



Learning to innovate with families

Toolkit and guidelines for working with multi-challenged families in new ways



Erasmus+



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Introduction

This publication describe and provide innovative products and tools resulting from the LIFE Erasmus Plus project which can be used by practitioners and policy makers working with multi-challenged families in the partner countries and other EU member states. The full reports can be downloaded from www.lifeprojecterasmus.eu.

The LIFE Erasmus Plus proposal was initiated by the Research and Development Centre in the Municipality of Linköping in Sweden. The other partners in the project were The Centre for Child Welfare Research and Innovation at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, The Faculty of Social work at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, The Associação de Paralisa Cerebral de Coimbra (APCC) in Portugal and The Municipality of Cervia in Emilia Romagna in Italy.

Despite a considerable investment of resources, there have been relatively little change in the situation of families experiencing multiple and complex difficulties. Professionals from a wide range of services (social work / child welfare, mental health, education etc.) often intervenes simultaneously addressing individual problems through their different specialisms with limited coordination and the families themselves often feel disempowered and inadequately consulted over their difficulties and how they should be addressed.

For multi-challenged families, our organization and ways of doing things are often part of the problem they have to deal with. There is a need for a more holistic approach capable of prioritising issues and effecting real change.

The overall aim of the project was to develop new skills, competencies, training products and methodologies to enable social workers and other professionals to innovate and adopt more effective interventions in working with families experiencing multiple and complex difficulties.



Important starting points for the LIFE Erasmus Plus project

During the first phase of the LIFE Erasmus Plus project, the partners carried out a baseline study/needs analysis exercise to bring together the existing relevant experience and research, to analyze existing practice and professional training relevant to work with the target group and to identify gaps in provision. The overall purpose of the study was to provide a sound basis for joint development work on the projects' main intellectual outputs/products.

The baseline study reviewed existing professional training provision relating to work with multi-challenged families in the partner countries. It concluded that there were few directly relevant programmes and gaps in existing programmes included:

- Too much emphasis on intra family relationships and too little on inequality and marginalisation.
- Thinking underpinning interventions fails to recognise the complexity of issues faced by practitioners.
- Professional education is too specialised and discourages holistic and multi-disciplinary approaches.
- There is insufficient focus on practical work.

The main challenges facing services and practitioners working with multi challenged families include:

- A lack of professional focus on multi challenged families and competencies in working with them.
- Individual support services are over specialised and coordination between them is inadequate.
- Management and organisational structures can obstruct inter agency multi-disciplinary working.
- There is a need for a more holistic approach including inter agency case managers.
- There is a need for greater emphasis on families' perceptions of their situations and co creation of solutions.

