

# Transfrontier Exchange for Modelling Good Practices in Social Intervention Based on PAR: The Case of the Sarea Project

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## ABSTRACT

Application of the Participatory Action Research methodology allows a reflective, systematic and critical scientific procedure that aims to study some aspect of the reality, of the problem situation, with the express purpose of transforming and freeing the community. This is the methodological design that the transfrontier project SAREA has selected to create synergies between practitioners from the social action field in Spain and France and search for the best practices to empower social services users. The opportunities for exchange that are created afford the possibility of actors sharing what is being done and how, based on a reflective and collaborative work to mutually learn the good practices presented. In their role as facilitators, the education bodies leading the project will seek to systematize the co-constructed knowledge in the exchange and prompt the emergence of the "good work model" that underpins the practices submitted. The value added of this inter-professional cooperation translates as conceptualization of practices for their transfer at the territorial level as well as joint building of educational projects that provide our students with a background that addresses the reality they will be facing in their future careers in a creative, constructive and collaborative manner.

**Keywords:** Methodological Design; Participatory Action Research Methodology; Qualitative Research Model; Social Work.

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the real, specific community[...] However, starting from the community means (and should actually mean) assuming the community as the key reference point for social intervention[...] community participation must be built to focus on its problems (Marchioni 1988, p. 60).

**P**AR based research methodology not only allows participants to actively collaborate in the diagnostics and identification of good practices that may empower their Social Services users and families. It also generates synergies with extremely positive effects, in the socio-political context as well as the professional and personal spheres: Generating knowledge Contact and exchange between practitioners from both territories boosts acquisition of mutual knowledge and enriches the different professional practices and intervention types. Reflection-based action: At the present time, with the frenetic activity of our daily work, creating permanent networks gives practitioners the opportunity for continuous evaluation of their practice. Modelling good practices The PAR methodology enables co-generation of co constructed knowledge based on reflection and systematization of daily practice. Training: These merging models will be used as teaching resources to train practitioners, students from the social fields to prepare them for professional life, teaching staff, students and host families. Replicability These "good work" models for good practices will be collected and used to create theoretical premises for future dissemination and seek replicability in other contexts and territories to contribute to excellence in social intervention. And finally, Social transformation: Starting from shared and modelled action based on reflection, the intention is to provide services that guarantee the Social Services users' and their families' empowerment in their active role in social care processes. This co-construction working methodology implies social innovation in the Social Services field.

### **THE METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN: CHARACTERISTICS OF PAR**

The field of Social Sciences is currently overcoming the initial prejudice and questions concerning its scientific validity. An increasing amount of research is venturing into understanding realities based on qualitative methodologies. This is bringing about a great change in ontological, epistemological and even ethical aspects for researchers in this field. They are beginning to make use of traditional methodological designs although from novel and flexible perspectives that strictly comply with the rigour required in scientific systematisation.

An appropriate approach to social intervention, based on the Social Sciences, and particularly Social Work, implies a priori detection of a series of needs that could become social problems in future (Coady 2012) and lead to the need to take action to improve, ensure or transform the level of well-being until it is considered adequate.

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Obtaining an accurate social diagnosis is considered key to know the specific response required for intervention. And this is precisely what this methodological proposal based on Participatory Action Research aims to address. Starting from the co-construction of a diagnosis of reality and the existing resources, with the participation of various social agents, the aim is to provide the context of a specific social reality where short and medium term interventions of excellence can be implemented. The term Participatory Action Research is attributed to Kurt Lewin and was first used in 1944. It described a type of research that could link the experimental approach of the Social Sciences with social action programmes that would address the main social problems at that time. Lewin (1946) argued that theoretical advances and social changes could be achieved simultaneously by using this methodological design. Sandín would later add that the ultimate purpose of this research design consisted of "prompting social change, transforming reality and making people aware of their role in this transformation process". (Sandín 2003, p.161)

This methodology also evidences some particular characteristics from the qualitative approach, situating it in epistemological and interpretative reference frameworks. The initial premises are:

- the participants experiencing a problem are the ones most capable of tackling it and finding resources that will provide change.
- behaviour is linked to the natural community setting in which the problem situation is located.
- researchers accompany and guide throughout the process but it is centred on the participants.

