



**THE VOICE OF ADVERSITY  
BECAME PUBLIC THROUGH CLOSING EVENTS  
IN THE FIVE PILOT DISTRICTS**



## THE PROJECT

### **Analytical perspective**

Can the voice of those who are vulnerable be captured so as to improve the community awareness of childcare practitioners and, over time, draw attention to issues that have regional or national significance?

*We have devised and tested a user-friendly tool and, having seen the emergence of themes and patterns. We believe it shows promise. Practitioners and government agencies have responded favourably.*

### **Professional awareness**

Can listening to the personal stories of their clients impact meaningfully on the awareness of child-and-family service providers and lead to adjustment of work practices?

*We think that we have shown that this can happen. Professionals tell us they've changed.*

### **Personal wellbeing**

Can sharing stories in safe and secure settings contribute to the wellbeing of the storytellers?

*We believe that we have shown convincingly that it can. Storytellers feel part of something bigger than themselves. They are acknowledged, heard and they feel that they belong.*

### **Empowerment**

Does storytelling lead to a transformation in storytellers in terms of awareness of shared capability?

*We witnessed the creation of group narratives and the desire to make something happen.*

## THE ROADSHOW

### Itinerary

Date	Location	Venue
27 <sup>th</sup> June	Plovdiv	Plovdiv Cultural Institute
28 <sup>th</sup> June	Sofia	The Place – art cafe
29 <sup>th</sup> June	Vidin	Centre for social support
1 <sup>st</sup> July	Ruse	Regional History Museum meeting room
4 <sup>th</sup> July	Shumen	Hotel Zamuka garden and seminar room

During each event Galina and David Bisset gave presentations on behalf of Equilibrium but there was a significant amount of improvisation. This was called for, in part, by the nature of the venue but, more particularly but the composition of the audience. For instance, the Shumen event included both senior representatives of municipal and regional bodies and a substantial number of children. During the Sofia event, youngsters with special needs shared the time and experience with people from prominent NGOs and a number of public figures.

At each event, those partner organisations represented in the specific localities shared their experiences from the project as did a number of those who participated in storytelling sessions. Storytellers included mothers, young care-leavers, youngsters whose special needs brought them in contact with child protection / social services and young representatives of Shumen's Roma community.

Presentations from the Equilibrium team covered

1. The power of storytelling: its impact on those who shared their personal stories and those who mentored them (primarily David)
2. The method of analyzing stories using a computer tool designed and tested during the project (Primarily Galina)

We were keen to emphasize the following:

### **1. The information-gathering aspect of the project that yielded insights about social / cultural phenomena and their impact on vulnerable families**

“Response (within society\*) is multidimensional and always situation-and time-specific. The lives that people lead do not follow a systematic structure. Lives fold back, start, get cut off, re-form; growth is recursive. It is false to suggest that building a better future can be organized like, say, building a factory...”

(D.C. Taylor, C.E. Taylor, 'Just and Lasting Change: When Communities Own Their Futures', 2002, John Hopkins University Press)

We wanted a means of analyzing stories that was sufficiently simple to be user-friendly but which minimized the natural human tendency to draw inferences based on the (professional) experience of those using the stories as a source of information about families and communities.

We chose a metric based on the affirmation / violation of social capital on the basis of the fact that Bulgaria's shortcomings in "the strength of personal and social relationships, institutional trust, social norms and civic participation" are highly pronounced (See: <https://www.prosperity.com/globe/bulgaria>)

Additionally, this basis of analysis focuses on the events and interactions described in a story and do not entail an attempt at analysis of the emotional / psychological impact on the storyteller. Our intention was to look for emergent themes and patterns and to test a tool that could be applied to large numbers of stories and could reveal the impact of effluxion of time on a community. How the storyteller was made to feel in the circumstances described is best conveyed directly in the context of self-advocacy or community activism.

The tool was devised in the expectation that significant themes would be identified primarily on the basis of an accumulation of very similar stories pertaining to one or more areas of the storytellers' lives defined as follows:

1 Issue within the family	4 Social welfare	7 Employment / household economy
2 Education (incl. preschool)	5 Social services	8 Transport & mobility
3 Health (including mental health)	6 Accommodation / living conditions	9 Leisure & recreation

While there may be potential for this to happen over an extensive period of time in which many hundreds of stories have been accumulated, it did not really happen in the context of the project.

Why not?

Probably because of

- Breadth of diversity among the various groups of storytellers
- Lack of "critical mass" within any one geographical location or category of participant

These factors contributed to the potential for *haphazard* distribution of stories within our framework.

However, we saw the pervasive and multifaceted effect of two social / cultural factors:

1. Cultural chauvinism and the desire to conceal the blight on the rose petals.

*The needy spoil the picture and can be blamed for doing so.*

2. Rules and regulations created for the sake of having rules and regulations.

*The needy often find compliance difficult. It's difficult to jump through hoops with the weight of the world on your shoulders. However, very little concession is made for diminished capability.*

Our group mentors revealed that the tool was easy to use and our story analysts – Lora and David found the data straightforward to deal with.

Additionally, without too great a level of inference or “creative interpretation” of story summaries, the data did certainly reveal social / cultural phenomena that were *pervasive* – they made their presence felt in multiple situations and affected all age groups (albeit in different ways).

## **2. The transformative effect of storytelling**

We explained the “snowball effect whereby a single personal story can elicit a flurry of stories in response. All the stories are about “me” but as a collection, they are about “us”. Indeed, over time, we noticed a transformation in the language used and the way that storytellers represented themselves. This was prominent during the public events. It was all about US. As David explained to younger listeners, a group containing a bold lion, a clever monkey and a charming cat is a team that can do wonders. (You had to be there.)

Our mentors (drawn from the world of social services) described the impact of their project experience on their professional attitudes and performance. It had provoked reflection and this had solidified into a commitment to save space for storytelling in their engagement with clients.

On this note, we referred to the signal from government that they want improvement in the retrieval and recording of feedback from clients of social services suggests potential for development of a formal environment amenable to storytelling as an information gathering device at the very least.

However, we are aware that whatever mechanisms were used to provide a sense of safety and security to encourage storytelling by clients of social services and to preserve the integrity of their stories, self-advocacy and provision of feedback are two completely different processes. You provide feedback about something specific, the boundaries of which have been defined. Even case studies are often employed to be *representative* of something. The emergence of familial or social issues from personal stories is driven by other factors representing the multidimensionality that Messrs. Taylor refer to.

However, the use of the EQ computer tool could reveal something about that multidimensionality and the changing face of the community they work in.

Our appeal has already elicited a positive response from public bodies. For instance, partners in Shumen have received a number of enquiries and requests from municipal and regional authorities signaling a deep interest.

## KEY POINTS AND THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

**Observation:** In each locality, we see the emergence of potential leaders (the bold lions from David's skit with the Shumen children). Additionally, we have seen the potential for the creation of points of focus – self-representation among youth (including care-leavers); the capacity of Roma communities to enhance their contribution to the ongoing narrative about issues that are sensitive in terms of their culture and position in relation to the majority; mutual support and self-representation within parent groups

**Requirement:** This encourages EQ and partner organisations to sustain our work in the direction of helping build stable platforms for activism in the various localities

**Observation:** In each location, professionals and representatives of government agencies have registered a positive response and this was especially obvious in Shumen.

**Requirement:** We need to explore the potential for molding a local participatory approach to family support in chosen districts and using them as a demonstration model for other districts / senior stakeholders