gather as much data on diverse experiences as possible. The advisory group of social workers broadened my knowledge of foster care from an expert's perspective, as my previous knowledge had only come from working with foster carers. It was important to get a new and different perspective on the foster care process and get a more comprehensive picture of the subject matter. However, the foster care process itself and its structure were not completely clear, hence the need to deepen knowledge on this topic further. The knowledge gained helped to formulate a thesis and research questions aimed at exploring this area and its complexity in depth, as well as the possibility of changes in practices that seem necessary for social workers dealing with foster care.

7.2. BUREAUCRATISATION OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM AND APPLYING THE GROUP WORK METHOD IN FOSTER CARE

The first phase of the research investigated the first thesis of the dissertation and collected data to answer four research questions on the bureaucratisation of working with service users and the lack of knowledge, experience and resources experienced by social workers preventing them from practising the rarely used group work method that incorporates the principles of emancipation and participation in working with foster families. Moreover, the research plan for collecting answers to the first thesis of the dissertation consisted of conducting training for all interested social workers in the foster care system in Croatia who had applied through the invitation questionnaire, forming an action group and conducting semi-structured interviews with action group members.

The research began with organising a training course for licenced organisers, initiators and coordinators of family group conferences. It was based on the assumption that talking about something with insufficient knowledge is difficult, and forming an action group and further research work to help participants acquire knowledge about the area under investigation is important. Although all potential participants who had completed the Google form and applied to take part, they were given the opportunity in the questionnaire to indicate whether or not they wanted to take part in the research, where the invitation to attend training was sent to all who had expressed some level of interest.

During the training, I conducted the observation in discussions about the topic with the help of two students. The observation had two aspects. Firstly, the motivation of the participants, the interest in family group conferences as a method and the participants' desire to learn and explore more about the topic were observed. The reason for this observation is to assess the motivation of the participants as to who could become part of the action group. The second aspect of the observation refers to questions raised and possible discussions about the possibility of using the method with families. The results of this observation revealed the obstacles and opportunities of using the method and provided a better understanding of the process of foster care practices.

An analysis of observation notes revealed five key areas:

- a) The use of the method at the beginning of the foster care process or in other parts of the foster care process,

- b) The use of group work or possibly family group conference when creating an individual change plan for a child in foster care,
 - c) Advantages and disadvantages of the family group conference method and the knowledge required for its application
 - d) The relationship between the method and the protection of personal data as a legal obligation of social workers,
 - e) The motivation of participants for further participation in the action research.
- a) During the training, a discussion was initiated among participants as to the possibility of using the family group conference method in practice, i.e., at what point in the foster care process do social workers see the possibility of using the method? Some participants thought the method was not applicable once the child entered foster care, i.e., as a meeting between the primary family and the foster family along with the child. They describe the situation of the family and the child during the separation as very stressful, considering that the application of the conference would further unsettle the family, especially the child, for example:

“It's a big loss for the child, the family is scared, how will someone react to the situation, too risky.” (ST1_02).

The statement shows the social workers' fear of change describing the risks to the family as justification, but the part referring to the family's reaction shows the social workers' resistance due to their own uncertainty and the conferencing process requiring more involvement. The participants saw the separation of the child from the family as a traumatic event for the child and saw an increased risk for the child when exposed to a simultaneous meeting of two families, but they did not explain the underlying reasoning.

Some participants disagreed with the statement that organising a family group conference at the beginning of foster care is bad for the child. These participants believe that it is exactly this time when the separation of the child from its parents can be eased, especially if a court judgment orders the measure. They stated:

“After the decision, when we know where the child is going and with whom, when the decision is final, we have 15-20 days to prepare while we wait for it to become final” (ST1_03).

It is significant in the statement that there is a period of 15-20 days in the foster care process which can be used to prepare and conduct the conference, with the aim of connecting all participants, getting to know the two families and the child.

The participants described a time when a family group conference could be held, especially in the case of a court decision. There is ample time before the court ruling to organise a joint meeting between the two families to help the child adjust to the new situation as well as possible. They also referred to a risk assessment of the situation in that not preparing the child on what to expect poses a greater risk than talking together and helping the child feel safe. Based on the research conducted on the use of family group conferences in foster care, Berzin, Cohen, Thomas and Dawson (2008, p. 51) emphasise in their recommendations using the method at the beginning of the foster care process to get all participants involved in the decision-making, but also to connect families at two levels – with each other and with the community.

Good examples of the practical use of family group conferences in Serbia were presented by educators who have conducted over a hundred conferences on working with children. They stated that the method has shown excellent results in kinship care, in regulating contacts and establishing a link between the primary and foster family, as well as when child leaves foster care, requiring the mobilisation of community resources to support the young person. Similar research findings are reported by Wang et al. (2012), describing the significant impact of the method on increasing the number of children placed in kinship foster care.

b) Preparing a individual change plan for a child placed in foster care is a legal obligation of social workers (Social Welfare Act, Official Gazette nos. 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23). When conducting a family group conference, an important factor is the family's private time, for which the family draws up a plan, which the social worker reviews at the end of the conference (Božić, 2017). During the training, there was a discussion on how, in practice, social workers create individual change plans for children in care. Some of the participants stated that all people involved in the foster care system participate in the planning process, while others stated that planning in social work has become a bureaucratic formality without the active involvement of all those affected by the plan.

Although some participants state that everyone is involved in creating an individual change plan for the child, they explain that not all participants ever come together and discuss decisions but that a part of the plan concerning them is agreed upon with each participant individually. They explain that users often do not want to be actively involved in the planning or do not want to sit together because they are too proud. Group work is not a method of planning in Croatian social work practice. It is important to point this out, and participants explained that social workers often utilize some form of manipulation in

practice. For example, if the parents are not cooperative, they are told that the children are at risk and that the parents should agree to the experts' proposals, as shown by an example of a participant's statement:

"...the expert sees what is needed, they reject it, and then the expert says that the children are at risk." (ST3_01).

Two important things can be observed in this statement: the expert who knows what is needed and makes the decision instead of the family, and another important point are the mechanisms by which the family is persuaded to agree with the expert's decisions.

Risk assessment of the child is done in accordance with the Regulation on Measures for the Protection of the Personal Rights and Welfare of the Child (Official Gazette, 106/14, 87/22). Tools and lists are used to assess the risk to the child or its safety, on the basis of which the degree of vulnerability is calculated, which can be no risk or low, medium and high risk. In line with the risk assessment, the regional office team of experts determines what needs to be done to protect the child. The assessment lists are not only used as a tool for determining risk, but according to the discussion outcome, they also serve to achieve user cooperation when working with the family. According to Prpić (1987, p. 14), social control and guardianship are an obstacle to achieving the emancipation of people. The discussion outcome shows that although users are aware of this, they lack the strength to face oppression and systems acting as the source of oppression, as described by Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela (2015), especially when referring to a system that is expected to understand emancipation and be a source of exactly the necessary support for users to overcome oppression.

Despite lacking an understanding of emancipation as a core social work value, a majority of participants agreed that an individual change plan for a child drawn up by the family in a family group conference could be accepted as a formal plan.

c) During the training, video material was used to illustrate to participants the process of conducting a family group conference. The participants had the opportunity to see practical examples of working with Roma families in Serbia, which was helpful in connecting the theoretical and practical parts of the method. A discussion ensued about the usefulness of the method, its advantages and disadvantages. Key messages were noted to help understand what is required in social work to apply the method successfully. All participants described the method as idyllic or that families lack the support they need in the setting, comparing it to what they experience in practice.

“Often families do not have that kind of strength or support from the extended family.” (ST2_01).

The statement identifies one of the main problems of social workers, namely the lack of faith in the family's abilities and possibilities, while the support network is considered insufficiently large, which serves more to justify the inactivity of social workers than is actually the case in practise.

The majority of participants expressed distrust in the family's potential to resolve issues and lack of a wider support network. The results indicate a lack of trust in users, which also indicates there is no collaboration between social workers and users. To successfully solve this problem, professionals have to believe in the users' abilities, as this is the only way to achieve equal cooperation with users in social work (Mali, 2009). Perlman (1970) believes that everyone has this ability and can be motivated to solve problems, while Borić and Mataga Tintor (2022, p. 77) emphasise that having trust in children is equally important but often lacking, and children do not participate in decisions that affect them.

Participants in the educational process see the advantage of the family group conference method in preventing the separation of the child from the family, as it supports the primary parent and the child in remaining together. The experts recognise a different approach in terms of child involvement, the psychological well-being of the children and the importance of a trusted person for the child to speak on their behalf. Frost, Abram and Burgess (2014, p. 487) point out that the presence of a trusted person, chosen by the child, is important for two reasons: the child is fully protected and safe, and the child's voice is guaranteed to be heard when implementing the method. The participants also concluded that the method is beneficial for the family in the long term, for example:

“If done correctly, it gives them the opportunity to organise themselves in the future. Next time, they will do it their way and succeed. We have made them strong.” (ST3_03).

The statement shows that the social workers understand that the family's ability to cope with difficulties needs to be strengthened. Despite the social workers' lack of belief in the family's ability, the statement shows that they see the new knowledge for the family as useful for future interventions in the family.

In addition to the importance of the child's participation, the participants also recognised the role of other experts such as teachers, doctors, and people who are important in the family's life. They also discussed how to motivate experts to participate. The participants talked about their practical experiences, where working with different experts is the norm for working with every family, but it is not always successful. Often, social workers have

to contact schools, doctors and other professionals, which is time-consuming in their opinion. Interdisciplinarity is a feature of the social work profession, as is working at multiple levels, i.e., the micro, meso and macro levels (Mali, 2014), with which Payne (2014, p.195) also agrees, explaining from an ecological perspective the need for a multidisciplinary approach in resolving difficulties in the person's natural environment, the setting in which the person lives. An important finding was that all participants stated that they lacked the knowledge to work with families, for example:

"... there is a lack of connection, I have worked with children and families, and there is a lack of experts connecting the whole family; sometimes it just takes a little bit for something to change in the family." (ST3_05).

The statement indicates two important facts: the need for a multidisciplinary approach when working with families, for which social workers do not have sufficient knowledge, and another fact, namely that sometimes little is needed for change. This is important information for social workers, firstly about the need for change in the way they work and secondly about the fact that they themselves see that perhaps no major interventions are needed to change things.

The results of the discussion show that social workers lack knowledge about group work and working with the whole family, but also an interdisciplinary approach to make the process of helping and supporting users more efficient. The group work method is used less and less in social work practice (Drumm, 2006), while Shakil (2015) talks about the significant development of group work in other professions, such as psychology, psychiatry or part of psychotherapeutic work with users. The educational system for social workers in group work does not provide sufficient knowledge and is heavily influenced by psychology as a profession (Knight, 2017). Participants described the family group conference as new knowledge that helps them see working with families differently through a multidisciplinary approach that leads to a faster and more transparent flow of information.

d) All participants considered the legal part as one of the most important topics and questions and how to behave in line with personal data protection, i.e., how to involve the family network in the organisation's work when social workers are obliged to store all family data. The protection of personal data in Croatia is regulated by the Act of general data protection regulation (GDPR) (Official Gazette, NN 42/18). Experts discussed how to regulate the presence of those involved bureaucratically and, at the same time, protect data or obtain the family's consent. One suggestion was to change the form currently used by the family to give consent for their data to be shared with certain people. This theme

encouraged participants to say more about the bureaucratic nature of social work in regional offices, which takes away their time to work with families, so one participant stated:

“I have 20 minutes to assess and decide where and with whom the child will live.” (ST2_02).

The statement gives a worrying indication of the time available for social workers to work directly with families. It is estimated at 20 minutes, which is not enough for a conversation and, above all, for a joint decision on further steps in the work with the family.

The observation results show that social workers lack time to work with the users, which is also reflected in the number of families assigned to each social worker in the regional offices, i.e., over one hundred families per social worker (Sladović Franz, 2004). Research by Družić Ljubotina and Friščić (2014) shows that the social workers in regional offices are overloaded and that an underdeveloped support system within the community makes work even more challenging. The time for working with users is limited. Added to this is the bureaucracy that burdens the social system and social workers; hence, expecting social workers to have an effective work approach with users and a personal commitment is difficult.

f) Towards the end of the training, the participants asked questions about the ongoing research plan and the possibility of putting a family group conference into practice. As the training progressed, the participants were increasingly motivated to continue, but noticeable was the fact that the participants were unclear about what was expected of them in the action research. They were presented with an ongoing research plan, the aim and purpose and an action research approach as a joint group work of researchers. None of the participants had had the opportunity to participate in this type of research, but they did not describe their previous experiences of participating in various working or advisory groups as positive, for example:

“What’s the point of taking part when we always say how it is in practice, but nothing has changed? I don’t know why they ask us.” (ST2_03).

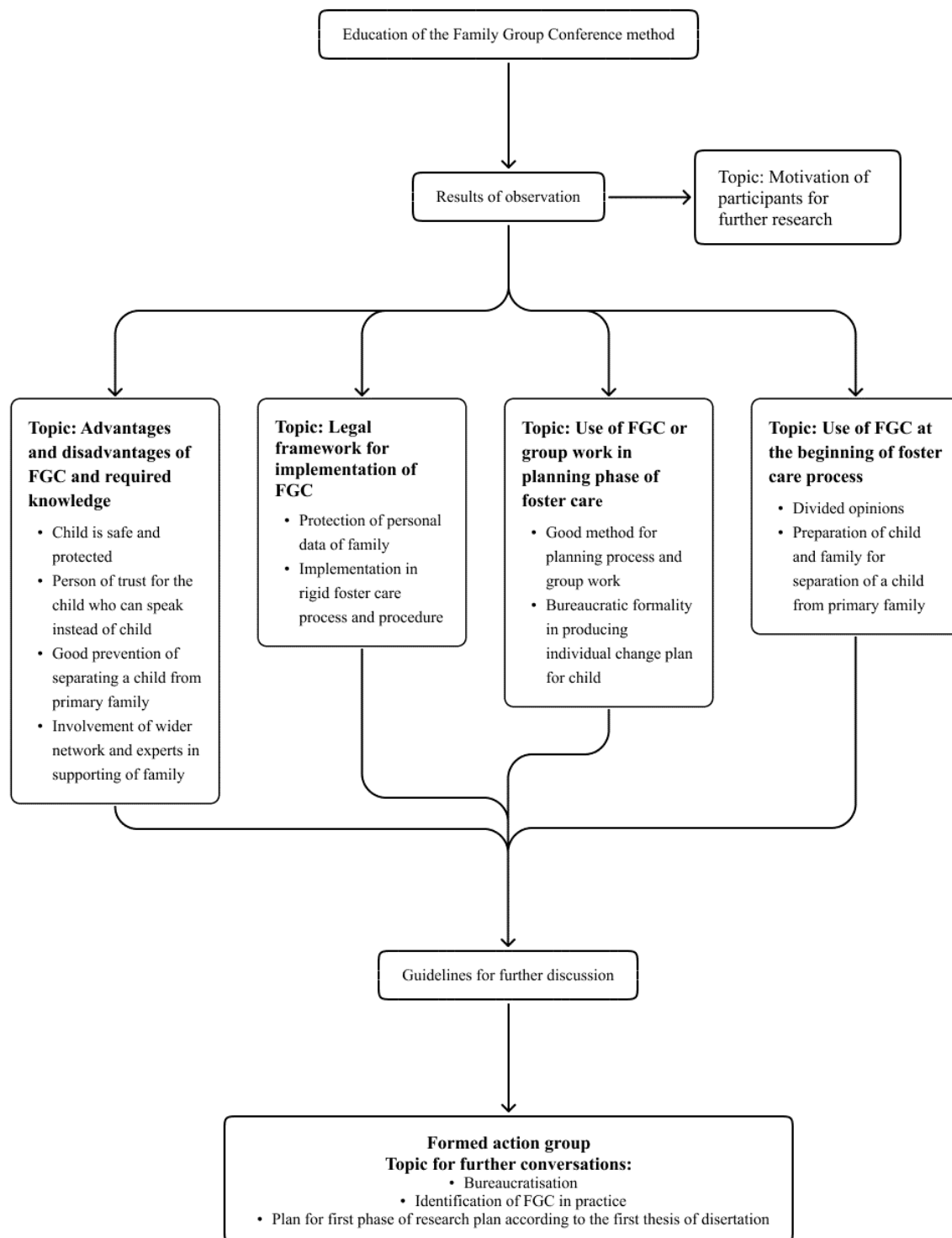
The statement points to the social workers' lack of trust in participation and the possibility of achieving change, but also to the lack of understanding that change starts with themselves.

The results of the observation show that the participants are suspicious of any joint collaboration where their practical expertise is required. Despite the effort and time they invest in participating in working groups or advisory bodies, and most of them have this experience, all arguments are regularly heard but do not influence the final decision. A form

of participation where opinions are respected and heard without influencing decisions is called tokenism or apparent participation (Arnstein, 1969).

At the end of the training, six social workers from different districts and regional offices decided to participate further in the research. All members of the action group were highly motivated to partake in the research and interested in the changes needed in the foster care system. The result was the formation of an action group of researchers who met for the first time immediately after the training.

Figure 8: Results of observations and discussions collected during the educational course



Source: Author's work

The observation results from the training are shown in Figure 8, as well as the results of the topics that emerged as important in discussions among the participants. The four themes most frequently observed in the discussions covered unrelated areas. As to the question of

whether the family group conference should be used upon commencing foster care when the child is separated from the family, participants were most divided on whether or not the conference should be used at this stage of foster care. Some of the participants concluded that it is a good opportunity to prepare all participants of the foster care system, given that preparation is often poorly implemented in practice. They also see it as an opportunity to connect and get to know all the participants. In another part of the training, participants concluded that applying the method in this stage of foster care causes additional stress and poses a risk for the child. In addition, the issue of preparing the child and primary family for separation is a topic not included in the dissertation research plan but was noted by the participants and included in further discussions in the action group.

The advantages and disadvantages of the family group conference in the observation results show that the participants perceived the most important aspects of the child as the child's protection and safety, as well as hearing the child's voice, which was ensured in the implementation of the method. It was observed that participants focused on prevention and saw the benefit of applying the method before the child's separation from the family. In further research in the dissertation, based on the observation results, work undertaken with the family before a child is separated from it is shown in the regular separation process in order to obtain a clearer picture of the various possibilities of the method and its usefulness at certain stages.

The legal process and the ability to harmonise the method with the legal framework are found in the observation results but not included in the dissertation research plan. The collected information serves as a guide for further exploration of the topic and ongoing research requirements. The discussion on this topic provided insights highlighting another important issue in the area under study, i.e., the bureaucratisation of the system, which was included in the dissertation research plan and forms part of the first thesis.

According to the observation results, applying the family group conference and its connection with the planning phase in the foster care system provided clear guidelines for further research into the possibilities of applying the method in practice, but also the participation and emancipation of all participants in the foster care system, whose active role is also planning. Further research, as part of the dissertation, was directed to collecting more detailed data on the planning process, the possibilities for joint group work, and also planning to use the family group conference method.

According to the findings, the motivation of the participants observed during the training indicated several factors that are necessary for forming an action group. The motivation

was apparent in the desire to put a family group conference into practice, the interest shown in gaining more knowledge about the method and its application, and the interest in participating in a group of researchers who want to change current practices. The observation results helped in selecting participants, who were further interviewed about their desire and ability to participate in the research, leading to the formation of an action group of six social workers and myself.

7.2.1. The foster care process – from the separation of the child from the primary family to placement in foster care

The first research question of the first thesis refers to the current practice of social work in foster care, which needs to be defined. The results of our research⁴ show that the majority described the beginning of foster care relationships in the same way. Two types differ according to the method of separating the child from the family (Figure 9): expected situations and unexpected situations in relation to the primary family. The first situation is the expected way, where the social workers inform the family that the child will be separated from the family. Another unexpected way is the urgent or hasty separation of the child from the family in crisis situations when the child's life and health are in danger. For example, the majority of respondents describe the process:

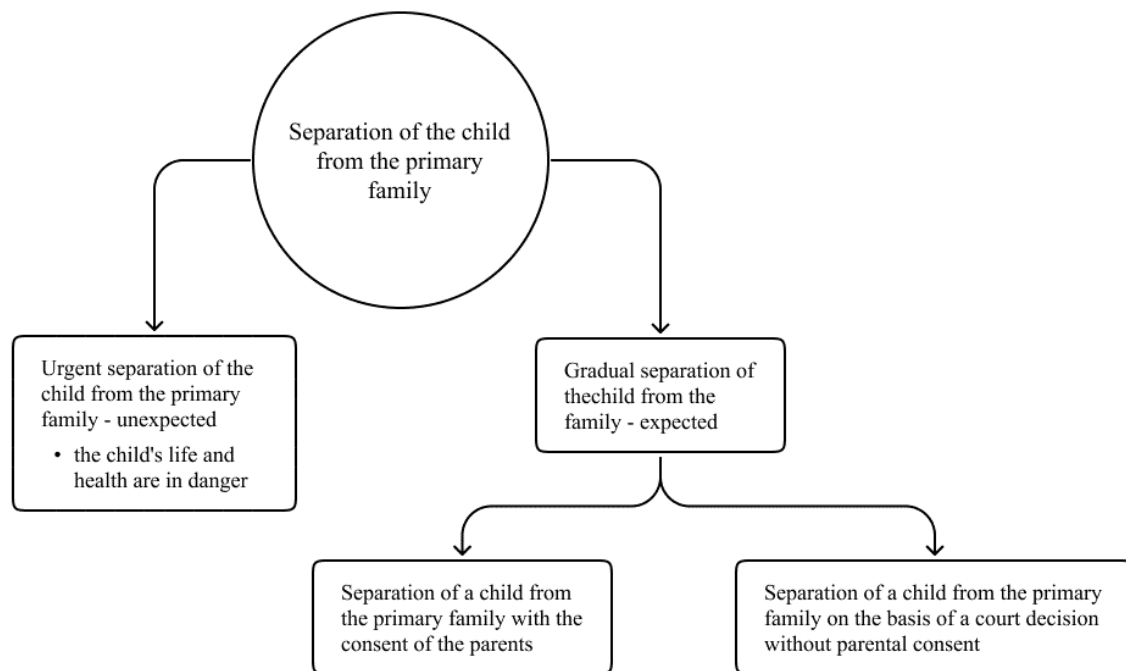
“In the event that family law protection measures have previously been imposed on the parents, we inform the parents that if sufficient progress is not made, a proposal to tighten the measures must be made. In this way, children and parents are familiar with the current state of the family and know that they are under intensive supervision.” (SR4_01).

The respondent's statement suggests that social workers incorporate family law protection measures that relate to helping and supporting the family little by little, but also to warning the family that stricter monitoring measures will be taken against the family if the family does not improve, up to and including separating the child from the family. Compliance with the procedure and bureaucratisation are evident from the statement, but not the way in which the families are worked with and offered help and support, which is the most important aspect for social workers when working with families.

⁴ In interpreting the results in this doctoral dissertation, the term “our research”, “our findings” or “our results” stem from the research group that formed the action group and whose results are presented as a joint research. The terms refer to the results of the research conducted for this doctoral dissertation.

The cooperation between the social workers and the family usually continues for some time before the child is separated from the family. If it is established that the family has failed to care for the child, one of the protective measures under family law is issued, the first of which is a warning for certain failures to care for the child (Family Act, Official Gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23). After the warning, if nothing changes in the family, a measure of professional assistance and support in the care of the child is imposed, and then a measure of intensive professional assistance and support in the exercise of parental care if there is still no change. The separation of the child from the family is the last measure when working with families.

Figure 9: Ways of separating a child from the primary family



Source: Author's work based on Family Act (Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) and Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

Child protection measures are legally defined as interventions that are implemented gradually towards the family, from milder measures to the ultimate measure of separating the child from the family (Sladović Franz and Mujkanović, 2003).

Separation of the child from the primary family with the consent of the parents

The first way of separation of a child from the family refers to cases in which a measure from the area of family law protection is imposed on the primary family. The results of our research show that social workers characterise these families as high-risk families, where social workers must pay particular attention to the child's needs, monitor the child's progress, and, if necessary, be prepared to decide on removing the child from the family. When working with the primary family, all participants point out that they warn the primary family about the possibility of separating the child if the situation does not change, for example:

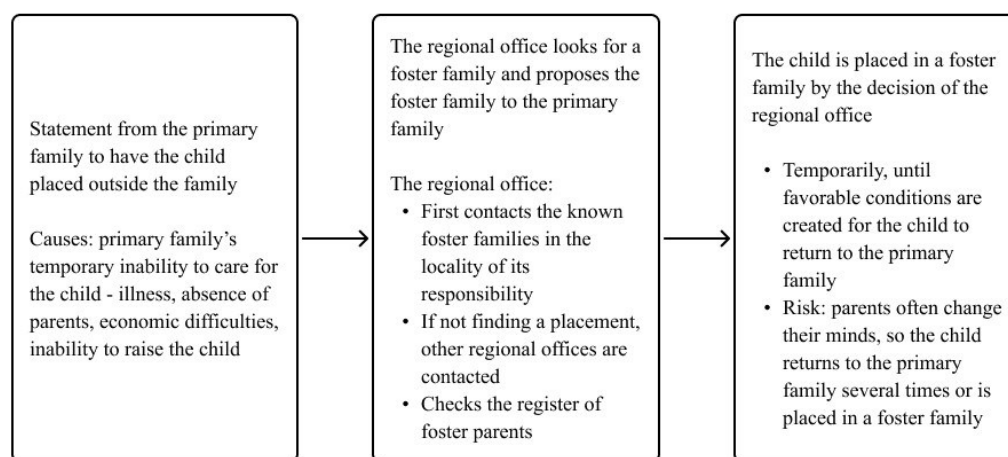
"During the work, you warn the parents that if they do not change their behaviour, it can lead to the children being taken away from them and placed outside the family, and if they do not cooperate with the centre, the law stipulates even criminal responsibility, so that they will be prosecuted." (SR1_01).

The statement shows strong support for the protocol and the bureaucratised procedure, as the respondents mostly only talk about it without describing how they work with the family. Furthermore, the statement refers to the mechanisms of the system to bring families under control and force them to co-operate, and this is the legal basis that allows criminal sanctions for parents who do not co-operate.

The results of our research show that the difficulties in the family and the reasons for the separation of the child are most often the neglect of the child's upbringing, the personal aspects and abilities of the parents who are unable to fulfil the child's needs, such as education, or when the child has a specific need, such as developmental difficulties, which the parents are unable to fulfil. According to the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23), there are two options for the gradual separation of a child from the family if such a move is expected. The first case of separation takes place with the consent and agreement of the primary family. The majority stated that this is a rare case in social work practice, but it does occur if the parents are unable to care for the child due to illness, for example, if they are seeking the child's separation or are unable to fulfil the child's needs and provide the necessary care. In such situations, foster care is a short-term placement until the problem in the family is resolved and the conditions for the child to return to the primary family are created.

A study by Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003, p. 216) over a period of three years, in which children in two Croatian cities were separated from their families, shows similar results to ours. It shows that out of a total of nineteen families in which a child was separated, only three families directly applied for separation and placement of the child outside the family.

Figure 10: The procedure of gradually separating a child from the primary family with the consent of the primary family



Source: Author's work work based on Family Act (Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) and Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

The majority indicated that in cases where the primary family signs a statement entrusting the child to another person because they are temporarily unable to care for the child, the procedure requires cooperation between the primary family and the social worker or the family work team (Figure 10). The court, police, and other agencies of the system are not involved when placing a child in foster care and when it is based on the decision of the regional office. Such situations are rare, and usually, the primary family has someone in their extended family network who can temporarily take care of the child, but in practice, it can happen when the family has no other support. In such cases, the majority recognised the difficult situation in that the primary family often changes its mind and wants the child returned to it, for example majority stated:

“...the parents have given their consent, and the placement is in line with the Social Welfare Act; however, in the meantime, they want to take the child back home, but we just want to ensure continuity in the child’s upbringing until the needs are met, so we will go ahead with the decision to separate.” (SR2_01).

The statement, which the majority of respondents agree with, indicates that the process of placing a child outside the family with the consent of the primary family can become a removal of the child without the consent of the family. The statement suggests that the decision is made by social workers who state that this is in the best interest of the child, while an agreement or co-operation with the family is not mentioned as a possible option, indicating the lack of the participation of the primary family that existed at the beginning.

Separation of the child from the primary family by court decision

Another option for separating a child is a court decision at the proposal of the regional office's team of experts if the primary parents have not fully cooperated or one parent does not agree with the decision to separate (Figure 11). The separation of a child from a family by a court decision can have two consequences: (1) deprivation of the parents’ right to live with the child or (2) deprivation of the right to parental care. According to our findings, a primary parent is most frequently deprived of the right to live with the child. However, in cases of severe forms of child neglect or abuse, there is a possibility that their parental rights will be withdrawn. In its decision, the court also regulates personal relationships, i.e., the child’s interaction with the primary family, which depends on the reasons for the separation, the age of the child and the child’s needs. For the social workers to make a proposal to the court, they must have information about the foster family in which the child is to be placed. It means that before approaching the court, they must find suitable accommodation for the child with a suitable foster family that agrees to take the child.

The majority stated that the foster family must declare to the court whether they agree to the child being placed with them in order for the court to make a decision and for example they stated:

“When the court receives the proposal, they need to know that they will be invited to a hearing when the court decides on the right to placement. Our foster carers have to testify to the court about their consent to placement.” (SR5_01).

The statement points out two important facts: first, that the foster parents should testify in court to confirm their consent to the placement, which was already mentioned in the social workers' proposal to the court, while the second purpose of the testimony is not recognised,

and second, that it is more important to hear the primary family, which is not mentioned in the statement as an important participant in court.

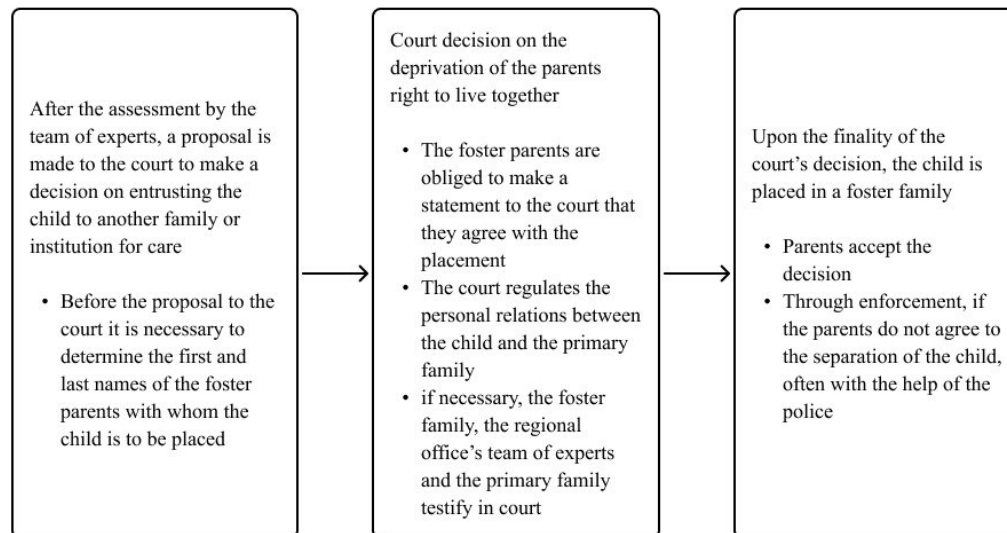
Our research shows that the experts or the primary family are often invited to the hearing, but it is at the discretion of the court, so the respondents state, for example:

“Generally, the court will hear the parents if it is necessary, and even more often, it will hear experts from the team to help the court make a decision.” (SR1_04).

It is clear from this statement that the court, as a body that makes decisions about the lives of the primary family and the child, does not involve the important participants in the process. The court shows more trust in the social workers, i.e. in the system, than in the person whose life is being discussed and decided upon.

According to our findings, it is important to note that the primary family is not always involved in the court’s decision. The court only hears the primary family if it is deemed necessary. Social workers are more frequently asked for their opinion about the primary family.

Figure 11: The procedure of gradual separation of the child from the primary family by court order



Source: Author's work based on Family Act (Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) and Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

Urgent separation of the child from the primary family

The separation of the child from the primary family can be unexpected and urgent (Figure 11). The majority mentioned this type of separation. Urgent separation of a child from the family means that the social workers believe the child's life and health are in danger and the child, as the majority have said, needs to be "rescued". Our results show that this process is the most difficult, emotionally and physically exhausting for social workers and that they experience significant frustration and stress. Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003) make the same claim when talking about the emergency separation of a child from the family while emphasising the problematic conditions under which emergency measures are carried out after the social workers' working hours or on weekends. The biggest problem for the social workers is then the placement of the child. The emergency separation of a child takes place after the social worker has been notified by the police, a family member or a third person when the social worker is on-site and visits the family home. The social worker

assesses the possible threat to the child's life and health on the spot and then makes an immediate decision about the urgent separation of the child.

The majority described the on-site procedure and stated that the decision is made verbally by pronouncing the emergency measure of separating the child from the family in the actual home and that a note of the investigation and a written report are then drawn up. If the parents are not present, the child is collected, and an attempt is made to contact the parents. If this is not possible, a notice will be issued to the parents and sent to their address. The child should be collected and placed immediately, after which the social workers call the foster carers in the area of responsibility of their regional office, although some of the participants stated that they already know approximately whether or not there is space in foster homes. Majority respondents describe the process in a similar way, for example:

“...if you go on-site and see that the child is at such risk, you place them immediately...the social worker in charge will call other centres urgently and try to place the child either in foster care or in a home for neglected children. With the caveat that if parting with the child in a hurry, you must send a full written statement to the court within 72 hours requesting that the child be entrusted to a specific person.” (SR1_05).

It is clear from the statement that the system does not provide for a solution for the placement of the child in the case of an emergency separation, but leaves it to the social worker to seek and find a solution limited to 72 hours. This is a burden for social workers, especially if no accommodation is available. However, the stress of an emergency separation of a child from a difficult family situation is not easy for either the child or the social worker.

Often, social workers decide on temporary placement in an institution for neglected children until a foster family is found, but some respondents stated that it is very difficult to get a place in an institution for neglected children, and most refuse on the grounds of overcrowding. In addition, if there is no available accommodation in the above cases, the social worker calls nearby regional offices based on existing contacts with social workers to check if there is any available accommodation in foster homes in their localities. One of the options available to social workers is the Register of Foster Parents, which contains a list of all foster families and available accommodation in the Republic of Croatia and is managed by the Ministry. Participants pointed out an important fact, which is that available places, although listed in the Register of Foster Parents, are often not available because they are kept for court proceedings, for example:

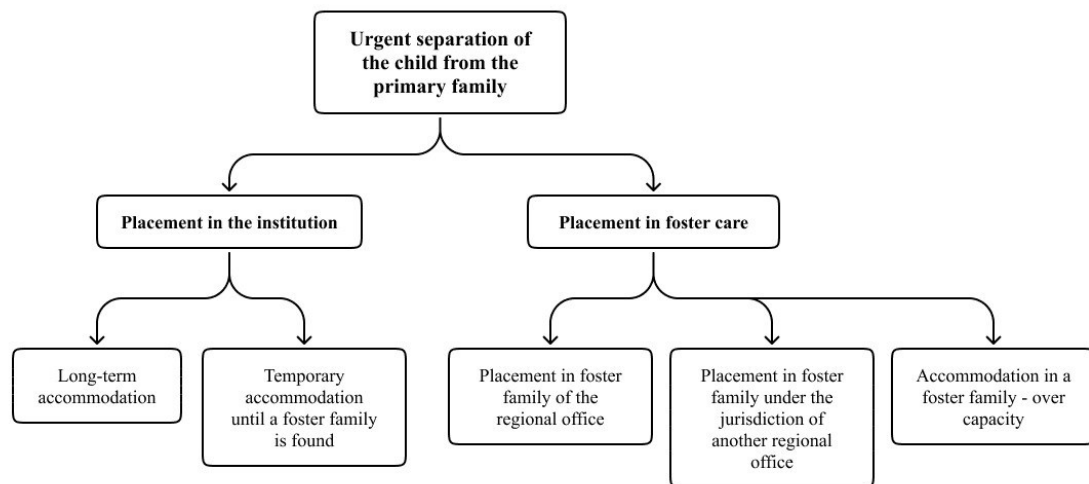
“The register is fine; we have it great. Where it says there are places, there are not, these are the places that are kept for those court cases, other things... you have to know that the court process takes two years, the circumstances of the foster parents change, and the place is kept free; there can be all sorts of things happening.” (SR2_02).

The respondent's statement clearly shows that although the system provides social workers with a form of support in the form of the Register of Foster Parents, it does not provide the functionality of this support, which leads to additional frustration and helplessness for social workers in their search for accommodation. Furthermore, according to respondents, the Ministry is saving places for court cases, which penalises other children, especially children whose lives are at risk and who urgently need to be separated from their families. For example, one of the options for foster care placements goes beyond the permitted number of users:

“Some centres, especially in our area, place more than the permitted number, four children or adults at a time, so it happens that you have seven adults placed if the accommodation capacity of foster families allows it.” (SR1_06).

The statement shows the possibility to deviate from the legal provisions when it suits the state, for example when authorising overload placements in foster care. However, this is a clear indication that the state is not striving for a planned solution in its policy and foster care system, but is reacting inappropriately to challenges in practice.

Figure 12: The procedure of separating a child from the primary family as an urgent measure



Source: Author's work based on Family Act (Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) and Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

Placement of a child in a foster family

All participants agree that finding accommodation is one of the most challenging tasks in social work practice because they know that there are no available foster parents and that institutions deny them accommodation due to being overcrowded. The last measure they resort to is contacting the Ministry, which helps them find accommodation, so most respondents describe, for example:

"If we get negative replies... if there is no other way, then we write to the Ministry asking for help. We describe the situation and seek help, attach all the rejections and send them to the Ministry. In my experience, the ministry helps, but as far as I know, others do too, but it boils down to them ordering, literally ordering, that the child must be admitted with the first and last names." (SR1_07).

The statement that most respondents agree with refers to the power that the Ministry has as an authority that can order the placement of a child in a particular institution or organisation. The social workers do not have this power, which they justify in their statement by saying that they receive a refusal in place a child in an institution where a child can be placed by order of the Ministry. This means a lack of autonomy and emancipation for the social

workers in their work with the families and an additional position of powerlessness, but also an increase in unnecessary work for the social workers.

Our results show that the placement of users is one of the most difficult tasks of social workers. In the case of foster care, the process often ends with social workers having to go directly to the Ministry, which has the authority to instruct the organisation to take the child in. The social workers are not satisfied with this solution for several reasons. The child is placed under the authority of the Ministry, which disrupts the previously good cooperation between social workers and organisations. In addition, the social workers have to invest a lot of time, labour and energy into searching for accommodation, searching for foster parents or institutions and finally corresponding with the Ministry. Until then, the child waits to be placed and is often temporarily inadequately accommodated, which Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003, p. 234) describe as a high risk for everyone involved in the process.

In our research, the majority pointed out another important fact that deviates from the law in practice, namely that according to the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 71/23, 156/23), children up to the age of seven must be placed in a foster family. Practice shows the opposite, and it often happens that children under the age of seven are placed in institutions due to overcrowding or lack of foster care availability, although this is not in accordance with the law. However, this is also a consequence of the slow development of deinstitutionalisation processes and weak involvement of other services or support providers in the community, which leads to younger children being placed in residential care but also to temporary placement becoming a long-term solution (World Bank, 2019, p. 6).

When separating a child from the family and placing the child in foster care, the majority stated that they are guided by the child's best interests, meaning they first try to place the child with relatives, then friends and the extended family. The child knows these people from their family network, and this is the least stressful option for the child in a difficult situation. The participants stated that they always try to place the child in a home environment first, as close as possible to the primary family, nursery or school the child attends, so as not to separate them from their familiar surroundings and social network, for example:

"We have to choose a placement that is as close as possible to the primary family and a foster parent who understands the child's needs and is prepared to deal with the baggage

that each child we take in brings, but who also works with the centre and the primary family.” (SR1_09).

The respondent's statement suggests that social workers know how best to accommodate a child by considering the child's needs in relation to their previous micro and meso level. However, this is more of a desirable description of what a foster care should look like than the actual situation in practise.

In addition to the distance between the child and the primary family, another important factor for the child is the choice of foster parents. Our research shows that the majority of respondents are familiar with the qualifications and options of foster carers in their regional office's area of responsibility. Having good information about foster carers helps the social worker place the child in a foster family that meets the child's needs and takes into account their particular characteristics, for example:

“...we know their preferences, specialities and perhaps amenities available for children. We take into account the age of the children as well as the chronological age of children already living in the foster family, which may influence carrying out the placement.” (SR5_02).

The statement points to an important aspect of the need for social workers to have knowledge about the community and the possibilities of foster families, which they usually have. However, the respondents do not explain to what extent this knowledge is actually applied in practise and what the challenges are to fulfil the conditions described in the statement.

Our results show that when choosing a foster parent, social workers take into account whether the foster child's brothers or sisters are already placed in one of the families, the chronological age of the children already placed with the foster parents, and special skills or affinities the foster family possesses. In comparison with our research, which shows the willingness and understanding of social workers that the child should be in a suitable foster family, the research by Sladović Franz (2004), conducted in Croatia, shows similar results in how social workers think in terms of selecting accommodation suitable for the child's characteristics. Despite this, the same research shows that, ultimately, the main criterion in foster care practice is the availability of a vacant place to accommodate a child. The same is evident in the research of Sabolić and Vejmelka (2015), indicating that the availability of a place is the dominant criterion when choosing accommodation for a child, but it is often not close to the child's previous place of residence.

The majority of respondents further highlighted the complexity of placing a child due to some foster carers picking and choosing children they will accept for placement, which is an additional problem with the already small number of foster families and for example, majority agree with the statement:

“And I am sorry to admit that foster carers sometimes have too many criteria. I mean, everyone wants ideal children, and we all know that our children are not ideal.” (SR2_03).

According to the statement, which the majority of respondents agreed with, social workers explain the possibility of a foster parent refusing to accept a child with difficulties. The statement suggests that social workers are concerned about this possibility, while on the other hand, an important fact is observed in relation to the training of foster parents who may not have sufficient knowledge to work with children with difficulties, as well as the lack of understanding of social workers about this aspect of necessary support for foster parents.

The majority pointed out that the bigger problem is no vacant accommodation in the foster families over which they have responsibility, regardless of whether the children are eligible or not. They explain this by the fact that the child is placed outside the home environment, in another city or a smaller town, often far away from the primary family, but also in foster families that are unknown to the social workers responsible for the child. At the same time, a new challenge arises, namely the responsibility of two regional offices – responsibility for the child and the foster family, for example:

“If there are no foster parents in our local area of responsibility, we look for them elsewhere. There may be two regional offices responsible for placement. For placement, we have to get approval from the foster carers and then give approval to our regional office so that our children can be placed with their foster family... Now, it's a bit difficult to work with a family that is under the responsibility of another centre. However, it's assumed that the social worker who does everything there, including the placement, senses that the child will be well placed.” (SR5_03).

The statement with which the majority respondents agrees describes two important facts: first, that the division of responsibilities for foster care additional work for social workers, and second, that placing the child in foster care under the responsibility of a social worker who does not know the child and does not continue to care for the child, because the social worker is only responsible for the foster parents. Furthermore, the link between the social worker and the child becomes weaker, as evidenced by the respondents' statements based

on the assumption that the other social worker continues to be committed to the child's welfare.

The attitude of foster parents towards cooperating with an unknown regional office responsible for the child is described in a study conducted in Croatia (Žižak, 2008). It shows that in 60% of cases, foster parents are satisfied with the cooperation between two regional offices, such as sharing information about the child, information, and helpfulness. In contrast, foster parents report dissatisfaction with the interest shown by social workers from another regional office for the child, reporting irregular contact and are less committed.

In the case of urgent separation, the procedure is different, and the majority agree that there is no possibility of taking all the necessary steps to place the child in appropriate accommodation. All steps are skipped, and the child is placed in the first available accommodation, regardless of whether it meets the child's needs or not.