The PAR basically consists of four stages although they are not always clearly differentiated as the approach is open, expansive and not pre-designed. For this reason, it allows for flexibility and can be presented as a successive "spiral" of cycles. Lewin (1946) initially worked out the procedure with the so called "action/reflection cycles". From his point of view, action research consisted of analysis, information collection, conceptualisation, planning, execution and evaluation, and these steps would be repeated. An action research process can only be started when there is agreement between the actors that are experiencing the problem situation and the researchers. Karlsen & Larrea (2015) and Guzmán et al. (1994) refer to a cyclical, co-generative model in which the various agents that participate work jointly to define and develop it, specifying the characteristics and development of the problem. Once the research has been agreed, the following steps are followed:

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1. There is a first stage which we could define as pre-research during which some of the problem situation symptoms have been detected or the request for the study has been made Identify external and internal agents by some institution.
2. Define the problem or diagnosis.

When posing the problem situation, in-depth knowledge of its nature must be gained by immersion in the setting to clearly understand what the object of study will be. The existing documentation on the situation must be examined and the people involved must be interviewed. This type of research should engage the community actors and form the PAR group as Mertens states (cited by Hernández-Sampieri et al. 2006, p. 707). These people should be the ones who help to identify the problem situation when information is collected and will be the researchers' information source. Dialogue should be used for decision-making and reflection/action processes and elaboration of the final report should centre on said actors. As per procedures, focalized discussion, observations, participants, forums, workshops, discussion groups, etc. should be shared. (Colmenares 2012) The range of techniques that can be used includes, among others, concept maps, network analysis, cause-effect diagrams, etc.

3. A space for mutual reflection and learning.

Karlsen & Larrea (2015) speak of creating the *agora*, as a space for dialogue where the relational interaction between participants in the study, territorial actors and researchers is created. This is a place for joint reflection and learning that should be adequately set up. Creating this space and selecting the participants or actors are vital steps. They may be organizations and individuals that will take part in the meetings and engage in lively dialogue in a climate of trust. The intervention scheme will be jointly elaborated in these dialogue workshops. This is where the objectives, strategies, actions and resources as well as the time frame will be discussed.

4. Problem-solving through action

This is when the plan is implemented and must be adjusted as changes occur. Decisions are made at this time to see if the problem must be redefined or new hypotheses must be created. There is constant feedback from the participants and the results are evaluated. In this respect, changes are not only seen immediately through tangible and intangible indicators. They can be understood as gradual slow processes that are more difficult to measure but also more valuable as they are manifested in the participating actors' behaviour and thinking (Karlsen & Larrea 2015). Either through use of traditional Social Sciences methods or simply by estimating the effectiveness of the action as per the changes

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achieved, a final report will be drawn up that explains the results observed. Examples may include new attitudes or having re-defined the group's values and objectives.

#### 5. Learning from practice

Feedback on results from the actors leads to a new diagnosis and a new spiral of action/reflection. When collaborating in the process, participants learn to reflect *in* action and *on* action (Schon 1983 cited by Karlsen & Larrea 2015, p. 89). And the process continues in this spiral until it ends.

As we mentioned, PAR is set within interpretative and critical reference frameworks and has been applied for years in social intervention-related disciplines to prompt co-participatory work with communities. It has been, above all, oriented towards promoting participation processes (Marchioni 1988), either in terms of mobilizing human resources or giving the leading role to different groups. In addition to its use in these disciplines, as Fals Borda (1999) indicates, this methodological design has a long history of experimental trials and has been applied from different perspectives like social psychology (Lewin), Marxism (Lukacs), anarchism (Proudhon, Kropotkin), phenomenology (Husserl, Ortega) and liberal theories (Rousseau, Owen, Mill). According to Miguel Martínez (2009, p. 240), Participatory Action Research has manifested two facets throughout history. The sociological facet, developed mainly from works by Lewin (1946), Tax (1958), Kemmis (1988), and Fals Borda (1999) in addition to another which has a stronger focus on education and was inspired by the ideas and practices of Freire (1985), Taba (1962), Elliot (1990) and others.

