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Social Services Cooperating with Schools to Enable Community: The Case of two Territories of Southern Italy

Marco Ius 

LabRIEF – Lab of Research and Intervention in Family Education, Department FISPPA – Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Padova, Italy

ABSTRACT

The Program of Intervention for Prevention of Institutionalization (P.I.P.P.I.) is a programme that integrates research, training, and intervention in working with families living in vulnerable situations. It is funded by the Italian Ministry of Welfare and, since 2011, has cumulatively involved roughly 8000 professionals from Social and Health Services and Schools, as well as 4000 children and their families in more than 200 territories across Italy. P.I.P.P.I. focuses on supporting children and families through multi-professional, holistic, and resilience-based interventions, in order to reduce child neglect. Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development and its definition of neglect are the rationale for the programme, and discussing the theories on community and community capacity linked with resilience theory, this paper reflects on enabling community as an approach to alleviating social disadvantage and promoting child, family, and community wellbeing and resilience. The cases of two territories in Southern Italy will be presented and reviewed in order to illustrate how the service-school-family relationship was promoted within a resilience community approach. Using information from meetings, focus-groups with professionals, and document reviews, programme implementation will be presented and discussed to explore how the governance of social services and school-based service providers make decisions and organize activities to facilitate participation by children, parents, teachers, and social professionals, enabling more community development. Implications for practice, policy and research are highlighted.

KEYWORDS

Resilience; school; community; governance; holistic approach

Rationale and objectives of the study

Looking at resilience among social ecology, culture, and community

In work that explores vulnerability, particularly around child neglect, resilience research findings present important knowledge that can positively influence the contexts that create adversity (Aranda & Hart, 2015). While vulnerability is underpinned by structural factors, related to social disadvantage and inequality (Milani, 2018), populist notions of resilience tend to focus on individuals and their capacity, reflecting contemporary neoliberal imperatives in many social welfare systems. The implications of such a focus are more

likely to burden those living in challenging contexts and maintain their disadvantage rather than helping alleviate it. An individual focus fails to even recognize, let alone address, the social structures that produce inequality (Dolan, 2008; Hart et al., 2016).

By contrast, the definition of resilience as navigation and negotiation of resources sustaining people's wellbeing in culturally meaningful ways departs from the binomial, adversity-doing ok, understanding of resilience and implicates the social ecology in supporting improved outcomes (Ungar, 2008, 2011). All actors involved, across systems, within the child and family's ecology are bearers of *educability* and are considered reciprocally responsible within the relationships they engage in and promote. Paulo Freire (1970) claimed: "Nobody educates anybody else, nobody educates himself, men and women educate among themselves mediated by the world" (p. 52), emphasizing the ways in which the world mediates relationships. Furthermore, remedying oppression, including child neglect, necessitates the promotion of healthy relationships within the contexts in which oppressions occur and requires that neither children nor parents be considered the sole target, responsible for other actors within the ecology.

Resilience, community, and culture

As introduced above, resilience theory focuses not only on individuals but also on families, communities, and governments. Additionally, it introduces cultural considerations—personal and collective—and the need to activate negotiation processes that allow individuals to access resources available in their context. In this way, the community is seen not only as a social context but also as a change agent. On the one hand, community is a context in which risk and protective factors that can influence the well-being of community members are created and supported or reduced and inhibited. On the other hand, community becomes a change agent when we focus on the extent to which the community itself expresses resilience. Hence, the focus is not on how the context might influence individuals and families, but on how the collective acts and responds to situations of vulnerability and adversity (Chaskin, 2008). The first orientation reflects the classic ecological perspective discussed previously, where people grow and function within systems of more or less direct interactions that influence their well-being and that have an impact on their biographical trajectories. The second points to perspectives of resilience that have been less considered.