Figure 13: Ways of finding accommodation for a child outside the primary family

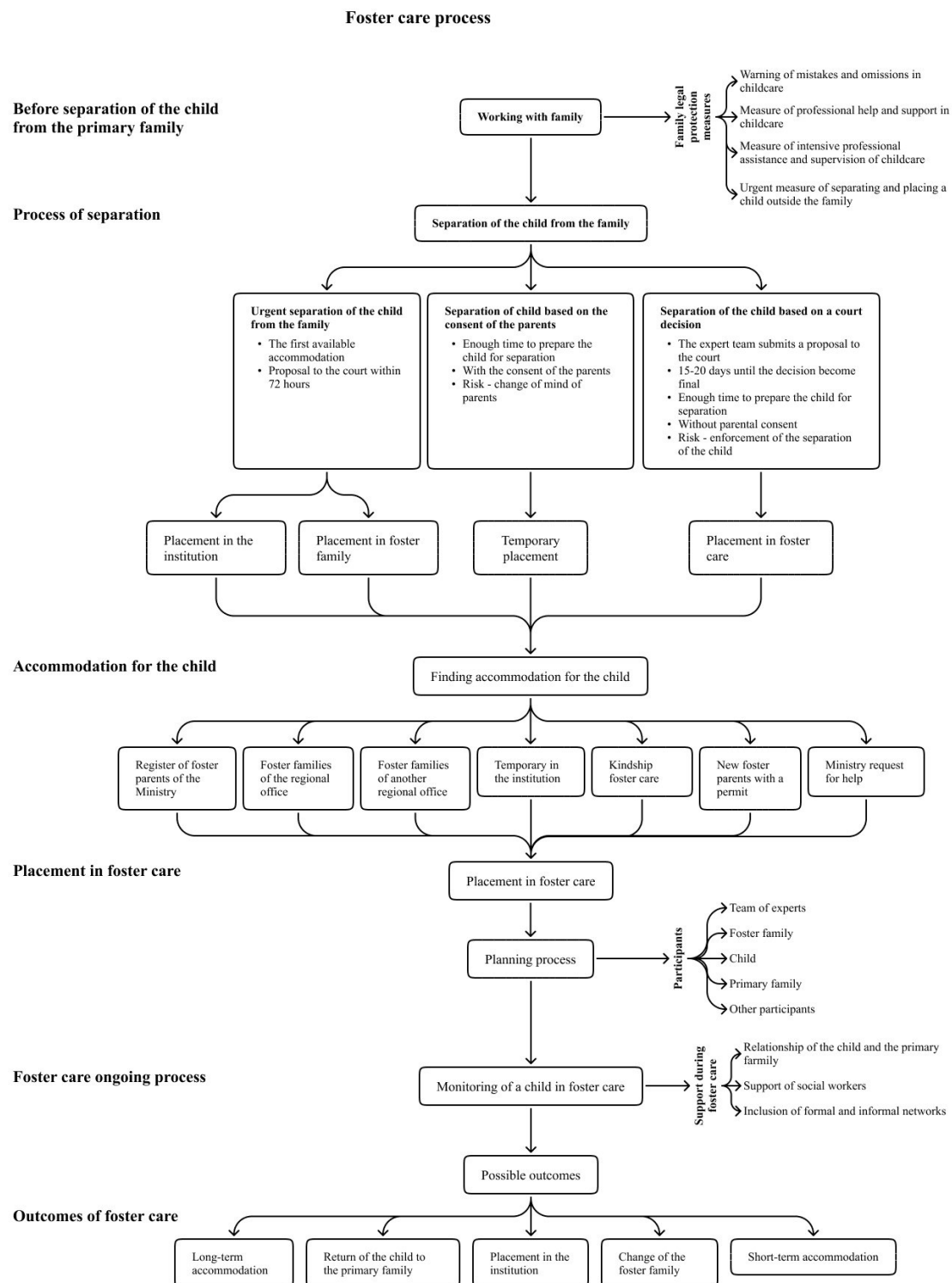
REGISTER OF FOSTER FAMILIES AT THE MINISTRY	FOSTER FAMILY UNDER OR NOT UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF THE REGIONAL OFFICE	INSTITUTIONAL PLACEMENT	ALTERNATIVES FORMS OF PLACEMENT	RELATIVE ACCOMMODAT ION
Through the register of foster parents	Available foster parents from the jurisdiction of the child's regional office	Placement in an institution until a suitable foster family is found	Accommodation in community service centers, alternative forms of accommodation - organized housing, private homes	Accommodation with relatives, friends, extended family
The register sometimes keeps places for court proceedings - not a reliable source	Available foster parents from the jurisdiction of the foster family's regional office - other regional offices			

Source: Author's work based on Family Act (Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) and Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

The results of our research show that there are several resources available to social workers when seeking placement for a child (Figure 13). One of these is the Ministry's Register of Foster Families, which social workers can access to check for a vacancy in one of the families. This source of information is not reliable when seeking placement, as the information sometimes does not correspond to the actual situation, and places noted as vacant are kept for outcomes of court proceedings. Another source is foster families for whom a social worker is responsible or foster families from other locations for whom other regional offices are responsible. The safest placement for a child is when the social worker knows the foster family and can assess whether the placement meets the child's needs, but most of the time, there are no placements close to the child's home. Social workers must enquire or contact all other regional offices to find out if there is a placement for a child in foster care. If a place is found in one of the other regional offices, responsibility is shared by two regional offices, whereby the social workers are responsible for the child losing contact with the child due to the distance. One of the options is placement in an institution, but this is also a problem for social workers as the institutions are overcrowded. Their job

is to send an enquiry to all the facilities and get replies or refusals. If there are residential communities for children and young people in the community or another form of placement to provide the child with temporary accommodation until a permanent solution is found, the social workers can only use these resources if available to them. Placing a child with relatives or close family members is one option, but it also requires social workers to be involved in exploring the wider family network. Although there are several options available to social workers, none of them is simple or bypasses bureaucracy when placing a child.

Figure 14: Matrix of the foster care process - separation of the child from the family and placement in a foster care



Source: Author's work based on Family Act (Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) and Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

The results of the first research question of the first thesis, answering the question of what currently prevailing practice in the foster care system is, are summarised and presented graphically in Figure 14. The description of practices comes from the responses of participants in identifying the process of foster care placement, guidance in different situations, and when and how the process is carried out for all participants.

The steps that social workers take before commencing the process of separating a child from the primary family represent the initial process that may or may not end in foster care placement, but recounting them in the context of working with families is important. The introduction of measures from family law to protect the child is gradual, from the mildest measure to the final measure of separating the child from the family, with the aim of establishing conditions that allow the family to take care of the child independently (Family Act, Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23). If the situation in the family does not change for the better, the team of experts from the regional office initiates the procedure for separating the child from the family. The separation of a child from the family can take place in various ways. The first is the hasty or urgent separation of a child as an unexpected event when social workers in the field remove the child from the family due to the child's health and life threatened. The result of this type of separation is often placement in an institution, which may be temporary until a foster family is found or long-term. A better solution is to find a foster family immediately, but often, it is not possible, or the placement does not meet the child's needs. This type of separation of a child from a family is the most challenging for social workers, especially due to insufficient and inadequate placement capacity. Another type of separation of a child from the family is when the parents themselves request that the child be temporarily placed in foster care because of their unfavourable circumstances, such as the illness of the parents, receiving medical treatment, and serving a prison sentence, as envisaged in the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23). These are rare situations in social work practice and an expected event in terms of planning the placement and its duration. In this situation, an agreement is made between the social workers and the parents. The third option for separating a child from the family is a court order if the parents fail to reach an agreement and the court has to intervene in deciding on the child's placement. The court decides on

separating the child from the family for a maximum of one year with the possibility of an extension, and it regulates the personal contact between the child and the primary family and, to supplement the decision determines with which foster family the child will be placed.

All three cases pose a common difficulty to social workers, namely, finding a suitable placement for a child in foster care. Though several options are available to social workers, such as the Ministry's foster care register, a wider network of families and relatives, some of the alternative forms of community placement or foster carers in their jurisdiction or that of another regional office, when none of the resources are sufficiently accessible and reliable.

The outcome of the previous steps described may lead to the placement of the child in a foster family under the jurisdiction of social workers or under the jurisdiction of another regional office in Croatia, placement with relatives or, if no placement is found, a request to the respective Ministry to intervene in finding placement for the child.

After a child has been placed in foster care, social workers monitor the child's progress to determine the next steps. The outcome may be a long-term placement for the child, returning the child to the primary family, changing foster families or, after the child has returned to the family, repeating the process if difficulties arise again.

7.2.2. Principles of emancipation and participation in foster care process

Two methods were used to obtain answers to the second research question about how social workers understand emancipation and the involvement of all participants in the foster care process. It is supported by interviews with social workers and action group members and, secondly, through a discussion among the members about their practical experience in emancipation and participation.

The educational method and the continuous process of educating participants across all stages of the research contributed to the quality of the discussion at the action group meetings. The action group members, apart from the researchers, are experts in social work and foster care, but some knowledge of family group conferences was lacking among all group members. Although the researchers in our research are practitioners who carry out the foster care process in practice, certain segments or rather certain principles of social work were not clear to all. This fact is especially true for some aspects of user emancipation

or participation. Some reasons can be attributed not only to ignorance but also to neglecting the social work principles in practice. Hart and Bond (1995, p. 66) emphasise the importance of educational value in research precisely because individual differences in such values between researchers should be recognised. The gradual acquisition of knowledge and the construction of concepts from collected empirical material provided well-reasoned insights that shaped the thinking and actions of researchers (Mesec, 1997). For transparent and honest group discussions, all researchers have to be empowered and free from any oppression or social control. Given that the empowerment theory emphasises the need for people to have control over their lives, it also emphasises that they need power to influence their lives (Saleebey, 2013, p. 13). Payne (2014, p. 294) emphasises that empowerment is seen as the mobilisation of power for making decisions, which Fleming and Ward (2004) interpreted as a methodology for working with people, but also working together leads to better outcomes. The participants in the action group gained strength during the course of the research by working together in the action research, maintaining enthusiasm, and increasing their desire to change the existing practice. The group dynamics at each action group meeting became more diverse, and the energy increased. Group work was a new experience for all participants in the action research because, as the research findings show, social workers rarely carry out group work in their practice. Although social work emphasises the importance of group work and group dynamics (Rivera and Darke, 2012), group work was increasingly used in psychotherapy in the 20th century (Skolnik, 2017). A similar shift is seen in the training of social workers for group work, which is as absent from the training system as its application in practice (Knight, 2017). The experience of group work for all participants in the action group represents another important fact, namely the experience of participation and partnership, which is an equally important element in the theory of empowerment (Fleming and Ward, 2004). Through group work, the action group acquired additional knowledge in social work research and research skills besides learning and acquiring knowledge, analysing the results and setting the direction for further action (Metcalf and Humphreys, 2002). The contribution to outcomes and combination of methods is visible on two levels: substantively through the research data and findings collected and procedurally through participation and the opportunity to apply research methods in social work practice.

Based on the findings of the first research question and the data collected on the foster care process, which provided insight into a number of steps in the foster care system, the next aim was to identify the number of participants involved in the actual process and how they

participate in foster care. The initial aim was to gather information at which point an individual participant was involved in the process, from the initial information about the child's separation through the placement process and finally to actual placement in foster care. Coincidentally, the research focuses on the ways in which the identified participants are involved in the foster care process, the present or absent principles of emancipation and the understanding social workers have of these aspects.

Participation of all users involved in the foster care process

The majority respondents distinguished in detail the child's involvement and the nature of the involvement of other participants in the foster care process. Our research results show differences in the involvement of individual participants and the child as to how the child is separated from the family. In the case of an urgent separation of a child from the family, the majority agreed that ordinarily, there is insufficient time to prepare and involve anyone else other than the regional office's expert team, who respond in line with the expedited procedure. In such situations, there is no need to have the primary family agree to the separation, nor the child who is taken away and placed in the first possible institution, foster family or other form of placement, regardless of whether the accommodation is appropriate at the time. Sometimes, the child is separated from the family with the help of the police because the primary family does not agree and does not want to part with the child. Johnson, Yoken and Voss (1995), in their study on the attitudes of children in foster care, describe how children feel shame and additional trauma when separated from the child's family with the help of the police. Our findings show that in cases of needing urgent separation, neither the involvement of the child or the family nor emancipation can be observed. However, what is noticeable is that social workers are aware of these shortcomings and justify them by focusing solely on protecting the child's life and respondents state for example:

"There is no preparation, and it is naturally a shock for the child. Once the child has settled in, they work with the foster parents and the child so that everyone gets used to the new situation." (SR4_02).

It is clear from the statement that the emergency separation of the child from the primary family is a procedure in which there is no preparation of the participants, so that all elements of participation are missing and the decision lies solely with the social worker. It is also significant that the statement emphasises the subsequent work with the foster parents and the child, while the primary family is not mentioned.

The results of our study show that in cases requiring emergency separation of a child, the involvement of other participants, such as the primary family, the wider network and other

experts, occurs later after the child has been placed. This means that the primary family is interviewed retrospectively after the parents have been formally invited to the regional office, while the children are interviewed after they have been placed with a new family. Research by Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018) shows that children are most often separated from their primary family without their consent and input. Adults make decisions about their lives, and the only person the children describe as familiar and omnipresent is the social worker responsible for the family. Burke (2008) comes to similar conclusions when describing children's input in decisions that affect them when referring to systems that are not even designed for children's input, and the power lies solely with the adults. Our findings show that there is no social work solution in emergency procedures as to how to work with the family. The children are not involved or consulted in the decision, while parents have no voice in the moment and no way of engaging with the structures that are the source of oppression, such as the police or social work.

Ways of connecting all involved participants in the foster care process

The results of our research show that in the other two cases of child separation under parental consent or by court order, all participants indicated that they had sufficient time for discussions with the primary family and the child and to inform them about the procedure. Most of the participants indicated that, based on the decision of the expert team, they call the primary family and the child into the regional office and inform them about the procedure for separating the child from the family. However, some of the participants indicated that they visit the family's home to converse with and inform all parties. In a study conducted by Johnson, Yoken and Voss (1995, p. 965) on a sample of 95 children, the results show that half of the children are involved in the decision to become separate from the family, while the majority of children believe that experts, foster parents and relatives should decide for them. Similar results appear in the research conducted by Žižak et al. (2012) in Croatia, where the majority of children stated that they were not consulted nor actively involved in the decision-making process regarding separation from the primary family. Our research shows similar results; a discussion is held with the child and family, but the purpose is usually to inform them about the decision to initiate the separation procedure and not to involve them in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, there are rare cases where the decision is made by the regional office's team of experts together with the whole family, usually in cases where social workers have discussions with the family in their home.

Furthermore, our research results show that the child is involved in judicial decision-making, which is highlighted as an important issue. The child's involvement in the court decision-making process also relies on the child's testimony in court. Depending on the age and seriousness of the situation, the child's involvement is further made possible by testifying in court and indirectly through the use of conversations recorded with the child, especially in the case of child abuse or trauma. The child's testimony in court usually takes the form of a conversation with a social pedagogue, while sitting behind the glass are the judge, lawyers and others who have the right to ask the child questions. Social workers only attend such interviews if it is an urgent situation or they are responding to a call from the police, for example:

"This was legislated several years ago to avoid additional trauma to the child... if the situation is urgent and the police are called, the social worker accompanies and interviews the child." (SR1_11).

The statement, which most respondents agree with, indicates that social workers only support the child in court in exceptional situations when the police have intervened during the separation. However, it remains unclear why only in these cases and not as a general practise for all court proceedings.

The results of our research have shown that the role of social work in the child's testimony in court is not sufficiently clear. In foster care, the child builds a relationship with the social worker based on trust, which means providing security for the child. The social worker does not accompany the child throughout the entire foster care process, but various experts take turns. Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018, p. 6) point out that educating children and informing them about what to expect is a basic prerequisite for their active role in the process, but the presence of a trusted person is necessary. Similarly, Stephenson, Gourley and Miles (2004, p. 17) state that the participation of children depends on their social and emotional preparation, as well as acceptance and support from adults.

Involvement of the child in the foster care process

The conversation with the child about placement in a foster family usually takes place in regional offices and only rarely in the family's home. Our results show that in most cases, the interview with the child is conducted by a psychologist in the regional office, but some of the respondents stated that a social worker also takes part in the interview. In the regional offices, there is a room for suitable conversations with children, equipped with toys and colours to help the child feel more relaxed. The majority have stated that the child is involved in this part of the foster care process and that great attention is paid to help the

child understand the changes in their life through talking. Though the child's opinion is taken into account, the decision has already been made to separate the child. The purpose of conversing with the child is to inform and integrate the child into the new family. Depending on the child's age, the reasons for no longer living with the parents, the relocation and the duration are explained to the child.

Although the majority emphasised that the child's opinion is sought concerning all life decisions, it is inconsistent with the results of noted conversations with the children. In their research, Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018, p.) noted that despite having conversations with children, most of them stated not knowing of the new living arrangement nor when it was to happen. The authors point out that the need to prepare the child for upcoming changes and that a single conversation is insufficient (Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori, 2018, p. 11).

Our research shows that the social worker listens to the child and takes notes of disagreements when the child expresses dissatisfaction, refuses to leave the primary family or does not want to go to a particular foster parent. In further discussions, the social worker will try to explain to the child of necessity in this situation, for example one respondent stated:

"Personally, I always try to explain it to the child in a normal way. I cannot, I do not ask, I have to admit, especially whether you want to go or not because we know that we do not have a choice for the child." (SR2_04).

The majority of respondents agree with the statement, but it is noted that social workers do not know how to talk to a child and respect their voice. The statement emphasises that the social worker has to act in this way without the child participating in the process because there is no other choice, which points to the helplessness of social workers when working with families and the lack of autonomy in finding different solutions to problems.

The data collected in our research shows the child's participation in the phase of separating from the family. The child is treated with respect, and his or her opinion is respected, but it still has no influence on deciding about the child's life. The child's role in preparing for separation from the family is passive, not active, so there is no participation. In their research, Borić and Mataga Tintor (2022) describe the opinions of experts on the lack of trust in children, which is consistent with our research findings. Children can express their opinions when conversing with a psychologist and hear all the information about changes to come, but the manner of dialoguing does not reflect that something new is created together, as described by Freire (2002). Emancipation is not present in this case because

dialogue is the basis of emancipation when working with people. Social work has the task of developing user potential and empowering users to utilize their potential to express themselves (Bognar, 2002), but our research shows that the role of social work does not take place in this way but rather in a bureaucratic direction.

Involvement of the primary family in the foster care process

Some of the respondents state that the primary family is actively involved before and during the separation of the child from the family. The involvement of the primary family in further proceedings is usually in terms of regulating personal relationships between the parents and the child during the child's stay in the foster family. While the child is in foster care, the primary parents, who have lost the right to live with the child, still retain all parental rights, and their involvement in deciding about the child is necessary. The social worker has the task of assessing the risk of the meetings with the primary parents for the child's development. Risk assessment lists (Ordinance on Measures for the Protection of the Personal Rights and Welfare of the Child, Official Gazette, 106/14, 87/22) are one way of assessing risk, but the entire history of the family and the reasons for the child's separation from the family should also be taken into account. This approach is important when the court decides on the amount of contact between the child and the primary family. When describing the work in practise, one participant state, for example:

“We work to ensure that the child does not lose contact with primary family. The circumstances are very different from family to family, from problem to problem. If there is a shift in the primary family's circumstances, we create space for their involvement in different ways.” (SR1_12).

This statement reveals an important fact, namely that the primary family's involvement in the child's life depends on the changes in the primary family. The primary family is expected to improve, repair or adapt what is assigned to them, i.e. in accordance with the social worker's assessment, and only then will they realize their right to play a more active role in the child's life.

This statement about the progress involving the primary family is important as it remains unclear how progress is achieved without the help and support of social work, as subsequent results will show. A third of respondents stated that they continue to work with the primary family while the child is in foster care, a third stated that they expect the primary family to seek help for themselves when needed, such as attending counselling or parenting skills programmes, and a third stated that they do not work with parents but only approach them when the child's consent is required, for example:

“Yes, now that I am talking about it, I think it is very important that parents somehow fall out of our professional work. There are many reasons for this, but mostly because there is simply a lack of professionals and not everything can be covered, while on the other hand, there are parents who are not willing to change and do something to improve the situation.” (SR4_03).

The statement includes two important areas: the lack of social workers and the overcapacity of social workers working with families, and another area related to the non-cooperation of the primary family. The non-cooperation of the primary family is not seen by social workers as a lack of the family's ability to participate or the knowledge they need to change their life situation, but as a refusal to cooperate.

Removing a child from a family where there are difficulties does not solve the family's problems. In Croatia, the Family Act stipulates that the separation of a child from a family is a temporary measure (Family Act, Official gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), but the results of our research show that the situation is different in practice. The temporary placement of a child often becomes permanent. Similar results were found in the research of Žižak et al. (2012), in which most children were placed in foster care for more than four years and up to nineteen years. Specific cooperation with the primary family to create conditions for the child's return to the family is regulated by the Foster Care Act (Foster Care Act, Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22), but practice shows different results. Our results show that the primary family is the least involved participant in the foster care process. The primary family's participation is limited to a minimum and depends on the social workers, their commitment and time at their disposal. No work takes place with the primary family concerning the necessary change, meaning that the family does not get the necessary knowledge and learning opportunities to develop greater responsibility (Flaker, 2023) and consequently take greater responsibility in caring for their child. There is no emancipation for primary families when working with them, while social workers, although aware that working with primary families is lacking, fail to understand the long-term consequences of such an approach. Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019) came to the same conclusion when they referred to the lack of work with primary families and the need to help them get new knowledge and learn, which is the main task of social work and part of the user emancipation and user autonomy process.

Social work should emphasise the need to support the primary family, as shown by the research results from England, where the emphasis was placed on working with the primary family, resulting in a greater number of children returning to the primary family (Thoburn,

2002). After separating the child from the family, there is no organised work continuing with the primary family, though Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019, p. 136) believe it should be part of working with the family, given that social work has the fundamental task of helping the primary family mobilise its strengths, work on conflict resolution and acquire new skills.

Emancipation of participants and involvement in the planning process in foster care

According to the results of our research on planning, the primary family's involvement in creating an individual change plan for the child is very low. In most cases, the primary family participates in resolving issues as to how and when they will see the child, the additional costs of having to contribute to the service, or pocket money for the child. The majority stated that the plan for the child is made bureaucratically for administrative reasons. They said creating the plan is easier when they do it given their knowledge of the family, after which they present it to the parents and seek approval.

The results of our research show that even later in the foster care process, in the planning phase, the participation of the child, the primary family or the foster parents is rare. Social workers describe foster care planning as bureaucratic work rather than a specific method of working with families, and accordingly, other participants are rarely involved. The respondents explain this planning approach with the lack of time and space resources and the impossibility of gathering all participants in the foster care system at the same time and in the same place. Social workers talk to each participant in the foster care system individually about the issues in the plan that concern them. As a result, not all participants are informed about all parts of the individual change plan for the child. It is not clear when and how the social workers have the conversations, but the organisation of the entire planning process is complex. There is no clear structure to the process or use of the group work method. The respondents described the whole process of foster care as quite spontaneous, depending on the time available to social workers, unanimously pointing out insufficient resources for group work. Research by Folman (1998), focused on children's experiences of the process of separation and placement in foster care, shows that the actual process is complex, clumsy and sometimes inappropriate.

The participants refer to their group work as working with the primary family or the foster family, but as two separate processes view the family as a group. A study by Ivković and Žižak (2010) on the state of foster care in Croatia shows that there is no form of support for the primary family during the child's stay in foster care. Furthermore, they note that little

research has been conducted from users' perspective of primary families on the topic of foster care.

Triseliotis, Sellick and Short (1995, p. 52) state the importance of helping the child understand and accept the child's history and right to gain experiences and have a background, as well as the underlying feelings. The authors explain that working on these elements of the child's emancipation, the child's right to having a history and background, requires awareness from the social worker and knowledge to grant the child these rights. Furthermore, freedom from dependency is seen by Prpić (1987) as an element of emancipation outside the legal framework of autonomy. In the context of achieving and maintaining the child's contact with the primary family, the results of our research show that social workers are aware of the child's rights and the need for continuous contact with the family, but they still believe that the state should control and regulate these aspects and relationships under the supervision of experts. The majority stated they recognise that many families are dependent on the system but offer no solution to help families become independent, while also mentioning that families return to that dependency on the system, which remains for years. Primary families do not have many options once they are in the system. The state takes further control over their lives; however, social workers are unaware of this form of control and perceive it as support and help for the child, even though they know that no one cares about the primary family. Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp (2014) associate working with the primary family with elements of autonomy, personal development and learning that contribute to the primary family's freedom and independence, while Čačinović Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019) did not find the presence of these same elements in working with primary families.

7.2.3. Involvement of the child, primary family and foster family in the decision-making process and ongoing cooperation during foster care

The results of our research show how and when the family collaborates, the way all participants in the foster care system are involved in the decision-making process, and ongoing collaboration while the child is in foster care, which is the third research question from the first thesis of the doctoral dissertation.

Joint work of all those involved in the foster care process

The respondents in our study describe the possibility of joint work between all participants, the child, the primary family and the foster family, as very rare or non-existent. Our findings show that in most cases, the primary family most often does not have the opportunity to get to know the foster family with whom their child will live. If it is an urgent separation of the child from the primary family, there is no opportunity or time for any contact before the child is placed. However, even after a court decision or an agreement between the parents and the regional office on separating the child from the family, if there is enough time, the parents rarely contact the foster parents to build a relationship with them before the child is placed in a new family. The reasons cited by respondents were that social workers lack the time and sometimes having a meeting between the primary family and the foster parents is not possible due to distance or lack of interest on the part of the primary family. Similar findings from a North American study in 1991 were reported by Galaway, Nutter and Hudson (1994, p. 76). They show that one-third of primary parents are given the opportunity to see the place where their child is placed or to meet the foster parents before the child is placed. Parents have the right to express their opinion about the placement, but this is rarely respected. Our research shows the same findings, namely that respondents believe that the primary family is not the person working in the best interests of the child and that the role of the social worker is to protect the child's welfare. Cooperation with the primary family is often not good in different relationships, for example:

“They have the right to express disagreement, and sometimes there are difficulties in cooperation between the primary and the foster family. In any case, the priority is to consider whether the foster family is in the best interests of the child.” (SR2_05).

The participant's statement points to two important facts. Firstly, that despite the right to express their opinion, the primary family has no influence on the decision-making process. Another important fact is that apart from the relationship between the social worker and the primary family, the co-operation is also unsuccessful in the relationship between the foster parents and the primary family. Social workers do not link the need to get to know the foster parents and primary family when placing a child with building a positive relationship that is in the child's best interests.

In addition, respondents stated that the primary family receives information about where the child will be placed after they have been served with the court's decision, for example:

“They have no information before the child is placed in a particular foster family, but only after the court's decision, which we do not know either. After that, we no longer have enough

time to prepare everything as it should be. Prepare both the foster family and the parents, who are only be informed by the court decision.” (SR3_03).

This part of our findings shows contradictory data when compared to the results noted from the training observations, where other participants stated that they had 15-20 days until the court decision to work with the families. Namely, the information about foster care placement is already known when the application is submitted to the court, but until the final decision on the placement is made (which takes 15-20 days), some social workers prepare the family for the placement process, while others do not, but wait for the official court decision.

Furthermore, the results of our study show that the majority explained the joint work with the child, the primary family and the foster family on similarly way. Indeed, they state that they act in accordance with the legal provisions obliging them to draw up an individual change plan for each child placed in foster care. All participants state that they try to involve the wider family network, the child and important people in the child’s life, but that usually only the immediate family, such as the mother and father, are involved in the planning process. The plan is never drawn up in a group or with everyone at the same time, i.e., when everyone is gathered in one place. Most respondents describe joint work in a similar way, for example:

“It’s very difficult. In practice, you should set it up so that it’s a joint meeting, but often the parents do not have the opportunity or if they are working, they are not available. If the foster parents are willing, we can organise it... There are situations where we can go to the foster parents and meet the parents, but these are rare moments, to be honest. We do not have the technical means or the time to organise this for every family we work with.” (SR1_13).

The statement points to several key elements, such as the awareness of social workers that planning is group work and a joint process of collaboration between all participants the foster care process, or such as the lack of resources for social workers to get to know primary and foster families. The difficulty in coordinating and involving all participants in the planning process is often attributed by social workers to the inability of primary or foster families to respond to a joint meeting and co-operate in the planning process, even though the responsibility for the planning process lies solely with the social workers.

The majority agreed that the planning process would be good in practice if it were done jointly with all participants, but despite this, preparing for the child’s placement and getting the families to know each other, as well as joint planning, are not part of social work

practice or it is very rare. The lack of resources and especially time to work with families was cited by respondents as the biggest obstacle.

Laklija and Sladović Franz (2013, p. 17) emphasise the importance of planning in social work, especially in foster care, where all participants should be allowed to participate in creating the plan where the role of the social worker is to coordinate. In the previous chapter, I noted that sometimes, the plan is drawn up by experts only, without involving the primary family. However, research by Ivković and Žižak (2010) shows that most of the time, not even the foster families are involved, and only 14% of foster parents participate in drawing up the plan.

Support of social workers during foster care

In our study, the majority agree that supporting the foster family is an important aspect of foster care. In contrast, social workers are required by law to visit the foster family twice a year to check on the child's progress. The respondents state that social workers are also available to foster carers in other ways, such as contacting them by phone or e-mail, and it is how they resolve most of the difficulties and support needs of foster carers. Similar results are described by Ivković and Žižak (2010) in their study, in which they point out that more than half of the surveyed foster parents have contact with the regional office once a year, which is certainly not enough for quality support. Similar results were found in the study by Sabolić and Vejmelka (2015), where foster parents and also experts were dissatisfied with the level of support for foster families. It is also consistent with our findings, as the majority expressed dissatisfaction with weak support for foster families and that they want to have a greater presence in the family's life, to be more educated about foster care and to be more accessible to foster families.

Mobile teams were mentioned by some of the respondents in our research who offer the service in their region. They agree that it is a good way to provide support, but at the same time, they point out negative aspects, e.g., that the experts from mobile teams are viewed as strangers coming to the family, whereas the foster carers have the most confidence in the social worker with whom they have worked so far. The majority stated that it would be much easier if there were a foster care team in the regional office to reduce the burden of specific tasks.

Under the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22), social welfare homes and centers providing community services are required to have mobile teams to support foster carers in the community. The Act and other legal documents do not define who the experts are supposed to be, nor the mobile support team assigned to foster parents and the

organisation of teams. Ivković and Žižak (2010) found that in Croatia, there are mobile expert teams for supporting foster parents of children with developmental disabilities, which were formed by an association in 2006. According to the Operational Plan for Deinstitutionalisation, Prevention of Institutionalisation and Transformation of Social Service Providers in the Republic of Croatia from 2022 to 2027 (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022b), there are 23 mobile teams formed in 2022, who are providing counselling and support services to vulnerable children and families, which reportedly include children in foster care.. No exact data is available on the number of mobile teams supporting foster parents, while the current mobile teams fall under project activities funded by the European Union. For many years, there have been calls for the need for and establishment of mobile teams in the foster care system in Croatia (Laklija, 2011a; Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015; Laklija, Vladić and Stanić, 2022), but how mobile teams are formed remains unclear, which experts become part of the teams, how support is provided in the field and future sustainability of the service after the projects end. The foster care team consists of experts, psychologists, social workers and lawyers in the regional office where at least one hundred foster parents are registered (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). In other regional offices, where the number of foster families is lower, foster care work is only carried out by experts who also have other regular tasks. The foster care team focuses on training, supporting, monitoring and approving foster care practices in regional offices. Ten or more years ago, the recommendations in foster care were to establish foster care teams in each regional office, regardless of the number of foster parents, but in the latest legislative amendments, it was not taken into account, and there is no change in practice (Žižak, 2008; Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015).

Making decisions during the foster care process

The results of our research on decision-making concerning the daily needs of children in foster care show that the issue is one of the biggest challenges in the foster care system. In foster care practice, the primary family must give consent and sign some decisions that affect the child's everyday life, such as photo shoots at school, medical appointments, outings, the child's enrolment at school, and the choice of a secondary school. The majority of respondents stated that foster carers experience high stress because contacting the primary family is difficult, or they promise to sign forms but fail to do so. It is up to the foster family and the primary family to make their own arrangements. Berglez (2005, p. 30), in his overview of the situation and research on foster care in Slovenia, noted similar problems described by foster parents and suggested giving foster parents power of attorney

for the child's basic needs, such as schooling, personal documents, permission for outings and school activities, during the child's stay in foster care. The study by Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović and Jelača (2005) shows that foster parents have the greatest need for support from social workers in building a relationship with the primary family and for protection from institutions in building this relationship. In contrast, in the study by Ivković and Žižak (2010), half of the foster parents stated that they have constructive cooperation with the primary family, while a smaller number of foster parents stated having negative experiences, but all agree that they often need the support of experts to achieve this cooperation. The results of our research provide similar data, such as regional offices often acting as mediators in the relationship when major conflicts arise or intervening when cooperation between the primary and foster family does not reach a satisfactory level. Consequently, it becomes especially difficult for a child to adopt a regular daily routine in a foster family, given that the child's everyday life relies on constant decisions. Majority respondents agree that the most difficult part of foster care is the regulation of decision-making for the child by the primary family so they describe, for example:

"Sometimes it's difficult to get hold of the parents. Then big problems arise, and no one has yet found a real solution or suggested how to solve them." (SR3_04).

According to this statement, which the majority of respondents agree with, it is clear that social work does not have an answer to the question of how to work on building a relationship between the primary and foster family, but also how to ensure the establishment of a daily routine for the child that requires the primary parent's signature for all the child's activities.

In addition, our study found that the foster care process becomes even more complicated if the primary family refuses to provide consent for the child because, in such special cases, a guardian is then appointed for the child.

7.2.4. Social work in foster care practice and community support networks

The fourth research question of the first thesis from the dissertation explores the current possibilities of social work practice in foster care and the potential limits for the ongoing development of community support networks. The findings of our research are presented in three thematic units corresponding to the responses of interview respondents. The thematic units are as follows:

- The institutional level identifies the obstacles and opportunities in work undertaken by social workers through institutions so they can build support community networks, connect with other service providers, perform their work satisfactorily and focus on the further development of foster care.
- The personal resources and shortcomings of social workers were observed in working with foster families and mobilising support networks.
- The knowledge that foster families and social workers need to get all community participants involved in the support network.

Institutional level - barriers and opportunities

Our research results indicate an increasing shortage of foster families and an insufficient commitment to finding new foster carers. There are two main reasons for this situation to be one of the biggest obstacles to social work practice. The first is that more and more children are being separated from their families, and social workers, and despite believing this approach is the best form of non-institutional placement of children, have not found a solution for placing a child outside of the family if necessary. One respondent describes an example from the practice of hastily separating children from a large family:

“A colleague from another centre told me the other day that they had to place children in emergency separation; they placed eight children in foster care. Yes, eight in one family, although the law only allows three. They simply had no other choice.” (SR4_05).

The weak development of the foster care system and the insufficient accommodation capacity are reflected in the statement indicating that the institution is unable to provide accommodation, especially accommodation that is suitable for the users.

Furthermore, the results of our research show that in practice, there are often situations where the child has to be placed in another town or county because there are no vacancies in the locality where the child resides, for example:

“We separate brothers and sisters because there is no accommodation in these areas; they literally go to the other side of Croatia. So what are we to do with these children?” (SR3_05).

The statement aims to clarify the issue of the quality of accommodation services provided by social work. The separation of siblings must not be caused by a lack of placement, because then it is questionable whether it is fully in the best interests of the child.

Another reason revealed in our research is the presence or absence of a foster care team in regional offices. Foster care teams also have the task of promoting and developing foster

care, but the teams only exist in regional offices with more than one hundred foster parents. The majority of respondents stated that the development of foster care is only possible if a foster care team is formed; otherwise, if there is no team, the professional staff performs foster care work in addition to all other regular work tasks, making it difficult to expand and develop foster care. Laklija and Brkić (2022) also comes to the same conclusions using the example of an analysis of the social welfare system, namely the existence of a foster care team, which is an excellent relief for foster families because the teams are exclusively dedicated to foster care work.

The results of our research show the difficulty of reconciling regular social work with the demands of foster care. Fully attending to the needs of the foster parents, the child or the primary family is difficult if the social worker has to handle more than a hundred users. There is no opportunity to develop and promote foster care because social workers lack time to engage in such activities. At an institutional level, the need to set up foster care teams to implement and develop a high-quality service was identified. Similar findings and needs in the foster care system are described by Ivković and Žižak (2010), who, in research undertaken more than ten years ago, set guidelines for introducing foster care teams in all regional offices in order to provide optimal quality foster care services, but Laklija and Brkić (2022) notes that nothing has changed to date.

One respondent mentioned a different type of team, a mobile team, as necessary for working with foster carers:

“Here, for example, I think a mobile team for foster carers is important, within the centre, as part of the system or something like a family helper who goes to the family and works on site.” (SR2_06).

Our findings show that mobile teams for foster care are needed in the community and, at the same time, are defined as a strategic determinant in the plan for the ongoing development of social services in Croatia, but the implementation and regulation of these teams have not yet been sufficiently set up. Time is a resource emphasised by the majority as an important but missing aspect. It depends on the organisation of work as well as the distribution of tasks and obligations and also includes the bureaucratic dimension of document management. Clearly, from our findings, social workers are aware of their limitations, both in organisational terms and in developing the support system for foster parents, all of which increase the workload of social workers.

The research findings of Družić Ljubotina and Friščić (2014) are consistent with our findings and show that social workers are overloaded with work in that a large number of

users for each social worker and frequent changes in regulations and laws affect the quality of work and create a higher level of stress among social workers.

The results of our research show that in addition to the two previously highlighted problems in working with foster carers, there are also resources at the regional office level that have a greater or lesser impact on work. A resource such as an official car, necessary for field trips, is available in most regional offices, but the number of vehicles is insufficient and organising a plan for field trips is difficult. The heads of the regional offices are not always equally open to suggestions, while the majority of respondents think that social workers do not have sufficient autonomy because they are required to get authorisation and approval for every aspect of their work. Due to lack of transport and time, most agreements and contacts with the community are made by telephone or in writing. There is inadequate personal contact between the social worker and, for example, associations, schools or local authorities. The frequent turnover of staff in the regional offices is an issue that emerged in our research as an indicator of the state of social care, particularly in the regional offices where social workers often feel powerless. The majority recognised this and linked it to poorer implementation of the trust relationship with the family, but also to less knowledge about the community and how to work together. Teamwork is described as a standard facet in the work of social workers, and the existence of teams for working with families, bringing together different professionals in one place, is mentioned as an advantage within the institution. One of the institutional advantages is in-house training courses, which take place regularly and for which anyone interested can apply.

Personal level – resources and shortcomings

The results of our research show that social workers are motivated to work in the field of foster care, indicating the activities they would like to carry out if they had the time and support of the regional office, e.g., workshops, additional training for foster parents, and guest lectures by experts. The high motivation to work in the foster care system is based on positive experiences in the foster care system and changes achieved when working with children. Creativity in working with service users is an important personal quality of any social worker, and resourcefulness is as necessary for working in foster care as good organisational skills. An example of good practice is the mandatory annual training for foster carers, during which an opportunity is taken to chat informally with foster carers and share experiences. The majority of respondents state that understanding, patience and love for the children are necessary for the foster care process to go well:

“Our children are children who have their own story. Our children are children who come with a suitcase full of burdens. A suitcase full of health problems, damage, neglect.” (SR3_06).

It is clear from this statement that social workers have a feeling for children and an understanding of their needs, especially when they refer to them as "our children", which gives them an emotional touch in relation to children.

The results of our research show that in addition to the positive characteristics and resources that are present, there are also negative phenomena. The majority stated that they consider a lower stress tolerance, a lack of autonomy at work and less team cohesion at the regional office level to be personal deficits. One of the findings is the lack of expertise required to work in the foster care sector, a lower level of commitment and an inability to fulfil more demanding tasks. Experience and years of service play an important role in employee retention in the organisation and community. An example given was that young colleagues sometimes find onboarding difficult until they have come to know the community and the opportunities it offers. Openness, good communication skills and the courage to question any situation are described as necessary skills, for example:

“When you come from the community, of course, you know certain people, acquaintances, friends, relatives, and we all use our private resources and social network because that’s the only way we can work.” (SR5_05).

The majority of respondents agree with the statement and the fact that social workers use their private contacts and resources to help their users. This indicates a system that has not developed sufficient methods to network on a cross-system level.

The majority stated that knowing the community also includes knowing the power of structures in the community. At the same time, personal contacts and resources that social workers use to gain the necessary help or support for users are also mentioned.

Education and training - resources and gaps

The majority of respondents to our survey identified training for foster carers and social workers as an important need, for example:

“Since the foster care system in Croatia is still developing, the law is not enough. The foster care system is something alive, evolving and improving, so I think that social workers dealing with foster families should be trained regularly.” (SR1_16).

Two facts are significant from the statement. Firstly, that foster care is more than legal regulation and secondly, that foster care is a process that is continuously changing, and accordingly, it is necessary to adapt education and develop methods for work in foster care.

Sharing information and experiences is, as the majority of respondents say, important between social workers and foster carers in order to learn even more from practice. Thompson (2000, p. 8) states that special situations and difficulties require special knowledge, and this requires special training. Using the example of caring for pregnant women or parents with children, Laklija, Vladić and Stanić (2022) describe additional knowledge that social workers and foster carers should have to provide quality care. In the research by Redding, Fried and Britner (2000), using the example of children with behavioural problems, the results show that very few foster parents receive the necessary and timely training to work with children. The results of our research show that social workers should improve their knowledge in the area of group work skills, which they rarely use, including dynamics and family processes, the foster care process, and changes that affect participants. Moreover, our research findings show that there is also a lack of knowledge in the area of community work, given that social workers express a need to be more present and engaged in the community. As an example, they cite organising and participating in roundtables on important topics, where different experts come together to inform the public and people who need specific knowledge about an area. The majority of respondents agree that knowledge about projects and how to get in touch with non-profit organisations is lacking. The research by Rajter, Katalinić and Tomić (2016) shows similar results and points to the need for knowledge and skills in the field of community work, community policy creation, advocacy and project activities. Furthermore, our findings show that social workers in the foster care system do not know what knowledge is available to foster carers, making it difficult for them to continue their work:

“I think it would be good for me to go through the training that foster carers go through if I want to work with these people. It’s important I know what areas they are studying... to understand how far their knowledge extends.” (SR6_01).

The statement points to the fact that the mandatory training for all those wishing to become foster carers is not fully known to social workers who are not part of the foster care team who providing the training. This points to a lack of information flow within the system, but also to the need for social workers to support foster carers in acquiring the necessary knowledge.

There is an emphasis on how important it is that social workers know what foster carers know to help them and provide additional knowledge that carers do not have. Ongoing training for social workers is prescribed in the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23), and it is based on the education plan adopted

by the Academy of Social Welfare. At the time of writing this dissertation, the establishment of the Academy of Social Welfare was still in progress, and not much is known about the education plan.

7.2.5. CONCLUSION BASED ON THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FIRST THESIS OF THE DISSERTATION

The results obtained on the research questions of the first thesis of the dissertation constitute the first phase of the research, which was carried out using educational methods, semi-structured interviews and observations. The research began with organising training on the method of family group conferences for all registered and potential participants of the further research in the form of an action group composed of social workers from regional offices in Croatia. Familiarisation with the research topic and generating knowledge about it are the initial prerequisites for continuing the planned dissertation research. During the training, observations were conducted to identify guidelines that may or may not be covered by the research questions, and that should be considered when discussing the research area. The observation results reveal four key areas identified during training as potential topics to be further addressed, as well as an area relating to an assessment by the actual participants of their motivation for further involvement in action research.

The first theme addressed the possibility of using family group conferences in current foster care practice. Some of the participants believe that using the family group conference at the beginning of the foster care relationship is too much of a risk for the child. In contrast, other participants hold the opposite opinion, believing that the commencement of the foster care relationship is an excellent opportunity to prepare the child, the foster family and the primary family using the group work method, as there is a greater risk of having unprepared participants in the new situation. The available research findings are consistent with this opinion (Berzin, Cohen, Thomas and Dawson, 2008; Wang et al., 2012). The findings show that all participants should be involved at the very beginning of foster care, but also that it increases the possibility of kinship care.

Another issue raised in the discussions during the training is the planning process in foster care, which is a legal obligation of social workers under the Social Welfare Act (Official Gazette, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23). The majority agree that family group conferences can be a good method in the planning process, but two important facts stand out. According to the results of the observations, there exist two cases of undertaking

planning in foster care practice: planning carried out with the involvement of all participants but not as group work and planning as part of a bureaucratic procedure, i.e., the administrative part carried out by a social worker as a necessary part of the documentation. The issue that came up in the discussion was the unwillingness of the primary family to agree on an individualised change plan for the child. From the observations, it appears that social workers sometimes persuade the primary family to sign off on an individual change plan for the child, referring to child risk assessment lists. Establishing control over the primary family's decisions can be viewed as a lack of emancipation in working with people, given that Prpić (1987, p. 13) interprets emancipation as freedom from dependency and oppression as a prerequisite for emancipation. Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize and Zandamela (2015, p. 55) emphasise the oppression that comes from the system and that users should confront it if they have the power to do so. According to the results of the observations, an understanding of emancipation as a prerequisite for joint work with users and cooperation is not present in foster care practice.

The advantages of a family group conference, as pointed out by most participants, are the involvement and safety of the child in the actual process, especially in choosing a person to represent and speak on behalf of the child. Another advantage mentioned is the long-term effect of the method, strengthening the family for future situations and problems. Also, there is the possibility of using the method to prevent the separation of the child from the family if a support network is mobilised for the family to help them resolve difficulties. Most agree that the family group conference method is an excellent example of cooperation between all those involved in the foster care system, especially when experts from different fields are involved. However, it was noted that participants lacked confidence in the family's ability and capacity to make decisions and create the plan autonomously. To achieve equality and success in joint collaboration, trust in user abilities is a basic requirement for social workers (Mali, 2009), where each person has the capacity to mobilise themselves and solve problems (Perlman, 1970; Borić and Mataga Tintor, 2022).

The participants also discussed the topic of the procedure in the practical implementation of the method, namely complying with legal acts when implementing the family group conference in practice. The majority highlighted the need to protect personal data and the approach to reconciling current practices with the legal framework and the bureaucratised system under the General Data Protection Regulation Act (GDPR, Official Gazette, 42/18). In addition, everyone agrees that the system is becoming increasingly bureaucratised, the available time for working with users is insufficient, and social workers are overloaded

with a large number of users, and the social services necessary to help them in the community are underdeveloped. Research by Sladović Franz (2004) shows similar results and points to too many families assigned to each social worker, while research by Družić Ljubotina and Friščić (2014) points to the insufficient time that social workers have for direct work with users.

One of the observation tasks was to assess the motivation of the participants in the training and their interest in further research. In addition, the interest in putting the method into practise and the desire for additional knowledge about the method were noted as necessary criteria. Most of the participants stated that they had had negative experiences in participating in various groups and expressing their opinions based on practical experience, meaning that the voice of social workers was never accepted, and their participation became almost irrelevant. Nevertheless, six interested social workers decided to continue participating in the action research and became members of the action group together with me.

Ways of separating a child from the primary family

The first research question in the first thesis of the dissertation addressed the current definition of existing foster care practice. The results of our research showed that the process of foster care placement begins with the separation of the child from the primary family in two possible ways: as a gradual and expected process, when the family autonomously decides to temporarily place the child outside the family or the child is separated from the family by a court decision, and as an unexpected process, in an urgent separation of the child from the family. Although the process of separating a child from the primary family does not necessarily end with placement in foster care, the process itself is important for understanding the dissertation topic under study in terms of preventing institutionalisation and the possible application of new methods in working with families. The majority states that the expected process of separating the child from the family is a gradual one if the family has received support from family law protection, which is one of the measures to help and support families, and with which Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003) agree when talking about working with families through the implementation of measures to prevent the separation of the child from the family. The measures are implemented gradually in accordance with the Family Act (Official Gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), from the mildest, such as warning about mistakes made in the family, to visits to the family once or twice a week to working with the family on receiving the necessary support, to the last measure which is separating the child from the family if the

expected change in the family does not occur. In addition, our results show that the most common cause of child separation from the family is the neglected needs of a child, the reduced ability of the parents to fulfil the child's needs adequately, and the inability of the parents to meet the needs of a child with developmental difficulties.

Separation of the child from the primary family with the consent of the parents or by court decision

The majority of respondents state that rarely in foster care does the primary family request the temporary placement of a child on their own initiative, but it does happen under certain circumstances, such as parental illness, serving a prison sentence or other unfavourable living conditions in the family. The problem arises when the parents change their minds and want to return the child to the family. In addition, the separation of a child by a court decision is most common when the parents disagree with the decision to place the child outside the family, and in this case, the court is the final decision-making authority. Our results show that parents are most often deprived of the right to live with their child, but this deprivation of parental care is a rare case. According to our findings, social workers initiate the procedure and submit a statement to the court naming the foster family with whom the child is to be placed. The court's decision regulates the relationship between the child and the primary family as well as the duration of the placement, which can be up to one year, with the possibility of an extension.

