Youth empowerment and engagement: an analysis of support practices in the youth protection system in Québec [1]

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1. Introduction

The question of how to provide support to youths perceived as *vulnerable* or *troubled* as they transition to adult life is a growing concern among practitioners, researchers and policy makers alike. Indeed, *vulnerable* or *troubled* youths go on to be overrepresented among marginalized adult populations (ex.: homeless people, drug addicts, criminals) (La Prairie & Stenning, 2003; Tweddle, 2007). Despite many studies that praise the benefits of programs or interventions that focus on modifying individual behaviors and attitudes through social learning and knowledge and skills transmission (Coren *et al*., 2003; Harris & Franklin, 2003; Kissman, 1990; McDonell, Limber & Connor-Godbey, 2007), a fair number of *troubled* youths present social integration issues at the beginning of adulthood.

These are disappointing realizations for service providers who are not always able to offer optimal support to youths during their process of integrating into society. The disappointing result may be attributable to the fact that the transition to adult life is influenced by many factors that go beyond the scope of individual responsibility (Goyette *et al*., 2006). Nevertheless, it is imperative that service providers do all that is possible to provide youth —especially those who are less equipped with life skills, such as those who have been placed in youth centers and who see their services cut off abrupt-

ly at the age of 18 after having received intensive and prolonged care— with support to make this transition. For these youth, the sudden injunction of autonomy is a challenge (Mann-Feder & White, 1999).

This article examines a research project that was conducted with two intervention programs that focussed on preparing youths from care to transition to adult living in Quebec Youth Centres.

It presents the design, implementation and evaluation phases of these programs based on the small group method. The article is comprised of three sections. The first takes stock of the challenges some more vulnerable youth face in transitioning to adult life. The second presents two programs that have been developed to build capacity among these youths. The third section describes the experimentation process.

Until April of 2015, Youth Centres offered specialized services to youth from the same geographic region. They were created after a reorganization of services (youth protection centres and youth centres had formerly been part of the social services).This created a continuum of services in youth protection, youth justice and psychosocial treatment. The primary mandate of these youth centres was the application of the Youth Protection Act, the Youth Criminal Justice Act and the Act concerning Health and Social Services. Some 100,000 young people, children and families receive services every year from the sixteen youth centres in Quebec.

2. The challenges of transitioning to adult life

Bidart (2006) points out that the changes in the entry conditions to adult life observed in recent decades are linked to the prolongation of youth and a de-synchronization of the entry levels of development to access adult living. Faced with newly imposed constraints, young people must rely on parental support for longer periods of time and be more creative in their approaches. The transition to adult living is now a process that takes time and that requires support. On the other hand, it is a transition that touches a variety of spheres of individual life, namely education, employment, housing and family. The pathways of entry into adult life have diversified and are characterized by many false starts and trial and error (Goyette *et al*., 2006b). Also, the transition to adult living no longer follows a single, unique model, and this implies that youth are confronted with a multiplicity of choices. Becoming an adult today isn't only about passing symbolic milestones, but also about engaging in a profound exercise of constructing one's identity.

Youths who are not supported by their friends and family can experience difficulties while going through this process. Research has shown that youths who have left the care system present more social issues that the general population: They show lower graduation rates, lower employment rates, an alarmingly high level of poverty, and a marked reliance on social welfare services, as well as experience more episodes of homelessness and housing instability (Goyette & Turcotte, 2011; Goyette & Royer, 2009). However,

studies show that many youths manage to overcome these difficulties.

In this respect, Goyette *et al.* (2006b) make a distinction between youth for whom the homelessness dynamic is part of a trajectory of social de-integration over time and those for whom instability is eventually resolved by social integration. The gap between youth that experienced a troubled childhood and the general population narrows by the mid-twenties (Frechon, 2005).