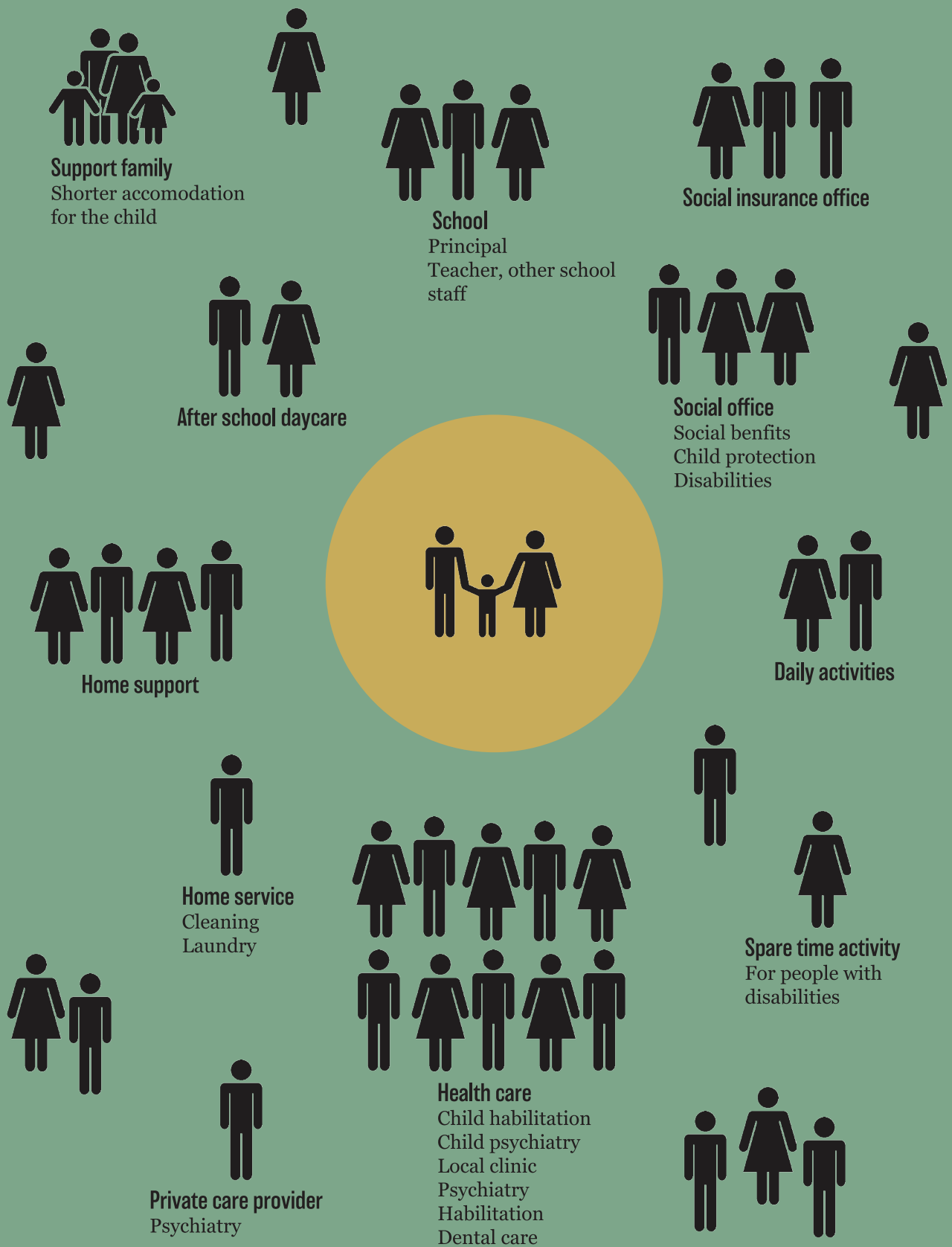
Defining multi-challenged families (MCF)

Common characteristics and challenges facing multi-challenged families:

- Parents are often unemployed or in insecure part time work.
- Many are one parent families, usually single mothers
- Low incomes.
- Parents traumatised by abuse suffered as children or maltreatment with partners in early adulthood.
- Strained relations between parents.
- Low educational levels.
- Poor health.
- Substance abuse / alcohol problems.
- Poor social networks.

Families with 4 or 5 of these characteristics can be defined as multi-challenged although they may have a wide range of differing needs.

This research provides the background and context for the development of the Competency Framework to learning to innovate with multi-challenged families.



A Swedish example of how many professional contacts a multichallenged family can have.

Competency Framework to learning to innovate with families

The main content of the framework was identified through research carried out separately and collaboratively by the project partners which resulted in a baseline study which identified some of the common characteristics of and problems faced by multi challenged families in the partner countries, existing professional practice and professional training for social workers and related professionals working with the families, and perceived gaps in existing education and training provision and content.

The LIFE Erasmus Plus project want to develop innovation skills. Innovation skills are practically the types of skills that allow individuals to become innovative in what they do. These are usually a combination of cognitive skills, behavioral skills, functional skills and technical skills. Based on the conclusions from the research the key element of the Competency Framework should include:

- The understanding and skills required to implement a holistic approach to working with the family in which the totality of issues and problems facing them are considered, analysed and continually reviewed.
- The capacity to identify areas with the potential for change in the family situation and to prioritise interventions accordingly.
- Understanding innovation in social work in a family environment.
- Co creation of solutions with the family, valuing their perceptions.
- The ability to work in a multi-disciplinary environment and address the fragmented nature of multiple professional interventions.
- Case management skills, including the ability to jointly assess and plan interventions with professionals from other disciplines and manage the implementation of these interventions.
- Generic and functional skills and competencies including reflection on theory and practice, problem solving, team work and communication.