Community is theorized as being an "affective unit of belonging and identity", a "functional unit of production and exchange", a "network of relations" (Chaskin, 2008, p. 67) and a unit of collective action (Chaskin, 2013). These components highlight the importance of a sense of belonging and implicate different kinds of relationships and different cultural processes of making and guiding the purpose and the way of being together (support and control, civic engagement, association inside and outside your own local community, political will and action). These community components include bridging processes that allow for a negotiation between cultures (personal culture, the culture of one's own community of origin and/or belonging, the culture of the extended context of life, within which the culture of services is present). Micro and macro cultures permeate the different processes of resilience, and through socially constructed and shared ways of being and doing, they promote bonding and offer a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for everyday life (Theron & Liebenberg, 2015; Ungar, 2015). These observations are consistent with the personalistic approach of Mounier (1935) who views people as part of a

human community, emphasizing the importance of communication between human beings to establish community as a place where members can find themselves and realize their potential (1936). Such social contexts allow for authentic political and social engagement, by assuming an approach that is simultaneously oriented towards individual and community wealth (Rendtorff, 2014).

The interaction of cultural, human, and social capital, together with organizational and leadership skills and available resources, is what builds community capacity and its ability to effectively support its members (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). Four aspects are required in community capacity: meaning (the sense of community referring to “connectedness among members and the recognition of mutual circumstances”), commitment (the responsibility to act as a stakeholder and the willingness to participate as a stakeholder), problem solving (when actions are taken and have an impact), and access to resources (economic, human, physical, and political within and beyond the community) (Chaskin et al., 2001, pp. 14–16). The strategies to build community capacity include the development of leadership and organization, the organization of community itself, and the support of collaborative relations among the organization operating within the community (Chaskin, 2001).

Operationalizing community involves three core components. The first two, *organizing* and *empowerment*, are described as processes referring respectively to the ability of communities to reach collective goals (by problem solving, mobilizing resources, implement strategies) and to act to change social and political context to improve equity and quality of life. The third, *building*, is more an attitude or an orientation that invites everybody to contribute *for*, *with*, and *within* the community (Doyle, Ward, & Early, 2018; Wallerstein, Minkler, Carter-Edwards, Avila, & Sánchez, 2015).

The theoretical elements of community and resilience provide services with an interesting basis from which to reflect on and improve the governance and management of family support. These theories suggest new actions and new skills with which to engage people in relationship with the care system and to enhance their participation within the various niches of social ecology.

Objectives of the study

This paper aims at presenting and reflecting on the cases of the two selected territories working with the programme P.I.P.P.I. within the framework of community enabling and resilience that are outlined as theoretical premises. The goal is to show and discuss examples of the integration of social services and schools, as key actors in promoting community, and to identify future research to further P.I.P.P.I. in terms of co-development, co-research, and co-learning among universities, professionals, and families.

The P.I.P.P.I. programme

P.I.P.P.I. is a research-training-intervention programme that was developed as an intensive means of addressing child neglect in families living in vulnerable situations. P.I.P.P.I. has been run since 2011 by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, in cooperation with the Laboratory of Research and Intervention in Family Education (LabRIEF), at the University of Padua. Regional and Local welfare services across Italy also act as partners that voluntarily applied to participate in the programme.

Aimed at promoting children's wellbeing and supporting parents, through a multi-professional and resilience-based intervention, the acronym also references the resilience of Astrid Lindgren's fictional character, Pippi Longstocking. The intent of the programme is to minimize rates of institutionalization—out of home placements—in situations of neglect where alternative interventions are more appropriate (Sellenet, 2007). The programme also responds to social work practice that increases institutional capture due to poor planning, poor or non-existent multiprofessional assessment, lack of intervention evaluation, and/or vague timelines and goals in case management (Lacharité, 2015).

Within the Italian context, national legislation pertaining to social services are regulated, managed, and implemented by the various regions in which they are situated. Consequently, intervention programmes implemented by social service agencies aimed at supporting families and children in vulnerable situations differ across the country and are often fragmented. P.I.P.P.I. is the first national initiative developed to improve continuity in social and health services working with families. Its goal is to harmonize service provision throughout the country, providing professionals with a common theoretical and practice framework. The programme delivers training sessions to professionals, equipping them with the necessary tools to work more effectively with families, document the care path, and evaluate outcomes. Following implementation of its pilot project, which took place in 10 cities (2011–2013), P.I.P.P.I. has been scaled up to include an additional 50 local authorities annually (since 2013). Since 2011, a total of approximately 8000 professionals and 4000 families in more than 200 territories have been involved in the programme.

