

BETTER SUPPORTING YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE IN QUEBEC:
A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

By

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Abstract

Every year, it is estimated that 2,000 youth in Quebec's child welfare system age out of care. Young people leaving care often face a number of complex challenges that make this transition period particularly difficult, such as pressures to rapidly conform to dominant ideals of 'adulthood', insufficient and inadequate support services, a lack of meaningful and supportive relationships, and the lasting impact of unresolved traumas faced during childhood and adolescence. These realities make them particularly susceptible to difficulties such as housing instability, unemployment, substance misuse, school attrition, mental health problems and poverty in adulthood. Although there has been growing recognition of the importance of providing post-majority services to better support youth as they age out of the foster care system in Quebec, such services continue to be largely insufficient to meet the diverse and evolving needs of this population. This major research project seeks to explore the experiences of youth as they age out of care in Quebec through a life course perspective, by adopting a theoretical and inductive approach to investigate the social, structural and relational factors emerging in the literature that act to shape their realities during this transition period. The method of thematic analysis was utilized in order to derive themes and patterns from a selected body of literature, comprising of 12 academic articles and gray literature discussing the experiences of youth leaving care in Quebec.

Keywords: youth, aging out of care, transition to adulthood, foster care, Quebec, Programme qualification jeunesse, life course perspective

Résumé

À chaque année, on estime que 2 000 jeunes quittent le système de protection de la jeunesse au Québec. Ces jeunes sont souvent confrontés à plusieurs enjeux complexes qui rendent cette période de transition particulièrement difficile, notamment les pressions qu'ils subissent pour se conformer rapidement aux idéaux dominants de l'« âge adulte », des services de soutien insuffisants et inadéquats, un manque de liens significatifs dans leurs réseaux et l'impact des traumatismes non résolus subis pendant l'enfance et l'adolescence. Ces réalités rendent ces jeunes susceptibles à des difficultés telles que l'instabilité du logement, le chômage, le mésusage de substances, le décrochage scolaire, les problèmes de santé mentale et la pauvreté lorsqu'ils deviennent adultes. Bien que l'on reconnaisse de plus en plus l'importance d'offrir des services post-majoritaires pour mieux soutenir les jeunes lorsqu'ils quittent le système de protection de la jeunesse au Québec, ces services demeurent largement insuffisants pour répondre aux besoins divers et changeants de cette population. Ce projet de recherche vise à explorer les expériences des jeunes qui quittent un placement au Québec à travers une perspective de parcours de vie, en adoptant une approche théorique et inductive pour examiner les facteurs sociaux, structurels et relationnels qui émergent dans la littérature et qui contribuent à façonner leurs expériences durant cette période de transition. La méthode d'analyse thématique a été utilisée afin de dégager des thèmes et des modèles à partir d'un corpus de littérature sélectionné, comprenant 12 articles académiques et de la littérature grise discutant des expériences des jeunes quittant un placement en protection de la jeunesse au Québec.

Mots clés : jeunes, protection de la jeunesse, transition à la vie adulte, Québec, Programme qualification jeunesse, perspective du parcours de vie

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CISSS: Centre intégré de santé et de services sociaux

CIUSSS: Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux

EDJeP: Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés

PQJ: Programme Qualification Jeunesse

INTRODUCTION

Context

In the province of Quebec, it is estimated that 2,000 of the 12,000 youth in the child welfare system ‘age out’ of care every year (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021). The notion of ‘aging out’ of foster care, also widely referred to in the literature as ‘transitioning out of care’ or ‘exiting care’, is defined as the process in which a young person is discharged from government-managed child and family services once they reach the age of majority identified in the provincial child welfare legislation that governs the delivery of such services (Doucet, 2020a; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013). The process of exiting care as a young person generally involves leaving a temporary government placement, such as a foster family or youth center, where they previously resided for a period of time. This process also often involves the loss of access to vital services and supports, such as access to shelter, food, financial support, physical and mental health services, as well as access to the support of social workers and other youth workers (Laurent et al., 2021). This leaves young people in such circumstances with little to no resources and support as they make the transition to independent living and increasingly take on adult roles and responsibilities, such as finishing school, participating in the labor market and living on their own (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013).