To develop innovation skills, we have to be prepared to redefine tasks so that they relate better to a family's needs, and we have to be critical about the assumptions built into prevailing practices that do not help us to deal with the needs and difficulties a family experiences. This may require reframing, that is revising the assumptions involved in assessing the problems that affect a family and the ways in which we set out to help them.

This might include a shift from specialized social services, where every problem requires its specific contribution and where the mission is clearly defined, to a generalist role that provide support and treatment with width and a system theoretical perspective that focus more on prevention and interact with all relevant partners and the family. A generalist should also be able to judge when there is a need for specialized treatment and be able to motivate and direct on to the current instance.

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The Knowledge Triangle - the interaction between practice, training and research

The interaction between practice based knowledge, knowledge in training and education, and research-based knowledge - the knowledge triangle - is a fundamental issue in the LIFE Erasmus Plus project.

Practitioners in services face challenges in assimilating, analyzing and applying their own practice knowledge as well as knowledge based on research. This can be a barrier to innovation, the more so because practice-based knowledge and research-based knowledge must be seen as different forms of knowledge.

Practice-based knowledge develops in the context of a particular workplace and is usually shared between those who work there. It is situated knowledge that often enough is not fully articulated and not shared with outsiders, but it shapes the workplace and the perceptions and preferences of those who work there nonetheless. Workplaces that function entirely on the basis of practice-based knowledge will risk becoming resistant to change and will operate within the comfort zone of their practitioners.

Research-based knowledge is developed using universal criteria for validity and is often assumed to be applicable in many settings or even in any setting, but such knowledge is, as experience tells us, not always readily adaptable to a particular setting. Applying research-based knowledge in a service setting and achieving a proper balance between practitioners' experience and research-based knowledge takes time and requires respect for the culture of the workplace. The point is that some kind of balance between practice-based and research-based knowledge has to be sought.

On the other hand we need to be able to develop ways of training practitioners that are responsive to the needs and experiences of service users. Practitioners must be able to reflect upon their work with users of services in order to find improved ways of working. An important idea in the LIFE Erasmus Plus project is that trainees will benefit from open-ended reflection about their clients, their work and

their workplace. This is especially important in a situation in which we want to develop innovation skills. If information provided by clients can be deployed and used in training, so much the better.

A central premise in the project is that multi-challenged families make severe demands upon professional helping services. The second premise is that there is no definitive approach or method that will reliably help all families. The point of the Knowledge Triangle is to emphasise that research and everyday practice provide us with the information that we need to innovate and improve services. The point of training is to help professionals assemble and use this information.

The Innovation Skills Development Programme is to be based on abductive reasoning and learning. The simplest way of explaining abductive reasoning and learning is that inference from observation and experience is an essential step in developing new ideas and hypotheses, without undue reliance upon or reference to prevailing doctrines and theories. Inference in this connection means a summarization and weighing of observation and experience to find likely or plausible explanations for a phenomenon or problem.

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Innovation Skills Development Programme - Pilot

27 practitioners from all partner countries took part in the 12 month pilot programme carried out to test the relevance of the first intellectual outputs; the Competency Framework and the Knowledge Triangle. The focus in the LIFE Erasmus Plus project is upon low-level innovations that will improve help for families, good ideas that can be realized using available resources.

Innovation requires actual changes in practice, primarily designed to provide better, more appropriate help for families. Practice is complex, and heavily influenced by a whole series of pressures, and takes place within an arena in which practitioners have to make judgments and decisions in a constant flux. The innovation training program sets out to provide participants with a "free space" within which they can discuss and develop practical approaches to problems that they encounter in their everyday practice with multi-challenged families.

The training program includes both transnational and national components. There are many similarities in the national training programmes but also some differences and this flexible structure means that the programme will be readily transferable throughout the EU. A key feature is that practitioners participating in the programme need to be actively working with multi-challenged families, and to develop innovative approaches during the course of the programme.