Urgent separation of the child from the primary family

The third and most difficult path for social workers, according to our research, is the urgent separation of a child from the family as an unexpected event that requires an immediate response from social workers because the child's life and health are at risk. The child is immediately removed from the family to the first available placement, regardless of whether it is suitable or not. Our findings show that it is often an institutionalised form of placement until a suitable foster family is found. However, placement in an institution often becomes a long-term placement for the child due to a lack of foster parents and other forms of placement. Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003, p. 234) describe the emergency separation of a child from the family in a similar way, i.e., the greatest source of stress and frustration for social workers is emergency separation because accommodation is immediately needed for the child.

Placement of a child in a foster family

Finding accommodation for a child is, according to our research, a complex task for social workers, mainly due to insufficient accommodation capacity. The majority of respondents

believe that placements take place in stages, from the most favourable to the least favourable option for the child. It would mean first trying to place the child with a relative, then with a foster family in the same area, then in a facility in the neighbourhood, followed by foster families from other regions and finally facilities in Croatia. The results of our research show that social workers are guided by the best choice for the child. They are aware of the importance of keeping the child in a familiar environment and close to the primary family, but also, the first available placement is often the only criterion, regardless of the child's needs. Triseliotis, Sellick and Short (1995) also agree with the need for the child to remain in the home environment when discussing a change to the child's life due to separation from the family. The majority of respondents stated that during the child's stay in foster care, the child's progress is monitored, and the possibility of returning to the primary family is assessed. Our results show that foster care outcomes are often a long-term placement in foster care or an institution, a possible change of the foster family or a transition from foster care to an institution, or, in the rarest cases, a return to the primary family. In addition, Croatia has noted an increase in the number of children moving from foster care to residential care in 2017 (Lerch and Nordenmark Severinsson, 2019).

Based on the results of our research collected as answers to the first research question, the stages of the foster care process were defined, which form the basis for further research and the collection of data on the involvement of participants in the foster care process and how social workers understand emancipation, which is the second research question in the first thesis of the dissertation. According to our findings, the involvement of participants in the foster care process depends on the method of separating the child from the family, the willingness of participants to cooperate and the time available for social workers to work with all participants.

Ways of participation of all involved in the foster care process

Our findings show that when a child is separated from the family in an emergency, cooperation is usually limited, and the focus is on protecting the child, while the primary families often do not agree to the separation, meaning that the process is sometimes carried out in the presence of the police. The majority of respondents state that separating a child from their family in the presence of the police is not a pleasant process. Johnson, Yoken and Voss (1995) agree with our findings when describing children's attitudes in such situations and recounting feelings of fear and shame. Our findings show that in such cases of separating the child from the family, neither participation nor emancipation was observed, and social workers are aware of these inadequacies and the child and the primary

family lacking preparation for the separation. The majority agree that the consequence of such a process is the placement of the child in the first available accommodation, which may not be suitable for the child, and that the involvement of participants, such as the primary family, the child, the wider network or other professionals, only occurs after the fact. The results of our research show that in cases of emergency separation, social workers have no other solution due to insufficient available time in the process to get the consent of the child or parents, while similar data in the research of Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018), found that children are not involved in the decision on family separation, regardless of the separation method. Burke (2008, p. 6) says that the system is not designed for children but for adults, drawing similar conclusions about the lack of involvement of children in decisions that affect them.

Participation of primary family and the child in the foster care process

The results of our research indicate two ways of involving and informing primary families: inviting the family to the regional office or visiting the family at home to inform the child and parents about the procedure in progress, but the criteria upon the social workers decide on one of these two options is unclear. Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018, p. 20) state that the conversation with the child should be conducted in a familiar and safe environment, which is not always the case according to our research findings. Furthermore, our findings show that the conversation is held with the primary family and the child to inform them of the separation decision that has been made, which leaves no space for the child or family to express their views or make decisions about their lives. However, our findings reveal the rare cases where a joint decision is made in a conversation between the professional team and the family. Research by Johnson, Yoken and Voss (1995, p. 965) shows similar results, i.e., children believe the decisions are made for them by experts or other adults. Similarly, Žižak et al. (2012) in Croatia found that most children stated that they were not asked for their opinion when the decision to separate from the family was made. According to our findings, in the ongoing process of the foster care system, where the court decision on the child's separation ensues, the child's participation is ensured, allowing the child to make a statement in court, either heard live or the statement is recorded along with the support of an expert, usually a social pedagogue. Stephenson, Gourley and Miles (2004, p. 17) point out that the child's participation depends on the preparation and support of the child by adults, while Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018, p. 6) emphasise the active role of the child, who can only expect to participate if what is happening has been explained and a trusted person is present. The

majority stated that an opinion is sought from the child, including remarks heard and noted, which they consider is the child's participation in the process. According to Arnstein (1969, p. 217), it is not enough to hear and listen to the child's voice if the child does not participate in the decisions, as it would only seemingly be participation. Borić and Mataga Tintor (2022) talk about the lack of trust in children and the belief in their ability to make decisions, which is also evident in our findings, given that the child is a passive participant in the process.

According to our results, the participation of the primary family is more prevalent before separating the child from the family than after the separation. When implementing measures imposed on the family, primary families receive help and support in caring for the child, but after separation, the participation of the primary family is absent and only occurs in certain segments of the foster care system or when certain issues are discussed, such as regulating the personal relationship between the child and parents in the planning process. Our results show that the primary family is only involved in creating an individual change plan for the child in those areas where it concerns regulating contact between the child and parents, the amount of pocket money or additional costs the primary family have to pay for the child. Furthermore, the majority believe that the plan is only part of the bureaucracy and the necessary administration, where social workers are the ones drawing it up based on what they know about the family, while participants only agree and sign. Our research shows that in the planning phase, other participants, such as the child, the wider family network or the foster family, are insufficiently involved and are only individually involved when directly affecting them. The majority describe the planning process as a bureaucratic part of their work and not a method of cooperation with the users. According to our findings, it often happens that not all participants in the foster care system are sufficiently informed about all parts of the individual change plan for the child.

Our findings indicate that the court regulates the relationship between the child and the parents at the suggestion of social workers, while the parents do not necessarily have to agree with a particular aspect of the outcome but must comply with the decision, leaving no room for parental emancipation. Although the parents retain all parental rights, participation in decisions about the child that are part of the child's everyday life, such as decisions concerning school trips, photo shoots at school and visits to the doctor, are evident. Separating the child from the family does not solve the family's problems, but further work is needed to bring about change in the family through additional knowledge and skills that enable parents to take on more responsibility, as stated by Flaker (2023).

However, our findings did not see evidence of support for the primary family that would enable greater emancipation and participation in the foster care system.

Support during foster care

Support for the primary family, as the majority indicated, is not present in foster care practice and is usually completely absent while the child is in foster care, though the necessary support for primary families is regulated by law to reinforce their strengths (Foster Care Act, Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22). It is not clear how the primary family can progress and meet the conditions for having the child returned to the family without the necessary resources. Our findings show that the primary family is the least involved in the foster care process and depends on the skills, commitment and available time of social workers who can dedicate themselves to working with primary families. Ivković and Žižak (2010) come to similar conclusions in a study in which they describe the state of the foster care system in Croatia. They show that the primary family is completely excluded from the process of placing the child in foster care.

Understanding the emancipation of participants and the bureaucracy of parts of the foster care system

The role of social work in emancipating users is to create spaces and mobilise the capacities of each individual, including the child, to acquire the necessary skills to manage one's life. However, according to our results, such a case was not noted, while the process itself focuses on the bureaucratic part and the form to be filled in. On the other hand, our results show that a conversation with a psychologist preparing a child for separation from the family cannot be considered a sufficient solution. Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018) agree with this and point out that preparation should be seen as a process and not just a single meeting.

According to our findings, emancipation is not present when working with primary families, and social workers do not understand all the principles of this approach or are powerless when it comes to working a different way with users. Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019) also describe the lack of work with primary families and emphasise the need to invest in new knowledge that would help them take better care of the child, in the context of the emancipation and autonomy of users as advocated by social work. The importance of working with primary families is also shown in a study carried out in England by Thoburn (2002). The results show that working with primary families significantly increased the number of children returned to their parents. Although foster care is intended for the short-term placement of a child, our findings show that children are staying longer

and longer in foster care, which is consistent with research by Žižak et al. (2012) indicating an increase in the length of foster care placements, on average from four to nineteen years.

Group work in foster care process

According to our findings, group work does not usually take place in the foster care process, as all participants in the process cannot come together in one place. Most define group work with a single family, but never with both families together. Our findings show that social workers lack the resources, time and knowledge for group work. The majority claim that the entire foster care process is complex, spontaneous and adapted to the ability of social workers to dedicate themselves to the process. Folman's (1998) research also concurs with our findings and shows that children perceive the foster care process as disorganised, inappropriate and complex.

Maintaining a positive relationship between the child and the primary family is described by the majority as an important process, and social workers are aware of its importance for the child in terms of the child's rights and welfare. Furthermore, Triseliotis, Sellick and Short (1995, p. 52) point out that social workers understand the importance of the child's feelings and right to be informed of the origins and history as elements of emancipation in social work. Our research shows that most respondents believe primary families are dependent on the system and unable to make any changes on their own, describing it as social work not finding an appropriate solution in working with primary families but also taking control of the family's life in the long term. Prpić (1987) sees a necessary element of emancipation precisely in the dependency from which the users must free themselves, while Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp (2014) point to the need for joint cooperation in order for the primary family to achieve autonomy, independence and personal growth, which, according to our findings, is not given in foster care practice.

Joint work of all those involved in the foster care process

Further research and delving deeper into the topic under investigation is related to the third research question in the first thesis, referring to the way decisions are made in foster care and the continuity of the relationship between the primary family, the child and the foster parents. Our results show that the joint work of all parties involved is very rare or nonexistent in foster care practice. The majority of respondents state that primary families often do not have the opportunity to get to know the foster carers with whom the child is placed. This situation is particularly true in cases of emergency separations but also when the child is separated by court order or with the consent of the parents. Our results show that the most common reason is a lack of time on the part of the regional office's team of

experts, a lack of interest on the part of the primary family or the child's distant placement, for example, in another county. In addition, social workers often believe that primary families do not work in the child's best interests and do not trust them. Less participation by primary families was also observed in the study of Galaway, Nutter and Hudson (1994, p. 76), who showed that only one-third of primary families are given the opportunity to see where their child is placed and to build a relationship with the foster family. The results of our study show a difference in the attitudes of social workers in relation to their available time to prepare for a child's placement. Namely, the results of the observations during the training show that the participants indicate 15-20 days until the court decision is final as possible time for preparation of participants, while our results show that no action is taken until the court decision and only then do preparations start, leaving very little time for contact and introductions. Although the process of acting on a court order is legally correct and most social workers follow it in foster care practice, there are also contrary cases in foster care practice where social workers use this time for a different type of work with all participants. Most agree that planning is part of the foster care process when the joint cooperation of all participants can be achieved. In practice, however, the situation is different, and there is no possibility of bringing all participants together. However, the social worker is the person who defines the necessary part of the plan with each participant and tries to involve a wider family network. Research conducted in Croatia by Ivković and Žižak (2010) shows that primary families are rarely involved in planning, while only 14% of foster families are involved in the process, which is consistent with our earlier findings showing that the planning process is becoming increasingly bureaucratised and social workers often draw up a plan on their own.

Supporting the foster families and the child is referred to by the majority of respondents as a necessary network of institutional support. However, according to legal obligations, social workers visit the family once or twice a year, which is not enough to build a positive relationship and trust with the child or the foster parents. Similar results are shown by studies in Croatia (Ivković and Žižak, 2010; Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015), which indicate insufficient work with children and foster parents, but also the dissatisfaction of children and foster parents with this kind of relationship. Mobile teams as a support system for foster parents in the field are present in certain communities in accordance with the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22) but remain an underdeveloped service that largely depends on funding from the European Union in terms of project activities (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022b). Our research shows that social

workers see mobile teams as part of the solution to problems associated with supporting foster parents, but they also emphasise negative aspects, such as the fact that members of the mobile teams are persons unknown to foster parents and the contact with the social worker whom they trust is partially lost. In the context of joint cooperation between all parties involved in the foster care system, the mobile teams focus only on supporting foster parents without involving other participants, which fulfils only some of the needs of the foster care system. Another type of team, foster care teams in regional offices, is described by the majority as necessary for foster care but does not exist in practice, which the majority sees as a disadvantage, given that cooperation with all those involved in the foster care system should be more compact and comprehensive. Foster care teams are formed in regional offices that have more than one hundred foster families under their responsibility, which is rare (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015).

Decision-making during the foster care process

When it comes to decision-making in foster care, which encompasses all decisions needed in foster care and the child's daily life, our research findings show this to be one of the most challenging areas of foster care. The majority view is that the care of the child is left to foster carers, who do not have the mandate to make decisions about the day-to-day needs of the child, such as school trips, school photo shoots, school enrolment, medical appointments, travel and similar needs of the family. Decisions for the child are made by the primary family, with whom, in our findings, the foster parents have often not established a positive relationship.

Most agree that this is one of the most stressful tasks for foster carers as they are often unable to contact the primary family who are supposed to sign consents, or the primary family promises to sign but does not. In a study of children and young people's attitudes to foster care, as described by Morgan (2006), children recounted how their stay in foster care would be easier if foster carers could make decisions about their daily activities. Similar difficulties in decision-making are evident in research conducted in Slovenia by Berglez (2005, p. 30), in which foster parents express their dissatisfaction at not having the autonomy to decide on the child's basic needs, such as the child's personal documents, schooling and the child's participation in various activities. In addition, research conducted in Croatia on the relationship between the primary family and foster family during the process of placement in foster care shows that support from social workers to foster parents is most needed exactly when building a relationship between the two families (Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović and Jelača, 2005). In contrast, the research by Ivković and

Žižak (2010) shows that most foster parents are satisfied with the cooperation achieved with the primary families. Our results highlight the difficult cooperation between foster parents and the primary family, and the majority agree that the role of social workers is to be a mediator in processes to establish cooperation and resolve conflicts between the families, which affects the child's everyday life in the foster family.

Support network for the foster care process

The results of our research on the fourth research question in the first thesis refer to the opportunities and barriers in developing a community support network for foster care practice and are divided into three themes in relation to the results obtained: institutional level, personal level and resources, as well as the necessary knowledge as a resource.

According to the results of our research, the development of the foster care system promoted by the institution has not been or is insufficiently developed. Moreover, the number of foster families is insufficient to provide all the necessary placement capacities, considering that the number of children separated from their families is increasing and that children are often placed in residential care for lack of any other solution. In addition, the majority emphasises that in foster care practice, it often happens that a child is placed in another region, which creates additional difficulties for social workers as they are responsible for two regional offices, one for the foster parents and one for the child. Another important shortcoming at the institutional level, unanimously recognised as a major obstacle to the development of the foster care system, is the lack of a foster care team that deals exclusively with foster care and the development of the foster care system at the regional level. Laklija and Brkić (2022) also comes to similar conclusions in regard to foster care teams, which are important formal support for foster carers and are necessary for all regional offices. In addition, the majority of respondents agree that social workers in regional offices where there is no foster care team take on foster care tasks in addition to regular work, where such tasks are not well solved at the institutional level. Time is a necessary and missing resource highlighted as the most important finding of our research, which most respondents associated with work organisation at the institutional level, delegation of work tasks and the bureaucratisation of systems, taking up much of the time that could otherwise be utilised for direct work with users. A study conducted in Croatia by Družić Ljubotina and Friščić (2014) shows similar results, namely that social workers are overloaded with work and a large number of cases fall on a single social worker. The authors also highlight frequent changes in legislation as exacerbating for social workers in terms of available time, but also the increased stress burden for them. Other resources at

the organisational level that are described by most respondents as necessary and not sufficient are, for example, a company car for social workers to travel to field sites and a reduction in the possibility of personal contact between social workers and users. At the same time, the majority state that the lack of time and transport often makes it difficult for them to engage with the community, such as schools, local authorities and civil society, and be more involved in the work and connections of such organisations. The institutional level also includes a hierarchical system which, according to the majority of respondents, is sometimes an obstacle to the mission of social workers, given that the heads of regional offices are not always willing to make suggestions and their approval is required for all social worker tasks, leading to a lack of autonomy for social workers. Our findings found that the turnover rate of social workers in regional offices is frequent, which the majority of respondents associate with difficulty in building trusting relationships with users. Most identify the advantages of the institution in terms of resources, such as premises to work with users, the training available to social workers, teamwork and the possibility of integrating various professions as a multidisciplinary approach to users.

When it comes to the personal level, the majority cite the motivation of social workers and their desire to work in the foster care system as a positive resource. In addition, social workers should have good communication skills, creativity, and organisational skills. The majority express the desire to be more actively involved in developing community services and establishing contacts with local actors, hence referring to lectures, workshops or guest lectures organised within the community. Despite the positive motivation, most agree that there are also negative aspects, such as the burden of stress, lack of autonomy at work and less teamwork in some regional offices. The experience and length of engagement by social workers in foster care practice is mentioned by the majority as an advantage in terms of being connected to the community, which they agreed requires an awareness of power relations between structures and also the development of personal relationships in order to find sources for user support.

The results of our research show that social workers lack knowledge about certain areas of social work, which was already identified during the observations in the training phase (Chapter 7.2.), such as community work, group work, working with families and foster care. In addition, the majority concluded that further training is important to their professional development, and when working in foster care, they highlight the need for ongoing training together with foster parents. Most underscore the need for familiarity with the area of community project activities and getting involved. Similarly, the research

findings of Rajter, Katalinić and Tomić (2016) show the need to improve the knowledge of social workers in the field of advocacy and policymaking in the community and project activities. The majority agree that foster parents need continuous training, especially in specific areas they may encounter when working with children, while Laklija, Vladić and Stanić (2022) describe an example of working with mothers and children in foster care and highlight the additional knowledge required for this kind of work. Our findings show that foster carers rarely have access to additional knowledge beyond the legally required annual training. This outcome is consistent with the findings of Redding, Fried and Britner (2000), who show that foster carers rarely receive the necessary and timely training to work with children.

7.3. ELEMENTS OF THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE IN FOSTER CARE PRACTICE AND THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF WORKING WITH USERS

The second thesis refers to elements of the family group conference method in the foster care process and the social workers' practical knowledge of the principles of empowerment, inclusion, the importance of control participants have over their lives and the involvement of a wider community network.

To obtain answers to the research questions in the second thesis, the action group first defined the elements of the family group conference based on knowledge gained from training and examined scientific data. The action group discussion analysed the defined elements of the family group conference and presented them in a table for easier understanding and the link with current foster care practices (Table 9). Action group members had time to observe practices in the regional offices, utilising the defined process of foster care stemming from the result of the first thesis and the first research question in this dissertation. The collected results were summarised and analysed, and knowledge about the different experiences of the social workers in the regional offices was shared.

Further research focused on knowledge of the process of empowerment, the involvement of a wider user network and the community resources available to social workers. A discussion is one of the methods used extensively in this phase of the research to conduct an in-depth analysis, pose questions and find common answers to the topic under study. In addition, during the action group meeting, diary of the meeting and notes on answers to the second and third research questions in the second thesis were kept. Data on how social workers listen to the child in the foster care process was noted, including how the broader family network is involved and whether social workers are aware that families should retain control over their lives.

7.3.1. Characteristics of the family group conference method in foster care practice in Croatia

The results of the first research question in the second thesis, referring to elements of the family group conference in social work practice, are presented in a descriptive and tabular form for the sake of transparency and a better understanding of the results (Table 9).

After conducting interviews with action group members, in which the foster care process was clearly and defined in detail as a series of steps taking place in different situations, a clear picture of the foster care process was established, largely based on the legal provisions that stipulate the jobs of social workers. The outline of the foster care process (Figure 14) provides a clear sequence of events in specific situations but without a deeper understanding of how those involved in the process should act. Mesec (1997, p. 77) describes the need for different perspectives using different methods and approaches during the research in order to gain a clearer picture of the research topic by observing from different perspectives. The data collected in the interviews formed the basis for further research into the individual segments of the foster care system by linking them with the elements of the family group conference. A prerequisite was the method of training all participants in the action group, resulting in the synthesis of data and combining new knowledge with existing knowledge from practice. None of the participants in our action group had any prior knowledge of the family group conferences before taking part in the research, nor were they familiar with the method. The education method enabled participants to take a fresh look at the foster care process and return to the practice and research of the foster care process through the newly adopted elements of the family group conference. Metcalfe and Humphreys (2002, p. 441) state that action research is an opportunity for shared learning and has educational value for researchers. Furthermore, by identifying the elements of the family group conferences in practice, action group members gained much more clarity on the importance of participation and the emancipation of participants. All group members were encouraged to think about the possibilities of applying the method in practice, as one participant explained:

“It also depends on the foster carers. I was constantly thinking about whether I could use the method to some extent with some of my foster carers and what they wanted. What kind of foster carers are they, traditionally speaking? I think that’s a very different division of

responsibility, maybe in that preventative part so that there's no separation, so we can take a range of measures.” (AGs3s3_01).

Freire (2002, p. 17) calls this type of teaching “education for liberation” because a critical attitude towards the problem is encouraged and knowledge is acquired in this way. The participants developed an awareness of a problem that is real and changeable, and the challenge is to learn about it. In conversing with action group participants, awareness was raised, followed by critical distancing, helping participants to objectively observe foster care practice and the possibilities of applying the family group conference, as seen in the results and testimonies of participants. Learning and generating new knowledge coincided with problem-solving, i.e., changing the direction of thinking in relation to the area under study (Bargal et al., 1992).

The recording of events during action group tasks led to observing changes in the attitudes and opinions of action group members about the family group conference method, which became more positive, but also about the need for change foster care practice. As the meetings progressed, participants began engaging more deeply with the topic, offering a more honest assessment of current practices while discussing and sharing their own experiences with the practices. The sense of belonging to the group increased with each meeting, helping participants bond and feel free to express their opinions, for example:

“And wait, why should they be afraid of what we say? I mean, it's all part of the experience and what's behind it, and the second thing is what we all see here. I think it's become clear that things are not going in the right direction.” (AGs3s5_01).

The group dynamics were not linear but accompanied by changing activities, different intensities of discussion and different attitudes. The parts of the creative cycle were clearly recognisable, as was the equal participation of all members, including the researcher.

In our research, after the action group members had generated knowledge from both areas under study, i.e., foster care and family group conferences, gained experience in group work from action group work, and released their inner potential in active participation as researchers, they focused on collecting answers to the second research question in the second thesis. The action group defined the elements of the family group conference as a result of our research. The elements, once defined by the action group, were combined with the existing theoretical framework from the reviewed literature to formulate the characteristics of the family group conference and elements consistent with existing theory. Table 9 shows each defined element of family group conference associated with foster care and is expressed as present, partially present or absent. Partially present means that the

element is present to a lesser degree, that practises vary across regional offices, or that the element is only sometimes present in practice when there are opportunities to apply it in the foster care process.

Table 9: Identifying elements of the family group conference in social work practice

Elements of the family group conference defined by action group	The process of foster care in practice and the present elements of the family group conference / PRESENT – YES, NOT OR PARTIALLY
Gathering the whole family (primary and foster), child and experts in one place	Partially - In the process of creating an individual change plan for the child
Joint conversation among all participants – creating space for dialogue	Partially - In the process of creating an individual change plan for the child - Communication problems between primary and foster families
Equal inclusion of the primary family	Not - Weak involvement of the primary family
The voice of the child heard by all participants in the process	Yes - Before separation from the family - Interview in a regional office with a psychologist or expert team
The right of the child to express an opinion	Yes - Opinion of the child during the process of separating and deciding on placement - In the process of creating an individual change plan for the child - Important decisions about the child's life
Empowerment of the primary family, the child and the foster parents	Partially - Measures from the legal protection of the family before separation - Support for foster parents and children as needed - Missing primary family
Democratic approach – everyone participates equally	Partially - In court, anyone can express their opinion - Not present enough
Equality and inclusion	Partially - The regional officer and the court have more power and make decisions - The process of creating an individual change plan – everyone is involved
Transparency of working with the family	Yes - Through an individual change plan, participants are informed - Documentation and correspondence
User-friendly language	Yes - Present in all conversations with families and children - Depending on the social workers, their skills and experience
Strengthening the connection of family members	Yes - Encouraging the maintaining of the relationship between the child and the primary family - Finding placement in the area where the child is located
Building a positive relationship	Yes

	- Honesty and trust in all relationships during the foster process
Incorporation of formal and informal family resources	Partially - The available resources are used - There is often a lack of resources in the community. - Families have a weak support network. - It depends on the skills of the social workers
Active role of the family – not passive	Partially - It varies from family to family - Accommodation in relative foster care - Primary family passive - Creating an individual change plan for the child
Appreciation of cultural differences	Yes - Respected throughout the foster care process
Representative for the child – if the child does not want to participate	Not - A special guardian for the child is determined extremely rarely
Meeting place with family at their home	Partially - The regional office is the most common meeting place - The home of the family rarely
Respect for each other – expert, participants and child	Partially - Respect by social workers and foster families - Sometimes, there is no respect from the side of the primary family or the child
Right to information – two-way communication	Partially - Experts inform the family - Sometimes, information is withheld by the child or the primary family
A dynamic process aimed at change	Partially - A dynamic process involving various participants - Less focus on change, more on accommodation of the child - Longer stay of the child in the foster family
Strengthening the competences of all participants	Partially - For experts, it depends on the regional office covering the locality of the child - Foster families attend an educational course once a year - The primary family is missing
Shared responsibility	Partially - Too little responsibility for the primary family - The greatest responsibility of the regional office/social workers and foster family - Unequally represented

The findings summarised in Table 9 show the relationship between the elements of the family group conference and social work. However, a detailed narrative analysis and presentation of certain characteristics of our research findings in relation to the first research question of the second thesis is required for a discussion of the area explored.

Gathering the family, child and experts in one place and having a joint discussion with all participants

Our research results show that bringing together all foster care participants, i.e., the primary family, the child and the foster parents, is partly present in social work practice, meaning

that such situations sometimes exist. Most of the time, it is possible to work with a family, whether foster or primary family, together with the child. However, this is not the general rule because, at times, a parent cannot participate, which is more common in primary families when one member is absent, e.g., because they are serving a prison sentence, the partners are separated, or one of the parents is undergoing some kind of treatment. The majority state that social workers are always in contact with all parties involved and regularly try to bring them together, for example, when it comes to agreeing on important aspects of the child's daily care, returning the child to the primary family or drawing up an individual change plan for the child.

When all participants can be gathered in one place, the discussion is not held with everyone together but with each family individually or one child, in particular, according to information from the majority in our research. Furthermore, our findings show that joint conversations are a rare situation in practice, although examples from practice do exist where joint conversations between the primary family and foster family were held on the topic of better communication between the primary family and foster family or the child. Another noted case from practice is the common development and definition of an individual change plan for a child, which is described as an individual case. Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy (2008, p. 75) describe the family group conference as a place where a joint, equal and collaborative process takes place between the family and professionals and the collaboration is based on bringing together not only the family but also the wider family network. The authors emphasise that this type of inclusive collaboration helps the family have a sense of control over the process and focuses on the actual needs of the family. A family group conference is not a top-down driven process, which is important for social work to achieve inclusive collaboration and a balance of power.

Our findings show that discussions among all participants or their partaking in planning are rare in the foster care system and described as isolated cases. Furthermore, the results show that everyone is involved in different ways. The child is often singled out and spoken to individually and is not present during discussions with the primary family. The foster family meets separately and the primary family separately, while in practice, joint cooperation in one place happens partially in some cases. This approach makes the work of social workers more difficult, as more time is needed for individual discussions, the flow of information is weaker, and the foster care process is not transparent.

Equal inclusion of the primary family

The results of our research show that the element described as equal involvement of the primary family in the foster care process is not present in social work practice. The majority of respondents only mentioned individual situations in which getting the primary family involved is important. The example they gave refers to the need for social workers to get the primary family to sign off on an individualised plan for the child, involving the primary family only in terms of forming personal relationships, i.e., the details of meetings with the child. Our findings show that the primary family lacks involvement throughout the entire process of foster care placement. For example, this happens in the initial process, when a child is separated, and decisions take place on behalf of the child, or during the process when the primary family participates in signing various consents for the child (for medical treatment, school trips), but without partaking in such decisions. There is no work taking place with the primary family at all during the child's stay in foster care, according to the majority.

Merkel-Holguin (2004, p. 157) argues similarly, pointing out that it is common for primary families to be only minimally involved in drawing up individualised change plans for the child, and their involvement is generally almost non-existent. The consequences of minimal involvement of the primary family are plans that do not meet the needs of the family and are not realistic. The research findings of Laklija and Sladović Franz (2013, p. 19) describe similar results, i.e., the primary family lacks an active role when the child is placed in foster care. The authors describe how important the involvement of the primary family is for three main reasons. Involving the primary family in drawing up an individualised change plan for the child increases the possibility of cooperation and motivation on the part of the parents, as they are positively attuned to planned changes. Another reason is maintaining the primary family's responsibility towards the child, as their commitment and cooperation are still required and, therefore, play an important role in the whole process. The third reason is the active involvement of the primary family in preparing the conditions for the child's return to the family. Ivković and Žižak (2010, p. 44) point out another important fact, namely that there are no known studies in the field of foster care that show the perspective of primary families nor what happens to the families while the children are placed in foster care. The authors emphasise what happens to the primary family at any particular stage of the foster care process is unknown, and there is a need to develop an approach that takes into account primary families as equal participants in foster care.

Hearing the voice of the child by all participants and respecting the child's right to express an opinion

The child's right to express an opinion and be heard, described as an element of the family group conference, is present in social work practice, according to our findings. The majority described the practice of always consulting the child before separation from the family, a psychologist from the regional office interviewing the child and social workers regularly talking to the child during foster care. Furthermore, our results show that the child's participation depends on several factors: age, family situation, fear of speaking out and the time available to express an opinion. Nevertheless, in foster care, the child is always respected, either in a personal conversation with the child or within the family circle. Furthermore, the majority of respondents believe that hearing the child's voice is important in the foster care process, which is in line with Madsen (2007, p. 34), who emphasises the importance of all voices in social work, whereby each family member must be supported to achieve change. Furthermore, our research shows that respondents see the role of social work as empowering the child to express views on important existential issues and to participate in creating an individualised change plan. Loreman (2009, p. 3) also agrees when pointing out the important role of social work in respecting the child as an equal partner in dialogue and respecting the person's childhood. Although the majority in our research claim that the child is involved and listened to throughout the foster care process, this issue has caused the most debate because it is not clear how the child's views are taken into account when decisions concerning the child are made. Our findings point to two options: listening to the child, which does not influence the decisions as they are made by the expert team from the regional office, and respecting the child's opinion when trying to find a different approach or a different solution for the child. Čačinović Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019, p. 103) emphasise that the child is entitled to be heard the child has the right to feelings which should be taken seriously in the conversation, while Loreman (2009, p. 117) further states that respecting one's childhood means caring about its uniqueness, which is at risk of being defined by adults. Our research shows the risk of adults making decisions instead of children in social work practice.

Empowerment of the primary family, the child and the foster parents

The results of our research show that the empowerment of the child, the primary family or the foster family is only partial, meaning that, in practice, no effort is made to empower all participants in the foster care process. The majority state that the primary family receives support and assistance in caring for the child before the child is separated from the family.

After the child is separated from the family, there is no further support for the primary family from the social system or the community. During foster care, the child and the foster family receive ongoing support and the foster parents are empowered to cope with the challenges of working with the child.

The family group conference is based on a strengths-based approach that focuses exclusively on the strengths of the participants and on the belief that everyone has the potential to overcome difficulties. This approach empowers not only the family but also the professionals involved in the process (Fox, 2018). On the other hand, empowerment also involves a shift in power, achieving balance and transferring power to the family by the professionals.

Our findings from the action group discussion show that social workers are often not even aware of their position of power and that they often decide instead of the family, believing it is part of their role. Most agree that work is done with the child and the foster family to help them mobilise their skills and achieve a good outcome in foster care. The primary family lacks empowerment and a belief that they can make changes. The majority state that social workers find it most difficult to change positions of power as it requires a change in the way they work with service users, but also the difficulty of believing in the strengths of families; hence, they emphasise a need for more knowledge about working with families. For family group conferences to be applied in practice, the majority believe that changes are needed in the way social workers work and understand relationships with users.

Democratic access, equality, contribution and inclusion

The elements of a group family conference, incorporating a democratic approach and active participation, equality and inclusion of all those involved in the process, are partially present in foster care practice, according to our findings. The majority described situations in practice in which there is occasional opportunity for participation and expression of opinions by participants. One such situation is participation in devising an individualised change plan for the child, in which all parties are involved. In contrast, the majority describes participation in a court proceeding where the judge is the person who decides which persons are to be included in the decision-making process. The majority sees equality and inclusion as an occasional phenomenon, pointing out that regional offices and courts have the authority to make decisions regardless of other participants, which does not put experts and users on an equal footing.

The basic premise of the family group conference is the sharing of power among professionals and all other participants in the foster care system, with an emphasis on the

mutual balancing of responsibilities (Merkel-Holguin, 2004). The principle of participatory democracy in the family group conference is highlighted by Burford and Hudson (2008, p. 3) as the only possible fair approach to working with families. Furthermore, democracy is associated with strengthening the family and community, whereas a family conference can weaken family bonds if the understanding of democracy is left only to the institution (Moore and McDonald, 2000, p. 55).

Our findings show that understanding the democratic approach is, to some extent, left to the institutions, which decide when and how to involve users in the process. The weakening of family ties was highlighted in our research through two examples from practice: the difficulty of maintaining contact between the child and the primary family and the lack of involvement of the wider family and community in the foster care process. In addition, the difficulty in the child bonding with the foster family if not receiving support was also observed. In foster care practice, not enough space is given to the active participation of users, where equality can only be achieved with balanced power positions, which is not the case in our research.

Strengthening the bond between family members and building a positive relationship

Strengthening the bond between family members is an element of the family group conference present in social work and foster care practice, according to our research findings. The majority agreed that one of the main tasks of social workers in foster care is to build a positive relationship between the family and the foster family, but above all, maintain contact between the child and the primary family. In contrast, our results show that it is important for social workers and the court to judge whether it is in the child's best interests to maintain a relationship with the primary family. They cite circumstances when this is not good, such as in cases of sexual abuse or violence against the child.

Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy (2008, p. 77) not only emphasise the importance of maintaining the relationship between the child and primary family but also look at social work intervention from the broader perspective of ecological theory. It implies mobilising users and community capacity so that users have access to a wider social network and community resources to find the needed support. The aim of this approach is to promote solidarity for collective action and awareness of its necessity, while the family group conference can be a platform for its realisation. Constable and Lee (2015, p. 7) make a similar assertion, emphasising the important role of social workers in connecting and resolving relationships with families.

Our results show that the wider family network is rarely involved in the foster care process, although there are situations where a close relative or, in the case of kinship foster care, someone from the extended family is involved. The majority stated that social workers always try to maintain family ties, putting the child's placement always first in the child's home environment so as not to lose contact with the primary family as well as the previous social network. Trust and nurturing a positive relationship are only possible if all parties are involved and willing to cooperate, which the majority attribute to the characteristics of social workers who are aware of the importance of being honest with the child, respecting the child's feelings and avoiding promises that cannot be kept. Similarly, Madsen (2007, p. 34) describes experts as honest and responsible allies of people in co-creating solutions with the family by working together on the basis of a relationship of trust.

Barker and Barker (1995) describe the results of their research showing that families who have attended a group family conference report better connectedness and relationships within the family and with professionals after the conference. In addition, research shows that during family group conferences, open discussions were held within the family, the problem was viewed from multiple perspectives, and the family had the opportunity to learn about the dynamics of family relationships (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). In comparison to our results, in the foster care practice in Croatia, there is no opportunity for this kind of discussion within the family, and there is a lack of multiple perspectives on the family problem. The element of the family group conference to strengthen family bonds is present in practice in a form that the current foster care process can support and enable, and it relates only to strengthening and maintaining the bonds between the child and the primary family or the foster family and the primary family.

Involvement of formal and informal family resources

Our research findings show that formal or informal family networks are partially involved in the foster care system. It means that social workers usually cannot rely on a community support network in their efforts to connect the family to available resources, as it is usually not sufficiently developed. The majority indicated that sometimes an informal family network works with the family, but it depends on the social worker's skills and efforts as well as the family's capacity. Our results show that the common reason for involving an informal network, be it relatives or friends, is to find a foster family closest to the primary family, as the social worker's first choice when placing a child outside the family. The family group conference relies on getting the extended family network involved, while Nuttall (2009) associates positive outcomes for children with increased contact between

children and extended family members. Fox (2018, p. 32) describes the great benefits of involving family, community and the neighbourhood as available informal family networks. Informal networks become advocates for the family, support the family and facilitate necessary changes.

Based on our findings, formal support networks exist within the care system. This outcome refers to the involvement of the education system, health system, justice system and other necessary services. The majority agree that involving other professionals and systems is a difficult task when connecting everything and all aspects and getting the information to the family. The family group conference brings all the experts together in one place where all the information is more transparent and immediately available to everyone.

The family's active and not passive role and a dynamic process aimed at change

The active role of participants in the foster care system and dynamic process are elements of the family group conference that are only partially present in foster care practice. Our research findings show that the primary family participates less in the foster care process, in which their role is seen as more of a passive one. In some cases, the primary family actively participates in creating an individualised plan for the child during the planning process, but it depends on how the social workers conduct the planning process. The majority view is that the foster carer plays a more active role by constantly seeking support, participating in parenting, caring for the child and talking to professionals about the child's needs. The child plays a passive rather than active role and is only involved in the foster care process in exceptional situations, such as when being placed in a foster family and settling into a new family.

Our research shows that the foster care placement process is a very dynamic process incorporating a number of steps, constant communication and interaction, and requiring the active role of social workers. The majority said that the dynamics of the foster care process are not always the same and that the whole process sometimes stagnates due to overloaded social workers or the lack of foster care teams in the regional offices. The weakening of the dynamics certainly affects working with the primary family, leading to its neglect, deterioration of conditions for the child's return to the primary family and a prolonging of the child's placement in a foster family.

The family group conference is a dynamic process covering a range of activities undertaken by all participants, with each assuming an active role in supporting the family. Fox (2018, p. 29) describes the transition from a passive to an active participant in a family group conference happening through active engagement. It implies that each participant has a

specific task to fulfil in relation to the child and family receiving help. Fox (2018) points out that children and young people should be seen as active citizens and participants in all processes, speaking up for themselves rather than other adults taking on the role. In contrast to the family group conference, our findings show that current foster care practices do not provide an approach to determine the active role of participants in relation to others, except in meetings between the child and the primary family. The process occasionally requires the active involvement of a participant but not continuous involvement throughout the duration of foster care.

Appreciation of cultural differences

The results of our research show that respect for cultural differences is definitely present in social work practice, both in terms of different cultural groups and the heritage and preservation of the child's culture in the new environment. Lupton and Nixon (1999, p. 43) state that social workers make the family and the child feel accepted by approaching them personally and learning about each individual's culture and values. They explain this approach based on the origin of family group conferences, which arose partly in response to the cultural differences and needs of the Māori community in New Zealand, whose tradition is to resolve problems within the community. For this reason, recognising and respecting culture is a key desirable outcome of the family group conference method. Cemlyn, Greenfields, Burnett, Matthews and Whitwell (2009, p. 9) cite research showing that certain cultural groups in society are often marginalised or discriminated against, such as the Roma, and that respect and a deeper understanding of one's culture are necessary for a collaborative relationship.

Family group conferences are an answer to the question of how to reach different cultural groups of people, given that they utilise community support and the involvement of a wider network, which are extremely important in certain cultures (Fox, 2018). Children and their needs are part of a wider family and community network, not just part of the primary family. It means that cultural assumptions should be incorporated when working with families (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). Our research findings show that social workers in foster care practice respect cultural differences and the child's environment as part of cultural identity. However, often, it is not possible to fulfil the child's need to remain in their community. Instead, a placement for the child is found in a new environment, regardless of whether it meets the child's needs.

Advocacy for the child

The results of our research show that if the child does not wish to participate in the procedure, their interests are most often represented by their parents or social workers. If, in the social worker's assessment, the child needs to be represented in court or proceedings against the family, a special guardian can be appointed whose task it is to represent the child in court, inform the child and convey the decisions to the child (Act on the Centre for Special Guardianship, OG 47/20). The majority agreed that such situations are rare in foster care practice and social workers and psychologists from regional offices usually represent the child. Lupton and Nixon (1999, p. 110) describe the child's advocate, who may be someone from the extended family or a trusted person who takes on the role of representing the child in situations where the primary family cannot protect the child. Fox (2018, p. 32) also describes two types of advocate: an informal advocate, where the child's interests are represented by a family member or friend, and a formal independent advocate, who is trained to deal with such situations.

Our findings show that the form of the child's informal advocate does not exist in social work practice in Croatia, and the child is not given the opportunity to say who can speak on their behalf and protect their interests. The child has a formal or legal representative who assumes the role of representing the child in accordance with the law, but only in situations inside of court proceedings. Furthermore, the majority opinion is that a formal independent representative coming from the community is not the same as the child's legal representative, where such a form of representation does not exist in foster care practice. Our findings show that the child is not sufficiently protected in specific processes or letting them be heard in legal proceedings.

Right to information - two-way communication

Our research results show that the exchange of information between all parties involved in the foster care system is only partial and is described by most as a complex process. The majority state that social workers sometimes withhold certain information because they believe it would be very damaging to pass it on. They give the example of anamnestic information about a child not being fully shared with foster carers. They also perceive the primary family as a family that does not want to share everything important, sometimes out of shame or fear. Although they believe that all parties in the foster care system, including the child, should have the right to information for the child's benefit, they agree the situation is different in foster care practice.

One of the most important features of a family group conference is the exchange of information between all participants and the transparency of joint work. The expert's role is precisely to provide information about a problem, as well as available support and resources, which is seen as a completely new role and new position of power, as experts do not offer opinions or solutions (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). A family group conference is a two-way process of sharing information between all participants in a transparent manner that allows equal participation of all parties (Edwards, 2018).

In contrast to the family group conference method, our findings show that communication in the foster care process is limited as a one-way process when gathering information but not discussing it. Furthermore, the foster care process is not fully transparent and not everyone knows what is happening at every stage of the process. The majority describes foster carers most often complaining about lacking information about a child, mainly because they do not have the opportunity to meet with the primary family and obtain additional information. A study by Horvat, Tomašević and Lozina (2022, p. 108) arrives at similar conclusions and mentions the lack of information about a child after arriving at a foster family, which the foster parents consider important in helping the child adapt to the new environment and establishing a daily routine.

Strengthening the skills of all participants

The strengthening of skills, as an element of the family group conference, is, according to our findings, partially present in the foster care system. This outcome is due to the majority believing there are no opportunities for the primary family to develop skills and gain new knowledge because they are barely involved in the fostering process, while foster carers have to prepare themselves and fulfil specific educational standards. The exclusion of the primary family from most foster care processes reduces the possibility of creating new knowledge and competences for primary families, which Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019, p. 137) describe as a common case in foster care, but also consequently disrespects primary families. According to our findings, there are occasional parenting and communication skills workshops in the community that social workers refer primary families to while the child is in foster care, but these projects are short-lived and there is very little interest from primary families. While the child is living in foster care, foster parents can strengthen their skills by participating in the work of associations, but a large number of foster parents do not have an association in their neighbourhood. The majority agree that training to become foster parents is organised in the regional offices on a regular basis, i.e., once a year, which is also a legal obligation for foster parents.

The family group conference offers a space for exchanging experiences and knowledge, which in turn equalises the position of power as a prerequisite for emancipation (Saleebey, 2013). The aim of the family group conference is to learn from each other. Similarly, Freire (2002) describes the need for shared learning between students and teachers. Furthermore, Payne (2014) links empowerment to collaborative learning from a starting point of ignorance.

The findings of our research do not show an approach to learning and acquisition of new skills through collaborative working, just as the social workers did not see working with users as an opportunity to learn from them.

7.3.2. The voice of the child in the foster care process

The second research question in the second thesis of the dissertation refers to how children and their voices are given space during the foster care process from the perspective of social workers. Our research findings are supported by the data collected from action group members, from the foster care taking place in regional offices and their personal experiences. Although the first thesis of the dissertation talks about the issue of involving the child and expressing the child's views, we took it further by analysing the collected knowledge and discussion, and the findings of our research are presented in three aspects:

- Space of the child's involvement,
- When and at what point in the foster care process is the child involved, and
- Issues discussed with the child.

Given that the child is at the centre of the family group conference, participating on an equal footing and expressing needs, a deeper analysis of current practice helps reveal to what extent social workers currently respect, listen to, hear and communicate with the child so that we can consider the family group conference method and its practical use.

A place to converse with the child

Our research results show that where the child is interviewed, in most cases, is the regional office, i.e., the social worker's office. The majority agree that this is not always the case. For example, the child can be spoken to at home, but this is rare in foster care practice. According to our findings, the interview is conducted in a specially equipped office of the regional branch and in a child-friendly space, but the majority agree that the space is still unfamiliar to the child, which may affect the child's openness in the conversation.

Gehart (2007) points to the place harbouring the child's voice and created by social work, calling it a dialogic space. The author says that the space should be comfortable and friendly for the child, but not the offices where social workers work. A study conducted in Croatia by Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018) on children's attitudes towards foster care shows that the conversation with the child should be conducted in a safe and familiar space or in a place that the child experiences as private. Furthermore, the same study shows that it is not enough to have only one conversation with the child but multiple conversations are necessary for the child to process feelings. In their recommendations from the same study, the authors point out that a problem in social work is the lack of adequate premises to talk to the child.

Research by Mitchell and Kuczynski (2010) shows that children especially need time and conversations to talk to their parents before being separated from their primary family.

Research by Žižak et al. (2012) on foster children's attitudes towards foster care shows that social workers visiting the foster family often do not devote time or space to talking to the children, which the children perceive as a disadvantage given their desire to convey experiences. In contrast, our findings show that after the child is separated from their family and placed in foster care, social workers talk to the child alone in the new environment, but there are also situations where they talk to the whole foster family and the child together. In addition, social workers usually visit the foster families once or twice a year, which is not enough for good conversations and monitoring of the child.

Topics for discussions with the child

Our research results show that conversations with the child are conducted in two cases: before the decision to remove the child from the family and during the process of removing the child from the family. Before the decision to remove the child from the family, social workers and psychologists conduct a comprehensive assessment of the family, including several contacts with the child while still living in the primary family. The majority agree that the topics discussed during the family assessment are general and relate to the child's everyday life, such as kindergarten, school, leisure activities and friends. Furthermore, the majority state that questions are asked about the family, but in an indirect way, e.g., through drawing, playing or talking about a hypothetical situation, while older children are asked more specific, open questions about family members. At the same time, the psychologist assesses the child during the family assessment, for example:

“It is important that a professional, usually a psychologist, knows the child’s developmental characteristics, has experience in working with trauma, and establishes a trusting relationship with the child.” (SR2_07).