Research, however, has demonstrated that young people in recent decades are taking much longer than those in previous generations to take on roles and responsibilities traditionally associated with adulthood, such as those previously presented (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). This has caused the transition process to adulthood to deviate significantly from its conventional pathway and become increasingly gradual, de-standardized and

individualized, involving more lengthy and non-linear movements between the norms widely associated with youth and adulthood (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013). Despite this new reality, the process of leaving foster care in Quebec, as well as the expectations placed on youth during this transition period, remain largely centered around dominant age-based norms surrounding adulthood (Doucet, 2020a; Laurent et al., 2021). These, however, do not consider the unique and diverse realities, resources, needs and readiness (emotional and financial) that exists among these youth (Doucet, 2020a; Laurent et al., 2021). Moreover, young people that have experienced a foster care placement often also face greater challenges than their peers in their transition to independent living due to a number of complex factors, such as a lack of adequate support services, a lack of meaningful and supportive relationships and the impacts of traumas faced during childhood, which make them particularly susceptible to difficulties such as homelessness, housing instability, unemployment, substance misuse, school attrition, mental health problems, incarceration and poverty (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017).

Although there has been growing recognition of the importance of providing post-majority care to better support youth and their diverse needs as they age out of the child welfare system in Quebec, as outlined in the *Commission spéciale sur les droits des enfants et la protection de la jeunesse* led by Laurent et al. (2021), such services continue to be largely lacking (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Public Safety Canada, 2015). Furthermore, the majority of the existing supports in the province have highly restrictive admissibility criteria and are generally limited to youth with clearly defined plans to pursue post-secondary studies, those deemed to be more significantly ‘at-risk’ of negative developmental outcomes than their peers, or those residing in specific regions of Quebec (Bussièrès et al., 2015; Centre intégré de santé et de services sociaux

de la Montérégie Est [CISSS de la Montérégie-Est], 2020; Centre intégré de santé et des services sociaux de l'Outaouais [CISSS de l'Outaouais], 2017; Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2022; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Sansone et al., 2020). It is estimated, for example, that only 820 of the 2,000 young people that age out of care every year in Quebec benefit from the services offered through the *Programme Qualification Jeunesse*, the only national program in the province that supports foster youth past the age of majority (Laurent et al., 2021). This unfortunate reality leaves many young people that fall outside of these rigid eligibility criteria in major service gaps (Bussièrès et al., 2015; Goyette et al., 2022; Laurent et al., 2021).

Research Question and Objectives

There is currently a lack of research pertaining to the diversified experiences and outcomes of youth aging out of care in Quebec, particularly holistic and multidimensional research that analyzes the complex social, relational, economic and historical factors, at multiple levels, that shape the realities of youth as they transition out of the child welfare system. Moreover, there is a significant lack of data on the long-term outcomes of youth that have a history of foster care placement (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). In order to address this research and data gap, this major research project seeks to explore the experiences of youth as they age out of care in the province of Quebec through the lens of the life course perspective, by investigating a multitude of factors and barriers that act to shape their realities during this transition period. The three objectives guiding this research project include: (1) exploring the social, structural and relational factors that shape young people's transition out of the foster care system, based on major themes emerging in the literature; (2) describing the impacts of these factors on the outcomes of youth after a foster care placement; and (3) proposing recommendations to address the challenges faced by young people during this transition period. This will be accomplished through an analysis of existing

literature that explores the realities of youth leaving foster care at the age of majority in the province of Quebec, as well as the analysis of discourses and narratives of youth, when this data is available.

Structure

This major research paper is composed of a total of seven chapters. The first chapter, *theoretical framework*, defines and describes the theoretical framework, namely the life course perspective, which was utilized in the context of this research to analyze the data collected from the selected body of literature, through an overview of its early roots and history, its five core principles and its significance to the topic under study. Additionally, the second chapter, *methodology*, describes the qualitative methodology that was utilized in order to collect and analyze research data for this study, including the key words, boolean operators and inclusion criteria used to search academic databases, the articles retained for analysis and the steps followed to conduct a thematic analysis of the data.

The three following chapters (chapters III, IV and V) explore and analyze the social, structural and relational factors that shape youth experiences as they transition out of the foster care system in Quebec, based on major themes that have emerged during the data analysis process. More specifically, the third chapter, *socio-historical and geographical location*, investigates the dominant discourses and social expectations surrounding youth aging out of care, as well as the notions of ‘independence’ and ‘adulthood’. The fourth chapter, *variability*, explores the various programs and services that currently exist in the province of Quebec to support youth through this transition period. Finally, the fifth chapter, *linked lives*, examines the role that formal and informal relationships play in supporting or hindering the transition process.

The sixth chapter, *lifespan development*, investigates the impacts of the previously identified factors and barriers on the outcomes of youth previously in care. This includes, more

specifically, an analysis of the impacts of the traumatic experiences of youth with a history of foster care placement in childhood, adolescence and young adulthood on outcomes in later life.

Finally, recommendations are proposed and discussed in the seventh chapter, based on the transversal themes outlined in the previous chapters, to better address the challenges faced by youth in Quebec as they transition out of the child welfare system.

CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Theoretical Framework

1.1.1 Life Course Perspective

The purpose of this research project is to better understand the experiences of youth in Quebec as they transition out of the child welfare system. More specifically, this research project will explore the social, structural and relational factors that shape this transition period, as well as the impacts of these factors on the life trajectories and outcomes of youth that have experienced a placement in the foster care system. This will be accomplished through the presentation and analysis of the themes emerging in the literature through a life course perspective.

The notion of the ‘life course’ refers to both a concept and a theoretical perspective. As a concept, the ‘life course’ is defined as a collection of age-based roles, expectations and norms that an individual may confront as they progress through their life, from birth to death (Mitchell, 2003; White & Wu, 2014). The life course perspective is also a theoretical framework through which one can interpret how environments and various social forces influence human development, as well as the creation of life patterns and trajectories (White & Wu, 2014; Wulczyn, 2020).

The life course perspective, also known as the ‘life course approach’ or ‘life course theory’, has its roots in the field of sociology (White & Wu, 2014). It has also been widely used and adapted to other disciplines, however, such as medicine, psychology and social work (White & Wu, 2014). Applications of the components of the life course approach, such as a focus on variability in age patterns, developmental effects and the implications of historical change, can be traced back to the twentieth century (Mitchell, 2003). In the 1960s, researchers from an array of social science disciplines began to examine various aspects of life course themes, which included the significance of aging, development and cohorts (also known as ‘age groups’) in an attempt to better understand

the relationships that existed between individuals and social change (Mitchell, 2003). Continuing into the 1970s and 1980s, researchers advanced their exploration of the central themes of the approach by concentrating their attention on historical changes in life patterns, the impacts of experiences in the life course on well-being and the interconnected transitions of family members, among other themes (Mitchell, 2003).

As the end of the twentieth century approached, the life course perspective was considered to be an 'emerging paradigm', as a distinctive theory and research method (Mitchell, 2003). The paradigm began experiencing formal advancement in the behavioral sciences, namely through the works of Glen Elder (Mitchell, 2003). This occurred during the 1990s, a period which was characterized by rapid social change and an aging population (Mitchell, 2003). This period drew particular attention to the complexity and historical influences of the processes underlying the evolution and continuity of families (Mitchell, 2003). Moreover, advances in statistical techniques during the 1990s also fostered an increase in studies that attempted to understand life courses, which influenced the development of new methodologies for the analysis of longitudinal data (Mitchell, 2003). It is possible to draw a number of similarities between the life course perspective and Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, which also recognizes the influence that social context plays in shaping human behavior and development (White & Wu, 2014). The life course perspective, however, also takes into consideration the impacts of the timing of changes that occur on one's life experiences (White & Wu, 2014).

The life course approach is a multidisciplinary paradigm used in the exploration of the lives of individuals, structural contexts and social change (Mitchell, 2003). It recognizes that all of the stages of an individual's life are intertwined with each other, the lives of others and the contexts in which they take place (Mitchell, 2003; World Health Organization, 2018). Although the approach has its roots in the field of sociology, it encompasses ideas from a diversity of other disciplines,

such as history, developmental psychology, biology and economics (Mitchell, 2003). The approach puts forward the connections that exist between the lives of individuals and the social, economic, political, geographic and historical context in which they unfold, with a particular emphasis on the importance of the role of time and meaning on development (Mitchell, 2003; White & Wu, 2014). The life course perspective, thus, reflects the intersection that exists between individual lives and environmental factors, in order to explore or understand various phenomena, such as family, health, well-being, inequities and social problems (Mitchell, 2003; World Health Organization, 2018).

1.1.2 Principles of the Life Course Perspective

There are five principles which are central to the life course perspective. The first, socio-historical and geographical location, emphasizes the role that time and place, as well as the conditions or events that occur within them, play in shaping the developmental trajectories of individuals (Black et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003). This can include, for example, geopolitical or economic events and social or cultural ideologies, which can shape individual's perceptions and the decisions that they make, altering the course of their development (Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Mitchell, 2003). Although these events or social phenomena may be lived relatively uniformly by all members of a given population, their repercussions are not experienced in the same way by all individuals and groups (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). Mitchell (2003) explains that individual behavior and choices do not exist in a vacuum and are largely formed by interactions within the socio-historical time and place in which they occur. Taking these factors into consideration allows researchers to better understand how time, place and events affect people's lives (Mitchell, 2003).

