

## Focus on Good Practice in Flanders:

### The Training of Experts by Experience in Poverty and Social Exclusion by De Link<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, a four-year training programme for certified experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion was established in Flanders. The training is aimed at individuals who have experienced poverty and social exclusion. In this programme, they develop skills and knowledge with the goal of professionally utilising their experiential knowledge. Their individual experience is broadened and made professionally applicable. It is a methodology to engage in dialogue with service providers, services, and policy, as well as with people in poverty. Their experiential knowledge is equal to and complementary to academic and practical knowledge. The expert by experience brings the perspective of people in poverty into the dialogue. As a result, the expert by experience contributes to fundamental poverty reduction, as the individual has learned to advocate for their own rights and to facilitate others to empower for a more just society. The expert by experience acts as a bridge between service providers and service users, introducing them reciprocal to the world of people in poverty and non-poverty.

The training consisted of a one-year preliminary phase and three professional years. It was a part-time programme, which became more intensive during internship periods. The professional training was embedded in the 'Youth and Disability Care' programme of Adult Education Centres and the non-profit organisation deLink, appointed via the poverty decree as responsible for this education, coordinated the programme. The students who had a secondary school diploma and successfully completed the training received a diploma of an expert by experience.

The training content was divided into five blocks: research into one's own poverty experience, communication skills, psychology, society, and knowledge of the tasks and functions of an expert by experience. Gradually, this was supplemented with smaller modules such as Language and ICT, expression, dealing with stress and health, ethics and deontology, poverty in society, and social structures. It was a process-oriented training where theoretical frameworks were always linked to the participants' own experiences. The training was regularly adjusted in consultation to align with the needs and level of the participants. All theoretical subjects were oriented towards the future work setting. How can we use this knowledge as experts by experience? How can we apply it in practice?

The **preliminary phase** was an essential start to the training. People with poverty experience were **supported in processing their experiences**, lowering barriers to learning, and using their experiences as strengths. Personal processes of psychological empowerment were invested in. Three themes were central: reflecting on oneself, **research into social disadvantage**, and life stories. In the '**reflecting on oneself**' component, participants learned from each other, looked at their own lives, analysed their own backgrounds (the multitude, the chaos...). They were confronted with similarities and differences in experiences, gained insight into the external and internal aspects of a life in poverty. This way, they learned to expand their own story with the stories of others and link them to theoretical concepts. Themes that block people's development because they have caused deep wounds were given extra attention: out-of-home placement, experiences with the justice system. In the '**life stories**' module, they were supported in telling their story as they wanted, feeling all the frustration and anger that came with it. Therefore, concepts such as trust and safety were also very important. Participants were asked what meaning they gave to these concepts and what they needed in the training to achieve personal development. They also learned to listen empathetically to the stories of other students and to put their own story on paper. This is the first step to find structure and to share experiences. Training in **communication skills** was a common thread throughout the training: continuous practice in active listening, asking questions, mirroring, testing, dealing with conflicts,

engaging in dialogue. In addition to these process-oriented modules, participants also received some modules on the development of concrete skills, such as basic official language and ICT.

In the years of the **vocational training**, students learned how to functionally use their stories in a work setting, based on the acquired insights and the tools provided to highlight the necessary attention to the internal aspects. How can we use what we have experienced as a strength without falling into our own vulnerabilities? How can we collaborate? How can we turn fear and distrust into strength when we have often felt unheard? The subjects of **communication and psychology** ran as process subjects over several academic years. Themes covered in psychology included contextual and systemic approaches, attachment, developmental psychology. Many mirrors were provided, and extra care was taken. In the module on '**society**', they learned about how poverty is viewed and addressed, and about the various gaps that characterise poverty issues.

In the '**ethics and deontology**' subject, students learned how to work with their life story in their job, how to build a trust relationship with a service provider, and how to use the methodology of experiential expertise. It was important to restore trust and safety in the group process.

In the final year, participants were challenged to apply all they had learned in practice. This way, they were also prepared for the work setting. What if your supervisor or colleague does not understand you, how will you react if the interaction gets stuck. Self-confidence was built. Some students were very quiet in a classroom context but excelled during their internship. For others, the training did not work out. It was also important for people to realise that it was not working. Learning goals were formulated together, and competences were filled in. It was important to name competences and follow the evolution in dialogue.

For the preliminary phase and the professional training, curricula were developed, detailing the learning content and intended skills, so that in this cross-network collaboration project, each educational institution used the same learning objectives and offered the same modules.

A unique aspect of the training was **the intensive tandem work of process supervisors**. In addition to a teacher, there was always an expert by experience involved. These process supervisors guided the participants for four years in their growth towards certified experts by experience. They sought suitable internship placements and supervised them, provided feedback, and evaluated them. They discussed the basic attitude, work and learning points, supervised the subjects of methodological training and project work (the process subjects). The experts by experience was thus involved in internship supervision, intervention, communication, and research into social disadvantage and also assisted in theory and other skills modules. The task was to make the living environment visible, to lower barriers to dialogue, to be a point of contact when students got stuck in vulnerabilities or resistance, to be a bridge between participants and teachers. The assessment was also done in tandem. The experts by experience co-decided on the exam format, the exams were taken together and assessed in consultation.

For teachers who wanted to participate in the training, it was important that they had insight and experience with the target group, that they worked from a well-founded vision on the target group, that they dealt appropriately and participatively with students in vulnerable situations, that they brought content at the level and pace of the participants, gave space and recognition to the stories of students, and were able and willing to connect by also revealing something of themselves. There was always support and coaching for teachers provided by deLink.

Currently, the organisation is facing fundamental changes. A new professional competence profile has been developed for experts by experience in poverty and mental health. In September 2024, a

development committee will start to define the training profile ‘experts by experience in basic work’, which will be organised at the level of adult education. We hope to start this new training in September 2025. Conclusion: Work in progress that is worth to follow.

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<sup>i</sup> Compiled based on a group interview with Nebahat Devici (Expert by Experience), Lina Neeb (Content Coordinator of deLink), and Katleen Heussen (tandempartner of Nebahat, staff member in the Team for Advice and Support involved in coaching and training sessions)

Supplemented with information from section 3: Training - Info Bundle deLink Poverty Reduction, published on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of DeLink, the curricula of the preliminary and vocational training, and from the website <https://www.delink.website/kennis-expertise/essentie-van-methodiek-en-opleiding-ervaringsdeskundigheid/>