PAR is characterized by systematic methods in research procedures. It aims to increase group knowledge through a rigorous process that is adapted to the demands of the scientific method. Action research methodology provides the strict standards required by any method that can be considered scientific and backs up the results of the process as true knowledge, respecting the limits that science currently applies to this type of knowledge.

### **APPLICATION OF THE PAR METHODOLOGY IN CO-CONSTRUCTION OF THE DIAGNOSIS IN THE SAREA PROJECT**

The project whose methodology is examined in this paper is called SAREA (meaning "network" in Basque) and has been selected as a competitive project for funding. Said project is POCTEFA (2014-2020) the acronym for the INTERREG VA Programme Spain-France-Andorra. INTERREG-POCTEFA is a European territorial cooperation programme created to promote sustainable development of the frontier territories between the three countries. The Programme co-

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funds transfrontier cooperation projects which are designed and managed by actors on both sides of the Pyrenees and the coastal areas participating in the Programme, focusing on smart, sustainable and inclusive development of the territory. (INTERREG POCTEFA 2018).

Three training centres make up the consortium that leads the SAREA project. One is based in France and two are in Spain, all of which work in different areas and academic levels of SOCIAL INTERVENTION. Etcharry Formation (FR) teaching social educators, Nazaret Formación, teaching social integrators (SP) and the University of Deusto (SP) offering a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and a double Bachelor's degree in Social Education and Social Work. The project originated to address the challenges raised when implementing the new legal frameworks related to Social Services. Along these lines, one of the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy for growth was reducing the number of socially excluded people. The strategy set out a series of emblematic initiatives to achieve this. One was the *Innovation Union* with emphasis on efficient consistent strategies which make it possible to face up to new social challenges that promote empowerment of disadvantaged people in the member countries. At the regional level, based on recognition of "subjective social rights" in the current Social Services Law (2008), the Basque Country needs the know-how to guarantee the good work that will empower the disadvantaged who need require services and benefits. As for France, the 2016 Law on Social Services sets out the need to create innovative practices that empower the disadvantaged and their families in the social scope.

This interest in finding good effective practices, in addition to the training centre representatives' personal relationships and professional aspirations, led to the search for transfrontier technical knowledge with a view to reciprocal learning. This was how the SAREA project originated. It is closely aligned with the objectives for innovation and R+D+I established in its Horizon 2020 programme, which promotes research focused on solving social challenges and projects that work for social advancement and equal growth among Europeans. Perhaps due to the researchers' backgrounds, there was a clear idea of the epistemological principles that the methodology of this project would raise. They rest on the premise of "making science with and for people". Thus, the methodological design focusing on knowledge production to boost autonomy and freedom was chosen (Cifuentes 2011). It also links knowledge and action- Participatory Action Research.

The community that the SAREA project is going to intervene with is formed by the Social Services staff and political authorities in social intervention, particularly the areas for minors in vulnerable situations and the elderly who are in nursing homes. In other words, the groups who are protected by public administrative bodies due to their vulnerability or dependence.

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The participants or actors will be representatives of both public administrative bodies, political authorities and/or technical staff as well as staff from the third sector who work in these areas. The researchers, in this case the consortium formed by the training and research centres, will be “researchers at the practical level” who take on the role of expert counsellors and facilitators of the process (Arrieta et al. 2018). By applying this method, the knowledge generated in the professional exchange groups should revert directly to aforementioned Social Services users. They will become the recipients of new care models that improve professional practice and, ultimately, make the services more effective.

The technical actors who take part voluntarily agree to participate in different workshops/meetings that form a space for interaction, also called the *agora*. On a regular basis and under the supervision of experts in PAR methodologies, they will submit the needs, capacities, resources and intervention types at their centre or service. The intention is to identify effective practices with good results that can be transferred to similar centres or services.

What is intended is to generate an effect at different levels and at different moments.

- In the short term, the impact affects the professionals and technicians who participate in the working groups, where good intervention practices are identified.
- In the medium term, and following the piloting of the intervention model based on these good practices, the participating training centres will include in their curricula these models. Both the students themselves and the professionals who are interested will be trained.
- In the long term, the identification of the weaknesses of the system, the opportunities observed after the exchange of experiences in the working groups, will serve the politicians for the construction of social policies more adjusted to the Actual reality.