In brief, the framework underpinning P.I.P.P.I. integrates the two following core components:

- Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) bio-ecology of human development in which ability to promote and sustain children's healthy development and wellbeing requires the engagement of all the people who have a key role within their world.
- Child neglect (CN) (Dubowitz & Poole, 2019), a concept that is more likely to be neglected itself in comparison with other more evident child issues (Dubowitz, 2007). CN requires to consider and integrate multiple co-existing factors (individual, familiar, contextual, economical, ...) in order to be understood and it challenges researchers, professionals and policymakers for its conceptual issues and practical implications despite the fact its impact on child development and mostly on child brain development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012; Stokes & Taylor, 2014). CN is understood in P.I.P.P.I. as a significant deficiency or a failure to respond to the needs of a child, being those needs recognized as fundamental to child development. Additionally, it often stems from challenges in the parent–child relationship, as well as difficulties in the family–community relationship resulting in a sense of isolation for both children and parents within their social context (Dubowitz et al., 2005; Lacharité, Ethier, & Nolin, 2006).

This understanding implicates parents and caregivers, but also communities, which need to offer support to them when their role becomes challenging. Accordingly, to promote what Freire (1970) called “paths of liberation”, family members, professionals, service managers, policymakers, researchers, and so forth, are all expected to interact as

collaborating partners, as part of the same world. Furthermore, service providers are asked to act with and within communities to increase support for families, making public institutions responsible for promoting the development of relationships between families and their communities (Moran, Ghate, & Van der Merwe, 2004).

The Logic model of P.I.P.P.I. considers that an implementation leading to socially significant outcomes requires the integration of three main factors that are Evidence, Context and Process of facilitation (Kitson, Harvey, & McCormack, 1998), which refer to the structure of research, governance and training, respectively.

P.I.P.P.I. is a multidimensional and holistic intervention that allows for a team to be built around the child: the Multidisciplinary Team (MT) that is composed of professionals (including a social worker, professional home carer, psychologist, teacher or educator at early childhood educational centres, and other social or healthcare professionals) and family members. Both families and professionals enter the programme on a voluntary basis. Families undersign an informed consent that declares their personal data are anonymized and giving permission to use them in an aggregated way for research purpose. Professionals use P.I.P.P.I. method as part of their ordinary work with families. MTs co-assess family situations, co-plan the intervention, and co-evaluate it, following a Participative and Transformative Evaluation approach (PTE) (Serbati, 2017; Serbati & Milani, 2013; Serbati, Ius, & Milani, 2016; Vaquero Tiò et al., 2016). In order to respond to the two factors underpinning neglect, four activities are simultaneously available for families: home-care intervention, parents and children's groups, family helpers, and cooperation between schools, families, and other care services. Activity modules are adapted, according to each family situation, and are defined in their respective case management plans that move through four main components (pre-implementation, assessment, intervention, conclusion) over a period of about 18 months.

In conclusion, the actions P.I.P.P.I. promotes and supports help to build four types of collaborative and co-educational relationships (Bouchard, 2002; Jésus, 2004): *intra-team and community* (family-professionals and the community), *inter-professional* (professionals of the MT working with a family), *inter-services* (collaborative service provision by educational services and school, the public sector of social services, child welfare and adult welfare, and other private service providers within a specific territory/municipality contracting to the public system), and *inter-institutional* (ministry, regions, territories, and the university) (Milani, 2018; Milani et al., 2014).

The first two relationships engage with micro and mesosystem relationships, those established between children, parents, professionals, and other people in the community; including people engaged in informal family support activities. These are the system of relationships within which families function, and include sport/art/leisure leaders, teachers and staff of schools or early childhood services (Landry & Garant, 2013; Munn, 2010), and service professionals. These relationships can not to be assumed, or taken as a given, rather, they need to be recognized as a place of growth and change, and therefore of possible intentional intervention planning.