3. Program design

Driven by a desire to identify measures that are responsive to the needs of such youths, we chose to experiment with two intervention programs to see if certain approaches offer more promising solutions. The experiment followed a three-phase framework consisting of a design phase, an implementation phase, and an evaluation phase. The design phase consisted of a review of current practices, the selection of effective approaches, program design, group formation and facilitator training. The implementation phase consisted of the actual implementation of the programs and their tracking. Implementation was documented in a reflexive manner in order to make adjustments to the program if needed. The evaluation phase focussed on measuring the impacts, namely: participant satisfaction, their assessment of the outcomes, and observable changes.

A review of existing group intervention programs designed to help youth from youth centers participating in this project indicates that these programs reflect a range intervention philosophies. For these programs, the intent is to leverage the active participation of the youths as well as the group experience. This way of seeing the support to the transition to adult life points to an openness to the enhanced participation of youths in the intervention process, and as such, to the transformation of practices that is gradually starting to take place in organizations in the youth services network.

However, the goal of many programs remains to impart skills to youths, who, despite having some elbow room to express their opinions, are not in a position to define norms for themselves. Organizations and programs continue to support youths by providing them with tools to become more autonomous without necessarily working on a process that promotes the development of a sense of ownership of one's own life. If such interventions are performed in a group context, they are an extension of individual intervention rationales where the facilitator is an expert that essentially transmits knowledge (Mann-Feder & White, 1999).

To address this constraint, the implementation of programs that encourage active participation and the emergence of peer support appear as viable options when working with such youth (Goyette & Royer, 2007). For these youth, the sudden injunction (the sudden imperative of *be autonomous*!) of autonomy is a challenge (Mann-Feder & White, 1999).

Basing itself on a review of the literature, the team chose to adopt a facilitative approach according to which a facilitator

supports the members of a group in implementing an effective and constructive problem-solving process. Facilitation is part of an approach that invites participants to define issues, identify possible solutions and create conditions conducive to achieving goals (Schwarz *et al*., 2005). As such, acting as a facilitator is to guide participants so that they use their knowledge, skills and potential to achieve their goals. Emphasizing the facilitative approach is to concentrate on the process more than on the content —on how the group does something rather than what it does— which can sometimes mean setting aside planned activities to make room for what emergence from the group dynamics (Schwarz *et al*., 2005).

Facilitation takes a non-directive stance to group work. By emphasizing first and foremost the individual and collective potential of group members, the facilitative approach promotes the emergence of self-help. As the group evolves, the role of the intervener is increasingly relegated to the periphery of group activity. Rather than transmitting content or a step-by-step process to youths, the work of the facilitator is to bring them to think for themselves and make choices. In this respect, the facilitative approach is directly linked to the emergence of self-help; both of these approaches invite youths to actively participate in the intervention process.

Therefore, youth workers leading groups must be able to adapt to the constraints imposed by working with short-term groups, and this represents a challenge for youth workers who wish to work within the self-help and facilitation paradigm. The management of a temporary group demands a very high level of assimilation of these approaches on behalf of the facilitator. More importantly, youth workers that invite active engagement of youth participants must deeply believe in the capacity of the group to progress despite these constraints, so that the group may progress towards its initial goals.

3.1. Program structure

To better equip youths from youth centers to meet the challenges of transitioning to adult life, the intervention should address three areas of concern: Allow participants to acquire more self-knowledge, develop a capacity to project oneself into the future, and learn to use the resources in one's environment. In the project, these three concerns were articulated in the form of four intervention objectives:

— To foster awareness of one's values, attitudes and behaviors;

— To increase confidence in one's abilities;

— To increase one's capacity to realistically project oneself into the future;

— To increase knowledge of how tap into the support offered by the group.

In this project, we experimented with two group intervention programs in order to draw conclusions from the comparison of their implementations. The first, Mov-

ing On (*Droit devant*), is based primarily on the expression of emotions; the second, Friendship Group (*Moi et compagnie*, or *Moi et cie*), places more emphasis on developing a critical perspective in regards to one's entourage. A more detailed description of these programs follows below.

3.2. Moving On

The main aim of the program is to give youths the opportunity to explore and express the emotions that they associate with their transition to independent living (Mann-Feder & White, 1999). More specifically, the program focusses on fostering participant awareness of their emotional state as they face the transition to independent living and developing mutual support in the search of solutions to the problems that arise in the course of the transition.