Variability, the second principle of the life course perspective, indicates that, despite common variables shared between a given group of people or population, such as age, this does

not necessarily imply that there are shared perspectives or realities (Mitchell, 2003). Age groups (also known as ‘cohorts’) are not homogeneous and there exists significant variability and diversity in terms of life circumstances or identity factors, such as gender, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation and religion, that impact the life course (Mitchell, 2003). One’s movement through the life course and their ability to adapt to change can vary depending on their access to a variety of resources or supports, including economic, cultural or social capital (Mitchell, 2003). This can include, for example, access to wealth, education, meaningful relationships or familial support (Mitchell, 2003).

The third principle, linked lives, posits that individual lives are not lived in isolation from the lives of others and, rather, that they are experienced interdependently (Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Mitchell, 2003). The actions and choices of individuals are, thus, significantly influenced by those in their environment (e.g. parents, family members, friends, peers, etc.) and these actions also act to influence the lives of others (Marshall & Mueller, 2003).

Lifespan development, the fourth principle, emphasizes the importance of the role that the past plays in shaping the future (Black et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003). According to the life course perspective, it is believed that the conditions, situations or outcomes encountered by individuals in later life are significantly impacted by earlier life course decisions, opportunities and conditions (Black et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003). This implies that the past can be a significant contributor to outcomes such as socioeconomic status, health and well-being (Mitchell, 2003). Earlier experiences and the meanings attached to them are believed to be carried into new situations, allowing links to be made between events and experiences in earlier life (e.g. childhood and adolescence) and those that occur in adulthood or later life (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). The impacts of events and phenomena are also intrinsically linked to the timing (when) and the sequence in which life events or situations occur in a person’s life (Marshall & Mueller, 2003).

Finally, the fifth principle of human agency considers individuals to be active agents in their lives, with the ability to engage in planful competence and make choices or set goals in their best interest, in relation to their environment and social relationships (Mitchell, 2003). It is recognized in the life course perspective, however, that an individual's ability to make choices can be significantly limited by the opportunities available to them and the constraints of the circumstances or environment in which they exist (Mitchell, 2003). Due to the time and scope limitations of this study, the principle of human agency will not be explored in the context of this major research paper.

Other key elements that are crucial to understanding the experiences of individuals through a life course perspective are the notions of trajectories and transitions, which are closely related (Black et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003). A trajectory is believed to be a path of change or a series of connected states in human development that occurs over an extended period of time (Black et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003). Trajectories can include, for example, education, work, parenting or marriage. A transition, on the other hand, is a change or event that occurs within a given trajectory and it is often associated with the addition or loss of roles (Black et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2003). This can include, for example, a divorce, changing jobs, graduating or becoming a parent.

1.1.3 Life Course Perspective on Aging Out of Care

Central to the life course perspective is the idea that human development and individual experiences are directly impacted by factors, such as continuity, change, social structures and relationships, which are largely influenced by time and place (Black et al., 2009). Viewing aging out of care as a transition within the full life course, therefore, can improve our understanding of the experience as it is lived by youth (Johnson et al., 2011). Since the life course perspective posits that an individual's development is a lifelong process and that no life stage can be understood in

isolation from another, it is important to look at a the interconnection of a number of factors and contexts as they occur through time, such as an individual's lived experiences in childhood and adolescence, social changes, historical contexts, socioeconomic conditions, social roles and relationships, in order to comprehend the realities and experiences of youth leaving foster care (Horrocks, 2002; Johnson et al., 2011). Understanding youth's experiences as they transition out of foster care, therefore, requires an exploration of a multitude of these factors and the various ways in which they interconnect.

CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

2.1 Significance of the Study

There is currently a significant lack of research and data pertaining to the outcomes of youth as they age out of the foster care system, which is a reality that affects the province of Quebec, as well as the rest of Canada. This data gap makes it very challenging to understand the complex needs of youth leaving foster care and the long-term impacts that foster care involvement can have on individuals. This can, consequently, make it difficult to develop initiatives and programs to adequately support them during this transition period.

This research project seeks to address this data gap, by exploring a variety of qualitative sources that analyze and explore the experiences of foster youth in Quebec's child welfare system, in order to better understand their realities and the challenges that they face as they transition out of care. This lack of data highlights the important need for further research on this subject, which could support the development of improved services and intervention practices that meet the diverse needs of youth as they age out of care.

2.2 Position of the Researcher

My motivation to research this topic stems largely from my work as an intervention worker with adolescents, in a youth shelter for young people experiencing homelessness, housing instability or familial difficulties, as well as in a secondary school, alongside youth experiencing mental health and interpersonal difficulties. Both of these experiences provided me with an opportunity to directly observe the impacts that foster care involvement and the lack of accessible support services can have on the well-being of youth. My interest in this research topic was also largely inspired by my work in social policy pertaining to child and family services for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth and families across Canada. This experience has highlighted the

importance of taking the time to explore the diverse realities of young people in the development of legislation, policies, programs and other initiatives that seek to meet their complex needs. Neglecting to explore the diversified realities and challenges faced by youth and their families can result in the development of initiatives that are disconnected from reality, which can have negative impacts on their well-being or further contribute to their difficulties.