This statement clearly shows how important knowledge is in working with children and in conducting conversations in order to build a relationship of trust. The child's trust in the professional is the goal of the joint work, which enables an honest and open dialogue with the child.

The majority agreed that when a child is separated from the family, and once the decision has been made, the expert team from a regional office examines the child’s perception of the family situation by talking to the children and playing alone, colouring or using other techniques appropriate for the situation and the child’s age. In doing so, they use the child’s language to describe their family and respect what the child says without forming a judgment. Our findings show that the children are encouraged to talk to parents when describing what they did while living with them, how they spend time with parents and maintain personal relationships, where they go, what they do for entertainment, who helps them with schoolwork or, in the case of foster carers, how the foster carers treat them. When a child is placed with a foster family, the majority indicated that social workers have a conversation with the child exclusively in the foster home and ask questions to find out what difficulties the child is having adjusting and if they need help. The social worker gathers information about the child but also informs the child about his or her current status and other important information.

The conversation with the child and all participants should take place more frequently and every month, according to the inclusive model and project group described by Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019, p. 141), emphasising continuity in maintaining relationships and conversations between all participants. Our results show that before the decision to separate the child from the family is made, there are several conversations with the child, whereas, after the decision to separate the child, the conversation is held once at the regional office, where the child can speak and is informed about subsequent events. As long as the child lives in foster care, the interview with the child rarely takes place, given that social workers visit the family once or twice a year, but the conversational topics touch on the child’s satisfaction with placement, the child’s needs and adaptation to the new environment. A study conducted in Croatia by Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018) on children's attitudes towards foster care shows that children state that they had not been sufficiently informed about upcoming changes, which is due to the fact that there is not

enough time for dialogue and the building of a trustful relationship, but also for conducting a conversation with the child. Informing the child in good time and understanding how important it is to prepare the child for the new circumstances should not be left to a one-off conversation with the child and seen as an ongoing process (Žižak et al., 2012).

Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019, p. 104) note that children often remain silent in “social work processes.” They explain that it often masks the child's helplessness, previous experience when no one listened to their words and the impression that they had no value. A study by (Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori, 2018, p. 14), which describes what prevents children from expressing their opinions, comes to the same conclusion. It states that it is most often the fear of judgement and shame about their own situation, while they describe social workers as people who should be less professional and more sensitive in conversations. Our research findings also show that important issues are discussed with the child, but the child often avoids saying anything that bothers them or indicates what they want. In addition, social workers often neglect to check whether the child comprehends the new situation and what emotions they encounter. The majority agree that the time available for a conversation with the child is a limiting factor and that the conversation is perceived as more informative and less participative for the child's good.

The foster care phase of getting the child involved in the conversation

According to our study results, the conversation with the child is conducted in several stages of the foster care process. However, it is worth mentioning that in the conversation with the child before the decision to separate from the family, the relationship between the social worker and the child is already established at this point. Our findings show that the conversation with the child takes place at four important stages of the foster care process: 1) when the child is informed of the separation from the family, 2) at the court proceedings stage (if any), 3) at the planning stage, and 4) when placing of the child in foster care.

The conversation with the child is conducted in the phase of separation from the family phase, which has already been discussed in Chapter 7.2.1, but also continuously while the child is in foster care. The results of our study show that every visit to the foster family is carried out personally by social workers. Notes are taken, the visit form is completed, and the child's statement is added. In addition, after the visit to the foster family, the social workers inform the professional team and the foster parents about the child's needs, questions or wishes, and the support for the child are identified by the professional team from the regional office. The support of experts, during foster care, is important for the child as well as the foster parents, for example:

“At our centre, a psychologist supports a foster child through counselling and monitoring the show the child functions in the foster family. It is important that both the child and foster parents know who to turn to at the centre for advice and support, and receive this support in a timely manner”. (SR2_08).

The statement refers to the work of the psychologist in counselling and monitoring the progress of the child in foster care, but the role of the social worker is not clear. Furthermore, the availability of professionals at every stage of the foster care process is important for all participants, although the statement emphasises only the foster family and the child.

Although our research findings show that the child is spoken to during the foster care placement process and the expert team from the regional office is available to the child, the results of research conducted in Croatia (Žižak et al., 2012; Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori, 2018; Borić and Mataga Tintor, 2022) on child involvement in the foster care placement process show that cooperation between the professionals and the child or between the professionals and the foster parents is insufficient and necessary support for the child is lacking.

Furthermore, our findings show that although the child is involved in the planning phase, this cooperation is often lacking due to the bureaucratisation of the planning process and the creation of an individualised plan for the child as a formality in the foster care process. Laklija and Sladović Franz (2013, p. 21) describe the child's involvement in the planning process as a procedure that takes the child's opinion into account, which does not mean that the child can decide on important issues, as is consistent with our findings when the child participates in the conversation just to be informed but not asked.

The majority stated that in the stage of court proceedings, when a court decides on separation, the child makes a statement in the presence of an expert, but social workers are not always involved in conversations with the children, and it is often left to the psychologist or social pedagogue. Borić and Mataga Tintor (2022, p. 182) point out that contact with children in court proceedings should be individualised and adapted to the child's age while respecting the children's right to express an opinion in court. When it comes to alternative care arrangements for children and their participation, the research of Borić and Mataga Tintor (2022, p. 175) shows that children's participation is low, while children who are separated from their families are not adequately cared for, and the situation is similar for professionals who often feel excluded, especially when it comes to collaborating with other systems that care for children.

7.3.3. Engaging formal and informal networks and community services to support children and families

The third research question in the second thesis of the dissertation relates to the inclusion of a support network for the child and family and the link to available community resources. The foster care system in Croatia has developed primarily in rural areas, which are sparsely populated and where the majority of older people live. In addition, user services are less developed, and there is still a lack of non-institutional services and facilities that could be developed by the private sector or public institutions (World Bank, 2019). Štambuk and Penava Šimac (2021) come to a similar conclusion, stating that even today, community services for the rural population are underdeveloped. Our findings reveal similar conclusions, namely that foster parents mostly live in rural areas, often far away from the regional office, and local resources are limited. In some rural settlements, there is no doctor, kindergarten or school, and residents must travel to the nearest town offering such services. In most smaller towns, there are no psychologists or psychiatric help, nor accommodation and care for children with behavioural disorders. Associations and the civil sector that could provide certain services are almost non-existent. Everything the family needs requires going to the closest major city, for example:

“There is a family centre in our neighbourhood centre 30 km away that offers counselling services for those who have the means to travel there.” (SR4_06).

The majority of respondents agree with the statement that refers to the unavailability of certain services in the community, i.e. availability at a certain cost, time and the possibility of travelling to the nearest place that offers a service.

In addition, our research findings show that the network of formal services is poorly developed, and certain services are provided through projects such as mobile teams for counselling foster parents. The majority agreed that a school psychologist, a class teacher, a school pedagogue, a paediatrician or family doctor, a coach if the child plays sports, and a priest if the child participates in the life of the church in the community, are an important contribution to the family's support network. Foster families usually rely on an informal support network, on the support of family, friends and neighbours. The children participate in all available activities at home, e.g. sports or school activities. The majority respondents agreed that the lack of community resources is not only a feature of rural areas, but also in

larger cities. The majority stated that social workers need support from other systems, such as schools, kindergartens and doctors with whom the foster family and social workers collaborate. Social workers additionally describe cooperation with the community as an action and realisation of privileges for a foster child in the local environment, such as free transport and free use of the library, with the aim of faster and better integration of the child into the new environment, for example:

“If needing placement and economic improvement of family life, we co-operate with the local and regional administration and self-government.” (SR3_07).

All respondents agree that local government co-funds certain services in the community for foster children, but an important fact that the statement points out is that each local government and local authority provides different levels of support or none at all.

Our findings indicate that the majority agree that social workers try to link the family or child to all available community resources, but there is not much choice because not everything is equally available to everyone, and it depends largely on the resourcefulness and commitment of the social worker liaising with the foster carer.

Furthermore, our findings point to the link between the lack of community resources and equal opportunities for the child and foster family. It is illustrated in the example of the child not being able to choose the sport they want, but a sport that is available or another activity they wants than the one that is available. Foster families often do not have access to programmes offered by regional offices or civil society organisations due to the distances of such programmes. Furthermore, the majority state that scheduling foster parents is further complicated if, for example, they have to travel to another location or the first major city for a medical examination to obtain the necessary authorisation from social workers. Choosing a school for the child is also a challenge, as there is often not a big choice of high schools and study programmes in the area that the child would want to attend.

In addition to the new environment in which the child builds a social network, the need for social relationships and a social network from the previous community in which the child lived, such as friends from the neighbourhood, the primary family and school friends, is also important (Laklija and Brkić, 2022).

Community support for the primary family was only mentioned by one participant, as there were several civil sector projects in the participant’s regional office to strengthen parenting skills, resolve conflicts and improve communication skills that could also involve primary families. The majority agreed that engaging the informal family network in the foster care

process is often difficult. The most common reasons for this are the unwillingness of the primary family to cooperate or a poorly developed informal family network.

7.3.4. CONCLUSION BASED ON THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE SECOND THESIS OF THE DISSERTATION

Linking the elements of the family group conference method to foster care practice and the principles of empowerment and the involvement of a wider network of community users by social workers is the second thesis of the dissertation, where three research questions are posed in line with the thesis.

The first research question of the second thesis relates to identifying elements of the family group conference in foster care practice, i.e., in specific phases of the foster care system. The action group defined the elements of the family group conference on the basis of knowledge acquired during training, the scientific literature on the topic under investigation and linking it to the theoretical framework of the topic under investigation. The defined elements of the family group conference were examined in the practices of the foster care system in the regional offices to which action group members belong, and their presence in the foster care system was noted as an existing, a non-existing or a partially existing element. A partially present element means that it is noted less frequently in the foster care system, there exists a difference in the work of the regional offices in foster care practice, and the element occurs in certain situations.

Our results show that the elements of joint working, i.e., the meeting between the primary family, foster parents, child and experts in a joint discussion and the element of involving the formal and informal family network, are partially present in foster care practice. The majority state that most situations do not occur when all are gathered together, but partly, for instance, the primary family and foster family when it comes to improving communication between the two families, or the child and the primary family when it comes to establishing a stable relationship and meetings. Nevertheless, there are rare cases where everyone comes together and discusses, for example, the child's return to the primary family or the child's important needs as they arise. Our findings show that social workers coordinate and inform all parties involved, but attempts to get all parties to talk are often unsuccessful and indicate that a planning process is necessary to get all parties together. A family group conference, as described by Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy (2008, p. 75), is a space that allows all participants and experts to work together to find solutions to family problems through an inclusive approach with a focus on family decision-making. However, a prerequisite is the balance of power required for this type of collaboration. The majority

claim that this approach would speed up the process given that social workers interview each participant individually. The involvement of experts, representing part of the formal network, is seen by the majority as a challenging task, as social workers need a lot of time to collect all the information from the education system, health system, justice system and other professional services. The majority see the informal family network as important support, but it can be poorly developed. Nevertheless, social workers try to involve as many people as possible from the family network, primarily with the aim of finding a possible placement for the child. A family group conference has a different role when it comes to bringing the wider family network together, as Fox (2018) describes it. It gives the family network the opportunity to represent the family, contribute their resources to problem-solving and support the family in making the necessary changes. In addition, access to the necessary experts is much easier at a family group conference and information about available resources from experts is shared with everyone.

The participants' active instead of passive role and a dynamic process aimed at change is an element of the family group conference that, according to our research findings, is only partially present in practice. The majority attribute a passive role to the primary family, while there are rare situations where the primary family is actively involved, such as in the planning process, which depends on their motivation but also on the greater involvement of social workers in working with the family. Aspects like change orientation and an active role are attributed to foster carers, who are described by the majority as exceptionally active in seeking support and care for the child. According to our findings, the foster care process is very dynamic and involves a range of different activities, from the placement of the child, the child's adjustment to the new family, ongoing support for the child and the foster parents to planning and organising the child's return to the primary family. The family group conference aims to move from a passive to an active role for all participants in the process (Fox, 2018), with each of the participants assigned specific tasks and roles in supporting the family and covering a range of activities. It also emphasises the active role of the child in the process, who can voice an opinion without adults taking over the role.

The child's voice and the right to express an opinion are linked to the active role in the foster care process as an element of family group conference, which the majority of respondents believe is present in foster care practice and to which social workers pay the most attention in working with families. Our findings show that social workers talk to the child, listen to the child's views and ask about important matters that concern the child. Discussions with the child take place, for example, in the phase before separation from the

family and in the foster placement phase, but also during the foster care period when the social worker visits the foster family's home and talks to the child. In our research, the majority points out that social workers need to take into account the child's age and the reasons for the separation but also be aware that the child often does not fully express an opinion due to shame or fear. Furthermore, the majority of respondents described the role of social work as empowering the child to express views and giving space for the child to express views. According to Loreman (2009), the important role of social work is to respect and value the child's opinion and childhood. Although most agree that the child has a unique place in the foster care process, allowing everyone to hear the child's voice, it is not clear how it impacts decision-making. The majority claim that while the child may be heard, it has no impact on deciding about the child, which is the responsibility of the expert team at the regional office. Nevertheless, some of the participants state that they deal with the child differently, talk to the child more, explain the new situation, or seek a different solution together with the child. Loreman (2009, p. 117) also refers to this situation when describing respect for childhood and the possible risk of having only adults define specific stages of a child's life, which was also observed and included in the research findings when the expert team made decisions.

The informal representation of the child by a trusted person representing an element of the family group conference was not observed in our results. In fact, our research results show that the child is most often represented by the family, social workers or special guardians appointed to represent the child, for example, in court or other particular cases, which Fox (2018) refers to as formal representation of the child. The Act on the Centre for Special Guardianship (Official Gazette, 47/20) imposes a legal obligation to protect children, their rights and interests. If the child does not wish to speak for themselves and attend a family group conference, the child can choose a known person to speak on their behalf, which Fox (2018, p. 32) refers to as informal representation of the child. Lupton and Nixon (1999, p. 110) also describe that it may be someone from the child's extended family, friends or even neighbours, but it should be someone whom the child chooses and trusts. In foster care practice, we have found that an informal representative is not an option for the child. Despite formal representation, the child is not sufficiently protected in certain proceedings. According to our findings, the element of the family group conference to empower all participants in the foster care process is only partially present. The majority claims that the empowerment of the primary family is carried out intensively as long as the child is not yet separated from the family and the family is no longer involved in the empowerment process

after separation. Furthermore, the results show that empowerment in the foster care relationship is primarily focused on cooperation with the foster family and the child for proper care of the child and overcoming the difficulties of foster parents. In contrast to foster care practice in Croatia, the family group conference is based on a strength-based approach that aims to mobilise the potential of each individual to overcome difficulties. The method aims to empower all participants, including experts, assuming that a balance of power is achieved in the process (Fox, 2018). The understanding of empowerment in foster care practice does not reflect the true meaning of the term. In fact, the majority state that social workers are unaware of their position of power and make decisions as they see fit for their role when working with families. Our results show that this is the most difficult task for social workers, because changing the position of power requires a changing the way of working with users, but also believing in the abilities and possibilities of users. The majority agree that changing the way social workers engage with service users requires additional knowledge and an understanding of relationships with service users, particularly in relation to the use of the family group conference, and also the need to implement changes in social workers' approach to foster care practice.

The strengthening of bonds between family members and positive relationships as an element of the family group conference was identified in our findings as being present in practice. The majority state that the family is connected through the extended family's involvement in kinship care, enabling the child to remain in a familiar environment and social network. In addition, the majority describes maintaining the relationship between the child and the primary family as strengthening and maintaining relationships within the family. Most describe positive collaboration as the main goal when working with service users, while collaboration between two families or a child and the primary family is seen as the main task of social workers during the foster care process. Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy (2008, p. 77) point to the importance of maintaining the relationship between the child and the primary family through the ecological systems theory, which includes the need to develop a community support network as a social intervention to support the family, with the aim of promoting solidarity and collective action, and point to a family group conference as a good platform for this type of work. The role of social work is to create and maintain relationships when working with families (Constable and Lee, 2015). Our findings do not show that, in practice, the wider network of service users is actively involved in strengthening family ties, while the majority point to the efforts social workers make to maintain social ties and keep the child in the home environment. Barker and Barker (1995)

describe the experiences of families who have attended a family group conference as positive. The families state that the members are better connected to each other, and communication improves, as well as communication with experts after the conference. Lupton and Nixon (1999, P. 167) describe the family group conference as a space in which to learn about family dynamics and relationships but also as a space in which multiple perspectives of a family problem are presented. This outcome is in contrast to our findings, which show that there is no opportunity for joint discussion and multiple perspectives in foster care practice.

Strengthening the competences of all participants involved in the foster care system is, according to our findings, a partially existing element of the family group conference in foster care practice. The majority agree, and as already evident in previous findings, that without adequate support, the primary family cannot strengthen and develop their skills. Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl (2019, p. 137) also agree, stating that, in this way, access to knowledge and the acquisition of new skills for primary families is restricted, characterising it as disregard for the family. In addition, the majority respondents describe the existence of occasional workshops and training for primary families in the community organised within civil sector projects, which is rare, and interest from primary families is low. According to our findings, foster families and children have the opportunity to strengthen their skills, learn and acquire new knowledge, e.g., when taught in regional offices, the child is included in regular school lessons and acquires basic life skills through cooperation with the foster parents. Access to knowledge and the development of skills are prerequisites for a person's emancipation (Saleebey, 2013), and the family group conference aims for participants to learn from each other, share knowledge and experiences, and strengthen their skills through an equal power approach. Similarly, Freire (2002, p. 17) describes the need for students and teachers to learn together, while Payne (2014) links empowerment to collaborative learning from ignorance. Our findings do not show that social workers see an opportunity to learn from users, nor is there learning through collaborative working.

Respect for cultural differences is an element of the family group conference present in foster care practice. The majority state that the cultural aspect is present in two ways: 1) respect for different nationalities and their culture, and 2) respect for the child's origin, history and cultural heritage. The family group conference method has its origins in social work and the need to respect the Māori culture in New Zealand, which has a tradition of solving family problems with the involvement of the whole community (Lupton and Nixon, 1999, p. 43). In addition, the approach to each person in social work should be centred on

acceptance, appreciation and learning about the culture from which the person comes. The family group conference answers the question of how to reach different cultural groups of people, given that it utilises community support and the involvement of a wider network, which are extremely important in certain cultures (Fox, 2018). Our research results indicate that social workers respect the cultural identity of the child and the foster family, and efforts are made to promote the child's sense of belonging to the culture from which they come. However, placing the child in a remote setting can pose a risk to the child as they are separated from the environment in which their culture is present.

The second research question in the second thesis focuses on the child's voice in the foster care process from the perspective of social workers, although this topic was partially discussed in the first thesis and the first research question in the second thesis, where the voice of the child in practice was captured as an element of the family group conference. Our findings so far have shown that the child's voice receives attention in foster care practice, but knowledge of this researched topic should be deepened in order to examine how social workers incorporate the child's voice into the foster care process, given that the child is at the centre of the family group conference, equally participating in the process where the child's voice is ensured.

According to our findings, the data collected can be divided into three categories: 1) the place where the child is consulted, 2) when and at what point in the foster care process the child can be heard, and 3) which topics are discussed with the child.

- 1) *Place for consultation with child.* Our results show that social workers most often conduct the interview with the child in the official premises of the regional offices, in the social worker's office or in a room specifically set up for the child. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents feel that the official premises are unfamiliar to the child, so the dialogue sometimes takes place in the child's home, which may be more comfortable for the child. The dialogue space is described by Gehart (2007) as a space and time for the child's voice to be heard when conversing with the social worker, a comfortable and familiar space for the child, which the official spaces of regional offices are not. Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018) conducted research on the attitudes of children in foster care, showing that the child should be spoken to in a space that is safe, familiar or private for the child, not just once, but several times during the foster care process. Mitchell and Kuczynski (2010) describe in their research the importance of giving the child time to talk to the primary family before being separated from them. Our findings show that social workers often have no

choice when it comes to deciding where to talk with the child, as they lack the time and capacity to work with the family. Furthermore, Žižak et al. (2012) describe in their research on the attitudes and experiences of children in foster care that social workers' visits to foster families often do not lead to having a conversation with the child. Our research shows contrary data, namely that during visits to foster families, social workers talk to the child in their new environment, alone or together with the foster parents, but also that these meetings are infrequent, i.e., once or twice a year, which is not enough to monitor the child's progress.

- 2) *The topics discussed with the child.* The topics depend on the phase of foster care, and the majority agree that a distinction can be made between a conversation with the child before separation from the family, held in the family home to assess the child's current situation and condition, and a conversation at the time of the decision to remove the child, explaining the reasons and next steps. Our results show that the topics of conversation with the child before separation from the family refer to the child's daily routine in the family, the child's commitments, friends and activities, while questions about relationships in the family are asked indirectly through drawings or hypothetical situations. The conversation is usually conducted by a psychologist who makes an assessment of the child. The interview at the regional office, when the decision to separate the child has been made, is conducted by a psychologist who explains the new situation to the child using various techniques such as drawing and playing and asks questions about family relationships, the time spent with the parents and the people who help them in the family. If the child is placed in foster care, during the visit, the social worker talks to the child about the child's satisfaction, needs and necessary help. The inclusive model of foster care, as an excellent example of joint work, emphasises the need for conversations with the child but also for joint conversations between all parties on a monthly basis (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019). Our results show that there is never a joint discussion but usually an individual discussion with the child. Žižak et al. (2012) describe the need to inform the child on time about upcoming changes and emphasise the need to prepare the child and the family for the separation, which takes time, and the conversation with the child should be a process. Gerčar, Pezerovič, Topčič-Rosenberg and Šinjori (2018, p. 14) describe children's attitudes towards expressing their opinions and state that they are most often afraid of being judged when talking to social workers. Our research shows the same findings, namely that when talking to children about important issues, children often do not fully express their

views, while the majority agree that the time available to talk to the child is often a limiting factor and that the conversation with the child is more of an informative nature.

- 3) *The phase of foster care in which the conversation with the child takes place.* According to our findings, there are four phases of the foster care process: 1) when the child is informed about the foster care placement, 2) during the court proceedings (if they take place), 2) during the planning phase, and 3) during the foster care placement. Research conducted in Croatia (Žižak et al., 2012; Gerčar, Pezerović, Topčić-Rosenberg and Šinjori, 2018; Borić and Mataga Tintor, 2022) shows that the cooperation by social workers and their contact with the child or foster family are inadequate, and the child lacks support. The situation is similar to the planning phase in foster care, as the study by Laklija and Sladović Franz (2013, p. 21) shows. Although the children take part in the planning phase, their opinions do not influence the decisions, and the planning is more of a bureaucratic process. This outcome is in line with our findings on children's participation in the key phases of foster care, where the child's opinion and voice should be respected and not just heard.

The inclusion of a support network for the family and connecting the family and the child to available community services in current foster care practice is the third research question in the second thesis. The foster care system in Croatia is most developed in rural areas, while services in the community develop slowly, especially in rural areas where they are almost non-existent (World Bank, 2019). Our research shows similar findings, namely that the majority of foster carers live in rural areas, which is sometimes a barrier for participants in the foster care system. In fact, the majority agree that the necessary support for the child and foster parents is often not available in rural areas. They are far away from regional offices, have no access to specialised doctors, and in some cases, there is no primary or secondary school for the child. The foster parents and the child have to travel to the first major town for everything they need. According to our findings, support from the formal network is inadequate not only in rural areas but also in cities. The majority believe that local mobile teams supporting foster carers would be a good solution. Available community resources include teachers, coaches, school staff or the church as a source of support for families. Nevertheless, our findings show that foster families mostly rely on the support of an informal network such as relatives, neighbours or friends. The majority describe the lack of community resources as exacerbating for social workers who are required to work with multiple systems. Sometimes, social workers also work with the local community to ensure additional opportunities and rights for the child, such as free transport and use of library

facilities, with the aim of better integrating the child into the community. Our findings show that a lack of community resources often correlates with a lack of equal opportunities for the child and is manifested in not having the opportunity to choose a secondary school, recreational activities the child wants, or the sports the child wants. Foster parents also do not have the same opportunities, as they often cannot attend meetings in regional offices or join the Foster Parents Association. Laklija and Brkić (2022) write about the importance of the child's social network in the community where they grew up, which is sometimes not easy to reach due to long distances, and is consistent with our findings when the child has to be driven to a primary family in another city or even county. Given that the majority of respondents state that primary families do not have many sources of community support, their social network is often small, and there are only occasional activities organised by community associations they can join.

7.4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE IN THE FEALD OF REDUCED INSTITUTIONALISATION, SUPPORT NETWORKS, THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE AT SYSTEMS LEVEL

The third phase of the research relates to gathering answers to the research questions of the third thesis in the dissertation, which focuses on the contribution of the family group conference to the child's alternative non-institutional placement, normalisation of the support network in the community and the way in which the experiences of all participants in the family group conference process contribute to the development of a theory about working with families and change at the systemic level.

By conducting interviews and analysing the foster care process, data was collected which the action group supplemented with acquired knowledge from each subsequent meeting. The group discussion method, which is an integral part of action research and its cyclical process, provided a space for discussion among all researchers. O'Brien (2001, p. 4) states that the principle of reflexive critique is important for action research on the area under study in a different way, for example, including the wider social context and reality. Furthermore, the author explains the need to engage in dialogue and understand the relationship to the field under study. Freire (2002) explains dialogue as a series of activities, not just a discussion of ideas. It is about a series of ideas, mutual understanding and cooperation, but also a critical review of what the group has learned and efforts to bring change. Based on the process initially described and aligned with statutory guidance, critical reflection identified areas where change in practice is necessary and possible. Although the process that the researchers went through was not easy, the action research created time and space for a deeper analysis and discovery of the reality of practice in a way that brought the researchers together in a group and created a level of trust necessary for discussing specific issues honestly, but also to recognise the real situation in the field under study. O'Brien (2001, p. 4) interprets this process as a collaborative resource created by the joint work of the action group and the roles of the members, namely equal co-researchers. Accordingly, the data initially collected in the interview method and the contradictions between practice and process of foster parenting were analysed at the level of the group, which was intended to be consistent with the obtained data. Avison, Lau, Myers and Nielsen (1999) interpret action research precisely on the basis of differences and contradictions, i.e., they state that the focus is on what is actually done in practice compared

to what they say is done. It is the different viewpoints and knowledge of each researcher within the action group that has helped all researchers in the group to see different realities, not just their individual perspectives (Mesec, 1997). Similarly, Fleming and Ward (2004, p. 166) note a non-hierarchical approach within the action group, where each participant has a different but equal contribution to the research process. An important activity took place during the action group discussions, specifically the planning of future actions. The knowledge generated in the work of the action group helped to understand the practices, forming the prerequisite for translating knowledge into action (Fleming and Ward, 2004). The planned research, in which a family group conference method with several families was to be conducted as a pilot test, was not carried out as planned. Metcalfe and Humphreys (2002) note that a change in the research direction is common in action research, given that the research process is analysed piece by piece and further research is directed to where it is needed and possibly not planned. In view of the findings from the first two theses of the dissertation, the action group concluded that the implementation of the method should be postponed and gradually implemented into practice. Based on the findings from the first two theses, which revealed the complexity of the foster care system, of which the participants in the action group were largely aware but not in all segments, such as the different approaches to foster families and primary families in the various regional offices, the group concluded that it was necessary to gain more knowledge about implementing the method in practice. The group members reflected on their experiences at the beginning of the research when they did not know about the family group conference or action research as an approach and were unsure whether they wanted to participate or whether they needed more information to decide. The group members reflected critically on the knowledge they had acquired from their participation in the research and on the new knowledge they generated. Freire (2002, p. 47) describes researchers who gained knowledge and recognised they were, in fact, creating reality. False participation, as Freire (2002, p. 43) calls it, is replaced by participation and learning, which can be linked to all participants in the family group conference process becoming subjects. Based on the above conclusions, the action group concluded that primary families, foster families and children need to be educated about family group conference methods. The group deemed it first necessary to explain to users and participants how the method empowers families, how it is implemented and what their role is in conducting a family group conference. We felt that explaining and introducing the method to all participants was the most ethical approach, as they needed the knowledge to decide whether they wanted to participate in and organise a family group

conference in their family. It is an ethical imperative in research to ensure that the researcher, users and group of members possess the necessary knowledge to discuss questions that are clear to all (Davison, Martinsons and Wong, 2022). The group discussed a lot about inviting the primary family to presentations and training, as it had never been practised in social work in Croatia. The trainings were only ever held in the regional offices with foster families. Half of the participants in the action group were not inclined to involve the primary families. They justified their view with the lack of resources a primary family has in terms of transport and travelling, including their lack of interest and the assumption that they are uncooperative and less responsive. Rafaelič, Ficko and Flaker (2017, p. 185) state that the involvement and participation of users and a change in the relationship between experts and users is necessary, which is not the case for all action group members, as they believed that primary families are not suitable for education. There was a some lack of understanding of the process of equal participation by all group members as well as an understanding of the need to mobilise all participants in the process in order to achieve change. Furthermore, following the group discussion, we decided to change the way and approach to foster parent training, making it more inclusive for all, including the primary families, children and foster families. Despite lacking confidence in the outcomes of this type of training, all participants concluded that a change is necessary as well as a new way of approaching and working with primary families. The action approach to research focuses on the change expected in the setting or practice and the participants' understanding that change is needed (Hopkins, 2002, p. 79) in terms of recognising and accepting ethical frameworks between the two groups: researchers and practitioners (Avison, Lau, Myers and Nielsen, 1999, p. 94). Action group members found that inviting children to training is a difficult for foster carers, who often have nowhere to leave their children during training, and given that training in regional offices is always formal, children are rarely involved. The group created a plan for exploring educational opportunities in each regional office by gathering information on the number of foster families, children, and primary families wanting to attend, including the location and the date of the meeting. First, it was necessary to obtain the approval of the head of the regional office to conduct the training, which was my part of the task. I sent requests to the regional offices and received approval to conduct the training, with some regional offices suggesting that neighbouring regional offices should also be involved.

After an on-site investigation into the possibilities of training, including the collected data and the approval, the group drew up a schedule for training and the meeting and each

training session was designed as an experiential part of the simulated meeting with participants in a family group conference. It included a presentation and information about the family group conference method, a joint discussion, question time and comments, as well as participants socialising with snacks and drinks, deemed to be the closest thing to implementing the family group conference method in a family setting. Given that children are also involved in the training, the content of the training was adapted by showing an animated film with an example of how to conduct a family group conference and explaining the method in a very simple way and using simple language. After holding the training in five regional offices (in the localities of Vukovar, Rijeka, Daruvar, Đurđevac and Osijek), the results of the questionnaire prepared for the participants were evaluated, as well as the notes I took based on conversations with the participants during discussion time and informal gatherings after the training session.

7.4.1. How the family group conference influences the non-institutional placement of the child.

The first research question in the third thesis of the dissertation focuses on how the family group conference influences the non-institutional placement of the child and the deinstitutionalisation of foster care. Although the family group conference was not implemented in Croatian social work practice during the research as planned at the beginning of the research, the review of scientific research showed some of the possible outcomes of the family group conference influencing the placement of the child in foster care. An analysis of the textual material and available research revealed that the majority could relate to the role of the family group conference and the prevention of the child's separation from the family, the duration of placement with foster parents, but also the difference between public and private placement (Skaale Havnen and Christiansen, 2014). In contrast to Croatia, the US states have regulated the difference between public placement, i.e., placement with unknown carers, and private placement, which is foster care with relatives and being placed with family members (Crampton and Jackson, 2007). The differences are evident in lower support for foster carers and lower benefits for foster carers when family members are involved. There are differences between countries in the European Union, but in most countries, there is insufficient support for kinship care. Research in the UK shows that there is a lack of support for kinship carers, i.e., they are

not paid equally, do not receive training and do not have the same rights as foster carers (Mervyn-Smith, 2019). In Croatia, kinship care is considered one of the types of foster care, and support for kinship carers is provided in the same way as for other types. The child's right to receive livelihood support is exercised, but kinship carers do not have the right to compensation for their work as foster carers, as is the case with other forms of foster care (Foster Care Act, Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22).

Analysing how the family group conference impacts the placement of the child in foster care reveals several facts. First, family group conferences increase placements of children with relatives instead of placements with unknown foster carers (Crampton and Jackson, 2007; Pennell, Edwards and Burford, 2010; Wang et al., 2012). Moreover, family group conferences increase the likelihood of reunifying the child with the primary family (Skaale Havnen and Christiansen, 2014). Some research shows that the child's participation in the family group conference leads to sooner returning to the primary family (Pennell, Edwards and Burford, 2010), whereas other studies did not measure the impact of the family group conference on the duration of foster care placement (Wang et al., 2012). Similarly, Berzin, Cohen, Thomas and Dawson (2008) conducted a study of foster care outcomes in California in which a control group of 61 children for whom family group conferences were not conducted was compared with a group with 103 children who participated in family group conferences. They concluded that there was no significant difference between the groups and also no negative consequences for the families in which the family group conference was held. The authors recommend the use of a family group conference at the beginning of foster care when the aim is to involve family members in decision-making and ensure good cooperation between the family and the community as well as within the family itself. Lupton and Nixon (1999) compared the results of a study conducted in New Zealand with data from Marsh and Crow (1998) on the placement of a child outside the family following a family group conference. They concluded that the use of the family group conference reduced the number of children who had to be separated from the family and placed in foster care, where support came from the family network. They also concluded that the family group conference did not lead to an increase in kinship care when the child had to be placed outside the family.

Crampton and Jackson (2007) note that the family group conference can be an important and useful way to expand services to families and care for the child, especially as research shows that families who participate in the family group conference continue to adhere to the plan they established and therefore take better care of the children. Crampton and

Jackson (2007) report research results and analyses of 257 cases where the use of the family group conference reduces the number of placements of children in institutional care while increasing the number of placements with relatives as kinship care. A further result is a decrease in the number of placements of children, i.e., changing several foster parents and relocating the child.

Aras Kramar (2021, p. 206) discusses family legal protection measures and court decisions on separating the child from the family. The author raises questions and discusses can placement in foster care as a preventive measure against institutionalisation be considered a measure to strengthen the family or whether other possibilities exist, such as the family group conference, and emphasises the need for new working methods and alternative procedures. The lack of measures and methods of working with families before, but also immediately after the separation of the child from the family is noted by Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003), who mention the measure of warning and the measure of helping and supporting the family in terms of monitoring the family as the only measures available to the family.

According to our research and the results of the first and second thesis and in relation to the first research question of the third thesis, similar results were recorded concerning the possibility of using the family group conference, where the majority of participants identify the pre-separation phase as a good time to prevent the child's separation from the family (Chapter 7.2.). This approach can certainly reduce the institutionalisation of children, given that the number of children moving from foster care to residential care is increasing in the present foster care practice. Furthermore, Aras Kramar (2021, p. 206) states that in addition to family law protection measures under the Family Act (Official Gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23), the family group conference is one way of working with the family to prevent institutionalisation prior to more radical interventions in the family. This is consistent with our findings and suggests that current practice and work with families before, but also after, separation of the child from the family is an inadequate social work response to strengthening the family as long as there are no clear methods for working with families given the complexity of process and inconsistencies in practice. Although kinship care in some countries is seen separately as public placement, i.e., placement with strangers, our research shows that kinship care is equivalent to other forms of foster care placement, where the fee for foster care services is the only difference (Foster Care Act, Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22). In addition, research shows that holding a family group conference increases the likelihood of placing a child in kinship care, as the closer and wider family

network comes together to help the family, whereas our research results did not reflect this outcome, but the exact opposite. The majority of respondents state that the immediate and wider family network is rarely involved in the foster care placement process, despite kinship care as the first choice among social workers. According to the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy (2023b), there were 341 kinship care placements in Croatian practice, representing around a third of all foster care placements, while the same report for 2022 shows 407 children referred from foster care to another form of placement. Crampton and Jackson (2007) describe their research findings showing the use of the family group conference opens up a greater possibility of placement with relatives, preventing institutionalisation. Another important fact is the decreasing number of children separated from foster care and placed in residential care.

Although some studies have shown a greater possibility of the child returning to the primary family when using the family group conference in foster care placement, others have not observed this effect. When using the family group conference, our research shows a greater connection among family members, better communication among all participants in the process, better planning in foster care placement and transparency in joint work, which the majority identified as important elements missing in the practice of foster care placement in Croatia. The use of a family group conference at the beginning of the foster care placement process has, according to our findings, sparked many discussions (Chapter 7.2.) where opinions are divided, while other studies such as the one by Berzin, Cohen, Thomas and Dawson (2008) favour the use of the family group conference immediately at the beginning of the foster care placement process in order to better connect all participants, and receive better community support.

7.4.2. Learning about social work in foster care from findings in using family group conferences

The second research question of the third thesis relates to the collection of data and gaining knowledge about foster families through the experiences of participants in family group conferences. However, as no family group conference was conducted during the research, data was collected on the experiences and attitudes of foster carers, primary families and children during family group conference training. In this phase of the research, knowledge about foster care was gained and shaped through the collaboration of all those involved in

the foster care process in inclusive training on the family group conference method. The knowledge gained in this way provided information about the possibility of cooperation between primary families, children and foster families in the foster care process, i.e., whether there is room for mutual cooperation and communication as presented in the family group conference method.

After each training session, the meeting was analysed using the questionnaire presented in Chapter 6.2. (Appendix 2). The results were presented as statistical data and interpreted narratively, while qualitative data analysis processed the answers given to open questions from the questionnaire regarding the attitudes and needs of the foster families and primary families.

A total of 81 people took part in five organised training courses. Of the total number of participants, most (73 %) were foster carers, the rest were primary families, children and experts from regional offices. The fewest participants, only 5 %, came from primary families. The evaluation questionnaire was completed by 62 people or a total of 76.5 % of respondents. Some of the questions in the questionnaire related to expectations and satisfaction with the training, others to attitudes towards the usefulness of the family group conference method and the desire to organise a conference in their own family. The majority of participants, 87.1 %, indicated their satisfaction with the training, while a smaller proportion or 11.29 % expressed partial satisfaction. The results show that 91.94 % of participants consider the family group conference method to be useful for foster care, suggesting the potential of its use in foster care and acceptance of the method as a good method in foster care (Table 10). Despite the high percentage of participants who consider the method useful, only 10 participants or 16.13 % saw opportunities to organise and conduct a family group conference in their families (Table 10). The results presented are encouraging in terms of the potential interest of foster carers in the family group conference method and its use. Some families do not currently see room or the need to use the family group conference method but it paves the way for possibilities in families who learn about this method as a way to solve problems in the family.

Table 10: Data on participant satisfaction with the education and assessment of the family group conference

E* N1** N2*** ⁵	Did the training meet your expectations? /number of participants			Do you think the family group conference would be a useful method in foster care? / number of participants		Are you interested in organising a family group conference in your family? / number of participants	
E1 (N1=24; N2=19)	17	0	2	17	2	2	17
E2 (N1=24; N2=22)	20	0	2	21	1	5	17
E3 (N1=16; N2=10)	7	1	2	9	1	1	9
E4 (N1=11; N2=7)	6	0	1	6	1	2	5
E5 (N1=6; N2=4)	4	0	0	4	0	0	4
TOTAL	54 or 87.1%	1 or 1.61%	7 or 11.29%	57 or 91.94%	5 or 8.06%	10 or 16.13%	52 or 83.87%

The majority of participants, i.e., 98.39 %, were very satisfied with the training (Table 10). The participants are satisfied with the clarity of the training; they understand their role in the family group conference method and how the family group conference is initiated, organised and conducted. Above all, participants are clear about what the aims of the family group conference are, which is perhaps the most important part of understanding the family-centred approach and its needs.

Table 11: Satisfaction with the level of information about the implementation of the family group conference method

E* N1** N2*** ⁶	Have you received enough information about the implementation of the family group conference regarding:					
	Your role in the family group conference		Family group conferences are being implemented		What are the goals of a family group conference	
E1 (N1=24; N2=19)	19	0	19	0	19	0
E2 (N1=24; N2=22)	22	0	22	0	22	0
E3 (N1=16; N2=10)	9	1	9	1	9	1

⁵ *E – educations carried out in which primary families, children and foster families participated (a total of 6 educations in different cities, labelled from E1 to E6)

**N1 - number of participants who took part in the training, i.e. primary families, children and foster families

***N2 – number of participants who attended the training and completed the post-training questionnaire

⁶ *E – educations carried out in which primary families, children and foster families participated (a total of 6 educations in different cities, labelled from E1 to E6)

**N1 - number of participants who took part in the training, i.e. primary families, children and foster families

***N2 – number of participants who attended the training and completed the post-training questionnaire

E4 (N1=11; N2=7)	7	0	7	0	7	0
E5 (N1=6; N2=4)	4	0	4	0	4	0
TOTAL	61 or 98.39%	1 or 1.61%	61 or 98.39%	1 or 1.61%	61 or 98.39%	1 or 1.61%

All participants rated their satisfaction with the family group conference method (Table 11) on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is poor, 2 is satisfactory, 3 is good, 4 is very good and 5 is excellent).

Table 12: Evaluation of the family group conference method and its usefulness for the family

E* N1** N2***⁷	How would you rate the family group conference method on a scale of 1-5? / arithmetic mean A	On a scale of 1-5, how would you find family group conference useful in your family? / arithmetic mean A	On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the approach that allows the family to independently solve the problem in the circle of its important people? / arithmetic mean A
E1 (N1=24; N2=19)	4.05	3.74	4.21
E2 (N1=24; N2=22)	4.81	4.37	4.14
E3 (N1=16; N2=10)	4.40	3.90	4.50
E4 (N1=11; N2=7)	4.57	4.43	4.57
E5 (N1=6; N2=4)	4.75	4.75	5.00
Total – arithmetic mean A	4.52	4.24	4.48

Participants rated the method with an average or arithmetic mean of A= 4.52, which is midway between very good and excellent on the rating scale (Table 12). Participants also rated how useful the family group conference method would be in their family, and they rated it with an average score of A= 4.24, which tends to be very good. The participants rated the approach that enables the family to solve the problem independently among their significant others with an average score of A= 4.48, between very good and excellent. The ratings of the training participants, foster parents, primary families and children indicate an interest in the method and the use of the family group conference. Similar results were expressed by social workers in the study by Horvat (2021, p. 267), which was conducted on 193 social workers in Croatia. The results show that 39.9 % of respondents found the

⁷ *E – educations carried out in which primary families, children and foster families participated (a total of 6 educations in different cities, labelled from E1 to E6)

**N1 - number of participants who took part in the training, i.e. primary families, children and foster families

***N2 – number of participants who attended the training and completed the post-training questionnaire

method very useful and 57.5 % of respondents found it extremely useful. Interestingly, of the total of 193 social workers in regional offices in Croatia, 89.1% expressed a desire to learn more about the method (Horvat, 2021, p. 268), which indicates that our findings and the views of foster carers, children and primary families are consistent with the views of involved social workers concerning the usefulness of the method.

In the qualitative analysis of respondent answers to the open-ended questions, several important concepts or codes emerged, which were used to categorise the results based on common concepts defined in user responses.

The first category is education, and participants indicated they expected to be taught, meaning they want to learn something new, and the educational course should be instructive and useful. In addition, statements from participants about education refer to new expected opportunities in working with children, as well as the opportunity to learn about topics of interest to them and learn new methods.

The second category is support, where participants described their expectations in terms of support in solving problems, where the method would teach them how to behave and resolve conflict situations and provide help in raising and caring for the child. They expected useful advice, something practical and applicable to solving problems and improving relationships in the family.

In the category of mistrust, one-third of the participants stated they had no expectations of the education courses and often had expectations but ended up being disappointed. The survey conducted by Ivković and Žižak (2010) in Croatia among 303 foster families shows similar results, where 38% of respondents are mostly satisfied with the training, while 33% felt the training did not provide new knowledge and or help foster parents. Bad experiences from the past could be the reason for the participants' lower expectations of the training.

In the category of motivation to acquire more knowledge about the method than offered in the training, the participants said the method presented a new way of solving problems which they had not previously come across. They describe the method as a good approach and idea, the implementation of the method is well thought out, and the method is useful for families. Most respondents point out their interest in the results of applying the method in practice. A smaller proportion of participants show less motivation to learn more about using the method, suggesting the method is not applicable in their families.

The participants appreciate the value they received from the training, which is new general knowledge, new information, new approaches and methods and insights into the potential of the method in crisis situations. Some of the participants state that the training was fun,

interesting and interactive. One of the fundamental tasks of social work is to impart knowledge to those who do not have it, creating a cooperative relationship. Combining the theory of empowerment with the aim of educating participants in the care system, the educational process itself served as mutual learning and sharing experiences for all involved, which is in line with Cattaneo and Chapman (2010, p. 649), who state that empowerment is a two-way process between the two parties involved. Freire (2002, p. 17) emphasises that knowledge is exchanged between students and teachers, learning from each other in this relationship. Through this inclusive education, where the social barrier is broken down, the empowerment of all participants is based precisely on the starting point of shared ignorance and connection with the participants (Payn, 2014).

The participants indicate a familiarity with using the family group conference method and are sufficiently informed about the method. Some of them state that the lectures and video presentations helped them gain a clear picture of using the method. They believe the method is only of great help if all parties are open to cooperation and should be demonstrated in practice. A different approach is needed to achieve joint cooperation (Payn, 2014), where the family group conference is a good example of a different approach to the participants, especially the family. In our training, good collaboration was achieved through a combination of multimedia content and interaction that took place in discussions and debates, but also in the opportunity for all participants to critically reflect on the method.

The participants emphasised the advantages and obstacles they saw when using the family group conference method. They state the advantages are the necessity and promising results of the method in practice; it achieves certain results, is relatively easy to implement and is an excellent working tool. Most indicate that the method focuses on positive outcomes and problem solving and is centred on family needs. The participants describe the method as applicable, clear and interesting, while one of the training sessions highlighted its naturalness in terms of situations as part of the family routine, such as sitting around the table and discussing potential problems. As shortcomings or barriers to using the method, participants state that they are not sure if it is applicable to all generations, i.e., they state that the method would be more suitable for teenage children rather than younger children. Some participants state that the method is not applicable in all situations, but they do not specify which situations. Participants point out that it is not always possible to use the method and they see the main focus as using the method with older children placed in foster care. Doolan (2004) describes the results of research on the possibility of using the family group conference in practice and highlights its use in working with children with

behavioural problems, in school settings, in working with adults and older people, while Božić (2017) also mentions its use in foster care, in divorce cases, in cases of peer violence or in cases of developmental crises in adolescents. Furthermore, when respondents are asked in which situations the method would be useful in their family, they most frequently state its usefulness in everyday situations when the need arises.