The program constitutes a psychodynamic approach according to which it is important to revisit previous experiences of separation in order to better understand how they impact current behaviors. Translating this approach to the context of youth transitioning to independent living led us to form the following guiding assumptions:

— The transition to adult life is a turning point characterised by the ambivalence, uncertainty, and grieving of a state of dependency on others;

— This transition is particularly difficult for youth placed in foster or residential care because they have experienced previous separations;

— Support to the transition to adult life requires paying attention to psychological preparation and the expression of the emotions one experiences;

— Repressed emotions can seriously hinder the success of a transition;

— The acknowledgement of difficult emotions helps the acquisition of skills and contributes to the management of fear and sadness;

— By encouraging the expression of emotions experienced through support and modelling, the participation in a group intervention will help the transition to adult life.

In this group, the role of the youth workers consisted mainly in fostering and supporting the expression of emotions felt through the transition. According to Kass (2008), the expression of emotions is made easier if the interveners are guided by the following principles: 1) to create and communicate a safe space; 2) to encourage participants to express their fears; 3) to help participants see that they are not alone; 4) to encourage the development and maintenance of group functional roles; and 5) to encourage the development of spontaneity.

3.3. The Friendship Group

The *Friendship Group* program is rooted in the belief that a successful social integration depends on the acquisition of certain social competencies and the capacity to make sound relationship decisions by developing a critical stance towards interpersonal relationships. Translating

this approach to the context of young girls on the verge of being discharged from substitute care and transitioning to independent living led us to make the following guiding assumptions:

— Young girls approaching discharge from substitute care frequently find themselves in situations of isolation and exploitation;

— Their vulnerability hinges largely on their low self-esteem;

— They can be helped to develop a concept of interpersonal relationships that can reduce their vulnerability;

— They can learn boundary management;

— The group can act as a support in the development of a critical perspective.

In this group intervention, the relationships established among participants and between participants and the facilitator are used as models of appropriate relationships. By offering participants with a safe experience through which they can learn about the benefits of building relationships based on trust and mutual respect, the program is viewed as a way to better equip young girls to recognize dysfunctional relationships that the most vulnerable among them will be exposed to. Friendship and trust constitute two central themes of the program, which uses as a step-by-step model found in Road of Frienship (*La Route de l'amitié* (Lambert, 2001). Caution and warning signs themes used to help participants recognize dysfunctional relationships. Through the group experience, the facilitators must not only bring participants to recognize signs of danger, but also develop ways to deal with situations that can make them vulnerable.

The two programs were comprised of eight two-and-a-half-hour group sessions each focussing on a theme. The following table details the themes and objectives of the sessions for the two programs. A bank of activities was proposed to spark discussion; the choice of whether or not to use them, however, was left to the participants.

TABLE 1: *Description of session content for both programs.*

	Moving On		Friendship Group	
	Theme	**Objective**	**Theme**	**Objective**
1	Introduction	Participants introduce themselves to each other	Introduction	Participants introduce themselves to each other
2	Being placed	To get to know each other	The stages of friendship	To reflect on friendship as process that develops over time

	Moving On		Friendship Group	
	Theme	**Objective**	**Theme**	**Objective**
3	Experiences in substitute care	To stimulate discussion of experiences of being placed in substitute care	Friendship and self-esteem	To help participants make links between friendship and self-esteem
4	Discharge	To foster a reflection on the end of care	Warning signs and conflictual relationships	To help participants identify the warning signs of problematic relationships
5	Planning for independent living	To spark the emergence of thoughts and emotions surrounding independent living	Dangerous situations and personal boundaries	To learn how to respect one's own boundaries in relationships
6	Hopes and fears surrounding discharge	To stimulate a conversation on the elements not touched upon in the previous meetings	Romantic relationships	To initiate a conversation on romantic relationships
7	Managing difficult emotions	To begin the group termination phase and identify learnings that can be generalized	You and I	To review the stages of friendship and foster positive and realistic expectations towards relationships
8	Termination	To stimulate discussion on the group experience that is coming to an end	Graduation and end	To stimulate discussion on the group experience that is coming to an end