Summary of main components in the national training programmes:

- Local curriculum, aims/goals. Develop skills for innovation, acquire tools and methodologies able to support work with MCF.
- Content/themes. Learning and innovations in working life, co-creation, case management, communication, reframing.
- Course design. Lectures, group exercises, discussion, reflection.
- Participation of teachers, facilitators and supervisors. Support from project team, stakeholders, researchers.

Structure and content of the training programme

The programme includes both transnational (2 weeks) and national components, representing an average 160 hours, and consists of:

- An introduction to innovation theory and practice (learning, learning organizations, knowledge production, expertise and reflection, the relation between scientific/knowledge based structuring and reflection, social workers background and competence lifeworld, citizens voice and monitoring practices).
- Reflection by individual learners and groups of learners.
- Individual work with practice-based innovations in their own context.
- A written presentation from each participant/ country group describing the individual learning process and developed innovations.

- Different approach; half-day meetings or fewer but longer sessions.
- Instructions and tasks for participants. Homework after meetings, critical reflection on practices, analysis of situations, resources and needs of MCF.
- Learning materials and tools. Articles, power point presentations, evaluation tools, template report.
- Abductive learning and work with micro innovations. Encourage contact and dialogue with users, understanding of complex systems, analysis of factors for change.
- Feedback to participants regarding tasks and individual templates. Support from project team, discussions with researchers and participants, written feedback on texts/ templates.

”Not to have preconceived notions about what problems the family has or what help is needed.”

Practise-Based Innovations from the pilot

The training programme pilot resulted in a rich and varied range of practice based innovations undertaken by participants.

Innovation in relation to the client/family level

- To consider the family as a whole.
- Focusing on relationships in the family.
- Not to have preconceived notions about what problems the family has or what help is needed.
- The ambition to involve families in solutions and to strive to empower families.
- Dialogue and involving clients in the planning of support and help.
- To use different tools, such as assessment tools.
- Strengthening the family's network and reducing the number of contacts with professionals.

Innovation in relation to the role of social worker

- To embrace a learning perspective.
- To have an open mind, to be critical and creative, and to think outside the box.
- To test new ways to work specifically in the family context.
- Involve the professional system.
- To know and be able to apply theoretical perspectives to social work.

Innovation in relation to the group/team level

- To work with multidisciplinary/-professional teams around the families.
- To have a dialogue with colleagues about the work with the families and to share experiences.
- To reflect on support and implementation and being able to work with common instruments for assessment.

Recommendations for transnational training programmes

Recommendations for organizers of transnational training programme for social workers working with families facing multiple challenges:

- Programme must be based on a survey of participants' needs, done before the beginning of the training.
- Programme must include topics about specifics of social work with families facing multiple challenges, innovations in social work, use of knowledge in practice and knowledge production.
- The structure of the programme must follow the guidelines of knowledge triangle.
- Enough time in the programme for discussions in (multicultural) groups.
- Consider the language barriers at the international weeks and find way to enable all to participate.
- It is crucial for trainers who will lead national trainings and continuously support social workers during one year of national training to participate at the international weeks.
- National trainings should have broad common frame for all countries, but enough possibilities to adjust the programme to national needs.
- Continuous support for social workers included in the programme during national training is needed.
- It is crucial to regularly evaluate the training and adjust the programme based on the evaluation results.



The Innovation Toolkit - guidelines for social workers and managers

The Innovation Toolkit is designed to be a practical set of tools to assist service managers and social workers/practitioners seeking to implement innovation in work with multi-challenged families. The rationale for the toolkit is that practitioners are currently not taught innovation practice in their basic training and are often subjected to top down change strategies designed to enhance managerial control, and ration services rather than to improve practice in work with families. The toolkit summarises promoting and impeding factors in working with practice based innovations based on the experience of the LIFE Pilot Programme.

To unlock the potential of innovations results it is necessary to set-up an innovation friendly environment inside structures: supporting relevant and appropriate resources fitting to different stages of the innovation process, fostering new (organizational) capabilities and overcoming process and system related constraints.

Multi-challenged families provided knowledge throughout the innovation process in form of dialogues, feedback, testing and experimentation and suggestions for further improvement. These findings correspond with the observation that

those families have a substantial role in innovation processes that goes beyond the mere utilization of the solution provided by others. Moreover, it suggests that micro-innovation initiatives rely on users' specific knowledge and feedback to meet their needs properly. This is further substantiated by the involvement of multi-challenged families as solution providers, and clients as co-creators.