The participants believe sitting down and talking about difficulties and problems is useful. They also see usefulness in problematic situations in the family or in problems with communication. They believe communication is extremely important and see the method as an opportunity for proper communication. The participants believe the method is useful when working with primary families and is good support for the child who has significant or major problems in everyday life. Some of them state that the method is also useful for minor problems, frustrations, dissatisfaction and even important life situations. Half of the participants state that they already use similar methods, i.e., a similar way of communicating and conversing in their family. Together with their families, they are able to solve their problems and do not see the need for the method. They express fear due to not knowing with certainty the reaction of all conference participants. Some of the participants said they have too many commitments and do not have time for the meetings, or there is no need for the method in their family. When preparing a family for a family group conference, Davies, Adler and Goodman (2007, p. 3) state that several meetings with the family are necessary before the family decides to have a conference. Their justification is the need to strengthen the family before the meeting, but also to inform the family in detail about the process and outcomes of the conference. One participant explained that she encounters challenges because the child rejects any contact with the primary family, and she does not see the opportunity to apply the method in her family; she needs additional information and time to reflect.

For the family, the principle of implementing the method and practical approach enables them to solve the problem independently among their significant others and is described by the participants using several key terms such as transparency, support networks, adaptation and awareness. Transparency is described as the need for all family members, as well as the family support network, to point out problems that have arisen and discuss them with other participants in order to clarify the situation transparently and inform all parties openly. The participants in the training course recognised the key elements of the deinstitutionalisation process, such as independently deciding about one's life, deciding about childcare and each person being given the right to choose.

Regarding the family support network, some of the participants state that the connection between professionals, families and the wider family network is not necessary, as it is often unsuccessful in practice. On the contrary, some of the participants say the involvement of other people and institutions in the family circle is important and hearing the opinion of the other side is always beneficial. Burns and Früchtel (2014, p. 1155) state the importance of ensuring the involvement of the extended family and people from the family network when working with families, and they believe the family is entitled to decide whom they want to be involved.

Participants emphasise that it is important that these people are close and trusted people who form the support network for the family. They see the benefit of networking as an additional family strength, where the extended composition of the family's support network has much greater power, unaware to families, particularly the significant others and relatives who can often help, but families do not utilise these resources. Family, friends, neighbours or work colleagues are often involved in running the family group conference, and the family independently chooses them as part of the support from their network (Burns and Früchtel, 2014). A small proportion of respondents stated they should definitely work on adapting the method and see how to customise it to each family and its needs.

The participants defined the areas and specific situations in which they believe this approach or method is useful for them in their family. They cited examples such as severely damaged family relationships, conflicts with the foster child or foster parents not knowing how to deal with a child. They point out the difficult relationship with the primary family and see the method as a way of improving the relationship between the primary family and foster family or between children and primary parents when it comes to agreements and negotiations, or they suggest meetings between the child and the primary family. Adapting a child to a new environment is a challenge for any foster carer, as the participants note, and explaining that the method can help the child adapt to a new life in foster care, but also better understand foster carers as people who want to help. The foster carers and child need support in creating a functioning daily routine, meaning setting up the child's daily routine when moving to a new family. The establishment of routines and intrusion into the family's everyday life is described by Burns and Früchtel (2014) as the colonisation of family life, and they explain how family group conferences help to work better with families. In addition, the authors recommend the method in situations where mutual understanding and transparency regarding the family's needs and problems are required or when problems arise that the family cannot solve or does not know how to solve. The education of the child

is important for development. Therefore, the participants state that the offered help and use of the method is the basis for the support the child needs to master the school curriculum, but also for the child's information and equal inclusion into the new family and school environment. The participants suggest the method is well suited for children leaving the care system. Skaale Havnen and Christiansen (2014, p. 18) also agree that the method is well suited to a child leaving the care system, but also note in their study how organising a conference for families with different difficulties, such as families who need support in everyday life, in situations where the school is involved, until they come into conflict with the law, is almost impossible. Importantly, a training session opened a particular topic recounting the need to organise a family group conference to motivate and support foster parents, in other words, organising a family group conference with a focus on foster parents requiring support. The participants saw the family group conference as an advantage for adults, somewhat of an unexpected answer as the child is the sole focus, whereas Williams (2004, p. 80) emphasises the need to explore their reality in collaboration with the families, find out how they see it and then plan support.

Some situations during the training should be pointed out because, for the first time in foster care practice in Croatia, training was inclusive and involved the primary family, the children and foster parents, which was the first encounter for the primary families with this type of training and joint cooperation in general.

The first example refers to an educational in which the foster parents, child and child's parents were present. During the discussion and questions, the child's parents wanted to agree with the foster parents to attend the child's birthday party and be allowed to bring a cake for the child. The discussion took place in front of all participants in the training session, and the social worker responsible for the foster parents and primary family was also present. The foster parents asked to postpone the arrival time for the child's visit because they were unable to attend at the time set by the court, saying it was important they attend their child's birthday celebration. The foster parents and primary parents managed to allocate time to accommodate everyone involved, while the social worker confirmed the impossibility of exceeding the scope of the court order regarding the dates for the meeting between the child and parents. At an informal meeting, in a later conversation with the primary family, I learnt they are trying to adhere to everything agreed and set out in the court order; they are working hard to return the child to the primary family and are highly motivated to return and care for their child. They understand the situation and the need for the child to live in foster care at present, but they also expect to be supported to fulfil the

conditions for the child's return. The moment they found themselves together with the foster parents and the social worker, the educational course seemed a good space and opportunity to reach an agreement regarding the child. Everything went much quicker than it would have otherwise because everyone was present, and there was no need to ask the social worker and then the foster parents to agree. They also pointed out their uncertainty regarding a changing the schedule of meeting with the child without such an educational moment and the opportunity for everyone to meet together. This came about because they always agree with the foster parents, but according to the social worker's instructions, appointments outside of those set by the court can rarely be rescheduled, and there is little flexibility in this area. When referring to the method as well as access and communication at the family group conference, they said it seemed to be a very accessible method for them, and they felt satisfied during the educational course, including the opportunity to ask the foster parents a question and seek an agreement concerning the child, but also the opportunity to get immediate feedback and resolve certain issues.

During the second educational course, in which the grandmother as a foster parent, the child and the child's mother were present, a discussion began between the grandmother and the mother about how the child should be brought up, with resentment occurring on both sides and which quickly became a conflict situation. Just like with kinship foster care, communication was more open and direct, with a rapid escalation into negative talk. The social worker calmed the situation, and after some clarification, the discussion revealed the family group conference method to be a good choice for kinship foster families where conflict often exists between the primary family and the extended family with whom the child is placed.

The parenting meeting simulates the meeting at a family group conference, and the knowledge gathered adds a new dimension to observations of the foster care process. Specifically, primary families did not participate in large numbers, while the invitation to the primary families to attend education took into account the parents' motivation and their participation in other activities related to the foster placement. The social workers saw that their role is often neglected; they are insufficiently motivated and do not have the opportunity to participate due to distance, travelling or lack of motivation. Given that the system does not sufficiently engage with the primary family, even the invitation to attend education deviates from the standard activities with primary families organised by regional offices, especially when all are involved. At the training session, the primary families did not say much, although in several cases, they felt the need to say something, focusing on

the present problems or on something they want solved now with everyone gathered in one single place. In the conversations with the primary families in the informal part of the educational course and while socialising over food, they indicated how seemingly unusual it was for them to be invited, but they were also pleased. They did not really expect anything due to past disappointments with unsuccessful positive change when working with experts. Furthermore, the primary families expressed their attitude, saying they are not used to being offered a programme like this and they participate in a different way than when called if something is wrong. For this reason, they have not readily opted for education and do not have positive expectations of it either. All emphasise the feeling of being excluded from the foster process and see the family group conference as an opportunity for equal inclusion and for everyone to hear what they want to say. The relationship with the experts is also important to them. Participating in the training was an honour for them, and they felt respected. They also emphasise the need for a better relationship with foster families and the child, where the training gave them more time to build this kind of contact and cooperation. When talking to the children, I saw they found it interesting, and liked the animated film about the family group conference the most, but that they were also feeling satisfied, because we all got together at the end and socialised with soft drinks and snacks. After the training, I talked to the foster parents about their needs in organising a family group conference to bring the participants together in a less formal way. The foster carers had to clarify certain elements of the process in order to reflect on their options and capacities. Most of them were interested as to what happens when only a few people sign up, or the primary parent refuses to attend. How can they sign up if they decide to attend the conference? Where can they find out more? Brochures were prepared for all educational courses with a text briefly describing the method and my contacts in case they wanted to know more or decided to participate in the conference.

7.4.3. The link between foster care practice and family group conferences with possibilities for establishing participative and emancipatory social work in the foster care system

The third research question in the third thesis of the dissertation focuses on linking practice in the foster care system with the family group conference while taking into account the need to establish participatory and emancipatory social work in the foster care system. The

results of our research show that foster care practice is a challenging process that involves different processes and participants as part of the foster care system, and this relationship needs to be analysed transparently to understand it. To connect the elements of foster care practice, the family group conference and the principles of emancipation and participation, the results of our research need to be summarised and woven into a coherent network of data through the triangulation of findings. Reflecting on practice and discovering the viewpoints of all involved, including an overview of the system and how it works, identifies areas where it is possible to make a difference and take action. The findings of the first and second theses of the research provided an overview of the foster care system in an operational sense and established a link between foster care practice and the elements of the family group conference already in use in practice. In the third phase, the element of participation and the role of participants in the foster care process was added, which links and demonstrates the possibilities of applying family group conferences in practice.

The triangulation of the data and methods used in the research across all three phases leads to results demonstrating the link between group work in social work practice and the possibility of using family group conferences at an organisational level. The interview method used in the first phase of the research, the analysis of practice and the link with the elements of the family group conference, and the implementation of training and questionnaires in the final phase of the research made it possible to generate different data about foster care practice, but also through different participants in the process. Denzin (1978, p. 21) describes the possibility of triangulation of methods, data, theory or research. Although triangulation is often seen as a research strategy in which methods are used in parallel or simultaneously, the presentation of the results of our thesis uses triangulation, which is sequential and in which the methods are separated in time and follow the course of the research, as described by Lobe (2006, p. 64), who explains that the aim of this approach is to connect, explain and enrich the data collected by the previous method. The triangulation of methods and triangulation of data are two types of triangulation used in this dissertation. The triangulation of methods is described in the chapter on data processing and analysis (Chapter 6.5.), while the triangulation of results is presented as an integration of the results collected with different methods, with the aim of obtaining answers to the third research question in the third thesis of the dissertation and a better understanding of the summary of the research topic.

In linking the practice of foster care in Croatia and family group conferences, our research findings show that there are elements of the family group conference present in the practice

of social workers but are scattered in the process, sometimes present and other times absent and present at different stages of foster care. For example, the child's voice and involvement in the process were found to be present, but only at the time of the child's separation from the family, when the child is approached and informed about foster care but is not given the opportunity to decide on the placement or to meet the foster carers prior to placement, indicating a lack of understanding of emancipation on the part of the social worker, but also a lack of genuine participation by the child. Arnstein (1969, p. 217) interprets this as apparent participation because although the child expresses an opinion, the child has no influence on the social worker's decision. Ivković and Žižak (2010) come to similar conclusions and describe the 2004 report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which formulates clear recommendations for the field of foster care. In the report, the Committee found that the child's participation and right to express views on matters affecting the child was inadequate and recommended systematic work for involvement in all processes. Our findings show that the placement process is strongly supported by the legal protocol and is carried out by social workers with minimal flexibility, while the strongest factor affecting this type of foster care process is the time and work overload of social workers. In addition, our findings show that social workers establish a positive relationship with the participants during the process, mainly with the foster families and the child, but rarely with the primary family. Social workers communicate with all participants in the process in a language that is understandable to the participants, and the focus is on connecting the family members, especially the foster family and the child, with which most agree. The majority agree that group work is not part of social workers' practice and work, while the foster care process itself facilitates work with families, which social workers present as group work but only with one family.

The majority of respondents testify to having the opportunity in the foster care process for group work when an individualised change plan for the child is created, in which all parties should usually be involved and work together. However, according to our findings, practice shows that drawing up a plan is more an administrative part of the work and that the system is becoming increasingly bureaucratised. Planning is done with each participant, agreeing only on the part of the plan that relates to that participant. A study conducted in Croatia on a sample of 303 families shows that only 14% of foster parents were involved in the creation of an individualised plan for a foster child, while more than 40% of foster parents stated that they knew nothing about the plan or its creation (Ivković and Žižak, 2010). Planning is a phase of foster care that, in practice, can create space for greater participation, the voice

of the child and all participants, as well as the possibility of joint cooperation and space for learning and acquiring new skills, which is a prerequisite for emancipation. Planning is a fundamental part of the family group conference method, but unlike usual planning practices in foster care, the method allows for full participation and independent decision-making by all participants. Weinstein, Whittington and Leiba (2003, p. 174) note that experts often use cosmetic mechanisms when working with users to make decisions and state it does not change the power position between users and experts and does not represent true participation, which was also shown to be the case in our findings from foster care practice, e.g., when everyone is involved but only in the part concerning them and no one has all the information transparently.

The foster care procedure provides for the involvement and participation of all parties and joint cooperation during and after the placement of the child in foster care. Although the foster care process appears to be participatory and inclusive for all parties involved, especially when the law is followed, in practice, some parties are often excluded or only minimally involved. According to our findings, the primary family is often not involved at all, especially when the decision is made to separate the child from the family, to participate in the creation of a plan for the child or continue working with the primary family to create the necessary conditions for the child to return to the primary family. In addition, support for primary families in the community is only realised when there are civil society activities or project activities that enable the development of services for parents. The formal family support network, be it the primary or foster family, is only weakly developed and is often the main informal support that families have in their environment. Nyberg (2003) points out that social network theory aims to establish a relationship between personal development and networking and create conditions of empowerment that help individuals have a greater impact on the situation, achieving a better connection with the social network. According to our findings, primary families not only have a less developed network but also play a lesser role in the overall foster care process, have fewer opportunities for decision-making and participation, and also lack the necessary support, which calls into question the democracy of the process. In foster care, there is usually a lack of planned work with the primary family to mobilise the potential and strengths of the family, which is the main task of social work (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl, 2019), which is also consistent with our findings, as there are no measures or actions directed at primary families to increase the capacities of the primary family. Social work has a complex role in the foster care process, which is to care for the child and their needs but also to work on the

needs of the primary family (Boddy et al., 2013). If there is no practical consideration of the primary family, social work loses its role in working with people and expecting a positive outcome in terms of the child's return to their family is impossible. Social work practice in our research does not understand emancipatory social work, i.e., activation of the development potential within each person (Bognar, 2002) or liberation from the constraints of society to counter injustice and rights violations through the development of self-confidence (Dominelli, 2002). Flaker (2023) also explains professional emancipation, which means being independent and autonomous at work. However, to achieve this kind of emancipation, social workers need to understand their role and how they work with users. Our findings show that when social workers talk about institutional barriers and opportunities, their autonomy is often threatened or non-existent. The majority state that the outcome and progress of a foster child's care depends primarily on the social worker themselves, their commitment, their extra efforts and their ability to find solutions. Furthermore, as our findings show that social work practice does not involve group work, it is to be expected that not all those involved in the foster care system meet to get to know each other, share experiences or agree on further cooperation. The child rarely has the opportunity to get to know the foster parents before being placed in a new family and environment. While this is completely impossible for the primary family, our findings indicate rare cases where this happens in practice, but the incentive for such an approach comes exclusively from social workers, who understand the need for this type of work in the foster care process and make a special goodwill effort. The child is only partially involved in the whole foster care process; they are spoken to, asked for an opinion and heard, but the decision still rests solely with the social worker or professional team working with the family. Arnstein (1969) refers to this type of involvement as tokenism, where participants can express their opinions and attitudes, but the power remains in the hands of the other decision-making structures.

A positive relationship with foster carer participants is extremely important for practice and has a major impact on a good outcome in foster care, but this is often not the case, as our results show. In fact, our findings show the often reluctance and refusal of the primary family to cooperate and the placement of the child in foster care with the consent of the primary family are rare situations. The primary family has no trust in the system and is often disappointed by the lack of support they expected, as revealed in our findings from the training of foster carers, children and primary families. Nevertheless, Schofield et al. (2011, p. 15) state that with the right support, building a positive relationship and changing

the primary family's attitude towards families who refuse to cooperate is possible. Building a positive relationship with primary families depends on social workers who understand their negative emotions, whom they trust and who can build a constructive relationship, which means a better relationship with both the child and the foster family (Schofield and Stevenson, 2009). Similarly, Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019, p. 137) emphasise the exclusion of the primary family from the learning and parenting process but also from other processes of foster families, which prevents the emancipation of primary families. Negative emotions and the exclusion of primary families contribute to losing a sense of control over one's own life. The lack of involvement and positive cooperation with all parties involved in the foster care process contributes to the feeling that primary families need – they are still important people in the child's life (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 32). Schofield et al. (2011, p.12) state that primary families want to be involved and informed and expect understanding and respect from social workers in the foster care process. The separation of the child from the primary family also affects the breakdown of the relationship that the child has developed with their family (Brajša-Žganec, Keresteš, Kuterovac Jagodić, Šumelj and Žic Grgat, 2005), and it is important to continue with contact while the child is in foster care, which can help return the child to the primary family sooner (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor and Pithouse, 2004). A study conducted in Croatia by Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović and Jelača (2005) shows that the relationship between a child in foster care and the primary family is often damaged, and communication between the primary family and the foster parents is difficult. Our findings show that the connection between all parties is partially realised, but also the connection between two families and the child, but in such a way that the social workers work with the foster families and the child or with the child and the primary family, but never with all of them. The relationship and cooperation between the primary family and the foster parents is left to them alone; social workers are rarely involved, which has been cited in previous research as one of the biggest problems in foster care (Horvat, Tomašević and Lozina, 2022). Boddy et al. (2013, p. 10) emphasise the importance of the role and of maintaining the child's kinship network in order to retain a sense of identity. The authors describe the need to support both the child and the primary family in coping with separation and attachment. Our research has shown that social workers understand the child's needs and right to their origins, but on the other hand, social workers are powerless and have no solution for balancing the relationship between the two families.

In contrast to the current practice of foster care in Croatia, the family group conference provides space and time for all participants in the foster care process so that the primary family is equally involved in the discussion, planning and decision-making process (Straub, 2005). Our research findings on elements of the family group conference in foster care practice highlight the only partial active role of the primary family, i.e., when kinship care is involved, the role is more active, while the primary family is otherwise passive. Boddy et al. (2013, p. 9) point out that primary families need to be involved in the foster care process, especially in decision-making and planning care for a child outside the family. In addition, the authors emphasise the importance of involving siblings, grandparents and the child's extended network outside the primary family in the child's life, which they relate to the group family conference, where people close to the child come together when decisions are to be made or planned.

In the foster care process, there is often a hasty separation or a court decision to separate the child from the family, which makes it difficult to build further positive cooperation. Our findings show that in the foster care process, a positive relationship is usually established with the foster parents, especially at the beginning of the placement, but further cooperation is limited or rare. Research by Horvat, Tomašević and Lozina (2022, p. 108) shows that foster parents lack the support of a formal network as well as information about the child upon arrival in the family, which is scarce. Although our findings show that transparency is an element identified in the foster care planning phase, this is not the case throughout the foster care process. When creating an individualised change plan for a child, our findings reveal transparent communication with all participants, but it mainly relates to the purpose and goal, i.e. the plan needs to be signed off by all parties. The majority indicate that another way in which social workers see transparent communication and information for all parties involved is in the documentary or bureaucratic part, through written documents such as statements on the file, decisions and solutions which are handed out to the parties involved. The family group conference is carried out with the involvement of professionals and all others in the foster care system, creating space for simultaneously exchanging information between all parties and the provision of additional information about the family's options through a system of support from various professionals. The results of our research show that in foster care practice in Croatia, there is no such process or situation where all participants are in one place and share information transparently. Furthermore, the majority of respondents state that the whole process of foster care placement is primarily focused on the child and their needs. Doolan (2011) explains that children are included as equal

participants in a group family conference, which means they can choose who attends the conference, choose the person to speak for them in the conference if they do not feel safe, and they are involved in the creation of the plan and related decisions. Parkinson (2018) talks about involving the child at the micro and meso level through a group family conference, assuming that close relatives and people close to the child are involved, as well as the wider community. Without the involvement of a wider circle of informal support networks for the family and the child, achieving the change the family needs is difficult. Ecological systems theory states that systems must be interconnected and that changes in one system must be transmitted to other systems (Parkinson, 2018). Our findings show that in practice, there is no possibility of working this way with the child's extended network in the foster care system in Croatia, especially when discussing decision-making or creating an individualised change plan for the child in a joint session.

7.4.4. Possibilities of implementing the family group conference method in social work in relation to the institution, the community and policies

The fourth research question in the third thesis of the dissertation focuses on the necessary measures at the community, institutional or political level for using the family group conference in the foster care process. Furthermore, findings from the first phase of the research on the needs of social workers for working in the foster care system were supplemented in the final discussion in the action group on the possibilities of implementing the method in practice. The discussion developed in two directions. The first direction relates to applying the family group conference in the foster care system and the required resources. The action group participants agree that the best time to apply the method is before the child is separated from the family and while the measure of family law protection is still in force. Božić (2017, p. 7) expressed a similar view, stating that the method should be applied before court proceedings in the foster family. During the foster care process, the action group participants defined potential situations in which the method could be applied, such as when creating a plan for the child, when harmonising cooperation between the primary family and foster family, in situations where the foster family needs additional support in caring for the child and before the child leaves the foster family in order to ensure a quality support network for the child. After having the foster carers, primary families, and children go through the education process, the action group saw an opportunity for kinship care where the quality and transparency of communication could

be improved using this method. Pennell, Edwards and Burford (2010) found that by using a family group conference before the child is separated from the family, there is a greater chance of placement with relatives as the most favourable option for the child. Furthermore, Cleaver (2006; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011, p. 6) emphasises that foster parents need expert support when building and maintaining a relationship with the primary family, but it is also necessary to build a relationship with the child's wider network or siblings. A major problem in foster care is the relationship between the foster parents and the primary family. Therefore, it is important to point out that in the analysis of alternative care in European Union countries and in the European Commission report described by Lerch and Nordenmark Severinsson (2019, p. 33), an example of the family group conference as good practice is presented for cases where the relationship between the child and the primary family is maintained, but also a positive relationship is created between the foster parents and the primary family. An example of good practice is described in Belgium and refers to the method of family group conferences, which ensures the involvement and control of the primary family in the interventions.

The use of family group conferences in foster care practice in Croatia certainly has its justification, especially in view of the research findings that point to several key areas of foster care requiring additional support, for which social work has no answer for the time being. From the collected research results, it appears that the use of the family group conference before the separation of a child from the family is possible in two ways: a) as a separate procedure available to the family and one of the methods of support in addition to the existing measures of family law protection and b) as one of the methods used as part of one of the measures of family law protection in working with families through the measure for help and support. In addition, the possibility of using it as an alternative to judicial procedures is more than reasonable, as it would ensure a more democratic process of participation of all parties involved, but also an emancipatory and participatory work with the family with less harmful effects on the child. In the context of community involvement and support networks, the family group conference method can ensure access to resources for the family, but in addition, the social skills of the family are strengthened, and the problem is worked on together while all participants retain their autonomy in the process. The possibilities of the family group conference in foster care practice are manifold, but its implementation requires the involvement of other social actors in advocating this approach. The second part of the discussion focused on the community and the resources needed, the institutional environment and the policy governing the work of social welfare in Croatia.

In the conversation about the institutional capacities and possibilities that social workers have in their organisations, insufficient work on the development of foster care and the problem of reducing the number of foster parents are the primary issues. Although it is an issue for policymakers, who have emphasised this very need in strategic documents, social workers are aware that structurally, nothing is being done on this issue. On the contrary, the capacity for institutional placement is being expanded, and an increase in this form of care is being announced, which runs completely counter to the process of deinstitutionalisation – one of the most important strategic goals in the development of social care services and reforms in Croatia. Lerch and Nordenmark Severinsson (2019) note that in 2017, Croatia registered a larger number of children moving from foster care to institutional care, which is another indication of problems in the direction of the foster care system.

At the same time, the institution is often the first choice for social workers when placing a child because it is a less demanding process for placing and monitoring the child. This outcome is exactly what Flaker (2014, p. 16) is talking about when he describes Castelo and his concept of a total institution that has the ability to “rise like a Phoenix bird from the ashes”. Members of the action group defined the need to develop methods in foster care because, currently, there are no methods in practice to help in working with families. Although aware of the need to develop new methods, there is a concern about the institutional resources they need to change something. The first issue is the little time available to social workers, considering that a social worker takes care of over 100 families in Croatia. Another fact that makes it difficult for social workers to be available to users is the bureaucratisation of the system. The participants mention administrative tasks and documentation that are needed, and regulations and laws are followed without respecting and acknowledging the power of the users. This kind of bureaucratic responsibility in the sense of risk avoidance is described by Flaker (2023) as responsibility for another with the mandate to make decisions for another and determine what the other should do.

The group members see the development and implementation of the method in practice as feasible, but such that foster care teams are established in all regional offices whose role would be to work on the foster care process. Currently, there are foster care teams only if there are over 100 foster families per regional office, which is rare. In this situation, a team of experts would be created with a certain autonomy to work in foster care, but also the possibility of innovation, such as the family group conference method. Services in the community are not sufficiently developed or do not exist, while social workers have neither the time nor the resources to better connect with existing organizations in the community.

They state the need for better connections with civil society associations and organisations that offer certain services. Although they do not have continuous and present contact with the community, they still state that the family group conference method could be part of the services developed in the community and used in partnership with social workers. A similar example is seen in a survey conducted on a sample of 193 social workers in Croatia, which shows that 84.5% of respondents believe that family group conferences can be implemented in social care practice, while 97.4% of respondents believe that it would be useful or extremely useful in their work (Horvat, 2021, p. 267). Furthermore, in mentioned research, half of the respondents believe that the family group conference should be conducted by non-governmental organisations, and the service should be developed in the community as part of the deinstitutionalisation process. In most European countries, such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom or partially Germany, the coordination and implementation of family group conferences belong to the civil sector, but there are examples, such as Norway or Germany, where the state sector is in charge of implementing the method (Aras Kramar, 2021).

The action group members are of the opinion that the motivation, enthusiasm and desire for change are present among social workers in practice, but there is neither sufficient autonomy for social workers nor understanding on the part of the responsible ministry. In the discussion, the action group also defined the need for additional knowledge in certain areas of practical work, such as group work, work with families, advocacy or knowledge about the community. They see no opportunity to contribute to the development of practice or influence policy and believe that the family group conference should be translated into legislation. Examples from practice in European countries show that the family group conference method is part of the legal framework or court protocols in child protection (Aras Kramar, 2021, p. 214). The example of the United Kingdom shows that a family group conference is initiated before court proceedings, thereby resolving the family's difficulties in a different way, avoiding court proceedings in the care of the child (Aras Kramar, 2021), while in the Netherlands the family's right to resolve their problem independently and to participate in decisions about their lives is guaranteed by law (Asscher, Dijkstra, Stams, Deković and Creemers, 2014).

Systematic advocacy for necessary changes in the social system is one of the tasks of social workers, but according to our findings, this role of social workers does not exist and is often under the influence of political structures. The oppression by the system itself is reflected in the insufficient involvement of practitioners in decision-making about themselves.

Furthermore, strengthening the social work profession is a necessary process that can only facilitate change for the benefit of users, but the question arises as to how and who should strengthen the profession to gain the necessary autonomy. Furthermore, our findings show that the development of methods for working with users is necessary for social work practice, and social workers are often powerless in working with users, which calls into question their responsibility towards users. Institutionalisation is imposed as a possible solution, which is in no way consistent with the principles of social work. Education on topics that social workers need, such as advocacy, group work, working methods or community, are possible steps towards change.

7.4.5. CONCLUSION BASED ON THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE THIRD THESIS OF THE DISSERTATION

The third thesis of the dissertation, in regard to the corresponding four research questions, represents the third phase of research in the dissertation. The third thesis aims to answer the question of how the family group conference can contribute to an alternative non-institutional placement of the child, how it brings about the normalisation of the support network in the community and how the experiences of all participants in the family group conference process contribute to the development of theories on working with families and change at the systemic level.

The research was carried out in a modified form compared to the prepared research plan, i.e., the planned implementation of the family group conference in foster care practice as a pilot test method was not carried out. Changes in the direction of action research are common, as the collected results of the individual phases determine the direction of the research, even if this was not planned (Metcalf and Humphreys, 2002). The evidence gathered in the first and second theses of the research indicates that the use of the family group conference method in foster care needs to be gradually implemented and directed the research to gain more knowledge about the use of the method, both for action group members and foster families, primary families and the child.

Our findings initiated further research to plan training for primary families, foster families and children. Our aim was to explain to participants what the method offers families and how it is implemented so that participants can decide whether they want to implement the method in their family. Furthermore, this is also an ethical imperative in research, i.e., to

ensure that the researcher, participants and group members possess the necessary knowledge to discuss issues that are clear to all (Davison, Martinsons and Wong, 2022). In addition, after the discussion in the action group, we decided to change the way and approach of foster care education and organise inclusive education for all, including primary families, children and foster families. Despite the lack of confidence in the outcomes of this type of education, all participants concluded that a change is needed, as well as a new way of approaching and working with primary families.

Considering that the research direction has changed, and in answering the first research question in the third thesis of the dissertation, which refers to the contribution of the family group conference to the non-institutional placement of the child and the deinstitutionalisation of foster care, the focus was on examining the available research on the respective topic. Our findings show that most research data in the literature refer to the role of family group conferences in preventing the separation of a child from the family, followed by the duration of placement with a foster parent, but also highlighting the difference between public and private placement of a child. In some countries, kinship care is considered private, for example, in the US or the UK, which means that the child is placed with family members who also do not have the same rights as other foster carers (Skaale Havnen and Christiansen, 2014; Mervyn-Smith, 2019). In addition, public foster care refers to unknown persons who are the foster parents of the child (Crampton and Jackson, 2007). In Croatia, kinship care is one of the types of foster care, and support for kinship carers is provided in the same way as for other types, but it does not include the right to compensation for the foster carer's work (Act on Foster Care, Official Gazette, 115/18, 18/22). In addition, two important factors have been identified in relation to the positive aspects of the use of the family group conference. Firstly, family group conferences contribute to more children being placed in kinship foster care, which is attributed to the family network involved in the conference (Crampton and Jackson, 2007; Pennell, Edwards and Burford, 2010; Wang et al., 2012). Another important aspect is that the family group conference creates a greater likelihood of the child's return to the primary family due to the child's participation in the conference and active role (Pennell, Edwards and Burford, 2010; Skaale Havnen and Christiansen, 2014). In contrast, some studies show that family group conferences have no impact on the length of foster care placement and no impact on the foster care process, either positive or negative (Berzin, Cohen, Thomas and Dawson, 2008; Wang et al., 2012). The use of the family group conference prior to the separation of a child from the family shows promising results in preventing separations; namely, some of the

children remain with their families and are not separated from the family (Marsh and Crow, 1998; Lupton and Nixon, 1999). The same study highlights the positive effect of the method on connecting all participants in the foster care process through shared decision-making and achieving positive cooperation between the family and the community as well as within the family itself. On the other hand, the family group conference shows positive results in the planning process, where most of the plans determined in the family group conference are successfully implemented and the families follow them (Crampton and Jackson, 2007). The same study by Crampton and Jackson (2007) shows that the use of family group conferences reduces the number of placements of children in institutional care and increases the number of placements in kinship care. From a family rights and protection perspective, Aras Kramar (2021, p. 206) describes family law protection measures and procedures, including court proceedings, for which the family group conference is a possible alternative to strengthening the family and preventing institutionalisation. The author points out the lack of methods for working with families, which Sladović Franz and Mujkanović (2003) also agree with, and appeals to the current family law protection measures that are not sufficient in supporting families. The majority of participants in our research, when analysing the results of the first and second thesis of the dissertation, identified the extent of the family group conference prior to the separation of the child from the family, which could have an impact on reducing the institutionalisation of children, as a greater number of children are now moving from foster care to an institutional form of placement. Our findings are consistent with the findings of other research but also with the recommendations about the possibility of using the method as one of the family-strengthening measures to prevent the separation of the child from the family (Aras Kramar, 2021), especially because social work practice cannot meet the increasing demand for the placement of children, nor does it have adequate methods for working with all participants in the foster care process. Our research shows that the first choice of social workers is often kinship care, which, according to other research, positions the family group conference as an excellent method in the foster care process.

Nevertheless, the majority notes that in foster care practice in Croatia, no form of work brings together the family and the wider network of families and community actors; hence, the possibility of placing a child in kinship care is limited. According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs from the end of 2022 (2023b), one-third of all children placed in foster care in Croatia are currently in kinship care. In their research findings, Crampton and Jackson (2007) describe that the use of family group conferences

reduced the number of children removed from foster care and transferred to institutional care. According to our findings, children are remaining in foster care increasingly longer, and the results of other studies show that the use of family group conferences during the period of placement in foster care increases the possibility of the child's return to the primary family, while others have not seen this impact on the outcome of placement in foster care. Our research results show that family group conferences influence the connection between family members, improve communication between all participants in the process, and facilitate planning in foster care and joint transparent work, which the majority identified as important elements missing in foster care practice in Croatia. The use of the family group conference at the beginning of the foster care process has, according to our findings, triggered many discussions (Chapter 7.2.) in which opinions are divided, while available research such as that by Berzin, Cohen, Thomas and Dawson (2008) favours the family group conference right at the beginning of the foster care process to create a connection between all participants, but also broader community support. Our findings show divided opinions among participants. Some stated that a family group conference at the beginning of foster care is a major risk for the child, while others feel that the risk lies in the inadequate preparation of the child and that the method is more desirable at this stage of foster care.

To obtain answers to the second research question of the third thesis, which focuses on getting to know the family group conference through the experience of the family's participation in it, it was not possible to collect the results in the planned way. The research focussed on better knowing the possibilities offered in family group conferences based on the experiences and attitudes of all participants in foster care who attended the family group conference training. The knowledge gained provided information about possible cooperation between primary families, children and foster families in the foster care process and whether there is space for mutual cooperation and communication as presented in the family group conference method.

After each training session, the results of the participants' attitudes towards the method presented to them were analysed using the questionnaire described in Chapter 6.2 (Appendix 2). Our results are presented numerically and descriptively to better illustrate the results, with a focus on the qualitative interpretation of the data. A total of 81 participants took part in the five training sessions. Most of them were from foster families (73%), while the fewest participants were from primary families (5%). The majority of participants indicated that they were satisfied with the training and that they see the

potential of the method in its application in foster care practice (91.94%), as well as being clear about their role in the process of implementing the method and they are clear about the goals of the method, which is perhaps the most important outcome when talking about focussing on the family and its needs. Our results show that a smaller proportion (16.13%) of participants immediately expressed a desire to apply the method in their family, while the other participants did not see an immediate need to apply the method. The results are encouraging in terms of the participants' interest in the family group conference method, providing insight into the perspective of those for whom the method is intended. The evaluation of the method on a Likert scale shows that the participants consider the method to be very good and useful, that it is a good approach to helping the family solve problems involving the community and the support network, and that the family group conference is a useful method for working with families. A study conducted by Horvat (2021, p. 267) in Croatia using a sample of 193 social workers shows that 97.4% of respondents consider the method to be very or extremely useful for social work practice, while 89.1% of social workers stated that they would like to learn more about family group conference and its possible application. Our results from the user perspective and the results from the social workers' perspective in the presented research coincide, which is an important piece of information about the need for ongoing development of methods in foster care practice.

After the qualitative data processing, the findings were categorised into several identified areas based on the collected results and the linking of concepts into thematic units. The category of participants' expectations from the educational process shows that the majority emphasised the new knowledge gained, the opportunity to learn something new, and useful and practical advice for working with children. In the category of support, the majority stated that they expected useful advice on resolving conflict situations, getting support in solving problems and whether the method is useful for foster parents in caring for the child and improving relationships within the family. The category of distrust, which comprises about a third of the participants' answers, refers to participation without expectations because if they had expected something, they would often be disappointed, as they stated. Ivković and Žižak (2010) show similar results in a survey conducted in Croatia among 303 respondents who were foster parents. One-third stated that the training had not provided them with any new knowledge or help in caring for a foster child.

Regarding participants' motivation for gaining additional knowledge about the family group conference and their views on the usefulness of the method, most participants described the method as a new way of solving difficulties and previously unknown, a good

idea and an unusual approach for families. The majority described the value of the training for the participants as gaining new knowledge, new information about the possibilities of working with the family and new knowledge for crisis situations in which a family group conference can be useful. Some of the participants described the training as a fun, interactive and dynamic process. One of the fundamental aims of our research and organising the training was to involve both primary families and all other participants and provide new knowledge and experiences for those without such knowledge. It is especially true for primary families and children who rarely participate in education and need additional empowerment and strengthening of their skills. In view of this approach through the theory of empowerment, the educational approach enabled shared learning and the exchange of experiences from different perspectives, which is consistent with Cattaneo and Chapman (2010, p. 649), who describe empowerment as a two-way process, while Freire (2002, p. 17) explains the exchange of experiences and knowledge as a process of mutual learning in a reciprocal relationship. Organising inclusive education for all participants in foster care is consistent with the assertion that inclusive education, in which social barriers are broken down, leads to empowerment and is based on the assumption of shared ignorance through which participants connect (Payne, 2014).

In addition, the participants in the training courses stated that they see the family group conference as a great support in care, but only if all those involved are open to this form of cooperation. Some of the advantages of the method mentioned by the participants were the potential and necessity of this approach in practice, achieving concrete results in working with families, the ease of the method in practice and a good tool for working with families. Furthermore, the majority state that the benefit of the method is the positive orientation towards problem-solving and focuses on the needs of the family. The participants describe the method as clear and interesting, applicable in foster care practice and additionally emphasise its naturalness in terms of the usual ritual present in a part of the family, namely that everyone sits down together at the table and discusses the problem. The disadvantages described by the participants refer to the impossibility of applying the method in all situations, pointing out that it is good for older children, such as the adolescent child population, considering that younger children would find understanding how to participate in the conference difficult. Doolan (2004) describes in his research findings that the use of the method has proven to be particularly effective when working with children with behavioural problems or with children in school settings, but also when working with adults and older people. Božić (2017) points out that the method can also be used in other areas,

such as in divorce cases, foster care, cases of peer violence or with young people in developmental crises. Most participants agree that it always makes sense to sit down together and discuss problems transparently. However, they emphasise that communication within families is often a problem, which is why they consider a family group conference to be a good way of overcoming this obstacle. They also see that the method can be used in their families in various situations, from everyday difficulties to major problems within the family, and also say they are already using a similar approach when wanting to solve a problem within the family. Some of the participants see no need for the method, stating that they have too many commitments and cannot devote the necessary time to such meetings, while others state that there are currently no difficulties requiring such conferences, and others express doubts about the method with regard to the reaction of the invited participants during joint meetings. Davies, Adler and Goodman (2007, p. 3) state that before organising a family group conference, several conversations with the family are necessary to motivate and empower them to decide on the method. Regarding the approach to all participants and the principles of the family group conference, participants mentioned elements that were important to them, such as a support network for the family, the transparency of the process, the sharing of information about family difficulties with people who are important to the family, the possibility of making decisions about one's own life or the child's life, and the right of everyone to choose what they want. Some of the participants emphasised that the involvement of other people in the family's life, as well as the involvement of experts, is important, and it is always better to hear different opinions. Burns and Früchtel (2014, p. 1155) emphasise the need to involve a wider network of families when working with families but emphasise that it is up to the family to decide who they want to involve, which could be friends, neighbours or work colleagues. The majority agree that involving a wider network to collaborate means accessibility to new resources for a family. Participants defined situations in their families where they saw an opportunity to use a family group conference. The situations they noted were dysfunctional family relationships, conflict situations with a foster child or the primary family, the settling of a child into a new environment or organising a child's daily routine. Burns and Früchtel (2014) also mention the use of a family group conference in setting up the family's daily routine after the arrival of a child in a new family as a useful method of facilitating work with families. In addition, the majority believe that a child in foster care often needs educational support, and the method could help support the child in learning, coping with school material and settling into the new school environment. Participants also described

the importance of supporting the child when leaving the foster care system. In such cases, they see opportunities for the family group conference to ensure a network of support for the child who eventually becomes independent.

The study by Skaale Havnen and Christiansen (2014, p. 18) agrees with our findings and shows the usefulness of the method when a child leaves the care system. One of the unexpected topics discussed by the participants was the organisation of a family group conference for foster parents, which means that the focus is not on supporting the child but on the foster parents. The participants defined that the family group conference is also suitable for adults, which is an unexpected answer considering that the focus is only on the child, while Williams (2004, p. 80) emphasises the need to explore together with the families their reality, find out how they see it and then plan the support.

During the training sessions, discussions and informal conversations were held with the participants. After the presentation, participants could ask questions, get more information about the method or present their family situation. Importantly, this form of training as part of our research process was conducted in foster care for the first time, as never before had all participants – foster parents, primary families and children – been together in one place. There were only a few participants from the primary families, but in the interviews with them, they described their experiences, which are not positive because they are not involved in foster care and there is no support for them. This outcome is in line with our findings from the first and second thesis of the research, which show insufficient work undertaken with primary families but also their complete exclusion from participation. In addition, primary families state that they are not used to attending such events as they have only been invited to the regional offices when something is wrong, and it is rarely an opportunity for them to learn or get the necessary support. This situation is partly attributed to the fact that primary families are less likely to respond to educational programmes. Primary families expressed satisfaction with attending, mainly because they had the opportunity to spend time with the child but also to talk to the foster family and social worker in one place about their wants and needs. Discussions with foster carers tended to focus on the support they needed or additional information about whom they could contact if they chose to attend a family group conference. Brochures were prepared for all participants with a text briefly describing the method and my contacts in case they would like to know more or decide to hold a family group conference in their family.

After the training and presentation of the family group method for foster parents, children and primary families and the generated data from the practice in the first and second thesis,

the third research question in the third thesis of the dissertation refers to the connection between foster care practice and the family group conference method, while taking into account the participatory and emancipatory social work that needs to be established in foster care. Our findings show that foster care is a challenging process that involves multiple participants, procedures during the process, and complex relationships between all participants. Triangulation of the data was used to analyse all the findings obtained to link them and gain a better understanding of the topic researched and provide answers to the research questions. The findings gathered in response to the research questions of the first and second theses, relating to the analysis of current foster care practice, as well as analysing the presence of participation and understanding emancipation and linking the elements of family group conference with the phases of foster care, are connected to the third thesis and the roles of participants in the foster care process, the consideration of which shows possibilities of applying family group conference in practice.

Our findings show that the link between foster care practice and the family group conference method is dispersed and rather partial at the level of the elements from the method present in practice. Partially present elements mean they occasionally appear in work because practices vary across regional offices, and elements are present depending on the commitment of social workers, or elements are present only when conditions exist for them in practice. Furthermore, our findings show the presence or absence of some elements in foster care practice. Our research reveals that the element of involving the child in the foster care process and ensuring their voice is heard in the process is present in foster care practice, but not with actual involvement. In foster care practice, it was found that although the child is able to express views and be listened to, heard and spoken to, it has no impact on the decision-making process about the child. Our research findings point to a lack of child participation in foster care practice, but also a lack of understanding of emancipation on the part of social workers. Arnstein (1969, p. 217) calls this type of participation tokenism or apparent participation. Similar results are shown in the research of Ivković and Žižak (2010), who describe the 2004 report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and state that the child's participation and right to express their opinion on personal matters is insufficient. The findings of our research show that social work practice is governed by a series of laws and protocols that guide social workers towards increasingly less flexibility and more bureaucratisation in their work with service users, exacerbated by factors such as lack of time and social worker overload. In contrast to foster care practice, the family group conference views the children as equal participants in the process. This means that they can

choose who attends the conference, choose the person to speak for them at the conference if they do not feel safe, and they are also involved in creating the plan and related decisions (Doolan, 2011). The importance of involving the community in working with the family is emphasised by Parkinson (2018) when he describes working at the micro and meso level through the group family conference and emphasises that a change in one system should be visible in another system. Without the involvement of a formal and informal support network, it is difficult for the family and the child to achieve the necessary change. Our findings show that in the foster care practice in Croatia, there is no opportunity to work with the child's extended network in this way, especially when it comes to talking about decisions or creating an individualised change plan for the child.

Our findings show that building a positive relationship and cooperation with foster care participants is only partially present in foster care practice, as not all participants are treated equally. There is a lack of support and empowerment of the primary family, which is excluded from the foster care system. Therefore, the principle of equality and participation is insufficient or non-existent in foster care practice, while the democracy of the process is questionable. The majority attribute the lack of cooperation with the primary families to the fact that they refuse to cooperate, and the child is often placed in foster care without the consent of the primary family. The primary family has no trust in the system and is often disappointed by the lack of support they expected, as our findings from the training of foster carers, children and primary families show. However, Schofield et al. (2011, p. 15) state that with the right support and approach, a positive relationship with primary families can be built. Building a positive relationship with primary families depends on social workers understanding their negative emotions (Schofield and Stevenson, 2009), as these contribute to losing a sense of control over their own lives. The lack of engagement and positive cooperation with all parties involved in the foster care process created the proper and necessary feeling among primary families, namely a feeling of still being important in the child's life (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995, p. 32). Schofield et al. (2011, p. 12) state that primary families want to be involved and informed while also expecting understanding and respect from social workers in the foster care process. Our findings show that the primary family has a lesser role, meaning it is only involved in certain phases of the foster care relationship, such as only planning what concerns the meeting between the child and the primary family or the child's return to the primary family. In contrast to previous foster care practices in Croatia, the family group conference offers space and time for all

participants in the foster care process, resulting in equal involvement of the primary family in the discussion, planning and decision-making process (Straub, 2005).