3.4. Group formation and participant recruitment

Voluntary participation helps youths stick to the program and make progress, even if the target clientele are youths from youth centers. In addition, it is best that the ground rules for the group be collectively defined and that the group take on responsibility for its own development. These conditions are particularly demanding in the context of youth protective services because those contexts are often non-voluntary. If a group led under participatory principles can constitute an opportunity for youths placed under institutional care for extended periods of time to regain control over their lives, it demands on the other hand that the youth workers accept that some youths may approach the group experience with distrust.

In this project, youth recruitment was performed by the interveners implementing the programs. Two selection criteria were used: *To be in the process of transitioning to independent living and to be*

voluntarily willing to take part in the research process.

Two youth centers took part in the trials of the intervention programs. As such, each program was implemented in two different settings. The Moving' On program (Group 1) was tried on two groups of six boys each. The average age of the participants was 17 in both groups.

The Friendship Group program (group 2) was conducted among two groups of nine and ten girls respectively. We observed that the average age of participants of the groups was above 16 that the duration of care services varied largely, that the treatment center constituted the main residence for participants during their participation on the program, and that most of the youths had received minimal schooling and few of them were employed.

3.5. Youth worker facilitator preparation

The facilitators were selected by administrators of the various institutions involved in the development of this project. Openness to change and volunteering were at the heart of the selection criteria. In the end, the eight facilitators chosen were youth workers that for the most part possessed many years of experience in working in residential care. Because not all of them were familiar with the facilitative approach, a training program was conducted in order to familiarize them with the theoretical foundations and practice of facilitation. Delivered by researchers that teach small group intervention, the training used a facilitative approach to transmit knowledge of group dynamics, and as such served as a model of what the youth center facilitators were to foster with participants. The training addressed two key issues: 1) the transmission of conceptual guideposts and concrete tools for small group intervention; and 2) activities and discussions that allow facilitators to reflect on their facilitative stance. The two-day training was supported by a handbook that describes various theoretical concepts on themes such as: group norms, the advantages of the small group methodologies when working with youth, facilitation, leading group meetings, the stages of group development, facilitation tools, facilitator skills, co-facilitation, and managing emotions (Mann-Feder *et al.,* 2009c). A one-hour meeting among facilitators midway through the implementation phase allowed for follow-up with the facilitators.

In short, the training placed much emphasis on the importance of tailoring the content of the programs to the dynamics of each group and to the local setting in order to be in line with the facilitative approach. If manuals, tools and activities were developed to support the facilitators, they were intended to act as a means to achieve facilitation towards self-help and not to be an end in themselves as we see in traditional top-down program implementation. In the same line, if interventions targeted youths who are experiencing individual difficulties, we encouraged approaches to facilitation that distanced themselves the re-education rationale and instead worked with self-help and peer support. Therefore, for example, instead of focussing on transmitting skills

to modify behavior, we emphasized developing group and relationship skills. When performed in group, facilitative interventions distance themselves from a rationale of individual intervention where the intervener is an expert that transmits knowledge of life skills (Mann-Feder & White, 1999).

4. Evaluation methods

Evaluation of implementation can mean the measurement of the difference between planned activities and activities carried out during group sessions for example. In that case, we evaluate the fidelity of the implantation and of the planned intervention. However, to reach this aim a rigorous and detailed theoretical model of the program is needed. That wasn't the case in regard to our programs.

There is a trend in program evaluation that aims to understand the adaptation of the intervention that is performed by local actors. It is taken for as given, therefore, that the adaptation is necessary given the contexts within which the interventions are implemented (Perret, 2008). We have adopted this view in our relating of the evaluation of the implementation of the small group approach and its impacts.

Using an exploratory analysis of the comments of participants and interveners, we have tried to define the elements that helped or hindered the implementation of the facilitative and self-help approaches. We have also tried to assess the impact of the small group method in terms of a particular service offering, for both youth and the facilitators.

