After a brief outline of the contextual organization of youth protection offered in Quebec, the author presents an intervention program that aims to prepare youth in high-risk categories for employment, independent living, and an overall orientation to the development of an autonomous lifestyle.

5

Promoting autonomous functioning among youth in care: A program evaluation

Martin Goyette

Over the past few years, considerable research has highlighted the challenges posed by the need for social reinsertion of youth who leave placement. For youth who leave an alternative living environment at the outset of adulthood, this integration is made all the more difficult by psychosocial and health factors and a lack of support in preparing for independent living and employment. Although they may possess various qualifications and resources, many find themselves relying on publicly funded services or social assistance as they enter adulthood. This chapter examines an intervention program that aims to prepare youth in high-risk categories

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for employment, independent living and autonomous functioning more generally. It also presents preliminary results of a three-year pilot study and offers an outline for the provision of intervention and support to troubled youth who are entering adulthood.

**Context and overview of the problem**

In Quebec, the Association des centres jeunesse du Québec (ACJQ) is made up of seventeen youth centers and two multiple vocational centers whose mission is to supply psychosocial services and rehabilitation services for troubled youth, mothers in distress, and their families. Services mandated to provide community-based rehabilitation and youth protection through foster home placement or readaptation centers fall under the youth center’s jurisdiction. The primary mandate of these centers is to apply the Youth Protection Act, the Youth Criminal Justice Act, and the Health and Social Services Act. Each year, nine thousand social workers in the seventeen youth centers in Quebec supply services to 100,000 troubled children, teens, and their families under the auspices of this legislation. Close to 27,000 youngsters are removed from their natural families—thus, the term substitute (or alternative) living environment. Principally, they are placed in foster homes, but also may be integrated into residential centers or group homes.1 The youngsters who constitute the clientele of these youth centers are particularly vulnerable to social problems, as well as crime and victimization. They are also at risk of encountering core difficulties in the process of social reinsertion.

The subjects’ individual characteristics, such as their school and placement history, widen rather than narrow the gap where employment is concerned. In Quebec, studies on youth who have recently applied for social assistance demonstrate that a significant number were placed in foster care during childhood,2 as was confirmed by the evaluation of the Solidarité Jeunesse program.3 Often the youth interviewed for the study examined in this chapter mentioned that when they reached adulthood, they requested social aid because they saw no other alternative.4
From this perspective, a team of U.S. researchers confirmed that foster youth who reached adulthood while in a foster care environment and effectively made the transition to independent living nonetheless had higher rates of arrests and incarceration, were less schooled, experienced more marital instability, and had higher divorce rates. Foster youth who are in transition to independent living are also more prone to homelessness, have a higher rate of physical and mental health problems, are more likely to abuse drugs, and are more often unemployed. These findings are consistent with the work of Baker, Olson, and Mincer in the United States and the Ontario study conducted by Martin and Palmer on the difficulties foster youth experience in the community after they have made the transition from foster care.

In Quebec, Cloutier’s report underlines the needs of youth leaving care. The authors recommend “putting in action a practical training process that aims to teach independent living . . . to every youth aged 16 years or over placed for a medium-to-long term period . . . in order to help them to achieve a successful transition to adulthood.” In August 2004, the Conseil permanent de la jeunesse made several significant recommendations in relation to youth in care. Their report proposed the integration of preparation for instrumental independence into daily activities for youth, experimentation with new interventions that prepare youth for autonomous functioning in a more general sense, continuing research on this issue, the maintenance of support of youth who leave foster care environments as young adults, and the development of mixed housing measures to facilitate residential resettlement of young people leaving youth centers.

Considerable research exists that points out that youth rarely have adequate preparation to live independently. It is a well known fact that youth placed in foster homes generally experience integration difficulties, and few organizations in either Quebec or the rest of Canada have risen to the challenge by implementing sustained interventions that target social reinsertion. It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of what services for independent living preparation exist in Canada because of the significant regional
disparities among organizations that provide these services and because youth protection falls under provincial jurisdiction.