Support for primary families, as indicated by the majority, is provided in civil society when there are workshops or similar project activities to strengthen the capacity of parents. According to our research findings, primary families often have a less developed informal support network, which makes strengthening the family even more difficult. The theory of social networks, according to Nyberg (2003) explains how important it is to establish a link between personal development and the connection with a network in order to strengthen and influence one's own situation. Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl (2019) argue similarly when talking about the need to mobilise the potential and strengths of the family, which is in line with our findings, as there are no measures or actions in foster care to increase the capacity of the primary family. Boddy et al. (2013, p. 9) point out that primary families need to be involved in the process of decision-making and care planning for a child outside the family, but also in broader family networks such as siblings, grandparents, which is the primary aim of a family group conference when it comes to transitioning to community support and finding resources within and outside the family. Support networks are also not adequately represented for foster families and children. Our findings show that when the foster care process commences, there is a positive relationship and greater involvement of foster families. Subsequently, the intensity of support for foster families decreases, which is consistent with the research findings of Horvat, Tomašević and Lozina (2022, p. 108), which show a lack of formal support for foster parents but also a lack of information about the child upon arrival in the family. As opposed to foster care practice, the family group conference is conducted in a transparent manner involving professionals and all others in the foster care system who share information with each other and share the resources at their disposal to support the family. The results of our research show that in foster care practice in Croatia, there is no process or situation where all participants are in one place and share information transparently. The majority describe that one of the ways social workers see transparency in foster care work is through written communication, such as written documents such as file notes, letters, and decisions, delivered to those involved. Social work has a complex role in the foster care process, which includes attending to the needs of the primary family (Boddy et al., 2013), which is a prerequisite for positive outcomes in foster care and the child's return to their family. This situation suggests that social work practice in our research does not imply emancipatory social work, meaning work to activate the development potential of each person (Bognar, 2002) or work to

develop self-confidence in freeing a person from the restrictions of society and the violation of their rights (Dominelli, 2002). The active involvement of all participants in the foster care process, empowerment and strengthening of connections between family members are partially present in the foster care process and mostly refer to the more active involvement of foster carers who need support in working with a child or in parenting. The majority of respondents state that the element of strengthening bonds within the family is present in social work practice, but it mostly relates to strengthening the bond between the foster family and the child while weakening the bond between the child and the primary family. The separation of a child from the primary family at the beginning of the foster care relationship disrupts the relationship that the child already has developed with the primary family (Brajša-Žganec, Keresteš, Kuterovac Jagodić, Šumelj and Žic Grgat, 2005), and it is important that contact continues while the child is in foster care, which can contribute to a faster return of the child to the primary family (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor and Pithouse, 2004). In their study, Družić Ljubotina, Kletečki Radović and Jelača (2005) describe similar data on the broken relationship between the primary family and the child and additionally emphasise the problem of poor communication between the primary family and the foster parents. The relationship and cooperation between the primary family and the foster parents are left to its own devices, which has been cited as one of the biggest problems in foster care in previous studies (Horvat, Tomašević and Lozina, 2022, p. 108). Maintaining the child's sense of identity, Boddy et al. (2013, p. 10) emphasize the role of maintaining the child's kinship network as an important part of the role. The authors observe the family's coping with separation and attachment on the basis of the need for family support in overcoming these challenges. Our research shows that social workers understand the child's needs and their right to originate, but on the other hand, they are powerless and have no solutions to balance the relationship between the two families.

Furthermore, group work rarely occurs in foster care practice, while the majority of respondents described the form of group work they do as working with the family. The majority state that in practice, rarely do all participants in foster care at the same time in the same place and jointly create an individualised change plan for the child, while they describe planning as more of a bureaucratic process and a part of administration, given that the plan is mandatory for every child in the foster care. Ivković and Žižak (2010) describe the results of their research showing that in a sample of 303 foster families, 14% of foster parents were involved in planning, while more than 40% of foster parents have no information about the need to create a plan or its existence. According to our research

findings, the planning process in foster care is a potential space for joint collaboration and involvement of all participants, which can ensure the sharing of experiences, learning and acquisition of new skills – a prerequisite for emancipation. Planning is a fundamental part of the family group conference method, but unlike the foster care practice examined in our study, it implies an equal, democratic planning process and independent decision-making by all participants.

In the results of our study, it was found that social workers have less autonomy when working with users, which makes it difficult to expect a focus on emancipatory social work but also flexibility when working with users.

Flaker (2023) also explains professional emancipation, which means working independently and autonomously. Our findings show that institutional barriers or opportunities also influence how social workers work and liaise with users, especially due to a lack of autonomy at work. This situation is particularly important because the majority of participants stated that the outcome and progress in caring for a foster child depends primarily on the social worker themselves, their commitment, extra effort and ability to find solutions. As mentioned earlier, our findings show that in social work practice, there is no group work and no joint cooperation between all involved parties, which in foster care practice means that the child rarely has the opportunity to get to know the foster carers before being placed in a new family, while the same applies to the primary family which does not have the opportunity to get to know the foster parents. The child is only partially involved in the whole foster care process; they are asked for their opinion and heard, but the decision still lies solely with the social worker or the professional team working with the family.

Necessary measures at the social, institutional or political level for applying and implementing the family group conference in the foster care system are at the centre of the fourth research question in the third thesis. Some of the results were summarised in the answers to the research questions of the first thesis and supplemented with the results of the final discussion of the action group when it discussed the possibilities of applying the family group conference in the practices of the foster care system and the necessary changes. Two areas were considered in the discussion: 1) the stage of the foster care system for the implementation of the family group conference and 2) the resources required for its application in practice.

Throughout the process of our research, foster care practice was scrutinised, and the place for the application of the family group conference was considered. The action group

concluded that there is sufficient scope for the method to be used at several key phases of the foster care system. In addition, the majority say the method is suitable for use before the child is separated from the family and while the family is receiving support and assistance under one of the family law protection measures. Our findings are consistent with the findings of Pennell, Edwards and Burford (2010), who found that if a family group conference is used before the child is separated from the family, the child is more likely to be placed with relatives, which is the most favourable option for the child. From the collected results of our research, it appears that the use of a family group conference to prevent the separation of a child from the family is possible as a special procedure available to the family and as one of the options for support in addition to the existing measures of family law protection or as an option of family law protection a measure in working with the family through help and support. In addition, our results show that the method is suitable after the decision to separate the child from the family but before the court proceedings, while the same position is shared by Božić (2017, p. 7), who recommends the method as an alternative to court proceedings. Moreover, the possibility of using the family group conference as an alternative to court proceedings is more than reasonable, as it would ensure a more democratic participation of all parties involved, but also emancipatory and participatory work with the family and less harmful effects for the family and the child. The example of the United Kingdom shows that the family group conference is initiated before court proceedings, thereby resolving family difficulties in a different way and avoiding court proceedings in caring for the child (Aras Kramar, 2021), while in the Netherlands, the family's right to solve problems independently and to participate in decisions about their own lives is guaranteed by law (Asscher, Dijkstra, Stams, Deković and Creemers, 2014).

In addition, the method is also helpful in other phases of the foster care system, for instance, in the planning phase, when there are difficulties in achieving cooperation between the primary family and foster family, when the foster family needs help in caring for the child and when the child leaves the foster care system to ensure a high-quality support network for the child. The experience of training primary families, foster carers and children highlighted another area that the action group had not previously considered, namely kinship care, as the findings show that communication is sometimes even more difficult when family members are involved. Our findings are in line with available research, such as Cleaver (2006) and Sen and Broadhurst (2011, p. 6), who suggests that foster carers need professional support when it comes to building and maintaining a relationship with the

primary family, but building a relationship with the child's family and the child's social network is also necessary. According to our research, the use of the method is of great importance for building positive relationships between the two families, considering that one of the main difficulties is precisely the relationship between the foster parents and the primary family. The analysis of alternative care in the countries of the European Union presented in the European Commission report and described by Lerch and Nordenmark Severinsson (2019, p. 33) is consistent with our findings. The report highlights an example of the family group conference as good practice in cases of difficult relationships between two families and the child, while Belgium stands out as an excellent example of applying the family group conference to ensure that primary families take control over the interventions that concern them.

The use of the family group conference in social work and foster care practice in Croatia certainly has potential, especially in areas of foster care where social work does not have a solution to ensure a good outcome. From a community perspective, the family group conference provides the family with access to resources through a support network and the involvement of various formal support systems. The possibilities of the family group conference in foster care practice are many, but its implementation requires the involvement of other social actors who are committed to this approach.

The second part of the discussion in the action group focused on the community and the necessary resources, institutional environment and social policies in Croatia. Our findings show that there are barriers at the institutional level that prevent changes in social work practice, such as insufficient work on foster care development and the decreasing number of foster parents, which is an obstacle to the implementation of foster care teams in the organisational structure. Although this is an issue for policymakers who have emphasised this need in strategic documents, social workers are aware that structurally, nothing is being done on this matter. The majority see foster care teams in all regional offices, whose role would be to deal with the process and development of foster care. This situation would create a team of experts with a certain degree of autonomy to work in the area of foster care, but also the opportunity for innovations, such as the family group conference method. On the contrary, the capacity for residential care is under expansion, and the increase in this form of care is being announced, which is in complete contrast to the process of deinstitutionalisation – one of the main strategic goals in the development of social care services in Croatia. Lerch and Nordenmark Severinsson (2019) state that in 2017, a larger

number of children were transferred from foster care to institutional care in Croatia, which is another indicator of problems in the development of the foster care system.

Moreover, this situation of inactivity and lack of investment in the development of the foster care system encourages social workers to place the child in an institution because it allows for a less demanding process of placement and monitoring of the child. This outcome is exactly what Flaker (2014, p. 16) means when he describes Castelo and his concept of a total institution that can “rise like a Phoenix from the ashes”. The institution becomes the first choice of social workers when deciding where to place a child, and as institutions reach full capacity, capacity expansions are announced. The majority of respondents emphasised the need to develop new ways of working in social work and foster care, as current practice is not responsive to the needs of users. The majority of respondents in our study agree that the lack of time to work with users, too many families assigned to each social worker and the increasing bureaucratisation of the system are the biggest obstacles to the development of social work and better work with users.

At the community level, the majority feel that there are not enough services in the community nor sufficiently developed to support work with service users outside the institution. Our findings show that social workers do not have the time or resources to network better with existing organisations in the community. However, the majority state that the family group conference could be part of services developed in the community and utilised in partnership with social workers. In most European countries, such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom or partly Germany, the coordination and implementation of the family group conference are in the hands of the civil sector, but there are also other examples, such as Norway or Germany, where implementation is the responsibility of the state sector (Aras Kramar, 2021).

In our research, the results show that social workers need additional knowledge in specific areas such as group work, family work, advocacy and community work. The majority agree that social workers often feel powerless in their desire to make a difference and point out that it would be best if the family group conference were regulated by law. Examples from practice in European countries show that the family group conference method is part of the legal framework, i.e., court protocols for the protection of children (Aras Kramar, 2021, p. 214). Systematic advocacy for necessary changes in the social system is one of the roles of social workers, but to our knowledge, this role of social workers does not exist and is often influenced by the political structures of the state. The oppression by the system itself is reflected in the insufficient participation of practitioners in decisions about themselves and

the practices they carry out. Furthermore, our findings show that the development of methods for working with users is necessary for social work practice and that social workers are often powerless when working with users, which calls into question their responsibility towards users. Institutionalisation is imposed as one of the possible solutions, which is in no way compatible with the principles of social work or with the process of deinstitutionalisation as the most important strategic factor for the development of social care in Croatia. Education on the issues needed by social workers and empowerment of the social work profession are possible steps towards change.

8. CONCLUSION AND PROPOSALS FOR CHANGES IN FOSTER CARE

8.1. Foster care in Croatia and bureaucratisation of the system

Social work in Croatia faces a number of challenges, such as the slow development of the deinstitutionalisation process as a strategic provision of the current national documents, social care reform, which has been underway for several years, and the reorganisation of the social care system (Grozđanić and Rittossa, 2017; Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2022a). The foster care system is closely linked to deinstitutionalisation. The relevant strategies and plans emphasise areas requiring further development for the protection and safety of children and the prevention of their institutionalisation. The National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (Official Gazette, 13/21) highlights the child and the foster family as one of the priority goals in social policy and supports further deinstitutionalisation. Despite numerous plans, strategies and efforts to better regulate the foster care system, there is no evident progress in further deinstitutionalisation and field of foster care. An analysis of the strategic documents, such as the Plan for Deinstitutionalisation, Transformation and Prevention of Institutionalisation 2018-2020 (Ministry of Labour, Pensions, Family and Social Policy, 2018), indicates no improvement in effectiveness, but rather stagnation of the foster care system because the set goals have not been achieved despite the state's efforts to facilitate change. The research results show that social work is still dominated by a paradigm that attributes responsibility for the present situation to the individual.

Institutions create a social order imposing the need on users to better themselves. The results of the dissertation research show that primary families are usually labelled as 'bad', and parents are to bear the blame for problematic family situations and their inability to provide adequate care for the child. Therefore, primary families are labelled as incompetent and are entirely excluded from the foster care process, meaning they do not receive the necessary support when the child is in foster care.

In recent years, foster care as an alternative form of childcare has been one of the main topics in social policy and social work, sometimes due to negative experiences in everyday practice and sometimes due to the increasing number of children separated from their families and the lack of placement options. More and more children are separated from their families for various reasons: child neglect and abuse, poverty in the family, and special

needs of the child that the parents are unable to meet, such as developmental difficulties or the parents' inability to care for the child due to illness (Sladović Franz and Mujkanović, 2003). On the other hand, the placement of children in institutions is not sufficient and institutional capacities are full or overcrowded. Moreover, foster parents are giving up on fostering due to the lack of support and motivation or restrictions imposed by law (i.e., the age of foster parents). New and young foster carers are not choosing this specific profession, partly due to the high out-migration of young families from Croatia but also a lack of interest in providing this service (Laklija, 2011). As Croatia is a traditional country of foster care, the professional, political and public opinion on this form of care for children remains positive. Foster families are recognised as an essential and inexhaustible resource for the placement of children in the community.

This type of placement can be most beneficial for the child in terms of the child's right to live and be placed in an environment closest to family placement (Wolfensberger, 1972). Foster care should be a positive form of placement, but as this is not always the case, it should be considered as an option. Foster care is regulated by law as the temporary placement of a child due to adverse family circumstances, with a focus on the placement of children up to the age of seven and is seen as the most appropriate form of placement for the child (Foster Care Act, 115/18, 18/22). The results of the dissertation research in analysing changes in the foster care system and strategic documents indicate frequent legislative changes in recent years, but not based on practical experience. Most of the comments and input from practitioners were not taken into account when the law was passed, such as the results of dissertations pointing to the need to establish foster care teams in each regional office, which social workers called prior to the passing of the law. Mobile support teams for foster carers are also rare and, according to the findings of this dissertation, only exist in some regional offices.

In the last ten years, there has been little research in the field of foster care in Croatia, raising the question of how national policy is formulated and which should adopt a bottom-up approach and, above all, include the perspective of users and social workers. A similar conclusion is drawn from the lack of confidence among social workers in participating in action research as highlighted at the beginning of the dissertation research. This is probably due to previous bad experiences of participating in legislative working groups or similar activities that have not led to the expected outcomes, where the profession is not adequately consulted.

The findings from the dissertation research highlight the difference between foster care practice and legislation. Differences are evident in the choice of child placement, where the only criterion is the first available place, regardless of the child's age and whether the placement suits the child or not. Furthermore, differences can be seen in the planning process with a family that does not agree with the principles of social work and in the involvement of the primary family in the foster care system—prescribed but non-existent in practice. This research correlates with the result of research done by Žižak and others more than ten years ago (2012), addressing the issue of children remaining in the foster care system for long periods of time. This kind of placement is often seen as a long-term or permanent placement rather than a temporary service until the conditions for returning to the primary family are met. Furthermore, research has shown that strengthening primary families, restoring their strength and mobilising their potential for the child's return to the family is a practice that is lacking in social work in Croatia. This is also supported by other data in the dissertation, such as the increasing duration of a child's stay in a foster family, difficulties in maintaining relations with the primary family and the severance of family ties, the loss of the child's identity and less emotional attachment to the primary family, leading ultimately to complete severing of the relationship between the child and the primary family.

The results of the dissertation research offer important findings about the foster care process:

- Lack of theoretical knowledge of foster care and family work, and where the available models applied in foster care focus on therapeutic work, psychotherapy or on changing the parent or child to *solve* a problem,
- Foster care is a challenging and complex process that requires knowledge and the application of a broad theoretical framework for working with families. Hence, social workers need to develop new skills, such as creating a collaborative relationship with all participants, engaging in dialogue, developing skills to inform and educate foster carers and providing support at an individual and group level.
- The process of establishing and providing foster care involves participants from different sectors and systems, such as the health system, education system or community sectors, including local government and self-government or the civil sector that are part of the network with the family but also outside the family, an within the community,

- The foster care system is a complex process with many possible outcomes, such as short-term or long-term childcare, transitioning the child from foster care to residential care, which is different for all families,
- The system is bureaucratised due to specific elements, such as a clear hierarchical structure in which the head of the regional office approves all actions of social workers, the work of social workers is clearly allocated to their assigned user groups (children and family, adults, and financial support), rules and procedures applicable in regional offices are strictly followed, as well as the legal framework that forms the basis for work undertaken by social workers, administration and written records of all work performance for the user's official file are obligatory, and the relationship with the users as objects and not as entities with whom co-operation is established. Currently, there is no direct, collaborative work among all actors in the foster care system,
- Social workers cannot collaborate with all participants in the foster care system because the system does not valorise the social dimension of the process and social workers lack the necessary resources (e.g., space, transport to the family location), time and knowledge of multidisciplinary and group work. Group work and planning are rarely if ever, used or are only part of the administrative work undertaken by social workers due to the lack of time, resources and an official mandate.

There are several reasons for the above findings on foster care, such as the complexity of foster care, which is precisely due to a mismatch between opportunities and needs, development and stagnation, and the uneven development of certain segments of social work, such as group work, community work or fieldwork. The mismatch between needs and opportunities in social work is reflected in the way social workers provide services to users that have become bureaucratised, such as family planning, and which has ultimately become part of the administration, as shown in the research findings. In addition, the research findings in the dissertation indicate that social workers lack time to work directly with service users for several reasons: increasing bureaucratisation of the system, lack of social workers, overworked social workers due to a large number of service users, and the frequent turnover of social workers in regional offices. Social work is reduced to only handling interventions that are no longer effective and timely in people's lives, while the social system is ineffective when it comes to responding to people's needs. This is demonstrated by the research findings in the dissertation when addressing the separation of the child from its family. Overall, the needs of the family should be addressed sooner to

avoid possible separation. Methods used by social workers to address the needs of service users remain underdeveloped, where research findings show that social workers often do not know how to achieve positive outcomes, such as joint cooperation between all parties involved in foster care. Furthermore, methods for working with the primary family are yet to be developed when the child is placed in foster care, and subsequently, primary families are excluded from participating in the foster care system.

The models present in foster care practice focus on working with persons who have problems or are problematic for the family. These children have often come into conflict with the law or have behavioural problems. Current foster care models focus on family rehabilitation, educational measures and structures or on the treatment of young people. The existing models of foster care are based on psychological theories and refer to therapeutic approaches and psychosocial support to bring about a change in the person, whereas the aim of social work is to create the conditions for a change in the environment necessary for the user to solve their problems (Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh, 1995; Warman, Pallett and Scott, 2006; Henggeler and Sheidow, 2012; Caw and Sebba, 2014). The bottom-up social model is not only a matter of public policy, but also of social work, which must respect all user perspectives and identify what users need, rather than social work offering what it has, regardless of whether the user needs it, and trying to adapt the family to the environment. According to the dissertation results and when comparing foster care models (Table 1), most models do not take into account user participation and the balance of power between the parties (Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh, 1995; Warman, Pallett and Scott, 2006; Henggeler and Sheidow, 2012; Caw and Sebba, 2014). Children, foster parents and primary families become the subject of therapeutic approaches. These participants should adapt to society. In Croatia, data and studies on foster care models are lacking; hence, it remains unclear which model is used in foster care practice (Laklija and Brkić, 2022). Theories in the field of foster care are underdeveloped and knowledge of the theoretical concepts used in foster care practice is inadequate (Cameron, Reimer and Smith, 2015). In terms of methods, focus should be placed on the principle of adapting and developing methods based on societal changes and user needs (Flaker, 2016; Mali and Grebenc, 2021; Flaker and Rafaelič, 2023).

Bureaucratisation has taken over the social system—a flawed approach as it only focuses on one dimension, specifically, the legal aspect and the need to comply with laws and protocols, while the social dimension is missing (Burns and Früchtel, 2014, p. 1151). Greater bureaucratisation leads to the loss of important functions in social work, reducing

it to simply following prescribed protocols and only the legal protection of the child (Burns and Früchtel, 2014; Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). The dissertation results show that social workers are sometimes flexible when working with users and digress from rigid protocols for the benefit of the user. However, it raises the question of social workers exposing themselves to risk and increasingly subjected to penalties for this approach. The recommendation here is for a more in-depth study of this issue, as it is relevant to the social work profession in the context of social worker autonomy. The research results reveal that the ability of social workers to work with families and their adaptability depends primarily on the social workers themselves and how committed they are to working with service users. According to the research findings in the dissertation, social workers have less and less time to work with users and the human dimension of working with users is decreasing. This outcome is supported by the findings showing that a social worker has 20 minutes to talk to a user and make important decisions, with most of the time being spent on administration instead of actively listening, empathising and understanding the user. One social worker is responsible for about 150 families, entailing further frustration for social workers in practice.

8.2. Emancipation and participation in foster care

The development and reform of social care, the lack of progress in developing social work services and methods and the lack of clarity about the role of the social work profession often leave social workers feeling helpless, stressed, frustrated, and looking for quicker solutions. Based on the research results in the dissertation, social workers often feel their role and task is to make decisions on behalf of the user. This shows they do not fully understand their position of power, knowledge about the institution as a source of power, or the user's insufficient emancipation and participation. Flaker (2021) describes bureaucratic accountability precisely in terms of the social worker's task of making decisions for the users. However, research results show that social workers are aware of this oppression of users and consciously believe they know what the user needs, as it "saves" them from becoming overloaded with work and too many cases for which they are responsible. Persuasive or manipulative methods are often used when working with users, as administrative work cannot be done without the user's consent. The most important finding of the dissertation is that social workers are usually unaware of the principles of emancipation when working with users because the system that should guide them in solving the problems that lead to oppression is the very system that oppresses them. The principles of emancipation are partly understood by social workers in terms of viewing emancipation as a process where the child gains independence to leave care, but there is no understanding in working with all service users that emancipation means getting users to learn and take responsibility for their own lives.

The dissertation results point out that the reason for insufficient user involvement in foster care is that social workers lack confidence in the abilities of the primary family and the child, whom they see as insufficiently mature to make autonomous decisions. Joint collaboration and problem-solving can only be expected when cooperation is established, but it means social workers should believe in users and their abilities (Mali, 2009). Participation ensures all participants have an equal opportunity for involvement in the foster care process, but it only takes place at certain stages of the foster care process and never as a conversation between participants or in the form of group work. In the foster care process, the space for group work is in the planning process, which has become part of the administration and bureaucracy in the system rather than an opportunity to work directly with service users. This is one of the key elements of foster care practice and the fundamental role of social work in supporting families through the process of personal

planning. It raises new questions about foster care, such as: How is social work planning done with the family? Who determines the goals of the plan and how are all participants involved? How is the implementation of the plan monitored, what changes occur and who supports the family throughout the process? How and to what extent does the family decide on the individual points of the plan? Do the plans match the needs of the family and the child? These questions highlight the need for further research in planning when working with families, but also with other user groups.

Decision-making should always take place in the presence of the person for whom the decision is made, never without them (Flaker, 2021, p. 20), which is one of the most important principles of social work. Decision-making in the foster care system is still the responsibility of social workers, in contradiction to user autonomy and their right to make decisions about their own lives. Another challenge in the foster care system is definitely the involvement of the child, as the system is often designed for adults only. The child has the right to participate, to be heard and to be involved in decision-making. Based on our research and research from the past (Burke, 2008; Leeson, 2007; Borić and Mataga Tintor, 2022), this approach does not seem to be the case in social work practice, which means the child's voice and opinion are heard but not taken into account and have no influence on decision-making. It shows that child participation in foster care within Croatian social work is still lacking.

Social work incorporates ways of working and approaches to working with service users while adhering to the social work principles, professional ethics and values expounded in social work (Ofsted, 2015; Audit Scotland, 2016). The results reveal that the family group conference method introduced in the training and pilot phase of the research allowed participants to adopt knowledge and experience on teamwork, decision-making, collaboration and the involvement of a wider family support network, the equal participation of all those involved in foster care, a democratic approach to decision making, the right of the family to be actively involved and make independent decisions about their lives, respect for the child to be heard and equal participation. One of the attempts to increase support for foster families, based on the dissertation results, is the mobile team, meaning a professional team that visits the foster family with the necessary support in line with the Foster Care Act (Official Gazette, 15/18, 18/22). Although this service is not available in all regions of Croatia, it demonstrates a shift in the approach to foster care by providing support to foster parents locally, i.e., in the home of foster parents. An important aspect of the foster care system is that all participants come together in a joint problem-

solving process, as it ensures the participation of all involved and a network of participants who provide resources for supporting families.

8.3. Possibilities of the family group conference and its foundations in social work

The family group conference method is a social work response to discriminatory practises that do not take cultural aspects into account when working with communities (Burford and Hudson, 2008). As such, the method is based on principles of social work ethics. These include equality, participation, emancipation, the right of users to make decisions about their own lives, a democratic approach, ensuring the voice of each participant is heard, as well as the protection and safety of the child in the helping process (Levine, 2000; Staub-Bernasconi, 2009; Saleebey, 2013; Edwards and Parkinson, 2018). A feature of the family group conference is the variety of locations where the work with the users takes place, given that the method is conducted in less formal places that are comfortable for the family and the child. In addition, the family decides who participates and which important people they invite. The children can participate, but if they refuse, they can also choose a trusted person to speak on their behalf at the conference. The process itself involves family time, meaning that the family withdraws from the rest of the group during the conference and develops a plan on their own. The main feature of the method is that the family takes control of their own lives and decides on their needs, but also the role of social workers and other professionals changes, whose task it is to work with all participants and transfer some of the responsibility and power to the family.

According to the research results of the dissertation, the conclusion is that social work in Croatia contains elements of the family group conference and can, therefore, be implemented in Croatian foster care practice. In analysing the applicability of the method, the conclusion is that the method is valid for the entire foster care process and that the benefits of the method can be perceived by foster parents, primary families and children as the subjects of the method and for whom it is intended. The research findings of the dissertation show that the family group conference helps reduce the institutionalisation of children in several ways:

- Prevents the separation of the child from the primary family by providing help and support to the family prior to separation as one of the ways of getting a wider network involved in the helping process,
- Places the child with relatives rather than in an institution, thus engaging the wider family network,
- Ensures the early return of the child to the primary family,
- Reduces the referral of children from foster care to residential care,

- Helps the child leave foster care and transition to autonomy.

One of the most important conclusions of the dissertation is that the family group conference is aligned with basic principles of empowerment in social work. These principles include taking control of one's own life, mobilising decision-making capacity and the ability of each individual to develop ideas and take actions in their lives for which they have expertise. The results of the dissertation research suggest that the family group conference, which has the role of connecting the family, community, and system to strengthen the family, is perhaps a solution to the inadequate involvement of the broader community support network to help the family. An example is the primary families who attended training and have had the opportunity to receive support from foster carers and professionals.

The method utilises the potential and abilities of families for emancipation, as well as a successful and active role in securing their existence. The family group conference method provides space in which important issues like cooperation between all participants, emancipation, the family's acceptance of the plan, equal distribution of power between participants involved in the process and the new role that professionals play in this approach can be brought together. In Croatia, there is currently no clear foster care model, but there have been attempts at establishing models, such as the model of specialised care for children with specific behavioural problems (Laklija and Brkić, 2022). For social work and the development of work methods in the foster care system, the family group conference is a method that ensures a deeper understanding of the need for joint cooperation and a multidisciplinary approach. Based on the research findings of the dissertation, the method can be applied in several phases of the foster care system:

- Before the child is separated from the family, as a measure to help and support the family and prevent separation,
- As an alternative to court proceedings, giving the family the opportunity to solve problems independently,
- At the beginning of the foster care relationship, when the aim is to bring all parties together and give the primary family and foster parents the opportunity to learn from each other,
- At the planning stage, when the method can replace the current bureaucratic planning model and the family is involved autonomously and equally in planning,

- During the foster care relationship, when the foster parents encounter difficulties in communicating with the child or in shaping a relationship between the child and the primary family,
- When the child leaves the care system and needs the support of the network to live independently.

The family group conference is an approach to working with families that involves creating a network of people who talk to each other, work together and support families. In the theoretical sense of family work, the introduction of the family group conference as a method in Croatia facilitates a paradigm shift of theoretical concepts in the field of foster care involving theories focused mostly on the individual to the family and, finally, the family network and community.

The method is culturally and socially acceptable to families and social workers who, based on the dissertation findings, emphasise its naturalness when coupled with less formal joint participation.

Further planning the implementation of the family group conference requires testing the method in practice. Group work is presented in the dissertation as part of the family group conference method. However, given the perceived lack of familiarity with group work among social workers, the topic should be further addressed by analysing the use of group work methods in social work practice, especially since personal planning and service coordination are not sufficiently present in practice. Future research should involve the community to further demonstrate the use of the family group conference method in understanding the need for local support and finding ways how to get them involved. Given the unfamiliarity with the principles of the method, the recommendation is a review of the training system for social workers to improve and align university programs with the needs of the social work profession, such as teamwork, group work, development of methods and innovations in social work, community work and development of community services. Methodological recommendations include the justification of action research as a way of researching issues that affect people and their lives. A qualitative approach also provides clearer and more nuanced insight into people's life stories by combining different research methods. The family group conference should be incorporated into the mandatory training of foster carers. It would provide foster carers with knowledge, especially about relationships between foster carers and primary families.

8.4. Application of the family group conference

In some countries like New Zealand, Norway and the Netherlands, family group conferences are part of legislation or included in recommendations for working with families that are strongly supported by the social system, as in the United Kingdom (Aras-Kramar, 2021). The interdisciplinary combination of law and social work creates suitable conditions for the implementation of the family group conference in a new, appropriate context where law becomes a tool to strengthen the family and not just a regulatory mechanism in society (Aras-Kramar, 2021). At the national and policy level, the family's right to freedom of choice and the choosing decision-making support is respected before intervening in the family, as is the case in Sweden and the Netherlands (Asscher, Dijkstra, Stams, Deković and Creemers, 2014; Mitchell, 2020). The family group conference creates a space for this connection in terms of social and legal policies and utilises the method as an alternative to court proceedings (Božić, 2017; Aras Kramar, 2021). The savings made in the social and judicial system that the method brings are certainly a good argument for politics, but even more important is the relief for social workers and the positive effects of the method in working with users (Fox, 2019). Although the financial impact of the family group conference has not been addressed in this dissertation, previous research (Marsh and Crow, 1998; Fox, 2019; Dijkstra, 2019) points to cost reductions in the social care system. The recommendation is that this topic be investigated further based on arguments favouring the incorporation of this topic into policy agendas.

Implementing the method in social work requires understanding that foster care is more than just a legal regulation or a constantly changing process that adapts to people's needs and societal changes. Introducing the method into the legal framework and social work is not a simple process but requires the involvement of all public policy actors, including the commitment of legal experts and social workers. Given the interdisciplinary nature and close links between law and social work in the family group conference, an initiative stemming from two scientific fields has a much greater impact. Change is unlikely without integration, networking and organisation in an active approach to policy.

The new insights gained in this dissertation are applicable in practice in different ways and at different levels when working with families and children in the foster care system. The first level concerns policy and the social care system, where introducing the family group conference is possible in two ways:

- Implementation within the legislative framework, for example, as a family law measure under the Family Act,
- Recommendations for using the method in working with families, for example, introducing the method into the services described in the Social Welfare Act and as an alternative to court proceedings in foster care under the Foster Care Act and the Family Act.

Creating suitable conditions in social work to work directly with users and, in particular, the time necessary to liaise with users can be done through the integration and development of community-based services and a multidisciplinary approach to users as advocated by the family group conference method. This is an example of how, in most countries that have introduced the family group conference, the civil sector in the community assumes the role of implementing the method (Staub, 2005; Fox, 2018; Aras Kramar, 2021). It conforms to Croatia's strategic goals for deinstitutionalisation and the development plan for community-based social services (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2021). Greater integration requires creating a community that cares for the people living in it, including relationship building and mutual care, which has been lost in contemporary society that focuses on individualism. Importantly, social work receives resources that institutions otherwise do not. For foster care, it means that the social worker commences the method, whereas its implementation is delegated to the community, relieving already overburdened social workers. At the user level, effective services require greater user involvement, which in the case of foster care means not only the foster parents but also the primary family and the child (Mitchell, 2020). Also, the task of social work science is to identify mechanisms to move from the individual to the collective, which makes it a good choice as a method and implies active participation in the foster care process, not exclusion. This is especially true for primary families, who are often excluded from social work in general (Čačinović Vogrinčić and Mešl, 2019). Primary families should feel that they are part of a team that collaborates in creating solutions in foster care, are involved and are important participants who continue to be part of the child's life (Triseliotis, Sellick, and Short, 1995; Schofield et al., 2011), facilitating the growth, development and emancipation of primary families.

Social work targeting users should be designed to let them take control of their own lives, rather than the social worker providing the sole solution and preventing users from playing an active role (Zimmerman, 2000). Importantly, the family group conference method allows users to take control of their own lives (Marsh and Crow, 1998; Dijkstra, Creemers,

Asscher, Deković and Stams, 2016; Doolan, 2004). The method offers users more support and minimal restrictions on their freedom, which aligns with the principles of normalisation of human life. Working with people in need according to the principles of emancipation means that users can grow and express themselves freely, which is not the case in social work at the moment. This approach to users requires time, trust and patience. This situation is impossible if the system is bureaucratised, offering minimal contact with the user with an overbearing administration that records every step of the work (Sabolić and Vejmelka, 2015). If we know that the social work profession shapes culture, politics and education, clearly it has the task of transforming users from objects into subjects as participants and collaborators on an equal footing with professionals (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize, and Zandamela, 2015). The potential of users to be given greater decision-making capacity can only happen by working with people and not for people (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). The conclusion from the dissertation research is that the family group conference is a good choice for planning family goals to make changes in family life, where every family member is fully involved, equal and committed. The method can compensate for these shortcomings. Social workers need autonomy when working with service users but also a clearly defined role that changes the way they think and work with such users, with the aim of creating a balance of power (Flaker, 2024). The narrow scope of action available to social workers points to the need for change in social work, both at policy and institutional levels, as well as the social worker practice. A lack of knowledge is a major obstacle for social workers to work correctly. The research findings in the dissertation show that social workers pointed out their lack of knowledge of deinstitutionalisation, emancipation, group work, community and family work. The system is committed to providing social workers with ongoing training and access to knowledge necessary for effective work with users. The family group conference provides new insights into teamwork, the possibilities of a multidisciplinary approach and a different way of working in the community that social workers want and need in their professional work (Mirsky, 2003; Morris and Connolly, 2012). Creating a new theoretical concept based on the family group conference ensures the emancipation of all participants, where foster parents learn about the child and their personal life from the primary family, while parents learn skills to deal with the child, especially parenting skills.

8.5. Developing a theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in foster care

This dissertation is an important contribution to understanding foster care as a unique process centred on the right of each individual to autonomously decide how they want to live and their right to achieve it within the community. This outcome is only possible if the community is involved, which requires the family group conference method to make it possible in social work. The family group conference creates a bridge between real life and the social work system, i.e., a bridge between the primary family, the child and the foster family on one side and the system on the other (Marsh and Crow, 1998; Lupton and Nixon, 1999; Burns and Früchtel, 2014). In social work, knowledge to connect the actors in the foster care system is lacking. The family group conference emerges as a new topic and method for social work that can be properly applied in social work as it is based on theoretical concepts with a bottom-up approach. The social work profession needs to develop and profile effective knowledge and theoretical concepts applicable to current social work practice, which means that social work evolves and adapts to societal trends and changes. It means that social work utilises an innovative approach, the family group conference method, to find solutions in foster care that are not currently possible, such as involving a wider network of families.

The family group conference method should be theoretically grounded in social work from which it has emerged and practitioners need to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of working with users through this type of intervention (Parkinson, 2018). Space needs to be created for the method to complement existing social work processes. For example, an important contribution of the family group conference method lies in its role of restorative justice as a tool for repairing harm done to people and resolving problems rather than focussing on the person who has done wrong (McCold and Wachtel, 2003). Elements and values of restorative justice, such as community, dialogue, respect and solution orientation, are part of the family group conference process. Accordingly, space is created for dialogue on how to continue living together in a fair way and how to reduce the harm. This approach not only widens the circle of responsibility but also creates a partnership between the state and the family. Originally, the method was based on a restorative approach, representing a shift towards partnership intervention that respects different cultural values (Adams and Chandler, 2004). A paradigm shift in social work theory in foster care is considered necessary to develop an approach based on social work theories.

All the above findings and arguments give space to naming a new theoretical concept of social work, representing the main contribution of the dissertation at a theoretical level. Social work examines and interprets the lifeworld of users based on people's adopted narratives and realities, and together they create new alternative meanings that emerge in the form of grounded theories (Grebenc and Šabić, 2013). Grounded theory, the theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in foster care, a concept based on a multidisciplinary approach to family, justice and democracy, incorporates elements of ecological systems theory and empowerment theory through the insights gained in the dissertation. The multidisciplinary approach to conceptualising theory focuses on the network of people involved in supporting families and moves from an individual approach to a collective approach for supporting the family through a wider social network in the community (Burford and Hudson, 2008; Payne, 2014). The family group conference method, as the basis of the theoretical concept, brings together different professionals, social work and politics on the one hand and the participants of foster families on the other, thus creating a bridge that connects them. The interdisciplinary approach appears at two levels. Firstly, it refers to a combination of law and social work to obtain a broader picture in working with the family by considering both disciplines together and new ways as instruments to protect and strengthen the family (Aras Kramar, 2021). Secondly, it is about bringing together different professionals, people from the family environment, and people involved with family members and relatives, into a common circle of people who have the means to help the family without losing its autonomy and power to make decisions about its own life (Mali, 2014; Payne, 2014).

The new theory adopts new insights about connecting the system to the family's real life so that different experts necessary for supporting the family and the family network come together and connect, and also about connecting teamwork that includes all participants in foster care, and finally the importance of group work with families. The establishment of a family support network in the community is seen as the normalisation of family life in the environment in which the family lives. This includes integrating the family into the community by creating relationships at multiple levels (neighbours, family, protective systems, education) while preserving their autonomy and dignity (Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp, 2014; Grebenc, 2020).

The theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in the foster care system is a response to the bureaucratisation of the system and the need to restore the autonomy of social workers. It requires knowledge to understand the realities of family lives, teamwork,

multidisciplinary linking of experts and group work while also introducing an approach to working with families based on the principles of participation and emancipation of all participants, i.e., valuing the voice of each participant, adopting a democratic approach and respecting the right of each individual to make decisions about their lives. This theory positions social workers as advocates for creating resources and connections in the community. It changes the way social workers do their jobs by creating a balance of power with users and collaboration through collective networking (Bouwkamp and Bouwkamp, 2014). New insights include dialogue between social workers and users, a humane approach and change through equality in interaction (Bourdieu, 2000; Pulla, 2017; Dijkstra, 2019).

The main characteristics of the theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in foster care are (1) equal access to all resources (information, knowledge, support), especially for primary families who are excluded from the foster care system, and (2) the expansion of the support network for the family in the community, which enables establishing new connections in the lives of families. In addition, the theory points to the need to normalise the child's life in the new family, which means maintaining the previous social network and ties to the primary family. The child's voice and the right to be involved in all processes in foster care, as well as the child's safety, are an element of the theory that focuses on the care of the child throughout the foster care process. The feature of the theory that points to the need to respect the principle of emancipation is the right of the family to make independent decisions about their lives, with the support of social workers and a balance of power that is reflected in the autonomy of the family to make plans independently. The theory aims to create a link between the real-life world of families and the systems that families in foster care face. It is based on a democratic way of working and respect for families as experts in their own lives but also as partners in creating solutions for families. This theory underlines community involvement. The shift to community support eases the burden on the system and social workers, as the family group conference allows for greater involvement of families and support networks compared to professionals, which naturally promotes a paradigm shift from the individual to the collective with a broader sharing of tasks and greater solidarity. Current social work, based on rights and responsibilities, means that cooperation between state and family is based only on this framework (Lupton and Nixon, 1999), which does not allow for participatory decision-making (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009; Saleebey, 2013) and no autonomy for the family (Levine, 2000; Maluccio, Ainsworth and Thoburn, 2000), while the theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in foster

care, brings about a different understanding of the meaning of participation and emancipation when working with families, adding a social dimension to the context that opens the transition to community.

Social work must preserve the autonomy of a profession that is increasingly restricted in its actions (Flaker, 2024). Social workers are losing their identity, as reflected in high levels of frustration, stress and feelings of powerlessness, but also in their departure from the system, where the turnover of social workers is increasing (Sladović Franz and Mujkanović, 2003; Kletečki Radović, 2008; Družić Ljubotina and Friščić, 2014). There is an imbalance of power in a system in which social workers are often disempowered. They are under the influence of the state, which takes control of the social worker's tasks or solves problems if the social worker is unable to do so (when it comes to finding accommodation or placement for a child). In this way, the authority and autonomy of social workers are violated and the relationships that the social work profession builds in the community are not based on trust and equality.

Recognising the insufficient understanding of user needs in developing a theory of foster care and that models of foster care do not envisage working with all participants in a way that incorporates social work principles, means that the development of a new theory of emancipation and inclusive participation in foster care contributes novel knowledge, understanding and the theoretical frameworks of foster care as a social work process.

The contribution of the dissertation to social work science is also reflected in its methodology, as evident in the experience gained from participating in an action research approach, the new knowledge gained and the changes implemented. This research approach answers the question of how to equip social workers with the necessary knowledge, how to sensitise them to processes necessary for changing practices, and how to relate the experience to theoretical concepts of social work. In Croatia, there has been no action research in this field so far. Hence, this dissertation is also viewed as contributing to the development of research methodology in social work science in Croatia.

9. Vloga družinske skupinske konference pri rejništvu otrok z vidika socialnega dela (daljši povzetek v slovenskem jeziku)⁸

9.1 Uvod

Delo z družinami na področju socialnega dela postaja vse bolj aktualno, saj je čedalje več težav, ki se pojavljajo v funkcioniranju družin in s tem vse več zahtev po izločitvi otrok⁹ iz družin. Več otrok je izločenih iz družin, deloma zaradi kompleksnejših izzivov v življenju družin, deloma kot preventivni ukrep za zaščito otrok s strani socialnih delavcev. Namestitev otroka izven družine je ena najzahtevnejših nalog socialnega dela, še posebej ko govorimo o pomanjkanju nastanitvenih kapacitet na Hrvaškem v zadnjih nekaj letih (Kletečki Radović, 2008). Počasnejši razvoj storitev v skupnosti, stagnacija procesa dezinstitutionalizacije in vse večje zahteve po varstvu otrok izven družine poudarjajo potrebo po razvoju alternativnih oblik oskrbe v skupnosti in s tem tudi rejništva. Socialna politika Hrvaške je strateško usmerjena v zaščito otrokovih pravic, razvoj procesa dezinstitutionalizacije na področju zaščite otrok ter namestitev otrok v alternativne in neinstitucionalne oblike varstva (Miharija in Belamarić, 2017, str. 4), kar vključuje tudi pravico otrok do odraščanja v okolju, ki je najbolj podobno družinskemu (Sabolić in Vejmelka, 2015). Stoletna tradicija rejništva na Hrvaškem s svojimi začetki sega v čas po prvi svetovni vojni, iz česar je mogoče sklepati, da dolga tradicija omogoča dober potencial za razvoj kakovostnega rejništva, kar predstavlja potreben vir za spremembe v socialnem delu. Kljub temu se rejništvo razvija počasi, število rejnikov upada, motivacija za ukvarjanje z rejništvom pa usiha. Prvi zakon, ki se nanaša le na rejništvo, je bil sprejet dokaj pozno, šele leta 2007 (Buljevac, Milić Babić in Leutar, 2016, str. 1), nato pa je bil večkrat spremenjen in dopolnjen, vse do zadnjega Zakona o rejništvu (Narodne novine, 115/18, 18/22), katerega cilj je povečati kakovost rejništva in spodbuditi njegov razvoj. Kljub prizadevanju za boljšo zakonsko regulacijo rejništva, se rejništvo še vedno slabo razvija,

⁸ Doktorska disertacija je bila napisana v angleškem jeziku, dodan pa je razširjen povzetek v slovenskem jeziku. Razširjeni povzetek je najmanj deset odstotkov pisne disertacije brez vključenih seznamov, prilog in kazal. Uvod in zaključek sta v celoti del razširjenega povzetka.

⁹ V disertaciji je beseda "otrok" uporabljena pri opisu procesa rejništva ali ločitve od družine, pa tudi pri vseh drugih temah, povezanih z otrokovo dejavnostjo. Otrok je v disertaciji obravnavan kot subjekt, samostalni v ednini, posameznik, ki enakovredno sodeluje z drugimi udeleženci, o katerih se piše. Otrok je aktivni subjekt, ni pasiven, medtem ko bi množina predstavljala nedoločno obliko skupine otrok, brez pomena, ki ga želi doktorska disertacija poudariti. Občasno se množina besede otrok uporablja, kadar ustreza obravnavanemu kontekstu.

kar kaže na potrebo po raziskovanju tega področja in prepoznavanju ovir za kakovostno rejništvo, kar je eden od motivov za obravnavo tovrstne tematike v doktorski disertaciji. Poleg tega je reforma sistema socialnega varstva na Hrvaškem dolgoročen proces in vprašanje je, koliko dejansko sledi potrebam uporabnikov. Predstavniki ekološke teorije poudarjajo, da v socialnem delu primanjkuje metod pomoči, ni ustvarjanja in razvijanja novih pristopov, socialno delo pa nima odgovorov na vse bolj kompleksne potrebe uporabnikov (Henderson in Scannapieco, 2006). Za socialno delo sta pomembna tako podpora kot krepitev moči, sodobne paradigmatske spremembe v socialnem delu pa poudarjajo tudi pomen partnerstva in participacije (Mitchell, 2020, str. 213). V skladu z navedenim je treba kontinuirano preverjati prakso socialnega dela in raziskovati, kako se koncepti krepitve moči, partnerstva in emancipacije izvajajo in uporabljajo za razvoj novih teoretskih spoznanj. Praksa v skupnosti, ki temelji na holističnem pristopu in krepitvi moči uporabnikov, uvaja demokratičen proces pomoči (Grebenc in Žganec, 2016), utemeljen na participativnem vključevanju ljudi za razvoj samostojnega življenja v skupnosti (Fulcher, 2008). Demokratičen proces pomoči in možnost odločanja o življenju v skupnosti zahtevata pristop in refleksijo socialnega dela na način, da se v delu socialnih delavcev raziščejo možnosti, ki prispevajo k tovrstnemu holističnemu razumevanju dela z uporabniki.