4.1. Data sources

Using an action research framework, this study reviewed documentation and analyzed team member logs in order to describe the events, circumstances and settings of the implementation of the group intervention.

To document the manner in which the intervention plans were implemented, two sources of information were used: the youths who participated in the program and the facilitators.

The youth participants were interviewed at two different points in the process. A first interview of approximately 20 minutes, took place before the start of the group programs. The young people were questioned about how they were recruited, what motivated them to participate in the program, and their expectations in relation to the group. The second interview took place at the end of the group process, and lasted about 40 minutes, with a principal focus on how the group process was experienced, and more specifically how each participant viewed the strengths and weaknesses of the experience.

At the time of the second interview, the youth also completed a short demographic questionnaire. Quantitative measures were also administered as a pre-test before the groups began, and also as a post-test following the completion of the groups to provide a better understanding of the impact of the programs. This article will be based on qualitative data only.

Participants thus met with research assistants for individual interviews on two occasions, once before the launch of

the program and once following the final session. All the facilitators met with the research assistants at the end of the programs. They were invited to share their views on the implementation of the programs and their assessment of the impacts of the intervention. In general, these conversations were conducted with two facilitators in charge of a same group. When it was not possible to meet with both co-facilitators simultaneously, individual interviews were arranged [2].

4.2. Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. We conducted thematic analysis using semi-open axial coding with N'Vivo8 software. Selected general themes include satisfaction with the program, its implementation and its impact; these were fleshed out with views from participants and facilitators.

In keeping with the procedures that had received ethical approval, all the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

A sociodemographic portrait of the participants was established through responses to the first interview that had taken place before the initiation of the group programs. Participants were asked about their age, their placement history, their current placement, their work status, their romantic partnerships and their level of education.

5. Implementation

The comments of the facilitators and participants were grouped according to three aspects of program implementation: 1) engagement of youths in the group; 2) the integrity of facilitator approaches; and 3) the place of programs within the array of youth center practices. In general, the views expressed on both programs are similar. They are therefore presented here without any distinction.

5.1. Engagement

The most significant difficulty encountered by facilitators was how to engage the youths. The lax attendance constituted a challenge.

> «It fluctuated. It really did. It fluctuated depending on the given week or right up to the last minute we'd expect to have a certain number (...). So that was probably our biggest challenge». (Facilitator)

Many explanations for the difficulty in mobilizing the youths were put forth. Some facilitators mentioned that the timing of the launch of the program wasn't ideal. The heterogeneous composition of the groups also made it difficult for them to develop group cohesion; the groups were composed of youth who presented varying level of maturity, which fostered the emergence of power struggles within the group.

Some youths felt that they were not in a position to decline participation in the program, and this also contributed to the lack of attendance and engagement. The youths that felt that they had been forced to participate or that they had been recruited 'under pressure' reacted by engaging in a form of passive resistance. Some

mentioned not being informed that they had been enrolled in an eight-week program or not having agreed to participate: «My counsellor told me about it. She said she signed me up.»

For other youths, the issue wasn't motivation, but rather the capacity to bring a positive contribution to the group process. Some were in the grips of significant personal difficulties that prevented them from finding motivation and projecting themselves in the future, and therefore to engage in a group process.

5.2. The integrity of facilitator approaches

The ease with which the facilitators abided by the principles of facilitation and self-help groups was a factor in the implementation. Some interveners integrated the approach well and, by extension, the implementation was successful. These facilitators felt comfortable giving the youths all the elbow room they needed.

> «That's the spirit. To let them speak up, to be open to it and to integrate it, to stimulate sharing, because it's an activity that is essentially about sharing». (Facilitator)

These facilitators mentioned putting certain activities aside when the youths wanted to do something else. Moreover, they related situations in which they witnessed the emergence of a dynamic of mutual help in the group. These interveners were able to give meaning to their sessions and to perceive a guiding thread throughout the program.