The last two types of relationships refer to meso and exosystem relationships, connecting to the context wherein the programme is implemented (i.e. the institutional, political, professional, cultural on the national, regional and local level) and to the support system. The Territorial Group (TG), composed of representatives of the institutions, oversees the local governance, assuming a politically strategic role that guarantees continuity of

funding and the engagement of professionals. Since 2017, territories that have implemented the programme for two years can enter the Advanced Level (AL) of P.I.P.P.I. and establish the Territorial Laboratory (LabT) (Di Masi, Serbati, & Sità, 2019). LabTs bring professionals together with researchers of the University, in a reflective space where they can self-evaluate service practice to improve the work conducted with children and families. Assuming the orientation reflecting the PTE, the LabT functions at three levels:

- It makes use of qualitative and quantitative research data from previous implementation activities, provided by the scientific group of the university (Santello, Colombini, Ius, & Milani, 2017).
- It organizes meetings with professionals, families, and other actors to discuss emerging findings to define a “research question” that can deepen and/or start an innovative programme path.
- It plans and runs training programmes according to the needs of new professionals.

Learning from practices: the cases of two territories

This section will present and discuss the case of two local territories in Southern Italy, Ariano Irpino, Campania Region, and Francavilla Fontana, Apulia Region. This refers to the factors of context and process facilitation of the logic model and is based on the qualitative data gathered in different contexts and meetings over the implementation of the programme: LabT meetings, focus-groups with professionals, local reports, public presentation and discussion of the programme, documentation by local authorities and by researchers.

Beside knowing directly their implementation path (the author of the paper has overseen the P.I.P.P.I. implementation in macro-territory of Southern Italy since 2011), they were chosen among other territories for the following aspects that allow for a comparative exploration:

- Both of them counts about 100.000 inhabitants and consist of a group of several municipalities where social services are organized in a similar way.
- While they began implementation of P.I.P.P.I. at different times, they are now both being implemented at the advanced level and have experienced P.I.P.P.I. with about 70 families (Ariano I.) and 40 families (Francavilla F.).
- They used P.I.P.P.I. to empower their governance practices allowing social services and schools to make decisions and organize their actions so that community relations developed within and between the ecological systems of children, families, and communities.
- Both of them experienced an intense participation of teachers within the programme.

The experience in Ariano Irpino

After the first experience in P.I.P.P.I., the TG decided to enter the advanced level with the intent of improving cooperation between social services and schools at a communitywide level and to involve teachers working with children involved in the programme.

In the first advanced level activity, the LabT members—all of whom were social service providers—focused on planning and running teacher training for all the 7 school districts

in the municipality. After participating to the LabT meeting with researchers at university that was used for collecting teachers' perspectives, LabT members launched the training for teachers that were attended by 50 teachers belonging to 14 different schools working with children 3–14 years old.

The training was held in schools as an effort to encourage the movement of social services towards schools, and not the more usual movement schools towards social services that happens with school concerns for a child. Three teachers who attended the training, and experienced P.I.P.P.I. working in MT, showed the TG their interest and voluntary availability to be more involved and promote the school and social services cooperation. Once they attended the training of trainers provided by the University, in the following iteration of the programme, the territory had an interdisciplinary group of trainers with the skills to promote the P.I.P.P.I. approach, facilitating the intention of schools and social services to cooperate on a regular basis in fostering child development altogether, not only when facing neglect.

In the second advanced level activity, the LabT invited teachers and professionals to a daily session aimed at group reflection and research on the strengths, challenges, and development areas of their mutual work with children and families. The LabT team, supported by researchers at the University, used a series of small group activities, focus groups, and sociodramatic activities, to explore professional culture and experiences. Participants agreed that social service providers played a key role in promoting the wellbeing of all children, and not only the ones in care, and that this role was supported by working together with schools and in schools. Questions around how to implement this shift, however, arose. Similarly, questions arose around the development of a shared culture to promote and support child development; what sort of shared culture already existed between schools and services, and what further development would look like. Insights that were shared during these group activities and processes included recognition that:

- the passion coming from attending training is often followed by a sense of isolation once one has returned home, and specific and intentional coordination has not been planned and is not supported,
- schools and social services may take a long time to meet and organize shared case management plans, to the detriment of children who risk not been supported, or families who risk being considered passive clients rather than agentic participating actors,
- formal procedures for social service and school collaboration are sometimes too slow and not respectful or attentive to the needs of children and their families, and
- organizing activities for all families would create a deeper culture of child, family, and community development, and that there is a role for schools, services, and citizens to play in facilitating this development. This would foster the participation of everybody and would save time and energy when meeting a family facing a situation of vulnerability.