Razvoj metod socialnega dela mora temeljiti na razumevanju potreb uporabnikov. V socialnem delu je potrebno razvijati takšne načine dela, ki lahko ponudijo odgovore na nove izzive, s katerimi se soočajo uporabniki. Ena od metod, ki jo socialno delo na Hrvaškem ne pozna, je metoda družinske skupinske konference. Prisotnost metode družinske skupinske konference, ki se uporablja pri delu z družinami v številnih drugih državah, predstavlja za področje rejništva na Hrvaškem priložnost za spremembe v praksi socialnega dela. Na podlagi metode lahko preverimo temeljne vrednote obstoječega socialnega dela na področju rejništva in prisotnost načel in pristopov novih paradigmatskih spremembami. Metoda družinske skupinske konference obsega načela dela z družinami (Edwards in Parkinson, 2018), kot so spoštovanje otrokovih in človekovih pravic, socialna pravičnost (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009), sodelovanje družine pri sprejemanju odločitev, krepitev moči družine (Saleebey, 2013), osredotočenost na potencialne družinskega sistema in pripravljenost, da se k bodočim problemom pristopa bolj neodvisno (Levine, 2000). Načela metode družinske skupinske konference kažejo na participativen pristop do družin, pa tudi na vrsto načel, na katerih temelji socialno delo. Z vidika rejništva pristopa družinska skupinska konferenca do družin tako, da zmanjšuje tveganje za razlike v moči med družino in strokovnjaki (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009) in si prizadeva za normalizacijo otrokovega

življenja v novi družini. Načela normalizacije vključujejo prevzem nadzora nad lastnim življenjem, ki je eden od ključnih elementov metode, za zagotavljanje življenja z minimalnimi omejitvami svobode. Prav ti elementi so skladni z vrednotami socialnega dela, vendar v praksi pogosto niso prisotni, kar je priložnost in izziv za raziskovanje uporabe metode družinske skupinske konference v socialnem delu. Družinska skupinska konferenca in proces dezinstitutionalizacije imata sorodne vrednote, ki omogočajo aktivno vključevanje uporabnikov v proces pomoči in njihovo enakopravno sodelovanje pri odločanju o tem, kako nekdo želi živeti v svoji skupnosti (Nirje, 1970; O' Brien, 2011). Vključevanje širše socialne mreže v proces dela z družinami omogoča podporo družini v skupnosti namesto namestitev otrok v institucijo, zato podpira dezinstitutionalizacijo. Razumevanje in poznavanje procesa dezinstitutionalizacije ter sprememb, ki jih prinaša, je za socialne delavce nujno. Večinoma strokovni delavci proces dezinstitutionalizacije razumejo kot prehoda iz institucionalne v neinstitutionalno obliko bivanja. Vendar pa je pravo razumevanje tega procesa veliko več kot to, saj zahteva sodelovanje in raziskovanje na tem področju. Pristop družinske skupinske konference temelji na spremembi v družini in skupnosti z vključevanjem in ustvarjanjem prostora za dialog (Flaker, 2016), ki je po Freire (2002) najpomembnejše orodje za razvoj praks, temelječih na načelu emancipacije. Sodelovanje na skupinski družinski konferenci je kompleksno zaradi dinamike odnosov med udeleženci, zato je treba upoštevati načelo recipročnosti (Bourdieu, 2000), ki prispeva k razumevanju socialnih razmerij in dinamike med udeleženci. Za razvoj socialnega dela in doseganje sprememb na ravni odnosa med uporabniki in socialnimi delavci, se je treba usmeriti na medsebojni dialog udeležencev za doseganje polne participacije in emancipacije uporabnikov. Razumevanje izrazov participacije in emancipacije v kontekstu socialnega dela je pomembno, da bi razumeli, kaj je treba storiti za doseganje želenih sprememb. Metoda družinske skupinske konference je lahko dober način za predstavitev konceptov skupnega dela, doseganja ravnotežja moči, participacije in emancipacije udeležencev, tako za uporabnike kot za socialne delavce. Pregled strokovne in znanstvene literature in rezultatov raziskav o družinski skupinski konferenci pokaže, da metoda v hrvaški praksi socialnega dela ni prisotna in zato predstavlja potencialno nov teoretski koncept, ki bi ga bilo dobro uporabiti v socialnem delu na področju rejništva.

Doktorska disertacija je napisana in razdeljena na dva osnovna dela. Prvi del predstavlja teoretično predstavitev obravnavane tematike in pregled znanstvene literature o rejništvu. Drugi del je predstavitev empiričnega raziskovanja in rezultatov kvalitativnega

raziskovanja. V zaključku so podana glavna spoznanja in smernice, ki temeljijo na analizi teoretičnega in empiričnega dela doktorske disertacije.

V drugem poglavju doktorske disertacije je predstavljeno rejništvo, najprej njegov zgodovinski razvoj na Hrvaškem, od prve svetovne vojne do danes. Tradicija rejništva v hrvaški družbi je prikazane skozi zgodovinske dogodke in skrb za otroke in lačne ljudi, največkrat po vojnah (Jolić, 2020). Potrebo po rejništvu kot obliki varstva otrok so politiki zagovarjali tudi v 60-tih letih prejšnjega stoletja, ko so se usmerili k boljši oskrbi otrok z različnimi in številnimi težavami (Maglajlić, 1994). Vzporedno z razvojem rejništva na Hrvaškem so se v drugih državah razvijali različni modeli rejništva in iskali primernejše pristope za delo z družinami v kompleksnem procesu rejništva (Caw in Sebba, 2014). Na Hrvaškem ni veliko podatkov o razvoju oziroma uporabi specifičnega modela rejništva, tudi model, ki se uporablja v praksi, ni jasno opredeljen, še najbolj ga definirajo zakonski predpisi, ki se v zadnjih letih pogosto spreminjajo. Poleg tega situacijo v praksi otežuje pomanjkanje rejniških družin, nezadosten razvoj in pridobivanje novih rejnikov ter vse večje število otrok, ki so izločeni iz primarnih družin¹⁰ (Svetovna banka, 2019). Pomanjkanje namestitev za otroke socialnim delavcem predstavlja precejšno oviro pri njihovem delu. Rejništvo je navedeno kot prednostno pri razvoju socialnih storitev in naj bi prispevalo k povečanju kapacitet v alternativnih oblikah varstva otrok. Povezano je s procesom dezinstitutionalizacije v kontekstu potrebe po razvoju neinstitutionalnih nastanitev ter v pristopu in načinu dela z uporabniki, medtem ko so osnovne vrednote socialnega dela, kot sta emancipacija in participacija vseh udeležencev v procesu, utemeljene v obeh procesih. Proces dezinstitutionalizacije zagotavlja ljudem normalizacijo življenjskih pogojev (Appathurai, Lowery in Sullivan, 1986, str. 50), rejništvo pa zagotavlja potencialno veliko možnosti za nastanitev v skupnosti (Wolfensberger, 1972, str. 20). Potreba po povezavi teh dveh pojmov je neizbežna. Glede na hrvaške strateške usmeritve in nacionalne dokumente, sprejete z namenom nadaljnega razvoja socialnega varstva in dezinstitutionalizacije ter prehoda v zagotavljanje podpore v skupnosti, je pomembno

¹⁰ V disertaciji se izraz "primarna družina" uporablja za družino, od katere je otrok ločen. Ker se izraz biološka družina povezuje le z eno sestavino družine, biološko, je treba vključiti tudi funkcionalno razsežnost, ki je nujna sestavina družine (Kane, 2019; Medalie in Cole-Kelly, 2022). V disertaciji smo se osredotočili na funkcionalno opredelitev družine, ki poleg krvne opredelitve vključuje tudi pomen funkcij, ki jih družina izpolnjuje (More, 2022). Usodne vezi so bile obravnavane tudi kot oblika zavezanosti k skrbi in solidarnosti v odnosu, ki včasih presega pogodbeno razmerja ali sorodstvo. Primarna družina predstavlja skupno gospodinjstvo, od katerega je otrok ločen, in lahko vključuje starše, mačehe ali očete, posvojiteljske družine, rejniške družine, enostarševske družine, družine starih staršev, istospolne družine itd.

opozoriti na potrebo po raziskovanju tega področja. Glede na proces dezinstitutionalizacije in spremembo, ki je nujna v nadaljnjem razvoju socialnega dela, smo rejniško prakso analizirali z vidika participacije in emancipacije kot osnovnih predpogojev demokratičnega pristopa, ki je v skladu s smernicami in politikami hrvaškega socialnega varstva. Emancipacija je v socialnem delu ključna vrednota, v rejništvu pa omogoča osvoboditev od negativnih sistemskih vplivov (Bognar in Simel, 2013). Socialno delo ustvarjanja prostor za emancipacijo vsake osebe, kar pomeni, da omogoča razvoj človekovega potenciala za soočanje s strukturnimi pritiski, pa tudi pridobivanje veščin in znanja za samostojno sprejemanje odločitev o lastnem življenju (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize in Zandamela, 2015).

Družinska skupinska konferenca je opisana v tretjem poglavju kot eden izmed načinov dela z družinami. Metoda izvira iz socialnega dela in so jo najprej uporabili pri maorskih družinah na Novi Zelandiji od koder se je razširila in prilagodila v druge države. Na Hrvaškem kot metoda socialnega dela ni dovolj jasno opredeljena (Kletečki Radović, 2008; Ajduković in Urbanc, 2009), predvsem pa ni zabeleženih podatkov o uporabi te metode v rejništvu. Ker je družinska skupinska konferenca delno definirana kot metoda, delno pa kot model pri delu z uporabniki, je pojasnjena utemeljenost pojma, da je družinska skupinska konferenca metoda, ki prikazuje način dela v praksi socialnega dela z družinami. Razvoj novih metod v socialnem delu je nujna sestavina socialnega dela, ker dosedanje metode morda nimajo več učinka na življenje ljudi (Flaker, 2016), kar je še dodaten razlog za raziskovanje uporabe metode družinske skupinske konference v rejništvu. Poleg tega koncept družinske skupinske konference temelji na skupnem delu družine in širše socialne mreže, ki vključuje družinsko mrežo in mrežo strokovnjakov. Ta vidik družinske skupinske konference se je razvil zaradi neuspešnega dela z maorskimi otroki, ker ni vključeval kulturološkega vidika maorskega reševanja problemov v skupnosti. Pravica, da družina sama sprejema odločitve in vključuje osebe, ki lahko s svojimi sredstvi prispevajo k reševanju problema, je pristop, ki družini omogoča emancipacijo v smislu osvoboditve od sistema in pravico do avtonomije v zadevah, ki se tičejo njih samih ter participacijo, ki je predpogoj za sodelovalni odnos (Marsh in Crow, 1998). Vloga otroka kot enakopravnega udeleženca v procesu družinske skupinske konference je še posebej poudarjena v konceptu metode. Otrok je zaščiten, varen in tveganje zanj v procesu pomoči je minimalno. Predpogoji za izvedbo družinske skupinske konference so: varnost otroka, prostovoljno sodelovanje družine in ocena socialnih delavcev za izvedbo metode (Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković in Stams, 2016). Družinska skupinska konferenca ni uporabna v vseh

primerih, zato je potrebna presoja socialnega delavca in družine ter obojestranski dogovor o možnosti izvedbe metode. Značilnost konference je njena prilagodljivost socialnemu in kulturnemu okolju, v katerem poteka (Adams in Chandler, 2004), zato so se razvili številni modeli, prilagojeni kulturam, v katerih se izvajajo (Lupton in Nixon, 1999; Morris in Connolly, 2012; Fox, 2018). Družinska skupinska konferenca načeloma poteka v treh fazah, ki se lahko med posameznimi prilagojenimi modeli razlikujejo, osnovne faze pa so: 1) priprava in načrtovanje, kjer je organizirano druženje in sodelovanje vseh opredeljenih udeležencev, 2) izvedba konference, ki vključuje medsebojno izmenjavo informacij na začetku konference, čas, v katerem družina oblikuje načrt in zaključni del, v katerem je načrt predstavljen vsem in verificiran s strani socialnega delavca ter 3) evalvacija doseženih rezultatov in izpolnitev načrta (Božić, 2017). Skupinsko delo, kot ena od metod dela v socialnem delu, je temeljna oblika dela v procesu izvajanja družinske skupinske konference kot enega od načinov dela z družinami.

Rejništvo je z metodo družinske skupinske konference povezano v teoretičnih konceptih, ki so predstavljeni v četrtem poglavju doktorske disertacije. Obstajata dva osnovna teoretična koncepta, teorija krepitve moči in teorija ekoloških sistemov. Teorija krepitve moči je pomembna v kontekstu dela z družinami pri pridobivanju novih znanj in kompetenc za mobilizacijo lastnih virov in upravljanja z lastnim življenjem, pa tudi pri vzpostavljanju ravnovesja moči v odnosih. Krepitev uporabnikove samozavesti s krepitvijo sposobnosti za sprejemanje odločitev opisuje Payne (2014), pri čemer je nujno povezovanje znotraj družine, pa tudi s skupnostjo izven nje, da ima vsak pravico do razpoložljivih virov (Perkins, 2010). Povezovanje s skupnostjo in tudi s širšim družbenim kontekstom je utemeljeno v teoriji ekoloških sistemov, ki opazuje spremembe v posameznih sistemih in njihov vpliv na uporabnike (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Teorija je povezana z rejništvom v kontekstu spremembe, ki se dogaja v otrokovem življenju ob namestitvi v rejništvo oziroma spremembe na mikro ravni in vplivov na drugih sistemskih ravneh. Teoretični okviri rejništva in družinske skupinske konference se povezujejo preko utemeljenosti v teoretičnih konceptih krepitve moči in sistemsko-ekološke teorije, pa tudi v drugih pristopih in teorijah, ki so v socialnem delu povezane z družino. Teorijo navezanosti je treba ločiti od ostalih teoretičnih pristopov, da bi se pri delu v rejništvu pozornost usmerila na pomen spremembe v otrokovem življenju, ki je posledica izločitve otroka iz primarne družine (Cameron, Reimer in Smith, 2015). Za socialno delo je pomembno, da spremembe v otrokovem življenju povežemo s potrebo po navezanosti, še posebej v primeru pogostih menjav nastanitve in težav pri povezovanju otroka z novimi osebami. Teoretični okvir

družinske skupinske konference prikazuje povezanost s teoretičnim okvirom rejništva, kar omogoča povezavo metode s pristopom pri delu z družinami ter njeno utemeljenost v teorijah socialnega dela.

Potreba po novih spoznanjih in raziskavah na temo rejništva v povezavi z uporabo metode družinske skupinske konference je predstavljena v petem poglavju doktorske disertacije, prav tako tudi dosedanja spoznanja o navedenem raziskovanem področju.

Socialno delo z družino je kompleksen proces, rejništvo pa proces, ki vključuje dve družini in otroka, katerega potrebe je treba zadovoljiti, zato je raziskovanje tega področja zelo relevantno. Poleg tega, kljub nacionalnim in zakonodajnim okvirom, ki so usmerjeni v razvoj rejništva, ni opaznih sprememb v praksi rejništva na Hrvaškem, medtem ko se institucionalizacija ponovno revitalizira kot možna rešitev, kar je dodaten razlog za raziskovanje tega področja. Vloga socialnega dela je zagotavljanje dobrih rezultatov v rejništvu, očitna pa je tudi kompleksna naloga socialnih delavcev in njihova vloga v tem procesu (Triseliotis, Sellick in Short, 1995). Dosedanje raziskave rejništva na Hrvaškem se niso ukvarjale z analizo samega procesa in morebitnimi spremembami oziroma z razvojem metod, temveč so se bolj osredotočale na stališča strokovnjakov, rejnikov ali otrok. Poleg tega večina raziskav prikazuje iste smernice in priporočila že vrsto let. Sistem rejništva je vse bolj zbirokratiziran (Sabolić in Vejmelka, 2015), proces dezinstitutionalizacije pa stagnira (Grozđanić in Rittossa, 2017). Ker na Hrvaškem ni jasnega modela rejništva in ni razvitih metod dela z vsemi udeleženci v rejniškem procesu ter tudi ne obstaja dovolj znanja o skupinskem delu, so cilji doktorske disertacije usmerjeni v analizo rejniškega procesa, v načine vključevanja udeležencev v rejniški proces in morebitni doprinos metode družinske skupinske konference pri delu z vsemi udeleženci. V skladu s tem so v poglavju 5, 6 in 7 predstavljene teze in raziskovalna vprašanja za empirični del raziskave, zbiranje podatkov in predstavitev rezultatov raziskave v doktorski disertaciji.

9.2. Opredelevanje problemov in ciljev, teze in raziskovalna vprašanja

Številne težave v sistemu rejništva vplivajo na kakovost sistema socialnega varstva in na kakovost dela strokovnjakov z uporabniki. Na področju rejništva obstaja neenakomerna teritorialna porazdelitev rejniških družin na Hrvaškem (Svetovna banka, 2019, str. 16), kar posledično povzroča problem pri namestitvi otroka v okolje, ki ni blizu njegovi prejšnji socialni mreži. Nezadostno število usposobljenih strokovnjakov, ki bi lahko strokovno izvajali proces rejništva, prav tako nezadostno usposobljeni rejniki ter popolno pomanjkanje dela s primarnimi družinami, opozarjajo na potrebo po zagotavljanju znanja socialnim delavcem za delo na tem področju. Sistem rejništva na Hrvaškem še ni dovolj raziskan. Večina dosedanjih raziskav se nanaša na stališča in zadovoljstvo rejnikov z zagotavljanjem varstva, odnos otrok do rejništva ali na zadovoljstvo s podporo (Urbanc in Ajduković, 2010; Ivković in Žižak, 2010; Laklija, 2011a; Laklija 2011b; Sabolić in Vejmelka, 2015). Nobena študija se ne ukvarja s procesom rejništva in možnostmi njegovega spreminjanja. V zadnjih 20-tih letih je bilo izvedenih le nekaj študij, ki so preučevale rezultate rejniških odnosov in zadovoljstvo udeležencev z istimi smernicami in priporočili, kar kaže, da je na področju rejništva prišlo le do manjših sprememb in je pomanjkanje znanja še vedno očitno. Te spremembe so izključno pravne narave, ne vključujejo prakse in razvoja metod socialnega dela, ki bi sicer lahko vplivale na razvoj rejništva. S sprejetjem novega zakona v letu 2018 in njegovimi spremembami v letu 2022 (Narodne novine, 115/18, 18/22), razvoj rejniškega sistema še naprej stagnira. V zadnjih letih je bilo več otrok nameščenih v domove kot pa v alternativne oblike varstva (Svetovna banka, 2019, str. 35). Takšno stanje je v nasprotju z nacionalnimi strategijami, ki poudarjajo pomen alternativnih oblik varstva, izvajanje procesa dezinstitutionalizacije in v razvoj ustrezne pomoči za otroke v skupnosti, v okolju, ki je čim bližje družinskemu. Proces dezinstitutionalizacije stagnira ali pa napreduje le počasi (Grozđanić in Rittossa, 2017, str. 949), obenem pa je vloga socialnih delavcev v hrvaškem Zavodu za socialno delo vse bolj zbirokratizirana (Sabolić in Vejmelka, 2015). Otroci, namešчени v rejniško skrb, se nahajajo med primarno in rejniško družino, odnosi med njima pa so pogosto prekinjeni (Chateaufneuf, Turcotte in Drapeau, 2017, str. 77). Socialno delo nima povsem ustreznega odgovora na kompleksnost rejniškega procesa (Čaćinović Vogrinčič in Mešl, 2019), zato se postavlja vprašanje, kaj stroka socialnega dela potrebuje za uspešno rejništvo in ali obstajajo metode socialnega dela, ki enakopravno vključujejo vse udeležence na način, ki vodi k sodelovanju, emancipaciji in avtonomiji tistih, ki so vključeni v proces.

Razumevanje odnosov v rejniškem procesu zahteva znanje o delu z vsemi udeleženci in spremembo pristopa k delu z uporabniki storitev na način, da so primarne družine, otroci in rejniki videti kot partnerji v procesu iskanja rešitev (Morris in Featherstone, 2010). Mitchell (2020, str. 212) opisuje potrebo po uravnoteženju nasprotujočih si vlog tistih, ki so vključeni v proces rejništva kot nujnost partnerstva v socialnem delu in kot del problema zaščite otrok. Kadar se socialno delo osredotoča na rezultate in spremembe, potrebne za otroka, je lahko metoda družinske skupinske konference dober način za delo v sistemu rejništva. Na ta način lahko primarne družine, rejniki, otroci in socialni delavci pridobijo nova znanja in izkušnjo enakopravnega sodelovanja z vidika krepitve moči (Saleebey, 2013), kar omogoča emancipacijo uporabnikov. Družinska skupinska konferenca zmanjšuje razlike v pozicijah moči med udeleženci, še posebej v odnosu med strokovnjaki in drugimi udeleženci (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009), s ciljem normalizacije otrokovega življenja. Vključuje širšo družinsko mrežo in participativni pristop k reševanju problemov, s poudarkom na samostojnem oblikovanju družinskega načrta pomoči in odločanju o potrebnih spremembah (O'Brien, 2011).

Glede na prakso rejništva na Hrvaškem, ki je izjemno pomemben vir v oskrbi za otroke izven institucij ter dejstvo, da je vse več otrok odvzetih družinam, so pomembna nova spoznanja iz teorije in prakse socialnega dela v razvoju metode za izboljšanje kakovosti rejništva. Pomen rejništva in njegova kompleksnost potrjuje tudi, da je preučevanje rejništva znanstveno relevantno področje socialnega dela. Omogoča načrtovanje in razvoj metode, ki prilagaja proces rejništva dejanskim potrebam otroka in vseh tistih, ki v procesu rejništva sodelujejo. Novo znanje omogoča razvoj socialnega dela s skupino in razumevanje principov socialnega dela, kot sta participacija in emancipacija, ne samo v teoretičnem smislu, temveč tudi v praksi socialnega dela in razvoj metode družinske skupinske konference, ki vključuje tovrstne vrednote socialnega dela.

Čeprav je sistem rejništva v hrvaški praksi prisoten, ni jasnega modela oziroma metode dela z vsemi udeleženci. Takšno stanje je eden od razlogov za opredelitev cilja raziskave, ki se nanaša na razvoj metod socialnega dela, ki jih na področju rejništva še posebej primanjkuje. Primer dobre prakse oziroma dela na razvoju modelov v socialnem delu je Slovenija, ki v rejništvu uporablja inkluzivni model, ki temelji na participativnem pristopu vseh udeležencev v rejništvu (Čaćinović Vogrinčič in Mešl, 2019). Poleg tega je cilj raziskave razumeti proces rejništva v hrvaškem kontekstu in potencialni doprinos družinske skupinske konference kot metode dela z vsemi udeleženci. Cilj je deliti in ustvariti nova znanja, da bi dosegli spremembe v praksi rejništva, kakor tudi spoznanja o institucionalnih

ovirah, ki jih je treba raziskati, potrebah v skupnosti in socialni politiki. Cilj je preučiti prakso rejništva in definirati, kaj je potrebno za razvoj metode dela, ki bi bila koristna za socialno delo in uporabnike in bi temeljila na načelih sodelovanja, emancipacije in vključenosti skupnosti v življenje uporabnikov, da bi se pridobljeno znanje preneslo v teorijo.

Teze (T) z raziskovalnimi vprašanji (RV) so formulirane v skladu z opredeljenimi problemi in cilji raziskave:

T1: Zaradi birokratiziranosti dela ter pomanjkanja znanja, izkušenj in sredstev, socialni delavci le redko prakticirajo metodo skupinskega dela, ki vključuje principe emancipacije in participacije pri delu z rejniškimi družinami.

RV1: Katere prakse socialnega dela so trenutno prisotne na področju rejništva?

RV2: Kako socialni delavci razumejo načela emancipacije in sodelovanja družinskih članov v procesu rejništva?

RV3: Na kakšen način socialni delavci organizirajo delo z rejniškimi družinami in kako so otrok, primarna družina in rejniška družina vključeni v pomembne odločitve?

RV4: Katere trenutne okoliščine na področju rejništva omejujejo možnosti za razvoj podpornih mrež v skupnosti?

T2: Elementi družinske skupinske konference obstajajo v procesu rejništva v sedanjih praksah socialnega dela, glede na to, da so socialni delavci seznanjeni z načeli krepitve moči, enakopravnega sodelovanja, pomena prevzemanja nadzora nad lastnim življenjem, sodelovanja in vključevanja v širšo mrežo v skupnosti.

RV1: Katere značilnosti družinske skupinske konference so prisotne v dosednji praksi socialnega dela?

RV2: Kako socialni delavci poskrbijo, da se glas otroka sliši skozi celoten proces rejništva?

RV3: Kako socialni delavci vključujejo socialne mreže in storitve v skupnosti, da bi podprli otroka in družine pri prevzemanju večjega nadzora nad svojim življenjem?

T3: Uporaba družinske skupinske konference prispeva k zmanjšanju institucionalizacije otrok, normalizaciji podpornih mrež v skupnosti ter formiranju teorij za delo z družinami in spremembami na sistemski ravni.

RV1: Kako družinska skupinska konferenca prispeva k alternativni neinstitucionalni namestitvi otroka in dezinstitutionalizaciji rejništva?

RV2: Kako izkušnje vseh udeležencev v procesu družinske skupinske konference oblikujejo znanje o socialnem delu v rejništvu?

RV3: Kako povezati refleksijo prakse z metodo družinske skupinske konference in vzpostaviti participativno in emancipatorno socialno delo v rejništvu?

RV4: Kakšni ukrepi so potrebni na ravni skupnosti, instituciji in politike za realizacijo skupinske družinske konference v procesu rejništva?

9.3. Metodologija

Metodološki okvir raziskave je opisan v šestem poglavju doktorske disertacije. Raziskovalni pristop je akcijski, saj problem raziskovanja kaže na potrebo po socialni akciji in spremembi na raziskovalnem področju (Lewin, 1948). Akcijsko raziskovanje je pristop, ki vključuje skupino raziskovalcev, ki skupaj delajo na raziskovani temi, ciklično ponavljajo srečanja in konstantno analizirajo pridobljena spoznanja ter načrtujejo nadaljnje akcije. V doktorski disertaciji je uporabljeno profesionalno akcijsko raziskovanje, ki se nanaša na druženje raziskovalcev iz iste stroke, v tem primeru socialnih delavcev, z namenom raziskovanja in poglobljanja znanja o preučevanem pojavu (Mesec, 1994). Raziskava je potekala v treh fazah, in sicer je bila vsaka faza povezana z eno od tez, zbrani empirični podatki ene faze so usmerjali nadaljnji potek raziskave v naslednji fazi. V doktorski disertaciji je uporabljen kvalitativni pristop raziskovanja in uporaba več različnih metod v raziskavi kot pristop, ki omogoča boljše razumevanje raziskovanega področja z analizo zbranega empiričnega gradiva o izkušnjah udeležencev, njihovih razmišljanjih in občutkih ter načinu doživljanja določenih situacij (Denzin in Lincoln, 1994). Populacijo v raziskavi predstavljajo socialni delavci, zaposleni v regionalnih uradih Hrvaškega instituta za socialno delo¹¹. Udeleženci raziskave so se na začetku raziskave udeležili izobraževanja s področja družinske skupinske konference, nato pa se je oblikovala akcijska skupina, v katero sem bila poleg šestih raziskovalcev, socialnih delavcev, vključena tudi sama. Poleg akcijske skupine so v tretji fazi raziskave sodelovali še: primarne družine, rejniki in otroci, ki so se prostovoljno odzvali na izobraževanje o družinski skupinski konferenci, v katerem so delili svoje vtise in mnenja o uporabnosti metode v rejništvu. Nadalje je v poglavju prikazan potek izvajanja raziskave, od faze pred raziskavo in generiranja znanja o procesu rejništva kot smernic za formiranje tez in raziskovalnega načrta, pa vse do zadnje od treh raziskovalnih faz, od katerih je bila vsaka zase povezana z eno od tez doktorske disertacije. Obdelava empiričnih podatkov je v poglavju predstavljena za vsako metodo, ki se jo

¹¹ Disertacija je bila napisana v času prestrukturiranja sistema socialnega varstva na Hrvaškem. V skladu z novim organizacijskim sistemom socialnega varstva na Hrvaškem so centri za socialno varstvo in njihove podružnice od 1. januarja 2023 v skladu z Zakonom o socialnem varstvu (Uradni list, 18/22, 46/22, 119/22, 71/23, 156/23) postali območne enote Hrvaškega zavoda za socialno delo (v nadaljevanju: območna enota). V disertaciji se v delu raziskave in v izjavah anketirancev kot termin pojavlja izraz center ali centri za socialno varstvo. Razlog za to je, da je bila raziskava izvedena pred spremembo imena urada in je bil izraz v času, ko je bila disertacija dokončana, enak regionalnemu uradu.

uporablja za zbiranje empiričnih podatkov, rezultati pa so prikazani deskriptivno in še dodatno v tabelah oziroma slikovno za boljše razumevanje zbranih podatkov ter rezultatov.

9.4. Rezultati raziskave in razprava

V sedmem poglavju doktorske disertacije so rezultati in razprava predstavljeni v štirih podpoglavjih. Vsako podpoglavje je povezano s fazo raziskovanja in njej pripadajočo tezo doktorske disertacije, vključno z relevantno literaturo.

Faza pred raziskavo vključuje del generiranega znanja in realiziranih aktivnosti, ki jih izvaja raziskovalec kot pripravo na raziskovanje teme. Skupina socialnih delavcev je bila v vlogi svetovalne skupine in z njimi je bil izvedene nestrukturiran pogovor na temo rejništva. To je omogočilo vpogled v rezultate, pomembne za nadaljnjo usmeritev raziskave in jasno oblikovanje tez in raziskovalnih vprašanj. Poleg tega je pristop vključevanja svetovalne skupine zagotovil manj napak raziskovalcev in manj opazovanja raziskovane teme skozi predpostavke, ki morda niso bile nujno pravilne (Alston in Bowles, 2003).

Prva faza raziskave se nanaša na zbiranje odgovorov na prvo tezo doktorske disertacije in analizo trenutne prakse rejništva, s predstavitvijo procesov rejništva z različnimi možnimi izidi oziroma usmeritvami. Ker je rejništvo kompleksen proces, za katerega je potrebno razumevanje predhodnega stanja v družini, smo vključili tudi elemente dela z družino, ki se zgodijo pred izločitvijo otroka iz družine, z namenom razumevanja pristopa do primarne družine in otroka, pa tudi dejavnikov, ki vplivajo na način izločitve otroka iz družine. Skupinsko delo je identificirano v posameznih segmentih rejniškega procesa in je povezano z uporabniki, ki v njem sodelujejo ali so iz njega izključeni. Enak poudarek je bil tudi na sodelovanju in vključenosti vsakega udeleženca v odločanje v procesu rejništva kot osnovnemu predpogoju za emancipacijsko in demokratično prakso socialnega dela. V poglavju so opisana načela emancipacije in participacije kot elementov, ki so pri delu z vsemi udeleženci v rejniškem procesu bodisi prisotni ali pa ne in kako jih socialni delavci razumejo pri delu z uporabniki. Poleg tega je rejništvo povezano s skupnostjo in podporno mrežo, ki je nepogrešljiv del pri delu z družinami. Opredeljena so tri ključna področja, ki vplivajo na možnost povezovanja skupnosti in rejništva: institucionalna raven s prednostmi in pomanjkljivostmi za razvoj podpore iz skupnosti, osebna raven socialnih delavcev in znanje kot predpogoj za možen razvoj podporne mreže v skupnosti.

Rezultati prve faze raziskave in prve teze disertacije so omogočili pregled procesa rejništva in njegovega poteka, kar je služilo za nadaljevanje raziskave v drugi fazi v zvezi z drugo tezo doktorske disertacije, ki se nanaša na prepoznavanje elementov družinske skupinske konference v obstoječi praksi rejništva. Večina elementov družinske skupinske konference je bila v praksi rejništva opažena kot parcialno prisotna, kar pomeni, da se prakse v

regionalnih uradih razlikujejo ali pa je prisotnost elementov odvisna od načina izvajanja rejniškega procesa s strani socialnega delavca. V poglavju je še posebej poudarjen pristop do otroka in zagotavljanje njegove participacije v celotnem procesu, da bi razumeli, kako socialni delavci slišijo in spoštujejo otrokov glas, pri čemer so identificirana tri področja, ki so pomembna za zagotavljanje otrokovega glasu: prostor, kjer se pogovarjamo z otrokom, čas in faza v procesu rejništva, v kateri poteka razgovor z otrokom ter teme, ki so zajete s pogovorom. Glede na to, da je družinska skupinska konferenca usmerjena v zaščito in varnost otroka, sta vidik otrokovega glasu in možnost vplivanja na izid in odločitve, pomembna za razumevanje stvarnega vključevanja otroka kot enakopravnega udeleženca v procesu rejništva. Mreža podpore, ki je na voljo družini in ki se jo lahko vključi v proces pomoči družini pri premagovanju težav, je izjemnega pomena za vključevanje v delo z družinami, kar je glavna odlika metode družinske skupinske konference. V procesu rejništva je neformalna podporna mreža najpogostejši vir podpore, na katero se opirajo družine, medtem ko je formalna podpora težje dostopna in ne vključuje vseh udeležencev, na primer primarne družine, ki je pogosto izključena.

Tretja faza raziskave se navezuje na tretjo tezo disertacije, rezultati te faze pa se navezujejo na rezultate prve in druge teze. Predstavljena je organizacija izobraževanja za primarne družine, rejnike in otroke, glede na to, da je načrtovano izvajanje družinske skupinske konference težko izpeljati ne da bi metodo poznali udeleženci raziskave. Sekvenčno zbiranje podatkov s širitvijo znanja med celotnim potekom raziskave ter skozi vsako naslednjo tezo in raziskovalno fazo, je v zadnjem delu omogočilo triangulacijo rezultatov raziskave, kar je zbrane empirične podatke povezalo in zagotovilo večjo verodostojnost podatkov. V zaključnem delu so opisani glavni rezultati, ki se nanašajo na zastavljene teze disertacije ter so podani sklepni razmisleki, doprinos k znanosti in smernice za nadaljnje raziskovanje.

9.5. Sklepi in predlogi za spremembe rejništva

9.5.1. Rejništvo na Hrvaškem in birokratizacija sistema

Socialno delo na Hrvaškem se sooča s številnimi izzivi, kot so počasen razvoj procesa dezinstitutionalizacije, ki je strateško določilo sodobnih nacionalnih dokumentov, reforma socialnega varstva, ki poteka že več let, in reorganizacija sedanjega sistema socialnega varstva (Grozđanić in Rittossa, 2017; Ministrstvo za delo, pokojninski sistem, družino in socialno politiko, 2022a). Sistem rejništva je tesno povezan s procesom dezinstitutionalizacije, saj je v strategijah in načrtih poudarjeno področje razvoja, ki naj bi zagotavljalo zaščito in varnost otrok ter preprečevalo njihovo institucionalizacijo. Nacionalna strategija razvoja Republike Hrvaške do leta 2030 (Uradni list, št. 13/21) izpostavlja otroka in rejniško družino kot enega od prednostnih ciljev na področju socialne politike ter podpira nadaljnjo dezinstitutionalizacijo. Kljub številnim načrtom, strategijam in prizadevanjem za boljšo ureditev sistema rejništva dejansko stanje na področju rejništva ne kaže sprememb v smeri dezinstitutionalizacije. Analiza strateških dokumentov, denimo Načrta za dezinstitutionalizacijo, preoblikovanje in preprečevanje institucionalizacije 2018–2020 (Ministrstvo za delo, pokojninski sistem, družino in socialno politiko, 2018), ne pokaže napredka, temveč stagnacijo sistema rejništva, saj zastavljeni cilji kljub prizadevanjem države niso bili doseženi.

Institucionalni red ustvarja razmere, v katerih je uporabnik tisti, ki ga je treba izboljšati. Rezultati disertacije kažejo, da so primarne družine običajno označene kot slabe, starši so krivi za razmere v družini in nezmožni ustrezno skrbeti za otroka. Primarne družine so označene kot nesposobne in so popolnoma izključene iz procesa rejništva ter v času, ko je otrok v rejništvu, ne dobijo potrebne podpore.

Odgovornost za nedoseganje ciljev se večinoma prelaga na sistem socialnega varstva in nato naprej na posameznike. To kaže, da v socialnem delu še vedno prevladuje paradigma, ki odgovornost za položaj, v katerem se je znašel človek, pripisuje uporabniku, in da je uporabnik tisti, ki ga je treba izboljšati (Foucault, 1989). Ugotovitev potrjujemo tudi v doktorski disertaciji, saj so starši, ki imajo otroke v rejništvu, običajno označeni kot slabi starši.

V zadnjih letih je rejništvo kot alternativna oblika varstva otrok ena od glavnih tem v socialni politiki in praksi socialnega dela, včasih zaradi negativnih izkušenj v praksi, drugič zaradi naraščajočega števila otrok, ki so ločeni od svojih družin, pa tudi zaradi pomanjkanja

možnosti za namestitev. Vse več otrok je ločenih od družin zaradi različnih razlogov: zanemarjanja in zlorabe otrok, revščine v družini, posebnih potreb otroka, ki jih starši ne morejo izpolniti, kot so razvojne težave ali nezmožnost staršev, da bi skrbeli za otroka (denimo zaradi bolezni) in zadovoljili njegove potrebe (Sladović Franz in Mujkanović, 2003). Po drugi strani namestitev otrok v instituciji ni učinkovita, institucionalne zmogljivosti so zasedene, rejniki pa opuščajo rejništvo, ker nimajo dovolj podpore in motivacije ali jih omejuje zakonodaja (presega starostne pogoje). Novi in mladi rejniki se ne odločajo za ta poklic, kar je deloma posledica velike emigracije mladih družin iz Hrvaške pa tudi pomanjkanja zanimanja za to vrsto storitev (Laklija, 2011). Ker je rejništvo na Hrvaškem tradicionalno prisotno, je strokovno, politično in javno mnenje o tej obliki varstva otrok pozitivno. Rejniki so prepoznani kot pomemben in neizčrpen vir za namestitev otrok v skupnosti.

Ta vrsta namestitve je lahko za otroka najprimernejša, saj otroku omogoča uveljavljanje pravice do življenja in namestitve v okolje, ki je najbližje družinski namestitvi. Rejništvo bi moralo predstavljati pozitivno rešitev, ker pa ni vedno tako, bi moralo obstajati vsaj kot ena od oblik namestitve otrok. Zakonsko je rejništvo urejeno kot začasna namestitev otroka, ki zaradi neugodnih družinskih okoliščin do sedmega leta starosti ne more živeti v primarni družini (Zakon o rejništvu, 115/18, 18/22). Rezultati disertacije, ki obravnavajo analizo sprememb sistema rejništva in strateških dokumentov, kažejo, da se zakonodaja v zadnjih letih pogosto spreminja, spremembe pa ne temeljijo na izkušnjah iz prakse. Večina pripomb strokovnjakov pri sprejemanju zakona ni bila upoštevana, tudi ne potreba po oblikovanju timov za rejništvo, na kar opozarjajo rezultati raziskave te disertacije. Mobilne podporne ekipe za rejnike obstajajo le v nekaterih regionalnih uradih.

V zadnjih desetih letih je bilo na področju rejništva na Hrvaškem opravljenih malo raziskav. Vprašanje je, zakaj nacionalna politika ne upošteva pristopa od spodaj navzgor, predvsem pa, zakaj ne vključuje stališč uporabnikov in socialnih delavcev. Predvidevamo, da so zato tudi socialni delavci izražali nezaupanje glede sodelovanja v akcijski raziskavi na začetku raziskovanja te disertacije. Verjetno njihovo nezaupanje izvira iz slabih izkušenj s sodelovanjem v delovnih skupinah za spremembe zakonodaje. Zakonodaja se namreč ni spremenila tako, da bi bil zagotovljen otrokov glas.

Rezultati disertacije kažejo na razliko med dejansko prakso rejništva in zakonskimi določbami. Trenutno je pri odločitvi o obliki namestitve otroka edino merilo prva prosta namestitev, ne glede na starost otroka in na to, ali namestitev otroku ustreza ali ne. Načrtovanje rejništva v praksi sploh ne obstaja in ne poteka po načelih socialnega dela, ki

predpisuje vključevanje primarne družine v sistem rejništva. Rezultati raziskave v disertaciji potrjujejo rezultate raziskave, ki so jo pred več kot desetimi leti opravili Žižak in drugi (2012), tj. da otroci v sistemu rejništva ostajajo dalj časa. Tovrstna namestitvev je dolgoročna ali stalna in ne začasna storitev, ki bi trajala, dokler niso izpolnjeni pogoji za vrnitev v primarno družino. Rezultati disertacije kažejo, da so glavne pomanjkljivosti prakse socialnega dela na Hrvaškem: krepitev primarne družine, obnavljanje njene moči in mobilizacija njenega potenciala za vrnitev otroka v družino. Na pomanjkljivosti prakse opozarjajo tudi drugi podatki v disertaciji, zlasti vse daljše trajanje otrokovega bivanja v rejniški družini, težave pri ohranjanju odnosov s primarno družino in prekinitev družinskih vezi, izguba otrokove identitete in zmanjšanje čustvene navezanosti na primarno družino ter dolgotrajne posledice popolne prekinitve odnosa med otrokom in primarno družino.

Na podlagi rezultatov raziskave disertacije lahko naštejemo več ugotovitev o procesu rejništva:

- pomanjkanje teoretičnega znanja o rejništvu in delu z družino, čeprav obstajajo modeli rejništva, ki se uporabljajo v rejništvu in se osredotočajo na terapevtsko delo, psihoterapijo ali spreminjanje staršev ali otrok, da bi »rešili« problem;
- rejništvo je zahteven in zapleten proces, ki zahteva poznavanje in uporabo obsežnega teoretičnega znanja za delo z družinami, zato morajo socialni delavci razviti nove veščine, kot so ustvarjanje sodelovalnega odnosa z vsemi udeleženci, vzpostavljanje dialoga, razvijanje znanja za informiranje in izobraževanje rejnikov ter zagotavljanje podpore na individualni in skupinski ravni;
- proces vzpostavljanja in zagotavljanja rejništva vključuje udeležence iz različnih sektorjev, na primer zdravstvenega in izobraževalnega, ali sektorjev v skupnosti, kot so lokalna vlada in samouprava ali civilni sektor, ki tvorijo mrežo znotraj družine pa tudi zunaj nje, v skupnosti;
- sistem rejništva je zapleten proces z mnogimi mogočimi izidi, ki zagotavljajo kratkoročno ali dolgoročno oskrbo otroka oziroma prehod otroka iz rejništva v domsko oskrbo in se razlikujejo od družine do družine;
- sistem je sestavljen iz birokratskih elementov, ki se kažejo v postopkih odločanja, vodja regionalnega urada odobri ukrepe socialnih delavcev, delo socialnih delavcev je razdeljeno po področjih dela (npr. otroci in družina, odrasli, finančna pomoč), v regionalnih uradih se strogo upoštevajo pravila in postopki, prav tako pravni okvir, ki je podlaga za delo socialnih delavcev, pisno beleženje vsake delovne naloge v uradni spis uporabnika je obvezno, prevladuje odnos do uporabnikov kot objektov

in ne kot subjektov, s katerimi poteka sodelovanje. Ni neposrednega dela in sodelovanja z vsemi akterji, vključenimi v sistem rejništva;

- socialno delo ne more sodelovati z vsemi udeleženci v sistemu rejništva, saj sistem rejništva v proces ne vključuje socialne dimenzije, socialni delavci pa nimajo potrebnih sredstev (npr. prostora, prevoza do družine), časa in znanja za multidisciplinarno ter skupinsko delo. Skupinsko delo in načrtovanje se zaradi pomanjkanja časa, sredstev in uradnih pooblastil redko ali nikoli ne uporabljata ali pa sta le del administrativnega dela socialnih delavcev.

Razlogov za našteje ugotovitve o rejništvu je več, na primer zapleten sistem rejništva, ki nastaja prav zaradi neskladja med možnostmi in potrebami, razvojem in stagnacijo oziroma neenakomernim razvojem določenih segmentov socialnega dela, kot so skupinsko delo, delo v skupnosti ali terensko delo. Neskladje med potrebami in možnostmi pri delu socialnih delavcev se odraža v načinu, kako socialni delavci zagotavljajo storitve uporabnikom, ki so zbirokratizirane, na primer načrtovanje družine, ki je postalo del administracije. Poleg navedenega z disertacijo opozarjamo, da socialnim delavcem primanjkuje časa za neposredno delo z uporabniki storitev zaradi več razlogov: vse večje birokratizacije sistema, pomanjkanja zaposlenih socialnih delavcev, preobremenjenosti socialnih delavcev zaradi števila uporabnikov storitev in pogostega menjavanja socialnih delavcev na območnih uradih.

Socialno delo je zreducirano na intervencije, ki niso učinkovite in v življenje ljudi ne vstopajo pravočasno. Tudi socialni sistem je neučinkovit, saj se ne odziva na potrebe ljudi. To potrjujejo rezultati disertacije v primerih ločitve otroka od družine. Pomoč bi bilo treba družinam zagotoviti prej, da do ločitve sploh ne bi prišlo. Prav tako niso razvite metode, s katerimi bi socialni delavci obravnavali potrebe uporabnikov storitev, saj rezultati raziskave kažejo, da socialni delavci pogosto ne vedo, kako doseči pozitivne ukrepe, kot je denimo sodelovanje med vsemi udeleženci v rejništvu. Poleg tega še niso razvite metode za delo s primarno družino v času, ko je otrok v rejništvu, zato so primarne družine izključene iz sistema rejništva.

Modeli, ki jih je mogoče opaziti v rejništvu, se osredotočajo na delo z osebo, ki ima težave ali je problematična za družino. To so pogosto otroci, ki so prišli v konflikt z zakonom, ali otroci in mladostniki z vedenjskimi težavami. Trenutni modeli rejništva se osredotočajo na rehabilitacijo družine, izobraževalne ukrepe in strukture ali na terapijo mladih. Obstoječi modeli rejništva temeljijo na psiholoških teorijah, nanašajo se na terapevtske pristope in psihosocialno podporo, da bi dosegli spremembo pri osebi, medtem ko je cilj socialnega

dela ustvariti razmere za spremembo okolja, ki jo uporabnik potrebuje za reševanje svojih težav (Kufeldt, Armstrong in Dorosh, 1995; Warman, Pallett in Scott, 2006; Henggeler in Sheidow, 2012; Caw in Sebba, 2014). Socialni model reševanja stisk od spodaj navzgor ni le naloga javne politike, temveč tudi socialnega dela, ki mora na vseh področjih spoštovati vidik uporabnikov in ustvarjati tisto, kar potrebujejo, ne pa prilagajati družine sebi ali temu, kar je na voljo. Glede na rezultate disertacije in primerjavo modelov rejništva (Preglednica 1) večina modelov ne upošteva sodelovanja uporabnikov in razmerja moči med stranmi (Kufeldt, Armstrong in Dorosh, 1995; Warman, Pallett in Scott, 2006; Henggeler in Sheidow, 2012; Caw in Sebba, 2014). Otroci, rejniki ali primarne družine so predmet terapevtskih pristopov, ki jih je treba prilagoditi družbi. Na Hrvaškem ni veliko podatkov ali študij o modelih rejništva, zato ni jasno, kateri model se v rejništvu uporablja (Laklija in Brkić, 2022). Teorije na področju rejništva so premalo razvite in ni dovolj znanja o teoretičnih konceptih, ki se uporabljajo v rejništvu (Cameron, Reimer in Smith, 2015). Na ravni metod je pomembno upoštevati načelo, da je treba razvoj metod prilagajati in razvijati glede na spremembe v družbi ter potrebe uporabnikov (Flaker, 2016; Mali in Grebenc, 2021; Flaker in Rafaelič, 2023).