Others experienced difficulty in shedding the directive approach commonly found in the youth center field. For these youth workers, the facilitative and self-help approaches stood in contradiction with youth center philosophy in which youth workers are responsible for enforcing rules. For them, the group is first and foremost a means for the youths to adhere to what is brought forth by the facilitators. It is very difficult for them not to intervene and to let the group self-manage.

> «It's a bizarre approach. You have to intervene when some people are a bit scattered, you have to sort them out. On the other hand though, (...) you cannot threaten them with grounding, for example, because they are adults». (Facilitator)

The facilitators who had no difficulty in abiding by the approaches positioned themselves favorably towards these approaches and showed much enthusiasm in trying out the group experience. They also had a better relationship with their co-facilitator before even beginning of the program. This compatibility, whether spontaneous or acquired, is presented as having a major impact on subsequent group development. The type of program also influenced the integrity of facilitative approaches.

5.3. The place of programs within the array of youth center practices

The use of facilitation and self-help group methods was made all the more difficult by the occasional indifference, even resistance, of the other youth workers at the centers. Sometime residential

care workers would let the youths skip sessions without providing a valid reason, which gives the impression that the programs were not taken seriously. In institutions where the program was a priority, the workers actively collaborated with each other to support participation. It becomes apparent that the support of all levels of management is important in order to adapt work arrangements among workers within the residential context.

6. Evaluation of findings

Qualitative data analysis

Discourse analysis of participants and facilitators reveals that the programs have fostered the emergence of dynamics supportive to the development of autonomy. For the youths, the group represents a space for learning and awareness, a place for building relationships, a space of belonging and validation. They emphasize the practical skills and knowledge they acquired through the group experience and how these are more useful in facing the challenges that await them in their transition to adult life. Some youths said that the group had 'opened their eyes' to certain realities they were facing and had made them realize the need to begin preparing themselves if they wanted to achieve their goals in life.

The group is also a place for building relationships. In this regard, the youths underscored how much they appreciated the opportunity to meet with others to talk about things they had never shared before. The group represented a supportive space in which they could share their struggles and feel understood and accepted. As a place for belonging, it provides the opportunity to express one's self freely and regain a certain amount of control over one's life by taking part in the decisions that are made within the group. It allows youths to engage in building a sense of self by claiming ownership of the issues they face.

The group is presented as a space for validation. Through the activities, the youths experienced accomplishments that strengthen their self-esteem. As a consequence, they feel better prepared to face challenges and more confident.

By inviting the youths to claim ownership over the issues that face them, and by offering opportunities for validation, the group opens up the possibility for the development of a sense of self.

The following table illustrates the way that these benefits were expressed by the youths.

TABLE 2: *Benefits of Group Intervention.*

A space for learning	It gives us more information... it enlightens us more, it opens up possibilities for us.
A place for building relationships	You know, people would talk about their stuff and I found it interesting. It was similar stuff to what I was going through.

A space for belonging	It was ours place to talk, (...) It was like a collective. (...) We would share stuff and it would stay confidential.
A space for validation	I feel more confident about myself and about the future, even if I still have some gray areas, some foggy areas. But I feel more confident about moving forward.

According to facilitators, despite the fact that it is pointless to expect significant impacts at the close of the short-term program, participation in the group is nonetheless a starting point for changes to take place:

> There's a lot of seeds that were planted and I think that it opened their eyes. They were planted. They're there and you know it might take a long time before it's completely realized. (Facilitator)

The group acts as a vehicle for the renegotiation of social ties, as much between the participants and the facilitators as among participants. By bonding with facilitators, youths alter their negative perception of social services. The facilitators agree that by giving more space to the youths, facilitative and self-help approaches are more effective in reaching out to youth who are resistant to more directive approaches. Furthermore, they lead to a higher engagement of group members. Many facilitators said they were surprised by the openness to one another they observed among participants. By fostering the development of peer support, the group allowed many youths to gradually open up to what the other group members and the facilitators had to offer in terms of interpersonal development. The group establishes a new type of relationship for the youths; the fact of having their points of view taken into consideration and acted upon by the group allowed the youths make progress in developing a sense of self and building positive relationships.