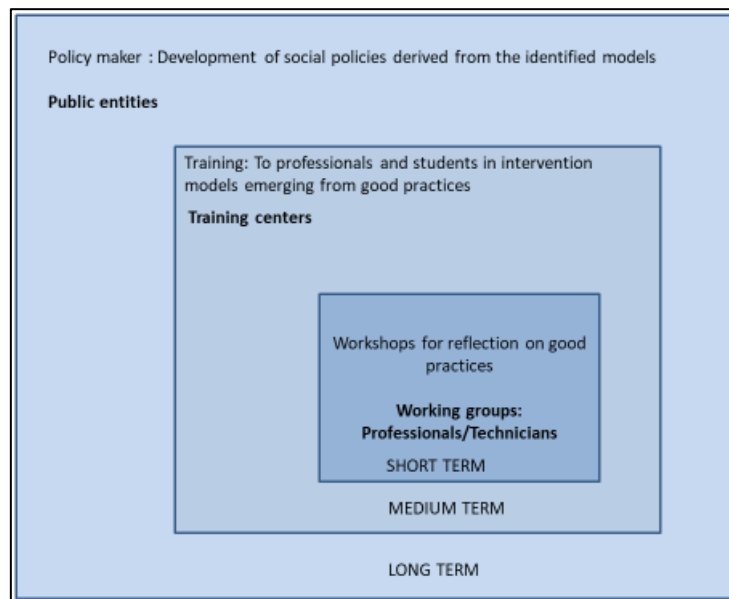
As we can see from next figure (Figure 01), in short, we could say that the knowledge generated from the application of this methodology has a liberating and/or transforming nature, which means that it will be used to change the situation or problem experienced by the Social Services users and which has led to the research. In other words, it should be useful in the short, medium and long term.

### **SAREA WORK PLAN BY ACTIONS AND PROCESS**

Work-for-actions plan is structured in 5 different actions in three years, each with their respective activities and evidence of work done:

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**Figure 01.** Methodological co-generation spaces linked to the search for intervention models based on good cross-border practices



Source: Self-elaboration.

## ACTION 1: MANAGEMENT AND COORDINATION STRUCTURE

A solid structure based on:

- *The Steering Committee* will be the body responsible for the management of the Project. Composed of a representative of each partner entity and led by the manager, its main functions include: Project management and coordination, planning, monitoring and continuous assessment of actions, control of execution, organizational and financial issues, review of reports of execution and financial.
- *Project coordinator.* The particularity of the SAREA project is that in addition to the partnership composed of three implementing partners, there is a large number (17) of associated partners that will participate in the network of professionals that will exchange and jointly develop the models. The figure of the coordinator is therefore key to the coordination and facilitation of the process through constant contact between all partners and associates.

## ACTION 2: COMMUNICATION

Give maximum diffusion to the models and methodologies for their territorial implantation in the territory covered by the project as well as in other territories. Involving public administrations and key agencies in Social Services in the promotion of the empowerment of people and family qualitative



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analysis by users of the devices aimed at their territorial implementation. It is also important to share and increase the knowledge of professionals on child and elderly care practices through the networking of the key actors of social action in both territories (child and foster care centers, institutions for elderly people, training centers and reference universities, administrations and territorial institutions ...), cross-border exchanges and study visits

Train professionals, trainers, students and welcoming families for the territorial implementation of innovative models / practices through the development and experimentation of cross-border training programs and their integration into the current offer

### **ACTION 3: IDENTIFY AND ANALYZE GOOD TERRITORIAL PRACTICES IN ATTENTION TO MINORS AND ELDERLY PERSONS FOR THE TRAINING OF PEOPLE AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF FAMILIES.**

Action 3 is the cornerstone of Sarea where the network of 90 professionals, belonging to the 17 partners, will be constituted, divided into 6 working groups to contribute to the improvement of respective professional practices, of intervention model, likewise ensure that the best interest of the user and their families is respected.