One of the inputs of the LIFE Erasmus Plus project was to underline that micro-innovations can complement organizational innovation at upstream level to achieve systemic, long-lasting changes in social work and families. When families instigate change themselves and develop the innovation pathways, it is more likely to be successful and endure. One of the central messages of these micro-innovations of LIFE is that they are the opposite of quick-fix solutions. The lifecycle of innovation (processes of emergence, stabilisation and scaling up) are very conditional and are not available simply at the press of a button.

Promoting factors for practice-based innovation Impeding factors for practice-based innovation

<p>Professional level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal engagement and motivation of social workers (SW), openness for learning, orientation for co-creative ways of collaborating with families. • Promotion of a culture of innovation. • Availability of adequate time. • Construction of a less formal setting that favors more dialogue and listening. • Availability of tools to give voice to clients. • Thematic areas to be explored during interviews/dialog. • To develop a more in-depth knowledge of the family situation. • To agree with the family on tasks and responsibilities. • To support the relationship among services and families. • To have a shared guide among operators for the assessment of the situation. • Possibility for the tools to be used by different operators (e.g. social worker, educator, psychologist, health care). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low professional self-confidence of SW. • SW are overburdened. • The need to intervene in emergency situations. • SWs do not record meetings with families in a proper way. • The Knowledge Triangle is not properly powered and supported.
<p>Organizational and Structural level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A culture of innovation. • Support from management to SWs. • Regular meetings where SWs could reflect on the processes of collaboration with families. • Feedback to SWs on the innovation process. • Structure of meetings. • Cross-sectorial collaboration and networking, exchange of ideas and triggering of collaboration potentials. • Support structures such as continuous training and workshops. • A good network of institutional and private partners, opportunities for exchange and dissemination of practices. • Clear goals and structure of the program. • Linking innovations to national guidelines. • Interim and final evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucracy. • Standards, norms and routines that hinder innovation. • Management does not support innovation. • Split up of social work, e.g. child interviews is prohibited for SWs. • SWs and other professionals use different approaches when collaborating with families (co-creative vs. authoritarian approach). This place only the single person at the center of the project and not the whole family. • Other organizations, in particular in the healthcare field, often has objectives that are different from the Social Services'. • Reorganization which bring more pressure and more procedural work within for SWs.
<p>Transnational development program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction of tools and methodologies that were useful in order to integrate with families. • Use protocols of collaboration. • Collaboration for guidance of the process and to sustain interaction. • Support to management to create a culture of innovation. • Guidance of theories and critical discussions. • To involve the stakeholders from the beginning of the project. • Stakeholders and management can reduce organizational obstacles, make sure that participants have sufficient time and resources, help in building networks and link different professions and sectors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear idea on the international level about what to implement on national level. • A clearer common structure and model is needed for implementing the international program. • To involve stakeholders and management in planning and developing new practices and structural changes you have to have support in research and how the new way of working is better from others and what financial consequences it will bring. • Stakeholders and management need to understand the aims, design and theoretical starting points for the project and to be able to support the participants and the national project team.

Recommendations for innovation in social work with multi-challenged families

To organise for innovations and development

- Involve management and stakeholders from the start of the project.
- Stakeholders and management can reduce organizational obstacles, make sure that participants have sufficient time and resources, help in building networks and link to different professions and sectors.
- If possible link innovations to national guidelines.
- Create a network of partners for exchange and dissemination.
- Organize cross-sectorial collaboration and networking, exchange of ideas and triggering of collaboration potentials.
- Map and describe other activities or organizations who are involved in the intervention system for multi-challenged families. Consider that other organisations often has objectives that differ from the social services’.
- Map "bureaucratic" obstacles and factors that hinder the development and testing of innovations.
- Create a culture of innovation.
- Have a long-term perspective on implementation of innovations so that good results are utilized after the project.
- Design management support for development and testing of innovations.
- Design support also for managers of the project.
- Support continuous learning and reflection i.e. in training programs, workshops, seminars, web-based platforms etc.
- Adoption of a case management approach with management responsibility being devolved to case managers.
- Creation of a multi-disciplinary approach in which individual professionals work together under the direction of the case manager.
- Creation of space and time within caseloads for professionals concerned to intervene effectively and intensively with the families.