Over the past decade, little research has focused on Quebec programs. One recent study generated a portrait of practices aimed at preparing Quebec’s foster youth for independent living while helping them with employment issues. What is remarkable is that in spite of an awareness of the importance of offering these specialized services to youth who leave foster homes, few broadly structured programs exist to assist them in preparing for and sustaining this transition. Most of the time, the interventions take only employment into account, much to the detriment of promoting autonomous functioning overall.

This article describes an approach to youth leaving care that was inspired by the view that social reinsertion should have the promotion of an overall transition to adult functioning as its central focus. In this way, social reinsertion encompasses not only independent living and employment, but also the development of a career plan and the creation of a new adult family structure. Based on this theoretical perspective, an intensive project was designed to prepare qualified youth for the transition from foster care to autonomous functioning: the Projet d’intervention en vue de préparer le passage à la vie autonome et d’assurer la qualification des jeunes des centre jeunesse (Projet Qualification des jeunes, PQJ).

Qualification des jeunes project

The PQJ is an initiative of l’Association des centres jeunesse du Québec. It is based on action research methodology, which strives to develop new strategies for social and professional integration for sixteen to eighteen year olds who are currently receiving service from youth centers. The project has targeted four Quebec regions: Abitibi-Temiscamingue, Laval, Outaouais, and Montreal (Batshaw).

The project team comprises one coordinator and eight youth workers or educators, as they are called in Quebec (two for each participating region). Each team provides service to ten youths. The educators hired for the project worked on a full-time basis and had
daily contact with the young people, thus adding resources to existing ones. This relatively high staff-client ratio is intended to facilitate richer personal and social development than can usually be accomplished through the regular activities offered in youth centers. The coordinator directs the project under the supervision of a counselor from l’Association des centres jeunesse du Québec in collaboration with the four people in charge from each region.

The project interventions are based on two major goals: preparation for independent living and the creation of a career plan that involves adequate training and preparation. An intervention plan is elaborated with each youth. Each young person may benefit from the addition of complementary supports from different service providers. Depending on the age of the candidate at the time of selection for the program, follow-up can continue to age nineteen. Thus, it is possible for program staff to provide a continuing presence during the youth’s transitional period to adulthood. Because of this continuity, the youth are better able to gauge and face certain responsibilities that they might otherwise have underestimated before they were actually on their own. The project is characterized by intensive interventions: each educator ensures follow-up for his or her group of ten youths. The ten-to-one ratio is uncommon, with the current average staff ratio in Quebec youth centers being twenty-four to one.

**The clients**

The project serves eighty participants from the four regions in Quebec. The youth recruited had to be sixteen years old at the time of registration. They were referred by staff at youth centers and then selected by the eight educators and the coordinator. The candidates had experienced lengthy displacements over the course of their lives, and there was little possibility of being reintegrated into their initial families. None had clear objectives in relation to school completion or any plans for job training once the foster care system stopped providing services to them. They exhibited signs of insecurity, low self-esteem, and weak social ties, and they demonstrated difficulty in delaying gratification, respecting rules, and setting limits for themselves. They were not optimistic that this new program would be able to help them.
**Objectives of the intervention**

The project is designed to prevent marginalization of youth who use services offered by youth centers at the time they reach adulthood. This in turn is hoped to reduce the possibility of involvement in a criminal milieu. To this end, the project has three objectives:

1. To prepare youth for their transition to independent living and supporting them in the process
2. To ensure that 75 percent of the candidates are either integrated into the workforce or have completed a vocational program by the time they reach adulthood
3. To support the development of a support system for the youth in youth centers

Thus, this intervention project targets overall personal and social development, as well as employment and preparation for living on one’s own.

**Intervention process**

An evaluation protocol was established to provide a detailed portrait of each youth to use as a guide in the program. Two evaluation tools were employed: an instrument that provided a descriptive picture of the youth and his or her family (the Portrait synthèse du jeune et de sa famille, in collaboration with Groupe de recherche sur les inadaptations de l’enfance) and the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessments (ACLSA).