The experience in Francavilla Fontana

Prior to the advanced sessions, the TG met regularly to create the conditions allowing services to involve the school as an inclusive space in the community. The TG decided to use schools as the setting for programme activities with children and parents. This decision stemmed from the Local Authority Manager who designed a set of territorial actions

not directly requested by the P.I.P.P.I. programme, and included P.I.P.P.I. funding provided by the Ministry and the Region, to promote activities intended for all the children and families in the community, and not only for the ones targeted by the programme.

About 80 teachers working in the schools that were attended by the children involved in P.I.P.P.I. were invited to a training session held in their schools. Here, the basics of the programme were shared, and the relationship between the various institutions and between teachers and social service professionals were fostered. Staff providing home care interventions, were involved in organizing group sessions run in schools with children and parents together in partnership with teachers. These sessions aimed at fostering resilience within a community perspective. The facilitators introduced the topic of resilience by using the Italian version of the children's book "Le petite casserole d'Anatole" (Carrier, 2011), which tells the story of a child who faces many challenges in his community, whose resources and weaknesses are represented by a saucepan, and who is supported by Daisy, the "resilience tutor" (Cyrulnik, 1999). All the activities used this story as a common reference point to frame and promote a sense of belonging, to provide playful and reflective inspiration, to present a social inclusive role model for participants, and to offer a story that everyone could retell and discuss together (Ius, 2012; Ius & Milani, 2011).

Municipal professionals, together with those from the social co-operative and the schools, planned and facilitated three kinds of group meetings. These were:

- *Meetings for children:* During school time, children belonging to the same classroom were involved in play activities aimed at establishing a context that would foster the development of each child and nurture a sense of community and belonging by allowing them to identify their resources and to foster cooperation and mutual support through teamwork. In the first meeting, the story of "Antonino" was presented through a play and then the group reflected on the story and its connection with their own life. The second meeting, called "Antonino Olympics", allowed children to explore what it might be like living with a difficulty and to put themselves in the shoes of others.
- *Meetings for parents:* For these, parents were invited to a meeting organized at school. After a welcome coffee, they were presented with the topic of resilience, also through the story of "Antonino". Together with the facilitator, parents shared their thoughts and personal experiences, also referring to the activities carried out by the children, which they were shown during the meeting. Additionally, facilitators suggested that parents organize a little refreshment for the following meeting with children, allowing them to bond, and meet in a relaxed climate, without the presence of professionals.
- *Meetings for children and parents:* This final activity involved parent-child pairs decorating a pot with symbols of their resources, as well as their difficulties. The activity offered children and parents a space to develop emotional closeness. When parents were unable to attend the session, their children were helped by other parents, promoting the perspective of co-education and solidarity between families. At the end of the meeting, children received a daisy plant to be planted in their own pot and to take care of once they returned home. The meeting was followed by refreshments prepared by parents.

In 2018–2019, 12 meetings for children, 6 for parents and 6 for children-parents together were organized, involving about 180 children and 120 parents overall. The activity is currently being reiterated with a similar number of people involved.

The professionals of a multidimensional team, working with a family in the programme, found out that the mother had attended art school before becoming pregnant and having to stop. They invited her to take part in the planning, organization, and facilitation of the art activity of the child–parent session. The various steps of the intervention were documented through photographs of the different meetings and a summary report. Drawing on this material, a short clip was created to present to the community, and to be used in future training and planning meetings. Finally, the GT held a meeting to present P.I.P.P.I. to other professionals not yet involved. The mother participated, sharing her experience.