Interaction between research, practice and education

- Share research-based knowledge of multi-challenged families’ needs and living conditions and social interventions aimed at the target group.
- Relate the research-based knowledge to local conditions regarding: a) existing practice, b) practice based knowledge and c) knowledge in training and education. Are there specific conditions in your context that you must take into account?
- Use the conclusions from above as a starting point in your Training program. Analyze how you work with multi-challenged families at present and why. What are the gaps between the current situation and a desirable state? Which innovations is needed to fill the gaps?

To develop and implement training/education programs

- Formulate clear goals, specify content and themes for the training program and anchor it at all levels of the organization.
- Organize management and design of the program so that it is optimal for the local context.
- Select a group of social workers with high motivation and relevant experiences.
- Free up time for management and social workers’ to participate in the program.
- Organize theoretical input and tools for assessment and follow-up of innovations.
- Design course activities so that there is a good balance between lectures, group work, exercises, reflection, collection of information, analysis, formulating and testing of innovations.
- Organize instructions and tasks for participants, learning materials and tools.
- Create a local project team of teachers, facilitators and supervisors.
- Organize for interim and final evaluation of the program.

Epilogue

The LIFE Erasmus Plus project set out to foster close and productive relationships between practitioners, educators and researchers. This knowledge triangle was seen as a prerequisite for work on innovation. The LIFE Erasmus Plus project was research-based, this conferred considerable advantages, and most of the partners had already viable structures and relations that helped to bring about close and productive interaction. Where there were difficulties, these were satisfactorily dealt with. But a consensus in the project was that the difficulties families encounter often have to do with professional perceptions and practices, and are to be seen as generic rather than national or local.

A lesson to be drawn from the LIFE Erasmus Plus project is that there is no standard solution to the difficulties encountered in working with multi-challenged families. The problem of how to learn from practice was fundamental in the project. A key to this learning is the knowledge triangle. Social workers, social work educators and researchers must work together, and strive to interact. However, we would do well to avoid a naïve understanding in which it is assumed that research findings can be "translated" into effective service, falling into the trap of what has been called neopositivism.

Practice knowledge is always situated. It belongs to those who occupy the workplace and is very often not shared with those who do not belong. It is impossible to envisage workplaces subject to pressure, dealing with conflicted and essentially contested issues, that do not develop this type of situated, internal knowledge system. In contrast research-based knowledge is acquired by using methods that have universal validity, and this is its strength and its weakness. Sound criteria exist for judging the validity of research findings. There are rules. But applying research findings to practical contexts is a matter of skill rather than science, since we have to interface with the workplace and its knowledge forms. This understanding of the complex relationship between practice knowledge and scientific knowledge has been basic to the project. Changing practice requires getting to grips with the situated knowledge of the workplace. For this reason alone, the abductive learning principles that the LIFE Erasmus Plus project adopted have to be seen as essential. There can be no innovation without change at the workplace.

**”There can be no innovation
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The LIFE Erasmus Plus project was carried out between 2016 and 2019. The Research and Development Centre in the Municipality of Linköping in Sweden was lead partner. The Research and Development Centre, which is a collaboration of 9 municipalities in the Region of Östergötland and Linköping University, has close working relations with a network of public and private providers of care, social services and social work within the region as well as with the national R&D Centres in Sweden.

The other 4 partners in the project were:

The Centre for Child Welfare Research and Innovation at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, Norway.

The Faculty of Social work at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia whose joint research with NTNU – Helping families in the Community, the Co Creation of desired Changes for Reducing Social Exclusion and Strengthening Health – contributed to the development of the project concept.

The Associação de Paralisa Cerebral de Coimbra (APCC) in Portugal, which was identified as a suitable partner through its experience of developing innovative approaches to supporting people with disabilities and their families.

The Municipality of Cervia in Emilia Romagna in Italy who have developed innovative community based approaches to supporting families with complex difficulties.

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