The Portrait synthèse du jeune et de sa famille is used to evaluate the youth’s psychosocial situation and produces a detailed history and description of the youth and his or her family. Throughout 2003 and the beginning of 2004, the educators completed this assessment with each the youth. After being provided with the overall results the educators met with the youth and those who participated in the data collection in order to present and interpret the results.

ACLSA is used twice each year with each participant and his or her worker, who is well versed in the details of the youth’s daily life. This
instrument evaluates the extent of the youth’s abilities for making the transition from placement to independent living. It uses six criteria that demonstrate functional autonomy: daily tasks, community resources and housing, financial management, the capacity to take care of oneself, social relations, and school and work habits. Completing the ACLSA online is one of the first steps in an intervention process. Once this is completed, a report on the results for each category is sent to the individual client’s educator. The results outline the subject’s strengths and opportunities for improvements in each area. After discussing the results, the youth and his educator establish objectives in each of the categories they choose to work on together. This phase of the intervention, titled “Life Skills Guidebook,” identifies competencies to be developed in each of the six categories. The Life Skills Guidebook also contains information on different instructional modalities that can be used to teach the youth life skills and includes an outline of apprentice sessions that apply to each skill. The list of competencies to be worked on is associated with performance indicators that can be used to show a youth’s progress. Finally, the guidebook proposes activities for the youth themselves to complete, either individually or in a group, to develop certain abilities. The Life Skills Guidebook was initially prepared by the Casey Foundation and has now been translated into French and adopted by the ACJQ.

The development of intervention strategies

Using the results obtained from the evaluation tools as a starting point, the youth and the PQJ educator complete an intervention plan that responds to the individual needs of each youth in terms of career planning and preparation for independent living. In this way, objectives and the means to attain them are defined as a function of each youth’s personal situation. The skills and capacities needed for each youth to succeed are also considered. The plan allows the PQJ educator to refine strategies along the way. The educator accompanies the youth through each step, both to assess progress and gather information that may be required. In addition, the educators participate in planning meetings with organizations that could provide services to the program participant once he is
back in his community, such as schools, employers, employment resources, and community organizations.

The moment that regular services have been terminated for the youth at the youth center, the PQJ educator works with the youth to develop his or her abilities for independence in the areas of schooling, employment, living arrangements, community resources, financial management, and self-management with regard to health and daily issues. The PQJ educator can draw on any local programs that address training and integration in these areas and forge partnerships to better service the young person. Part of the task of the PQJ educator is to develop community partnerships that help meet the goals for each youth.

Over the past year, PQJ educators have had the opportunity to offer more services to youth center educators as well as to foster youth from each youth center.

**Lessons from the PQJ evaluation**

An evaluation of the PQJ has resulted in a preliminary report that makes recommendations for conditions that are considered essential for successful program implementation in Quebec. These recommendations relate to regular youth services. Table 5.1 groups principal data along with samplings.

All youth who participated in research interviews and filled out questionnaires did so voluntarily. The data collected were cross-referenced to evaluate the impact of interventions throughout the youths’ path to autonomous functioning. Statistical analysis was made possible through the use of the assessment tools, and the results have implications for the types of interventions that are needed to support youth transitions to independent living.

**Social reinsertion and relationship issues**

The interventions described rely on the dynamics of the relationships between the youth and their staff. The interventions are based on and deployed around relational spaces between the youth and
Table 5.1. Data sampling time line, measures, and number of youth assessed

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Note: Risk factors and personal strengths were evaluated by the educators using a standardized procedure developed for this study.

those who determine the trajectories of the PQJ youth. The dynamics of these relationships, coupled with staff decisions and the effect they have on the social functioning of the youth, can produce dependence or facilitate constructive interdependence, which is what is needed for autonomous adult functioning. Furthermore, support can either promote autonomy or act as an obstacle to independent functioning.

