

## Session D8: Child and family social work

### **The challenges of parenting in a dynamic world: how social services can support parents' coping strategies**

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**The context:** The study of parenting has produced an abundance of literature, with a growing number of self-proclaimed experts setting standards, giving instructions and identifying mistakes. On the other hand the voices of those with parenting responsibilities, particularly in challenging family circumstances, are seldom heard and have not been systematically explored (Geinger et al. 2014; ). The study presented here aimed at identifying new knowledge about parents' self-representations and how professional practices connect with them. While recognizing parental roles and rights, the study is underpinned by a framework which underlines social responsibilities in supporting parental roles and child rearing and challenges the individualistic view of parenting which has become prevalent in contemporary society (Richter and Anderson, 2012). The outcomes of the research will make a contribution to more inclusive social work policies and practice interventions.

**Methods:** The research design was based on a qualitative participatory approach, with an advisory board including both professionals and parents, all of whom were members of family associations. The board supported the research design, the identification of the informants and the analysis of the data. We explored through semi-structured qualitative interviews the views of 50 parents and 40 professionals in the South Tyrol region in Italy. The professionals selected for the research were teachers, social workers, educators, psychologists, and lawyers. As for the parents, we chose to privilege diversity and to have examples of parents with different life circumstances, from the more traditional situations, to different family structures, families with a migration background, living in poverty or coping with disability. The research adhered to University ethical guidelines, all participants signed an informed consent form and all outcomes have been anonymised.

**Outcomes:** The data indicate that although parenting was described as highly problematic, both by professionals and parents, the multiplicity of family structures, such as families resulting from divorce and remarriages, patchwork families or single parents families, in keeping with other research, was not in itself deemed responsible for the difficulties families faced. The main challenges that emerged in the interview were related to financial instability, time management, parental authority and isolation. Differences in perspective between professionals and parents in relation to the identified themes offer stimuli for reflection on how services for families can be improved in ways that incorporate parents' self-identified coping strategies and competencies.