I am very happy because I didn't feel that the social service and I were separated, but like a family, ... where one helps the other, everybody shares his/her resources ... and when I was invited to join the facilitation of the art activity I was even happier. It was a great opportunity, because often you are considered only a social service client, or in my case as a mother of 5 kids, a full-time mother and nothing else. On that occasion I showed I'm something more. It was nice! My son was very happy and proud. It made him feel special in a good way. After the meeting, for a week he asked me the story of Antonino as a bedtime story, and he really understood the message. I liked the story very much because it was useful for parents too (...) in the past my son hit another child and therefore children would say "I don't want to play with you" or "my mum told me not to play with you". In P.I.P.P.I., since children and parents worked in group, they were all involved in school, many parents approached me in a different way, I felt they would understand me and did not label me and my children.
(Mother)

The meeting was key to involving more professionals in the next step of the advanced level that started soon after.

Discussion

Despite, the two territories did not develop their actions by intentionally integrating the framework of P.I.P.P.I. on child neglect and resilience with theories referring to community enabling, those theories provide an interesting basis for reflection and planning of future steps.

Experiences from both sites were characterized by the implementation of new practices of governance that meet the four aspects of *community capacity* by developing *leadership* and *collaborative relationship* among organizations (Chaskin, 2001; Chaskin et al., 2001). One key factor was that TG made the decision to allocate and use the economic resources coming from the programme to promote actions that went beyond a single family. Drawing from the subsequent experiences, it became clear that to effectively connect families with their social community, assuming a *community building oriented* social work practice was required in order to foster the *navigation-negotiation* resilient process in families, professionals, and services-schools (Ungar, 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2015). This entailed:

- meeting people (families and professionals) where they live to understand how they experience their social world, and to respond in meaningful ways to their needs in

order to support them in living in their world and accessing, using, and empowering the resources that are available in their environment.

- using resources strategically, to not only improve family contexts but also the community, promoting inclusive and participatory practices and networks so that families can socialize and be supported in the reciprocal relations of the community.

In both territories, the TGs shifted from the prevalent “service centred” approach, in which schools report on children’s situations and refer families to social services, to a “children’s world centred” approach, where services operate in the key places and locations of the children’s world, such as schools. Accordingly, the support system considered school and school staff to be essential actors and promoted cooperation between teachers and social service professionals in working with children and families (micro/mesosystem), and development of their professional *cultural capital* (exo/macrosystem). This includes the theories, skills, and resources that affect individual and community level changes consistent with school, social welfare, and health related goals and objectives (Goodman et al., 1998, p. 258). Since school is where *all* children, teachers, and families naturally interact, within this work, the school community was thus seen as being a unit combining *identity* with *functional* aspects and the primary site of change and support, both for families and professionals (Chaskin, 2008). The proposal to organize meetings, training, and activities at school demonstrated the willingness of social services to facilitate teachers’ engagement, to value their work, and to recognize school as being the children’s site of community.

Additionally, the two territories differ on the way they implemented their similar rationale.

In Ariano Irpino, LabT organized its work plan to collaboratively build, share, and recognize the framework for a social *commitment* focused on prevention, *problem solving*, and making *resources more accessible* and *meaningful* for all the people in the community. The first step was addressed to professionals of social services and schools. They met and discussed their shared culture around child development, reflected on their common practices, evaluated the efficacy of various activities, and from there organized, built, and empowered a sense of collaboration. Accordingly, the result was the creation of a *community of professionals* that enabled them to develop a sense of *belonging* and mutual *identity* amongst themselves, to re-think their *functional* aims in order to resolve misunderstandings and promote effective practice, foster cohesion, and agree on how to involve families in a new way. Having P.I.P.P.I. trainers for both the social services and schools was key to furthering these goals and creating a common framework for interventions with children and their families.

The school activity in Francavilla Fontana focused on all children and families, through the involvement of professionals and teacher. This context was further intended to *building a school community* as a site of belonging and social identity and to *empower* peer tutoring and support, fight adversity and disadvantage, and promote a “whole-school approach” that could offer all students, regardless of their level of risk, an opportunity to improve their well-being, mental health, quality of life and educational achievement (Hart, 2016). Such a project, however, required full-time liaison work between home, school, service providers, and the community. The activity intentionally engaged parents in reflection on their parenting and in spending meaningful and co-productive time with their children and other families, as a chance to *find themselves* and *realize their potential* (Mounier, 1936).