The PQJ educator is the principal support figure for the youth, regardless of where the pilot project takes place. By the time that youth receive services from youth centers and once they leave the institution, the educator will have provided close to three-quarters of the total service provided to the youth, two to five times more support than has been provided by all other adults. The role of different adults may change at different points in the transition; for example, parents, when involved, tend to be more supportive with regard to housing and material concerns, but are far less involved in employment transitions and the establishment of a new adult family structure. The support provided by different adults is sometimes
activated by particular events. If the majority of supportive adults do not intervene in transition toward a new family, we have demonstrated how pregnancy, for a young woman, can mobilize these support mechanisms. However, at the same time, the focus on the pregnancy will divert support from career planning, which may be detrimental in the long run. Still, the educator is always central to the intervention and has a role with the young person’s larger network of social support. The goal of intervention is therefore not to work with the youth in isolation, but to incorporate the resources and relationships at the youth’s disposal while encouraging the development of healthy reciprocity rather than dependency.

The study data reveal that as youths leave the center, they often express a desire for financial independence. Thus, they often place schooling issues aside, which actually hampers their progress toward autonomy in the long run. In fact, the number of individual objectives in this project relating to education constantly decreased between 2003 and 2005. This is linked to the new realities the youth experiences on reaching adulthood. One possibility to consider is whether providing adequate financial support for rent will help young people develop a career plan rather than just settle for a job. As for the issue of knowing which factors contribute to maintaining employment, it does not seem that salary or number of hours worked play a major role. Youth hold on to a job longer when they have found the job with the help of an educator or a third party from the network. Here, we hypothesize that improved networking between PQJ and the business establishment in offering support to both the youth and employer contribute to longer-term employment stability. Mentoring seems to be an essential element in these youth support systems.

Nonetheless, by autumn 2004, it was possible to affirm that PQJ intervention significantly helped to construct an environment where youth can acquire knowledge and competencies, as well as work experience. Many participants who experienced successful integration due to the PQJ program are at the margins of the mainstream labor force. The question, then, is not to know whether the youth are employed or if they have avoided seeking social assistance. It is, rather, knowing how these work experiences provide young people
with the identity of an employed worker. This involves the development of an understanding of the marketplace, the search for employment, and specific work skills and will have greater long-term benefits than simply securing a job. At the same time, a period of reliance on social assistance can sometimes help stop a downward spiral that might have propelled the youth toward homelessness or criminal involvement because of the absence of financial support. Youth who participated in the PQJ program were also more conscious of their rights as employees, and they knew about available support for finding employment. In this way, the PQJ’s success in matters of employment goes beyond the issue of obtaining and maintaining a job, thus going beyond most programming for transitions to independent living.

It must be kept in mind that the intervention does not constitute an end in itself; rather, it is a means to action. It is not meant to result in final outcomes for youth, but rather to help them create their own path as autonomous adults. Analysis of quantitative data pointed to the importance of the PQJ’s role in guiding youth in their trajectory toward an adult lifestyle, over and above an actual move to living on one’s own or the securing of a job. Figure 5.1 shows that youth autonomy appears to have increased considerably over the course of the first five measurement periods. Furthermore, improvement was maintained at T6 and subsequently at the termination of services provided by the youth centers. Also, the upward trend seems to continue at T7.

Coupled with the results obtained while analyzing the personal attributes and identifying the risk factors for each youth participant, these findings demonstrate considerable improvement in candidate profiles over the course of time spent with PQJ. Thus, Figure 5.2 illustrates the decrease in the extent of risk factors and the increase in personal strengths over the first two time periods.