### **ACTION 4: CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PRACTICES, OF MODELS OF ATTENTION TO MINORS AND OLDER PEOPLE AND PILOT EXPERIMENTATION ORIENTED TO ITS TERRITORIAL IMPLEMENTATION**

With the good practices identified, the creation of a theoretical model derived from the systematization of these. The partners will actively contribute to nurturing these models. Subsequently, its dissemination will collect and assess the work, knowledge and actions performed by professionals in their daily work. This will allow generating empirically valid and transferable knowledge to pilot experiences that contribute to social research, generating directly in the acquis of the scientific production of the social sciences and in particular in the disciplines related to social operators. Two EPs will be carried out for 6 months, both in France and in Gipuzkoa.

### **ACTION 5: DEVELOPMENT OF FORMATIVE OFFER FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW PRACTICES AND MODELS**

This action consists in spreading the innovative practices developed in actions 3 and 4 to the professionals, students and their trainers, thus allowing to expand the new models exponentially. The objective is to train professionals, students and trainers in the new intervention models extracted.

This research methodology not only allows participants to actively collaborate in the diagnostics and identification of good practices that may empower their Social Services users and

families Bergold & Thomas (2012). It also generates synergies (Max-Neef 1993) with extremely positive effects, in the socio-political context as well as the professional and personal spheres.

- 1. Generate knowledge** Contact and exchange between practitioners from both territories boosts acquisition of mutual knowledge and enriches the different professional practices and intervention types. Thus, the aim is to provide better care and more efficient services. Self-awareness and self-knowledge prompt closer ties between colleagues and the opportunity to work on other projects, processes or programmes in future. The SAREA groups also include representatives from the areas of child protection and the dependent elderly in Gipuzkoa and the French Basque Country at the political and technical staff level. These are child care and foster centres, institutions that care for the elderly, training centres and prestigious universities, territorial public administrative bodies and institutions. The transfrontier exchange sessions are held alternately at Spanish and French centres where the host receives the group, prepares the dynamics for the meeting and prepares study visits to the centre.
- 2. Reflection-based action:** At the present time, with the frenetic activity of our daily work, creating permanent networks gives practitioners the opportunity for continuous evaluation of their practice. The mere fact of leaving one's work routine and partaking in working groups in the *agoras* has a direct impact on daily actions. Sharing information on one's practice with other professionals boosts pedagogic supervision of interventions, which causes almost immediate changes in the actions, making them the cause and result of shared reflection.
- 3. Modelling good practices** The PAR methodology enables co-generation of co-constructed knowledge based on reflection and systematisation of daily practice. In this case, the representatives of the training organisations act as facilitators, extracting the underlying model of good practices from the shared discourses.
- 4. Training:** These emerging models will be used as teaching resources to train practitioners, students from the social fields to prepare them for professional life, teaching staff, students and host families. This will prompt development and experiences in transfrontier training programmes and their inclusion in the studies currently offered.

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5. **Replicability** These "good work" models for good practices will be collected and used to create theoretical premises for future dissemination and seek replicability in other contexts and territories to contribute to excellence in social intervention.
6. **Social transformation:** Starting from shared and modelled action based on reflection, the intention is to provide services that guarantee the Social Services users' and their families' empowerment in their active role in social care processes. This co construction working methodology implies social innovation in the Social Services field.

In summary, we see that PAR is different from any other qualitative methodology due to the active participation of community actors who are co-participants in the research, critical thinking and ultimately, interest in social change. The scientific community will contribute its knowledge in a practical manner, in addition to generating academic reflection-based knowledge at the same time (Barbero Ferrán 2011).

Of the various levels and ways to participate, it affords an opportunity for the University to co-generate thinking, facilitate building active and inclusive citizenship processes, directly targeting citizen empowerment, which is the aim of our profession.

The community area works with and for the community in a space for interaction with the means and the citizens, and it is part of the intervention levels of our discipline, Social Work.

### **SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS FOR A SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION USING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**

As we have indicated the project Sarea has just begun so is still in the first phase, the phase of mutual knowledge in the working groups. Therefore it's too soon to be able to talk about results, but in this first year, what is being accomplished is to realize in the state of the question. We have already a social diagnosis co-constructed by the social agents involved.