7. Discussion

This article examines two intervention programs based on small group methods to provide support to youths from youth centers in their transition to adult life. The experiment was structured in three phases: design, implementation, and evaluation.

Although the design phase didn't present any particular challenges, the unfolding the rest of the project revealed that it is essential to involve facilitators and youths in the design phase. It is imperative to consider them as key actors in the transformation process of youth center practices and to guarantee their voluntary participation in the process. They are the starting point for design, and interventions should take into account their perception of the issues posed by the transition to adult life and their ideas about the strategies to be used to support their transition (Goyette & Bellot *et al*., 2011). This way of seeing the transformation of practices is consistent with the view that program effectiveness is linked to its ca-

pacity to respond to needs perceived by clients and produce results that respond to their hopes and aspirations. This experiment also reveals the importance of involving all actors that are impacted by the implementation of the program. By this, we mean program designers, trainers, facilitators and administrators. This is without a doubt the best way to ensure participation in the program is maintained and encouraged.

The data on the implementation phase of the project reveals the complexity of intervening with people who are only minimally engaged. Even though participation in the programs of this project was *voluntary*, intervening in a youth center context poses limitations the voluntary nature of participation. In this respect, the observations of Turcotte and Lindsay (2008) on involuntary clients reflect the attitudes regarding their relationship to the group observed among many youths, namely «1) an ambivalent, even resistant, attitude towards the services, and 2) the prospect of negative consequences if the person refuses to participate in the intervention.» (p. 233).

It is conceivable that some participants accept to take part in the group only to place themselves in a position of confrontation with the facilitator; participating in the group in this context is then a part of a strategy aiming to regain control over youth workers that are perceived as seeking to control their lives of the youths (Breton, 1991, cited in Turcotte & Lindsay, 2008).

To overcome this resistance, facilitators must accept to fully engage in a participatory process, but in order to do so, they must distance themselves from the institutional practices of youth centers that favor control. This constitutes a considerable feat, because the value placed on openness and non-interference the facilitative approach to groups appears a priori difficult to reconcile with the directives of an intervention in a context of authority. In this respect, this experiment was the opportunity for many to generate learning and awareness on the issues of intervening in a context of child protective services.

Through this project, we also became aware of the complex dynamics that surround efforts to transform practices, both in relation to this research and more generally in the social service sector. The most striking obstacle to the implementation of group work was the tendency to rely on familiar and oft repeated intervention strategies without developing the reflexivity required to cultivate new practices. Returning to well-known and reassuring strategies seemed to respond more to the needs of the workers and the organization than to the needs of the young people... The actual structure of services tended to impose an abrupt end to placements once the young people turned. Consequently, the worked involved in following these youth felt the need to *push* them towards autonomy, without always engaging them actively in the process or taking their individual needs into account.

The comments of the youths and the facilitators indicate that the efforts invested in this experiment were not in vain since the group allowed the parti-

cipants make progress in their process of construction of identity and provided a vehicle for the renegotiation of social ties.

Best practices are here not conceptualized in a biomedical perspective of evidence-based —mainly considering that the practices at the heart of those programs are in development— but in a perspective where youth, professionals and stakeholders needs are determined with them and by them and therefore best practices. Moreover, we highlighted the need for social practice innovation implementation to consider the context in which the program is implemented as to identify *best practices* (Kissman, 1990; Goyette & Frechon 2013). Best practices associated with evidence-based most of the time doesn't take into account contextual variables (Coren & *al.*, 2003; Kissman, 1991; Lambert, 2001; Lovel, 1991). Therefore, this article provide best practices that are based on cultural, organizational, institutional context which is rarely the case (Goyette & Frechon, 2013).