**Intervention attributes**

This intervention rests on establishing strong relationships between the youth and their educators, both because they stay involved on a long-term basis and will act as a major support in the transition process.
**Figure 5.1.** Evolution of youths’ average standardized ACLSA scores obtained by interviewing youth and the caregiver between T1 and T7

![Figure 5.1](image1)

**Figure 5.2.** Average score evolutions for profile seriousness and personal attributes for periods T1 through T4

![Figure 5.2](image2)

*Note:* Separate data for personal strengths at T5 do not exist. The line is established according to the mean results obtained for the other time periods.
This works against instabilities in the youth’s life. The intensity, durability, and adaptability of the PQJ intervention do not, however, signify that it alone can replace all other involvements in the youth’s life. The PQJ intervention process must also involve collaboration with professionals within or outside the youth centers. These results call for collaboration from an informal case management perspective that promotes intersectorial and interdisciplinary intervention as practitioners rely on the strengths and resources of youths and their networks.

For youth to develop toward autonomy, programs must be created within a network of services and include interdisciplinary approaches. Programs must also work from a perspective of encouraging social experimentation and allow youth to put into practice the abilities and the knowledge they have gained through the program. This is possible only if the youth center provides some room for youth experimentation, with a full appreciation that the process leading to independent living is full of obstacles and setbacks.

Intervention paradigms need to be blended without subscribing exclusively to protection, rehabilitation, or risk management and without inhibiting the development of competencies through experimentation, which is essential in the transition to adulthood. The youth recruited for the PQJ all appreciated their relationships with the program educators even though the program operated in a context where most of them were disassociated from their milieu. In this sense, the PQJ educator represents for the youth an external authority with a mandate for protection and rehabilitation, who is available, whom they can trust, and whom they can confide in with dignity and confidence. The PQJ educator is also closely connected to the youth center, thereby facilitating the youth’s process toward autonomy.

In this framework, the PQJ implementation represents an interesting model, because the program functions, both internally (in the youth center) and externally (with and in the community at large), which is essential if there is to be a real impact on youths’ integration. Thus, the project not only allows PQJ youth to pave their own way, but also allows youth centers to formulate an alternative intervention. PQJ offers opportunities for youth centers...
to engage in structured but broadly defined partnerships with community-based organizations. At the same time, it allows youth to enter the community while allowing the community to be considered at the core of the youth center. One effect of the implementation of this program is that the whole foster youth population can see staff as a whole becoming more sensitive to the issues involved in matters of their preparation for independent living.

For the most part, the PQJ program achieved positive results. It stimulated changes in youth center practices and paradigms so that youth can move out into independent living through the development of attributes that contribute to autonomous functioning. This work clears a path for reflection that can mobilize youth centers and their partners, to eliminate structural conditions that serve as obstacles to social reinsertion.

**Conclusion**

The results produced by PQJ have contributed to increased expertise regarding interventions for preparing foster youth for independent living and supporting their integration into adulthood. The ACJQ has recommended that the PQJ formula be gradually implemented in all Quebec youth centers. However, the PQJ will accept only five hundred youths into the program throughout the province of Quebec each year. Those who receive long-term services from youth centers will still experience significant gaps in preparation in relation to the development of a career plan and an autonomous adult lifestyle.

It is essential to offer more services to foster youth in general, so that the PQJ work can continue in the context of broader initiatives that focus on social development and a milieu approach. The evaluation of the PQJ has identified some key requirements for intervention, especially in relation to intervention strategies and clinical tools. It is also necessary to tackle region inequities that exist in relation to access to transition services for foster youth, as these services can contribute to social integration, a reduction in criminal behaviors, and the elimination of victimization among youth.
Notes
manency planning in the child welfare system. Ottawa: Sparrow Lake Alliance, Children in Limbo Task Force.


17. On the financial side, various ministries and Québécois organizations contributed: Ministry for the Health and the Social Services of Quebec, Funds of Fight Against Poverty by the Reintegration with Work, the Funds Youth Quebec as well as the centers’ youth participants. The financial contribution of the National Center for the Prevention of Crime (a federal program of the Ministry for Justice) made it possible to improve follow-up with the young people, including extending the project from one year to four years, ending in November 2005.


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