This participatory research model in the Social Services field is an important tool for widening empiric knowledge and improving the quality of care. As Taquette & Minayo (2017) indicated referring to the field of health, but applicable to the scope of social services, this method is appropriate for understanding phenomena within a particular setting, understanding the link between concepts, representations, beliefs and behaviour, and producing important information to inform intersubjective decision making. Also provides important insights that can help to address deficiencies in social systems linked to minors in check-out and dependent elderly people, in our case.

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This qualitative research as a researchers allows us to understand aspects of social reality, aspects that we, as social workers, intervene with transcending the dimension of what to holistic perspectives of how, why, and for what. This acquisition of contents finds in the proposal presented in the current article a way to develop teaching methodologies. Thereby, the student is offered the possibility to interconnect diverse knowledges on a common basis; the community analysis based on a qualitative methodology.

### A SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS AS A RESULT OF APPLIED RESEARCH

The result of the analysis carried out during the months of work in groups, make up the conclusions drawn from the applied research within the framework of the chosen community. In this sense, in terms of qualitative research, we will talk about the report of results that, however, applied to the objectives of the activity and within the framework of our discipline, we will understand as the social diagnosis.

In relation to the qualitative reports that we reach in this initial stage, they “offer a response to the problem statement and indicate the strategies used to address it, as well as the data that was collected, analysed and interpreted by the researcher,” and adds “the qualitative reports are more flexible than quantitative [...], there is no single way to present them, although they are developed through a narrative form and scheme ” (Hernández-Sampieri et al. 2006, p.723)

In a correspondence between the results of an applied research and the objectives of research in Social Work from its own methodological concepts, etiologically the term diagnosis, indicates that it is a path oriented to knowledge; day “through”, “gnosis” knowledge, that is, “a knowing through” (Aguilar Idáñez 2013, p. 292, 294). Applied to the field of Social Sciences and more specifically to the field of Social Work, it is a question of knowing to act shaped, according to this same author, by four fundamental elements:

- is a way to use the results of applied research in the face of action
- is a unit of analysis and synthesis of the situation-problem
- It is an open instrument, that is, a diagnosis is never finished but must be constantly subject to readjustments that allow us to rethink and, therefore, reconstruct the diagnosed.
- A diagnosis must be adequately contextualized to reach its fullest meaning

Social diagnosis, derived from participatory methodologies in the Sarea project, is understood as an act of interpretation and analysis of a complex and dynamic reality, with a perspective of globality

that tries to apprehend its dynamisms with the aim of understanding it in a systemic key, with a social transforming purpose.

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## Intercâmbio Transfronteiriço para Modelagem de Boas Práticas em Intervenção Social Baseada no PAR: O Caso do Projeto Sarea

### RESUMO

A aplicação da metodologia da Pesquisa-Ação Participativa permite um procedimento científico reflexivo, sistemático e crítico que visa estudar algum aspecto da realidade, da situação-problema, com o propósito expresso de transformar e libertar a comunidade. Este é o desenho metodológico que o projeto transfronteiriço do SAREA selecionou para criar sinergias entre os profissionais do campo de ação social na Espanha e na França e buscar as melhores práticas para capacitar os usuários dos serviços sociais. As oportunidades de troca criadas permitem a possibilidade de os atores compartilharem o que e como está sendo feito, com base em um trabalho reflexivo e colaborativo, aprenderem mutuamente as boas práticas apresentadas. Em seu papel de facilitadores, os órgãos de educação que lideram o projeto procurarão sistematizar o conhecimento co-construído no intercâmbio e estimular o surgimento do "bom modelo de trabalho" que sustenta as práticas apresentadas. O valor

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agregado dessa cooperação interprofissional traduz a conceituação de práticas para a sua transferência em nível territorial, bem como a construção conjunta de projetos educacionais que proporcionam aos nossos alunos um background que aborde a realidade que eles enfrentarão em suas futuras carreiras de forma criativa, construtiva e colaborativa.

**Palavras-Chave:** Desenho Metodológico; Metodologia da Pesquisa-Ação Participativa; Modelo de Pesquisa Qualitativa; Trabalho Social.

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