Birokratizacija prežema družbeni sistem in je pomanjkljiva, saj se osredotoča le na eno razsežnost, in sicer na pravni vidik ter potrebo po upoštevanju zakonov in protokolov, medtem ko socialna razsežnost umanjka (Burns in Früchtel, 2014, str. 1151). Z naraščajočo birokratizacijo socialno delo izgubi pomembne funkcije, saj njegova edina naloga ni slediti predpisanemu protokolu, kar pomeni, da gre le za pravno zaščito otroka (Burns in Früchtel, 2014; Sabolić in Vejmelka, 2015). Rezultati doktorske disertacije kažejo, da obstajata občasna prožnost socialnih delavcev pri delu z uporabniki in odmik od togih protokolov v korist uporabnikov. Vendar se ob tem postavlja vprašanje tveganja za socialne delavce, ki so za tako ravnanje vse pogostejše kaznovani. Treba bi bilo opraviti dodatno raziskavo na temo tega vprašanja in v njej izpostaviti avtonomijo socialnega dela. Rezultati disertacije kažejo, da sta sposobnost socialnih delavcev za delo z družinami in njihova prilagodljivost odvisni predvsem od socialnih delavcev samih in njihove predanosti delu z uporabniki. Glede na ugotovitve disertacije imajo socialni delavci vse manj časa za delo z uporabniki in človeška dimenzija dela z uporabniki se vse bolj izgublja. Socialni delavec ima na voljo le 20 minut za pogovor z uporabnikom in za sprejemanje pomembnih odločitev, pri čemer večino časa porabi za administracijo namesto za aktivno poslušanje, empatijo in razumevanje uporabnika. En socialni delavec je odgovoren za približno 150 družin, kar socialnim delavcem predstavlja dodatno obremenitev.

9.5.2. Emancipacija in participacija v rejništvu

Zaradi razvoja in reforme socialnega varstva, pomanjkanja napredka pri razvoju storitev in metod socialnega dela pa tudi zaradi pomanjkanja jasne vloge poklica socialnega delavca se socialni delavci pogosto počutijo nemočne, frustrirane in iščejo hitrejša načina za reševanje težav uporabnikov. Socialni delavci menijo, da je njihova vloga in naloga sprejemati odločitve namesto uporabnika, kar kaže na nerazumevanje položaja moči in nepoznavanje institucije kot vira moči pa tudi na pomanjkanje emancipacije in participacije uporabnika. Birokratsko odgovornost Flaker (2021) opisuje prav z nalogo socialnih delavcev, da odločajo namesto uporabnikov. Vendar rezultati disertacije kažejo, da se socialni delavci zavedajo neupoštevanja uporabnika in se zavestno odločajo za vlogo tistega, ki ve, kaj uporabnik potrebuje, saj se tako »rešijo« preobremenjenosti z delom in velikega števila primerov, za katere so odgovorni. Zatekanje k metodam prepričevanja ali manipulacije je pri delu z uporabniki pogosto, saj birokratskega postopka ni mogoče izvesti brez uporabnikovega soglasja. Ugotavljamo, da socialnim delavcem načela emancipacije pri delu z uporabniki niso jasna, saj je sistem, ki bi jih moral voditi pri obravnavah, ki ustvarjajo zatiranje, prav ta sistem, ki jih zatira. Načela emancipacije socialni delavci delno razumejo v kontekstu razumevanja emancipacije kot procesa osamosvajanja otroka, ki zapusti rejništvo, ne razumejo pa, da emancipacija pri delu z uporabniki predstavlja priložnost za učenje in prevzemanje odgovornosti za lastno življenje.

Sklepamo lahko, da je eden od razlogov za nezadostno participacijo udeležencev v rejništvu nezaupanje socialnih delavcev v sposobnosti primarne družine pa tudi otroka, ki se jim ne zdi dovolj odrasel za sprejemanje odločitev. Skupno sodelovanje in reševanje problemov je mogoče pričakovati le ob sodelovanju, ki od socialnih delavcev zahteva, da verjamejo v uporabnike in njihove zmožnosti (Mali, 2009). Participacija vsem udeležencem zagotavlja enake možnosti za vključevanje v proces rejništva, vendar poteka le v določenih segmentih procesa rejništva in nikoli kot pogovor med udeleženci skupaj ali kot oblika skupinskega dela. V procesu rejništva je prostor za skupinsko delo zagotovo proces načrtovanja, ki je sedaj postal del administracije in birokracije, ne pa priložnost za neposredno delo z uporabniki. Osebnostno načrtovanje je eden od ključnih elementov rejništva in temeljna naloga socialnega dela pri podpiranju družin v procesu pomoči. Odpira nova vprašanja o rejništvu, kot so: Kako poteka načrtovanje socialnega dela z družino? Kdo določa cilje načrta in kako so vsi udeleženci vključeni v proces pomoči? Kako se spremlja izvajanje načrta, do kakšnih

sprememb privede in kdo podpira družino v celotnem procesu? Koliko in kako družina odloča o posameznih elementih načrta? Ali so načrti usklajeni s potrebami družine in otroka? Ta vprašanja poudarjajo potrebo po nadaljnjem raziskovanju na področju osebnega načrtovanja pri delu z družinami pa tudi z drugimi skupinami uporabnikov.

Odločanje mora vedno potekati v prisotnosti osebe, o kateri se odloča, nikoli brez nje (Flaker, 2021, str. 20), kar je eno najpomembnejših načel socialnega dela. Za sprejemanje odločitev v sistemu rejništva so odgovorni socialni delavci, kar je v nasprotju z avtonomijo uporabnikov in njihovo pravico do odločanja o lastnem življenju. Dodaten izziv v sistemu rejništva je zagotovo vključevanje otrok, saj je sistem pogosto namenjen le odraslim. Otrok ima pravico sodelovati, imeti glas in biti vključen v sprejemanje odločitev. Glede na našo in prejšnje raziskave (Burke, 2008; Leeson, 2007; Borić in Mataga Tintor, 2022) se zdi, da v praksi socialnega dela ni tako, kar pomeni, da sta otrokov glas in mnenje slišana, vendar se ne upoštevata in ne vplivata na sprejemanje odločitev. To kaže, da otrokova participacija ni vključena v socialno delo in rejništvo na Hrvaškem.

Socialno delo sestavljajo načini dela in pristopi pri delu z uporabniki, ki upoštevajo splošna načela socialnega dela, etiko in vrednote, ki jih socialno delo zastopa (Ofsted, 2015; Audit Scotland, 2016). Rezultati disertacije kažejo, da metoda družinske skupinske konference, uvedena v fazi usposabljanja in pilotne faze raziskave, udeležencem omogoča pridobivanje znanja in izkušenj o timske delu, o sprejemanju odločitev ter o načinu sodelovanja in vključevanja širše družinske podporne mreže, enakopravno sodelovanje vseh vključenih v rejništvo, demokratičen pristop pri odločanju, pravico družine do aktivnega sodelovanja in samostojnega odločanja o svojem življenju, spoštovanje otrokovega glasu in enakopravno participacijo. Eden od poskusov izboljšanja podpore rejniškim družinam so po izsledkih disertacije mobilni timi, to so strokovne ekipe, ki vstopijo v rejniško družino in zagotovijo potrebno podporo v skladu z Zakonom o rejništvu (Uradni list, št. 15/18, 18/22). Čeprav ta storitev ni na voljo v vseh regijah Hrvaške, kaže na premik v pristopu k rejništvu z zagotavljanjem podpore rejnikom na lokalni ravni, torej na domu rejnika. Za sistem rejništva je pomembno, da se vsi udeleženci združijo v skupnem procesu reševanja težav, saj le to zagotavlja sodelovanje vseh vpletenih in mrežo udeležencev, ki lahko zagotovijo ustrezne vire za podporo družini.

9.5.3. Možnosti družinske skupinske konference in njeni temelji v socialnem delu

Metoda družinske skupinske konference se je v socialnem delu pojavila kot odziv na diskriminatorne prakse, ki pri delu s skupnostmi ne upoštevajo kulturnih vidikov (Burford in Hudson, 2008). Kot taka metoda temelji na načelih etike socialnega dela. Ta vključuje enakost, udeležbo, emancipacijo, pravico uporabnikov do odločanja o svojem življenju, demokratični pristop, zagotavljanje glasu vsakemu udeležencu ter zaščito in varnost otroka v procesu pomoči (Levine, 2000; Staub-Bernasconi, 2009; Saleebey, 2013; Edwards in Parkinson, 2018). Značilnost družinske skupinske konference so različne lokacije, na katerih poteka delo z uporabniki, saj se metoda izvaja na mestih, ki so družini in otroku udobna, v manj formalnem okolju. Poleg tega se družina sama odloči, kdo sodeluje in katere pomembne osebe povabi. Otrok lahko sodeluje, če pa sodelovanje odkloni, lahko izberejo zaupanja vredno osebo, ki bo na konferenci govorila namesto njega. Sam proces vključuje čas za družino, kar pomeni, da se družina med konferenco umakne od preostale skupine in samostojno oblikuje svoj načrt sprememb. Glavna značilnost metode je prevzemanje nadzora družine nad lastnim življenjem in odločanje o tem, kaj družina potrebuje, hkrati pa tudi sprememba vloge socialnih delavcev in drugih strokovnjakov, katerih naloga je sodelovati z vsemi udeleženci ter del odgovornosti in moči prenesti na družino.

Glede na rezultate disertacije lahko sklepamo, da socialno delo na Hrvaškem vsebuje elemente družinske skupinske konference, zato obstaja možnost njihove implementacije v rejništvo. Metoda družinske skupinske konference je uporabna v celotnem procesu rejništva. Njene prednosti prepoznajo rejniki, primarne družine in otroci. Rezultati disertacije kažejo, da lahko družinska skupinska konferenca na več načinov prispeva k zmanjšanju institucionalizacije otrok:

- preprečuje ločitve otrok od primarne družine, zagotavlja pomoč in podporo družini pred ločitvijo z vključevanjem širše mreže v proces pomoči;
- omogoča namestitvev otroka pri sorodnikih namesto v institucijo ter s tem vključuje širšo družinsko mrežo v proces pomoči;
- zagotavlja hitrejšo vrnitev otroka v primarno družino;
- zmanjšuje število otrok, napotenih iz rejništva v institucionalno varstvo;
- omogoča podporo otroku pri odhodu iz rejništva in pri prehodu v samostojnost.

Ena najpomembnejših ugotovitev disertacije je, da je družinska skupinska konferenca skladna z osnovnimi načeli krepitve moči v socialnem delu. Ta načela vključujejo

prevzemanje nadzora nad lastnim življenjem, mobilizacijo zmožnosti odločanja in sposobnosti vsakega posameznika, da v svojem življenju razvije ideje in sprejema odločitve, za katere je sam odgovoren. Rezultati disertacije kažejo tudi, da je družinska skupinska konferenca, ki ima vlogo povezovanja družine, skupnosti in sistema za krepitev družine, lahko rešitev za pomanjkanje vključenosti širše podporne mreže skupnosti za družino. Primer tega so primarne družine, ki so se udeležile usposabljanja in so imele možnost prejeti podporo rejnikov in strokovnjakov.

Metoda aktivira potencialne in sposobnosti družin ter jim omogoča uspešno in aktivno vlogo pri zagotavljanju njihovega obstoja. Metoda družinske skupinske konference zagotavlja prostor, v katerem je mogoče združiti pomembna področja, kot so sodelovanje med vsemi udeleženci, emancipacija, sprejetje načrta s strani družine, enakomerna porazdelitev moči med udeleženci, vključenimi v proces, in novo vlogo, ki jo imajo strokovnjaki v tem pristopu. Na Hrvaškem trenutno ni jasnega modela rejništva, obstajajo pa nekateri poskusi, kot je model specializirane oskrbe za otroke z določenimi vedenjskimi težavami (Laklija in Brkić, 2022). Za socialno delo in razvoj metod dela v sistemu rejništva je družinska skupinska konferenca metoda, ki zagotavlja boljše razumevanje potrebe po skupnem sodelovanju in multidisciplinarnem pristopu. Na podlagi raziskovalnih ugotovitev disertacije je metodo mogoče uporabiti v več fazah rejništva:

- preden je otrok ločen od družine, kot ukrep za pomoč in podporo družini ter preprečevanje ločitev;
- kot alternativni postopek sodnim postopkom, ki družini omogoča, da samostojno rešuje težave;
- na začetku rejniškega razmerja, ko je cilj povezati vse strani ter dati primarni družini in rejnikom priložnost, da se učijo drug od drugega;
- v fazi načrtovanja, ko lahko metoda nadomesti sedanji birokratski model načrtovanja in je družina samostojno in enakopravno vključena v načrtovanje;
- v času rejništva, kadar imajo rejniki težave pri delu z otrokom ali pri oblikovanju odnosa med otrokom in primarno družino;
- ko otrok zapusti sistem oskrbe in potrebuje podporo mreže za samostojno življenje.

Družinska skupinska konferenca je pristop k delu z družinami, ki vključuje vzpostavitev mreže ljudi, ki se med seboj pogovarjajo, sodelujejo in podpirajo. V teoretičnem smislu dela z družino lahko uvedba družinske skupinske konference kot metode na Hrvaškem omogoči premik paradigme teoretičnih konceptov na področju rejništva od teorij, ki so

osredotočene predvsem na posameznika, k družini in nazadnje k družinski mreži in skupnosti.

Metoda je kulturno in socialno sprejemljiva za družine in socialne delavce, ki glede na ugotovitve disertacije poudarjajo naravnost metode na sodelovanje udeležencev v manj formalni obliki.

Za nadaljnje načrtovanje izvajanja družinske skupinske konference je treba metodo preizkusiti v praksi. Skupinsko delo je v disertaciji predstavljeno kot del metode družinske skupinske konference. Glede na zaznano pomanjkanje znanja o skupinskem delu med socialnimi delavci pa bi bilo treba to temo dodatno obravnavati z analizo uporabe metod skupinskega dela v socialnem delu, zlasti ker metoda osebnega načrtovanja in izvajanja storitev v praksi ni dovolj prisotna. V prihodnjih raziskavah je treba vključiti skupnost, da bi dodatno prikazali uporabo metode družinske skupinske konference, da bi razumeli potrebo po lokalni podpori in poiskali načine za njihovo vključitev. Glede na pomanjkljivo poznavanje načel metode je priporočljivo, da se pregleda sistem usposabljanja socialnih delavcev, da se izboljšajo in uskladijo univerzitetni programi s potrebami poklica socialnega delavca, na primer glede timskega dela, skupinskega dela, razvoja metod in inovacij v socialnem delu, skupnostnega dela in razvoja skupnostnih storitev. Metodološka priporočila vključujejo utemeljitev akcijskega raziskovanja kot pristopa k raziskovanju vprašanj, ki zadevajo ljudi in vplivajo na njihova življenja. Kvalitativni pristop s kombiniranjem različnih raziskovalnih metod omogoča tudi boljši vpogled v življenjske zgodbe ljudi. Družinska skupinska konferenca lahko postane del obveznega usposabljanja rejnikov. S tem bi rejniki pridobili znanje, zlasti na področju odnosov med rejniki in primarno družino.

9.5.4. Uporaba metode družinske skupinske konference

V nekaterih državah so družinske skupinske konference del zakonodaje, na primer na Novi Zelandiji, Norveškem ali Nizozemskem, ali pa so del priporočil za delo z družinami, ki jih močno podpira socialni sistem, na primer v Združenem kraljestvu (Aras-Kramar, 2021). Pravo in socialno delo lahko pripomoreta k izvajanju družinske skupinske konference, in sicer pravo lahko postane orodje za krepitev družine in ni le regulativni mehanizem v družbi (Aras-Kramar, 2021). Na ravni nacionalnih politik se lahko pred posegom v družino spoštuje pravica družine do svobodne izbire in izbire podpore pri odločanju, tako kot na Švedskem ali Nizozemskem (Asscher, Dijkstra, Stams, Deković in Creemers, 2014;

Mitchell, 2020). Družinska skupinska konferenca kot metoda socialnega dela ustvarja prostor na ravni socialne in pravne politike, saj se metoda uporablja kot alternativna oblika sodnim postopkom (Božić, 2017; Aras Kramar, 2021). Prihranki v socialnem in pravosodnem sistemu, ki jih metoda prinaša, so zagotovo dober argument za politiko, še pomembnejši pa so razbremenitev socialnih delavcev in pozitivni učinki pri delu z uporabniki (Fox, 2019). Čeprav finančni učinek družinske skupinske konference v tej disertaciji ni bil obravnavan, predhodne raziskave (Marsh in Crow, 1998; Fox, 2019; Dijkstra, 2019) kažejo v pozitivno smer zmanjševanja stroškov v sistemu socialnega varstva, zato je priporočljivo, da se ta tema dodatno razišče glede na argumente v prid njeni uvrstitvi na dnevni red politike.

Za uvajanje te metode v socialno delo je treba razumeti, da je rejništvo več kot le pravna ureditev in da gre za nenehno spreminjajoč se proces, ki se prilagaja potrebam ljudi in spremembam v družbi. Uvajanje te metode v pravno prakso in v socialno delo ni preprost proces, temveč zahteva sodelovanje vseh akterjev javne politike, vključno z zavzetostjo pravnikov in socialnih delavcev za spremembe obstoječe prakse. Glede na interdisciplinarno naravo družinske skupinske konference in tesno povezavo med pravom in socialnim delom ima lahko pobuda, ki izhaja iz dveh znanstvenih področij, veliko večji učinek na uvajanje sprememb. Potrebujemo aktiven pristop v politiki za predlagane spremembe.

Novo znanje, ki ga podaja disertacija, je mogoče uporabiti v praksi pri delu z družinami in otroki v sistemu rejništva na različne načine in na različnih ravneh. Prva raven zadeva politiko in sistem socialnega varstva, kjer bi bilo treba razmisliti o možnosti uvedbe družinske skupinske konference, po možnosti na dva načina:

- z uvajanjem v zakonodajnem okviru – na primer kot eden od ukrepov družinskega prava v skladu z Zakonom o družini;
- s priporočili za uporabo te metode pri delu z družinami – uvedba te metode v storitve, opisane v Zakonu o socialnem varstvu, in kot alternativa sodnim postopkom v rejništvu po Zakonu o rejništvu in Zakonu o družini.

Ustvarjanje razmer za neposredno delo z uporabniki in zlasti časa za delo z uporabniki na področju socialnega dela je mogoče z vključevanjem in razvojem skupnostnih storitev ter multidisciplinarnega pristopa k uporabnikom, ki ga zagovarja metoda družinske skupinske konference. To je primer, kako v večini držav, ki so uvedle družinsko skupinsko konferenco, civilni sektor v skupnosti prevzame izvajanje te metode (Staub, 2005; Fox, 2018; Aras Kramar, 2021). Sprememba je skladna s strateškimi cilji Hrvaške za

dezinstucionalizacijo in z razvojnim načrtom za socialne storitve v skupnosti (Ministrstvo za delo, pokojninski sistem, družino in socialno politiko, 2021). Ustvarjanje skupnosti, ki skrbi za ljudi, ki živijo v njej, je potrebno za večjo integracijo, vzpostavljanje odnosov in medsebojno skrb, kar se je v sodobni družbi z izrazitim individualizmom izgubilo. Socialno delo pa s tem dobi sredstva, ki jih institucija nima. Socialni delavec sproži to metodo v rejništvu, izvajanje pa se prenese na skupnost, kar bi razbremenilo že tako preobremenjene socialne delavce. Na ravni uporabnikov je pomembno razumeti, da je za učinkovite storitve potrebna večja vključenost uporabnikov, kar v primeru rejništva ne pomeni le rejnikov, temveč tudi primarno družino in otroka (Mitchell, 2020). Hkrati je za znanost o socialnem delu pomembno, da najde mehanizme za prehod od posameznika h kolektivu, zato je ta metoda dobra izbira, v rejništvu pa to pomeni aktivno sodelovanje v procesu in ne izključevanje. To še posebej velja za primarne družine, ki so pogosto izključene iz socialnega dela nasploh (Čaćinović Vogrinčič in Mešl, 2019). Pomembno je, da primarne družine čutijo, da so del ekipe, ki soustvarja rešitve v rejništvu, da so vključene in da so pomembne udeleženke, ki so še naprej del otrokovega življenja (Triseliotis, Sellick in Short, 1995; Schofield idr., 2011), kar omogoča rast, razvoj in emancipacijo primarnih družin.

Socialno delo bi moralo temeljiti na sodelovanju z uporabniki in na konceptu uporabnikovega prevzemanja nadzora nad lastnim življenjem in ne na iskanju rešitev brez aktivne vključenosti uporabnika (Zimmerman, 2000). Metoda družinske skupinske konference uporabnikom omogoči, da sami prevzamejo nadzor nad svojim življenjem (Marsh in Crow, 1998; Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković in Stams, 2016; Doolan, 2004). Metoda uporabnikom zagotavlja več podpore in minimalno omejuje njihovo svobodo, kar je v skladu z načeli normalizacije človekovega življenja. Delo z ljudmi v stiski po načelih emancipacije pomeni, da se uporabniki lahko svobodno razvijajo in izražajo, vendar pri sedanjem socialnem delu ni tako. Za tovrstno delo z uporabniki so potrebni čas, zaupanje v uporabnike in potrpežljivost. To ni mogoče, če je sistem zbirokratiziran, ne omogoča stikov z uporabnikom, temveč sloni na beleženju korakov dela (Sabolić in Vejmelka, 2015). Če na poklic socialnega dela gledamo kot na oblikovalca kulturnega, političnega ali izobraževalnega sveta, potem je jasno, da je naloga socialnega dela, da uporabnike iz objektov spremeni v subjekte, ki so enakovredni udeleženci in sodelavci strokovnjakov (Sewpaul, Ntini, Mkhize in Zandamela, 2015). Potencial uporabnikov za večjo sposobnost odločanja je mogoče mobilizirati le z delom z ljudmi in ne za ljudi (Perkins in Zimmerman, 1995).

Sklep, ki izhaja iz raziskave v disertaciji, je, da je družinska skupinska konferenca dobra izbira za način načrtovanja družinskih ciljev, ki vodijo k spremembam v družinskem življenju, skupaj z družino, v kateri je vsak član polno vključen, enakopraven in predan. Socialni delavci pri svojem delu z uporabniki storitev potrebujejo avtonomijo, vendar tudi jasno opredeljeno vlogo, ki se nanaša zlasti na potrebo po spremembi načina razmišljanja in dela z uporabniki storitev s ciljem vzpostaviti ravnovesje moči (Flaker, 2023). Ozko polje delovanja, ki je na voljo socialnim delavcem, kaže na potrebo po spremembah socialnega dela tako na ravni politike kot na ravni institucij in prakse socialnih delavcev. Pomanjkanje znanja je glavna ovira, ki socialnim delavcem preprečuje dobro delo. Rezultati disertacije kažejo, da socialni delavci izpostavljajo pomanjkanje znanja na področjih dezinstitutionalizacije, emancipacije, skupinskega dela ter dela v skupnosti in družini. Država se je zavezala, da bo socialnim delavcem zagotovila stalno usposabljanje in dostop do znanja, ki ga potrebujejo za učinkovito delo z uporabniki. Družinska skupinska konferenca je prinesla nova spoznanja o timskem delu, možnostih multidisciplinarnega pristopa in drugačnem načinu dela v skupnosti, ki ga socialni delavci želijo in potrebujejo pri svojem strokovnem delu (Mirsky, 2003; Morris in Connolly, 2012). Z oblikovanjem novega teoretičnega koncepta, ki temelji na družinski skupinski konferenci, je zagotovljena emancipacija vseh udeležencev, npr. nadomestni starši se od primarne družine učijo o otroku in njegovem življenju, starši pa o svojih veščinah ravnanja z otrokom in o svojih starševskih veščinah.

9.5.5. Razvoj teorije emancipacije in vključujočega sodelovanja v rejništvu

Disertacija pomembno prispeva k razumevanju rejništva kot edinstvenega procesa, ki temelji na pravici vsakega posameznika, da se sam odloči, kako želi živeti, in na pravici, da to doseže v skupnosti. To je mogoče le, če je v proces pomoči vključena skupnost, kar v socialnem delu omogoča metoda družinske skupinske konference. Družinska skupinska konferenca ustvarja most med resničnim življenjem in sistemom, tj. med primarno družino, otrokom in rejniško družino na eni strani ter sistemom na drugi (Marsh in Crow, 1998; Lupton in Nixon, 1999; Burns in Früchtel, 2014). Na področju socialnega dela je premalo znanja za povezovanje akterjev v sistemu rejništva. Družinska skupinska konferenca se pojavlja kot koncept in nova metoda socialnega dela, ki jo je možno dobro uporabiti v socialnem delu, saj temelji na razvoju teoretičnih konceptov, ustvarjenih s pristopom od spodaj navzgor. Poklic socialnega dela zahteva razvoj in profiliranje učinkovitega znanja

in teoretičnih konceptov, ki so uporabni v trenutni praksi socialnega dela, kar pomeni, da se socialno delo razvija in prilagaja družbenim trendom in spremembam. To pomeni, da lahko socialno delo uporabi inovativen pristop, metodo družinske skupinske konference, za iskanje rešitev na področju rejništva, ki trenutno niso mogoče, kot je na primer vključevanje širše mreže družin.

Metoda družinske skupinske konference mora biti teoretično utemeljena v socialnem delu, iz katerega je izšla, izvajalci pa morajo razumeti teoretične temelje koncepta dela z uporabniki s to vrsto intervencije (Parkinson, 2018). Ustvariti je treba prostor, da metoda postane dopolnitev obstoječih procesov socialnega dela. Na primer, pomembna prispevka metode družinske skupinske konference sta restorativna pravičnosti kot orodje za popravo škode, povzročene ljudem, in reševanje težav, namesto da bi se osredotočali na osebo, ki je storila napako (McCold in Wachtel, 2003). Elementi in vrednote restorativne pravičnosti, kot so skupnost, dialog, spoštovanje in usmerjenost k iskanju rešitev, so del postopka družinske skupinske konference. S tem se ustvari prostor za dialog o tem, kako nadaljevati skupno življenje na pravičen način in kako zmanjšati škodo. S tem se ne le razširi krog odgovornosti, temveč se ustvari tudi partnerstvo med državo in družino. Prvotno je bila metoda razvita na podlagi restorativnega pristopa, ki pomeni premik k partnerskemu posredovanju, ki spoštuje različne kulturne vrednote (Adams in Chandler, 2004). Sprememba paradigme teorije socialnega dela na področju rejništva velja v socialnem delu za nujno, da se razvije pristop, ki temelji na teorijah socialnega dela.

Vse zgoraj navedene ugotovitve in argumenti so podlaga za razvoj novega teoretičnega koncepta socialnega dela, ki je tudi glavni prispevek disertacije na teoretični ravni. Socialno delo preučuje in interpretira življenjski svet uporabnikov na podlagi pridobljenih pripovedi in resničnosti ljudi, skupaj pa ustvarjajo nove alternativne pomene, ki nastajajo v obliki utemeljenih teorij (Grebenc in Šabić, 2013). Teorija emancipacije in vključujoče participacije v rejništvu, katere koncept temelji na multidisciplinarnem pristopu k družini, pravičnosti in demokraciji, skozi spoznanja, pridobljena v disertaciji, vključuje elemente teorije ekoloških sistemov in teorije krepitve moči. Multidisciplinarni pristop h konceptualizaciji teorije se osredotoča na mrežo ljudi, vključenih v podporo družinam, in se od individualnega pristopa premika h kolektivnemu, katerega cilj je podpora družini prek širše socialne mreže v skupnosti (Burford in Hudson, 2008; Payne, 2014). Metoda družinske skupinske konference kot osnova teoretičnega koncepta povezuje različne strokovnjake, socialno delo in politiko na eni strani ter udeležence rejniških družin na drugi strani ter tako ustvarja mostove, ki jih povezujejo. Interdisciplinarni pristop se kaže na dveh

ravnih. Prvič, nanaša se na združevanje prava in socialnega dela, da bi dobili širšo sliko pri delu z družino, tako da bi z obravnavo obeh disciplin oblikovali instrumente za zaščito in krepitev družine (Aras Kramar, 2021). Drugič, gre za združevanje različnih strokovnjakov, ljudi iz družinskega okolja, ljudi, ki se ukvarjajo z družinskimi člani in sorodniki, v skupen krog ljudi, ki imajo sredstva za pomoč družini, ne da bi družina izgubila avtonomijo in moč odločanja o svojem življenju (Mali, 2014; Payne, 2014).

Nova teorija vključuje nova spoznanja: o povezovanju sistema z resničnim življenjem družine, tako da se različni strokovnjaki, potrebni za podporo družini in družinski mreži, srečajo in povežejo; o timskem delu, ki mora vključevati vse udeležence rejništva; in o pomenu uporabe skupinskega dela z družinami. Ustvarjanje podporne mreže za družine v skupnosti razumemo kot normalizacijo družinskega življenja v okolju, v katerem družina živi. To vključuje vključevanje družine v skupnost z vzpostavljanjem odnosov na več ravneh (sosede, družina, varstveni sistemi, izobraževanje) ob ohranjanju njene avtonomije in dostojanstva (Bouwkamp in Bouwkamp, 2014; Grebenc, 2020).

Teorija emancipacije in vključujočega sodelovanja v sistemu rejništva je odziv na birokratizacijo sistema in potrebo po ponovni vzpostavitvi avtonomije socialnih delavcev. Vključuje znanje za razumevanje resničnosti življenja družin, timsko delo, multidisciplinarno povezovanje strokovnjakov in skupinsko delo ter uvaja pristop k delu z družinami, ki temelji na načelih sodelovanja in emancipacije vseh udeležencev, tj. dopuščanje glasu vsakega udeleženca, sprejemanje demokratičnega pristopa in spoštovanje pravice vsakega posameznika do odločanja o svojem življenju. Ta teorija socialne delavce postavlja v vlogo zagovornikov za ustvarjanje virov in povezav v skupnosti. Spreminja način dela socialnih delavcev z vzpostavljanjem ravnovesja moči z uporabniki in sodelovanjem prek kolektivnega povezovanja (Bouwkamp in Bouwkamp, 2014). Nova spoznanja vključujejo dialog med socialnimi delavci in uporabniki, humani pristop in spremembe z enakostjo v interakciji (Bourdieu, 2000; Pulla, 2017; Dijkstra, 2019).

Glavni značilnosti teorije emancipacije in vključujočega sodelovanja v rejništvu sta: (1) enak dostop do vseh virov (informacij, znanja, podpore), zlasti za primarne družine, ki so izključene iz sistema rejništva, in (2) širitev podporne mreže za družino v skupnosti, ki omogoča ustvarjanje novih povezav v življenju družin. Poleg tega teorija opozarja na potrebo po vzpostavitvi normalizacije otrokovega življenja v novi družini, kar pomeni ohranjanje prejšnje socialne mreže in vezi s primarno družino. Otrokov glas in pravica do sodelovanja v vseh procesih v rejništvu ter otrokova varnost sta elementa teorije, ki se osredotoča na skrb za otroka v celotnem procesu rejništva. Značilnost teorije, ki kaže na

potrebo po spoštovanju načela emancipacije, je pravica družine do samostojnega odločanja o svojem življenju ob podpori socialnih delavcev in ravnovesju moči, ki se odraža v avtonomiji družine pri samostojnem načrtovanju. Cilj teorije je ustvariti povezavo med resničnim svetom družin in sistemi, s katerimi se soočajo družine v rejništvu. Temelji na demokratičnem načinu dela in spoštovanju družin kot strokovnjakov za svoja življenja pa tudi kot partnerjev pri oblikovanju rešitev za družine.

Teorija poudarja vključenost in sodelovanje skupnosti. Prehod na podporo skupnosti razbremeni sistem in socialne delavce, saj družinska skupinska konferenca omogoča večjo vključenost družin in podpornih mrež v primerjavi s strokovnjaki, kar seveda spodbuja premik paradigme od posameznika h kolektivu s širšo delitvijo nalog in večjo solidarnostjo. Sedanje socialno delo, ki temelji na pravicah in odgovornostih, pomeni, da sodelovanje med državo in družino temelji le na tem okviru (Lupton in Nixon, 1999), kar ne omogoča participativnega odločanja (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009; Saleebey, 2013) in avtonomije družine (Levine, 2000; Maluccio, Ainsworth in Thoburn, 2000), medtem ko teorija emancipacije in vključujoče participacije prinaša spremembe v razumevanju pomena participacije in emancipacije pri delu z družinami ter kontekstu dodaja socialno razsežnost, ki odpira prehod v skupnost.

Socialno delo mora ohraniti avtonomijo poklica, ki je vse bolj omejen pri svojem delovanju (Flaker, 2023). Socialni delavci izgubljajo svojo identiteto, kar se odraža v visoki stopnji frustracij, stresa in občutka nemoči pa tudi v njihovem odhodu iz sistema, saj se povečuje fluktuacija socialnih delavcev (Sladović Franz in Mujkanović, 2003; Kletečki Radović, 2008; Družić Ljubotina in Friščić, 2014). V sistemu obstaja neravnovesje moči, pri katerem so socialni delavci pogosto brez moči. So pod vplivom države, ki prevzame nadzor nad delom socialnega delavca ali pa reši problem, če socialni delavec tega ne more storiti (ko gre za iskanje nastanitve za otroka). S tem sta avtoriteta in avtonomija socialnih delavcev kršeni, odnosi, ki jih poklic socialnega delavca gradi v skupnosti, pa ne temeljijo na zaupanju in enakosti.

Ob spoznanju, da pri razvoju teorije na področju rejništva ni razumevanja potreb uporabnikov in da modeli rejništva ne predvidevajo dela z vsemi udeleženci na način, ki bi vključeval načela socialnega dela, je razvoj nove teorije emancipacije in vključujočega sodelovanja v rejništvu prispevek k znanju, razumevanju in teoretičnim okvirom rejništva kot procesa socialnega dela.

Prispevek disertacije k znanosti o socialnem delu se odraža tudi v njeni metodologiji, saj upošteva sodelovanje v akcijskem raziskovalnem procesu, pridobivanje novega znanja in

uresničene spremembe. Ta raziskovalni pristop omogoča odgovor na vprašanja, kako lahko socialni delavci pridobijo potrebno znanje in postanejo bolj senzibilni za procese, potrebne za spremembo prakse, in kako povezati izkušnje s teoretičnimi koncepti socialnega dela. Na Hrvaškem na tem področju doslej ni bilo akcijske raziskave, zato doktorsko disertacijo lahko razumemo kot prispevek k razvoju raziskovalne metodologije v znanosti o socialnem delu na Hrvaškem.

10. LITERATURE

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12. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Questions formed for a semi-structured interviews

How is the procedure for foster care currently carried out? How do social workers search for a place for a child in a foster care?

How do social workers inform the primary family and the child about the need to separate the child from its family? Where and when does the interview with the child take place, who participates and who is involved in preparing the placement in a foster care?

Are other members of the extended family or important people from the network involved in the foster care process? Do the primary and foster family meet before the foster care and where is the child present? What information do the foster parents receive about the child and from whom?

How do social workers involve the primary family in the foster care process? What rights do they have in the decision to place the child in a foster care? How is the child's opinion respected?

How is the primary family supported while the child is in foster care?

How do social workers work with foster families (how often do they talk to them, how often do they visit them, how often do they ask their opinion, how do they introduce a child who needs a foster parent)?

Who is involved in key decisions, e.g. making a plan for the child, providing the necessary support for the child, the child's health?

What do social workers need to work in foster care and what is currently missing? What are the institutional barriers or opportunities? What professional components are needed to work with the community and engage the wider network (knowledge of group work, knowledge of working in the community, community resources)?

When is the interview with the child to be placed in foster care conducted? What topics does the social worker discuss with the child? What questions does the social worker ask the child? Who else is present during the interview with the child? How and where is the child's statement recorded? How do social workers work with the primary family while the child is in foster care? What resources are available to social workers in the community for working with families, and which are lacking? What resources are most commonly utilized by social workers when working with the primary family?

How is a support network established for a child? How do foster parents become part of the child's support network? What community services are available to the child while living in foster care?

QUESTIONNAIRE ON SATISFACTION WITH TRAINING AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

Dear Sir or Madam, this questionnaire is part of a study investigating participants' attitudes towards and satisfaction with the family group conference. The study is being conducted as part of a doctoral thesis entitled " The role of a family group conference in child foster care from a social work perspective". Participation in the study is completely voluntary and anonymous. The results of the survey will only be processed at the group level and in accordance with professional ethics. Please answer the questions truthfully. The questionnaire takes an average of 5 minutes to complete and you can cancel it at any time. By completing the questionnaire, you confirm that you have read the introduction and agree to the statistical analysis of your answers. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.

1. What expectations did you have of the family group conference training?

2. Did the family group conference training meet your expectations? (cross out the box in front of the selected answer)

☐ yes

☐ no

☐ partially

Explain: _____

3. Did you get enough information about the implementation of the family group conference regarding:

a. Your role in family group conference ☐ YES ☐ NO

b. on the implementation of the family group conference ☐ YES ☐ NO

c. what is and what are the goals of a family group conference ☐ YES ☐ NO

Comments on how and whether you were sufficiently informed:

4. How would you rate the family group conference method on a scale of 1-5: 1 - poor, 2 - satisfactory, 3 - good, 4 - very good and 5 - excellent? (circle one of the ratings)

1 2 3 4 5

Why did you choose this grade?

5. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 - poor, 2 - satisfactory, 3 - good, 4 - very good and 5 - excellent, how useful do you think the family group conference is for you in your family? (circle one of the ratings)

1 2 3 4 5

Why did you choose this grade?

6. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor, 2 is satisfactory, 3 is good, 4 is very good and 5 is excellent, how would you rate the approach that allows the family to solve the problem independently of the other family members? (circle one of the ratings)

1 2 3 4 5

Why did you choose this grade?

7. Do you think that family group conference is a useful method for solving problems in families in foster care:

☐ YES ☐ NO

8. In which situations (difficulties) do you think it would be useful to organize a family group conference in your family?

9. Are you interested in organizing a family group conference in your family?

☐ YES ☐ NO

10. If you are interested, please provide your contact details so that the initiator (social worker) can contact you:

Name and surname _____

Contact telephone number _____

11. If you have any additional comments or suggestions, please provide them:

Thank you for sharing your impressions and thoughts with us!

Appendix 3: Invitation to the regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work to participate in the survey

Social welfare centre

N/P principal

Faculty of law Osijek, Social work study
Stjepana Radića 13, 31 000 Osijek
Gordana Horvat, mag.act.soc., assistant
B.Bartoka 41
31000 Osijek
0993240706

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am a doctoral student in the third and final year of doctoral studies in Social Work at the College of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, under the supervision of Associate Professor, Ph.D. Jana Mali and co-mentor Prof. Ph.D. Vito Flaker. The topic of my dissertation is "The role of a family group conference in child foster care from a social work perspective ". For my dissertation, I plan to conduct research that aims to determine the current state of social work in the foster care system, what support currently looks like for all participants in the foster care process, and how social work follows the principles of emancipation and participation. The aim is to investigate how we can apply the concepts of normalization and deinstitutionalization in the field of foster care through the method of family group conference.

The research is to be carried out in the Republic of Croatia in cooperation with social workers as equal researchers within the framework of action research, which is practiced in Croatia as an innovative research method.

I ask for your cooperation in order to jointly improve the science and practice of social work, and I ask you to forward the link to the questionnaire (it takes 5 minutes to complete out) to the social workers who work in your Center in field of foster care and ask them to complete it out.

Link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1EUDeftKGVBGyX0apLu_lACfjZvH9x1p6SF3qGInJdjE/edit

Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. I enclose the consent of the Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy and the decision/approval of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Work in Ljubljana for the research and confirmation of acceptance of the research topic.

Gordana Horvat, mag.act.soc., PhD student

Appendix 4: Google form

As part of my doctoral thesis, I would like to examine the state of social work in the foster care system, the current state of support for all participants in the foster care process and how social work follows the principles of emancipation and participation. The aim is to examine how we can apply the concepts of normalization and deinstitutionalization in the field of foster care through the family group conference method.

The family group conference method incorporates key principles of working with the family, such as respecting children's and human rights, involving the family in decision making, empowering the family and focusing on the healthy potential of the family system and readiness to solve future problems more independently. The existing resources of the community and social networks are utilized, and the active participation of the entire network in solving the family's problematic situation is encouraged.

The study is to be carried out in the Republic of Croatia in cooperation with social workers as equal researchers within the framework of action research.

Completing the questionnaire is voluntary and you can cancel it at any time. Your data will be anonymized and protected, and only the researcher will have access to the completed questionnaires. If you would like to be part of the research team, you can voluntarily provide your contact details (email or phone number) if you are interested in participating in the research.

Gender: M F

Year of birth: _____

Qualifications: _____

Name of the institution where you work: _____

Location: _____

County: _____

Your total length of service is (years, months): _____

In how many social institutions have you worked in total? _____

Name of the workplace where you currently work: _____

Since you have been employed at this last job (years, months): _____

How long have you been working in a foster care: _____

How many foster families or children are currently in your area of responsibility: _____

Have you attended additional training in the field of foster care: _____

Are you employed by: 1) for an indefinite period 2) for a specific period of time

I would like to participate in the survey as a member of the action group/team: YES NO

I would like to find out more about the research and the topic so that I can decide whether I want to take part: YES NO

I consent to further information about the research being sent to my e-mail address: YES NO

If YES, my email address is: _____

I consent to being contacted by telephone for research purposes: YES NO

If YES, my telephone number is: _____

Thank you for your cooperation!

Appendix 5: Consent of the Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy to conduct research in the regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work



REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA
MINISTARSTVO RADA, MIROVINSKOGA SUSTAVA,
OBITELJI I SOCIJALNE POLITIKE

ZAVOD ZA SOCIJALNI RAD

KLASA: 053-01/21-01/161
URBROJ: 524-09-01-02/2-22-2

Zagreb, 19. siječnja 2022.

Gordana Horvat
ghorvat@pravos.hr

PREDMET: Gordana Horvat
- suglasnost za provedbu istraživanja, daje se

Poštovana,

Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike zaprimilo je Vaš zahtjev za provedbu istraživanja za potrebe izrade doktorskog rada na temu „Uloga obiteljske grupne konferencije u udomiteljstvu djece iz perspektive socijalnog rada“.

Cilj istraživanja je utvrditi stanje u socijalnom radu u udomiteljstvu, kako se trenutno pruža podrška svim sudionicima u udomiteljskom procesu, kako socijalni rad slijedi načela emancipacije i sudjelovanja, te kako se kroz metodu obiteljske grupne konferencije može primijeniti koncepte normalizacije i deinstitucionalizacije na području udomiteljstva.

U svrhu provedbe istraživanja prethodno je dobivena suglasnost Etičkog povjerenstva Sveučilišta u Ljubljani, Fakulteta za socialno delo.

U skladu s traženim, izvješćujemo Vas da je Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike suglasno s provedbom istraživanja na temu „Uloga obiteljske grupne konferencije u udomiteljstvu djece iz perspektive socijalnog rada“, te Vas upućujemo da se u svrhu suradnje sa socijalnim radnicima u provedbi navedenog istraživanja, obratite ravnateljima centara za socijalnu skrb.

S poštovanjem,



Appendix 6: Decision of participation in the " Home Together " project



Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
Pravni fakultet Osijek
Faculty of Law Osijek

KLASA: 641-02/20-02/18
URBROJ: 2158/95-05-20-1
Osijek, 17. srpnja 2020. godine

Na temelju članka 21. Statuta Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Pravnog fakulteta Osijek, dekan izv. prof. dr. sc. Tunjica Petrašević donosi

O D L U K U **O IMENOVANJU PROJEKTOG TIMA**

Članak I.

Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Pravni fakultet Osijek, partner je u provođenju projekta „Zajedno do doma“, broj projekta: UP.02.2.2.06.0325, nositelj projekta: Svjetski savez mladih Hrvatska. Projekt je financiran sredstvima Europskog socijalnog fonda, Operativni program Učinkoviti ljudski potencijali 2014. - 2020. Razdoblje trajanja projekta je od 1. srpnja 2020. do 31. prosinca 2021. godine.

Ciljevi Projekta su:

- jačanje kapaciteta i usavršavanje stručnjaka i članova udomiteljskih obitelji
- osnaživanje i uključivanje u lokalnu zajednicu djece i mladih bez odgovarajuće roditeljske skrbi i s problemima u ponašanju
- formiranje programa za osnaživanje stručnjaka i članova udomiteljskih obitelji te prijedloga mjera za usavršavanje socijalne usluge udomljavanja
- osnivanje savjetovališta „Zajedno do doma“ te osnivanje Mobilnog tima stručnjaka

Članak II.

Za provođenje projekta imenuje se projektni tim u sastavu:

1. Prof.dr.sc. Branka Rešetar, koordinatorica projektnog tima
2. Gordana Horvat, članica projektnog tima
3. Suzana Tomašević, članica projektnog tima

Članak III.

Sredstva za provedbu projekta osigurana su Ugovorom o dodjeli bespovratnih sredstava za projekte koji se financiraju iz Europskog socijalnog fonda u financijskom razdoblju 2014. – 2020. zaključenim 01. srpnja 2020. godine između Ministarstva za demografiju, obitelj, mlade i socijalnu politiku (posredničko tijelo

Stjepana Radića 13	T +385 (0) 31 224 500	MB 301 4193
31000 Osijek	T +385 (0) 31 224 540	GRB 26416570803
Republika Hrvatska	E ured@pravos.hr	IBAN HR80 2340 0091 1001 6396 2
	W www.pravos.hr	

razine 1), Hrvatskog zavoda za zapošljavanje, Ured za financiranje i ugovaranje projekata Europske unije (posredničko tijelo razine 2) i Svjetskog saveza mladih Hrvatska (korisnik bespovratnih sredstava).

Članak IV.

Ova Odluka stupa na snagu danom donošenja.

D e k a n



izv. prof. dr. sc. Tunjica Petrašević

Odluku dostaviti:

- članovima projektnog tima
- arhiva