Finally, the involvement of the mother in Francavilla Fontana demonstrates the possibility of professionals to go beyond the boundaries of their own professional ecological systems and engage family members as “colleagues” in interventions. The simple actions of this intervention should be considered in terms of how they opened up an umbrella of opportunities which are theoretically underpinned with *empowerment*, *meaning/commitment*, and community as a *unit of production* and *network of relationships*. The mother had the chance to be with her child in a community context where she could be of service to the group, and her skills and her family were appreciated in a new way. Professionals and the mother experienced the reverse of the helpee-helper relationship and crossed the borders of formal-informal settings, and so they increased their role repertoire (Moreno, 1943; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). Professionals improved their ability to assess people’s resources, recognizing their value and leveraging them within a process of empowerment (Lee, 2001), and using them within and for the care path (Milani, Ius, Zanon, & Sità, 2016). The community challenged conventional understandings of social services through simple everyday actions such as “mum and social worker having a coffee” before the beginning of the session, in a context where people know who they are and in which the professional is not there “for a mother in need”, rather, they are “together for” facilitating meetings at school. Participants knew that everybody can contribute because they see “somebody like me” being recognized as a resource. Similarly, using informal moments, such as coffee breaks, new social networks were created. This aspect links to the practice of “generative welfare” (Fondazione E. Zancan, 2014), the goal of which is both the promotion of people’s wellbeing and the promotion of people who can generate resources.

Conclusions and implications

Reflection on the activities in two P.I.P.P.I. implementation sites suggests the ways in which governance and service implementation can be used to not only support families facing challenges but also enable community development. These two examples demonstrate the value of expanding the focus of child and family services’ work to include the community level. Social services, schools, and groups of parents and children are all promising sites in the consideration of what collective body of stakeholders creates a community.

The theoretical framework, particularly of community building and community capacity, interwoven with resilience theory, along with the discussion of the two experiences, raise suggestions and implications for further practice, policy, and research. From the practice perspective, which is strongly connected to the policies underpinning it, the work conducted within P.I.P.P.I. highlights how community capacity and resilience can be built and promoted, drawing on the system of the ecology that exists within and between members. By virtue of their role, social service professionals and school staff are in a strong position to help families identify and then make use of available resources, to the advantage of both families themselves and the community as a whole. This approach, however, also raises the questions of how best to support professionals in their assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation tasks, ensuring that each of these components integrates community development activities in informal settings in case management plans. For professional development, ways of ensuring that activities,

such as training, supervision, and mentoring, can enhance service provider attitudes towards the community and community development are central to helping them consider and work with informal resources as a key support to families. In this way, professionals will be better able to empower service users as “community builders” while receiving support services themselves. Such an approach necessitates collaboration, where partnerships with all actors within a particular social environment can be fostered, promoting dialogue to “co-ordinate, facilitate and service the processes of collaboration between a diverse set of interests and agencies” (Williams, 2013, p. 19). Consequently, services requires an “agile, creative, and enabling leadership” (Pinkerton, Dolan, & Canavan, 2016, p. 60) and the ability to consider community from a management perspective allocating resources according to community needs (Alford, 2010).

From the research perspective, community enabling practices deserve a specific implementation and evaluation plan that takes place over time. LabT has adopted this approach with a view to deepening the understanding of community enablement from a multidisciplinary perspective (VanderPlaat, 2016). According to the PTE method, participation of all actors should be facilitated and constantly increased. Involving children and parents in such ways that their voices and agency are aligned with those of professionals, researchers, and policymakers, is necessary to establish authentic understandings of needs and interventions, and to establish new ways of informing service practice, organizations, and the policies that support children, parents, and family through a community enabling approach.

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Notes on contributor

Marco Ius PhD, Assistant Professor in Education, LabRIEF – Lab of Research and Intervention in Family Education, Department FISPPA – Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Padova, Italy.

ORCID

Marco Ius  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8709-4171>

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