8. Conclusion

In summary, the two intervention programs presented in this article were perceived by many participants as different from the interventions to which they were accustomed. Contrasting with the directive and sometimes *boring* nature of interventions undertaken in a context of authority and that only minimally invite youths and interveners to take part in defining the directions of the interventions and selecting activities, these programs, by focussing on participation, placed youths in a more interesting position by empowering them throughout the intervention process. One of the core issues that was brought to light in the course of this study is the role youths in transition to adult life play in interventions that target them. In this respect, the process of devising public action targeting young adults would benefit from taking into account their need to be consulted and involved in the interventions that are destined to them. These realizations shed light on the importance of engaging a collective reflection on the question of how to support the fostering of autonomy in the transition to adult life, so that service providing organizations view the transition to autonomy differently than through a model that aims primarily to care for the youths.

In fact, the use of facilitative and self-help group approaches in this study required that the facilitators in charge of the groups possess an excellent reflexive capacity, which implies a broader comprehension of the issues involved in supporting youth through their transition to adult life. We discovered, more importantly, that the group experience allowed facilitators not only to master new approaches, but also to question their own practices in supporting youths in their transition to adult life. As such, the experiment contributed to the initial stages of a lengthy process of transformation of practices used in the field. On the other hand, the collaboration of the entire team of youth center workers on a global, agreed upon intervention process that places value on the group program can attendance and strengthen active engagement of youths. This realization highlights the importance

of the organizational context in which the clinical practices will be implemented, especially when these are innovative and leading to change. In other terms, it is important to prepare the organizations in which the intervention will take place when the aim is to integrate new group programs alongside clinical practices in a curriculum. Ultimately, the results of this study suggest that facilitation can constitute a vehicle for renegotiation of relationships between youths and the youth centers because it opens up a new range of possibilities, while the group becomes a space for expressing one's voice, for ownership and taking control of one's own life.

We must continue to make efforts to make the paradigm shift in terms of intervention, so that willingness is taken into account when involving facilitators and recruiting participants. At the moment of writing this article, many youth centers in the province of Québec and organizations working with troubled youth have integrated this reflection on the necessity of adapting practices, namely by launching this intervention model in their own programming. Of course, the institutions involved in this type of participatory project are aware of the importance of these new paradigms...

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Summary:

Youth empowerment and engagement: an analysis of support practices in the youth protection system in Québec.

The most common goal of interventions that support youth from care in the transition to independent living is to help them to become relatively self-sufficient. It was in this context that a project was created to implement and evaluate group work strategies for this population. Two sources of information were used: the youths who participated in the program

(n=31) and all the facilitators. The intent behind this research was not only to monitor the trajectory of the youth participants through the group process, but also to expose the workers who intervened in the transition to adulthood to an alternative treatment paradigm and a different way to work with groups.

The results reveal that the implementation of new intervention approaches is a process that takes time, and must take the context of the work into account. This research raises issues in relation to the definition, the implementation and the evaluation of programs that support the transition to adulthood for vulnerable young people.

Key Words: Vulnerable youth, transition to adulthood, placement, group work, engagement.

Resumen:
Compromiso y empoderamiento de jóvenes: un análisis de las prácticas de apoyo en el Sistema de protección a la infancia en Quebec

El objetivo más común de las intervenciones que apoyan a los jóvenes en su tránsito a la vida independiente es el de ayudarles a convertirse en relativamente autosuficientes. Fue en este contexto en el que el proyecto se creó para implementar y evaluar las estrategias de trabajo en grupo con esta población. Se utilizaron dos fuentes de información: los jóvenes que participaron en el programa (n=31) y todos los facilitadores. La intención de esta investigación ha sido no sólo la de seguir la trayectoria de los jóvenes participantes a través de procesos grupales, sino también la de proponer a los profesionales que intervinieron en esa transición a la vida adulta un paradigma de tratamiento alternativo y una manera diferente de trabajar con grupos.

Los resultados revelan que la aplicación de nuevos enfoques de intervención es un proceso que lleva tiempo y debe tener en cuenta el contexto en el que se interviene. Esta investigación plantea una serie de cuestiones centrales en relación con la definición, la ejecución y la evaluación de programas que apoyan la transición a la vida adulta de los jóvenes vulnerables.

Descriptores: Jóvenes vulnerables, transición a la vida adulta, acogimiento, trabajo en equipo, compromiso.