My research project was also inspired by previous research that I have conducted on this topic. Throughout my past research surrounding the process of aging out of foster care, I have come to observe that many Canadian provinces and territories have little to no support available to youth leaving the child welfare system. This remains the current reality in Quebec, despite efforts that have been made in previous decades to develop more programs to support young people. Although the Government of Quebec has increasingly recognized the importance of providing post-majority care, which can be observed in initiatives such as *la Loi modifiant la Loi sur la protection de la jeunesse et d'autres dispositions législatives* (Bill 15) and the *Commission spéciale sur les droits des enfants et la protection de la jeunesse*, the majority of youth leaving foster care still find themselves in a major service gap during this transition (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022b; National Assembly of Quebec, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021). This has led these youth to experience increased difficulties in education, health, employment, poverty, housing and criminal justice (Doucet, 2020a; Kovarikova, 2017; Laurent et al., 2021; Rebbe et al., 2017; Sukumaran, 2021). The experiences of youth aging out of care, however, are extremely diverse. They are largely influenced by complex factors, such as socio-historical contexts, socioeconomic conditions, access to services, relationships, trauma and more, which I seek to further explore in this research project.

2.3 Data Collection Process

This research utilizes a theoretical approach, which does not involve research participants, due to the time constraints associated with this major research project. The body of literature used in this research consists of mixed sources. This includes sources such as academic articles and gray literature (e.g. government reports, master’s dissertations and reports published by reputable organizations). The sources utilized in this research were found on Google Scholar, which provided access to several other databases, such as Érudit, Cairn, Academic Search Complete, Springer and JSTOR. The search for sources was conducted in both English and French, with the use of a variation of the key words and boolean operators from the list found in Table 1. Moreover, the ‘cited by’ function in Google Scholar was also utilized, as it provided connections to other literature that cited relevant articles in their bibliographies.

Table 1: Keywords and Boolean Operators Used in Database Searches

Language	Keywords and Boolean Operators
English	<i>“youth protection” OR “child welfare” OR “child protection” OR “child services”</i>
	AND
	<i>“aging out” OR transition OR passage OR trajector*</i>
	AND
	<i>quebec*</i>
	AND
	<i>qualitative OR interview OR narrative</i>

Language	Keywords and Boolean Operators
French	<i>“protection de la jeunesse” OU “protection de l’enfance” OU dpj OU “centres jeunesse”</i>
	ET
	<i>transition OU passage OU trajectoire</i>
	ET
	<i>québec*</i>
	ET
	<i>qualitatif OU entrevue OU entretien OU récit</i>

In Canada, child welfare services and legislation are governed by the provinces and territories, except where Indigenous child and family service laws or self-government agreements with such clauses apply. The maximum age at which youth are eligible to receive such services is, therefore, determined by these provincial and territorial legislations (Doucet, 2020a; Gouvernement du Québec, 2022a, 2022b; Public Safety Canada, 2015; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019; Rutman et al., 2007; Sukumaran, 2021). Moreover, the provincial and territorial support services accessible to youth and their families differ significantly across the country. Given that the structure of the child welfare system, youth protection laws and services are unique to each province and territory in which youth and their families are located, the documentary sources utilized in this research paper were limited to those pertaining to foster youth in the province of Quebec only. This allows for a better understanding of the unique experiences and realities of

youth exiting foster care in this specific province. Some of these documentary sources, however, were further supported by sources from other provinces in Canada, where relevant.

Furthermore, the sources retained in this research project were limited to literature published after 2006. The Dumais Committee, which began its mandate in 2003, was a committee of experts that was appointed by the Government of Quebec with the purpose of analyzing existing difficulties in the application of the *Youth Protection Act* in the province (Dumais et al., 2004; Goubau, 2014). The report produced by this committee drew attention to the increasing number of cases in youth protection, as well as the importance of stability and continuity of care provided to children (Dumais et al., 2004; Goubau, 2014). The report also highlighted the importance of developing permanent life projects for each child in care and setting time limits for intervention with families (Dumais et al., 2004; Goubau, 2014). This report, along with the influence of similar changes made in the United States and the rest of Canada, shaped the modification of the *Youth Protection Act* of Quebec in 2006 (Goubau, 2014). These new provisions sustained the priority of children remaining within their family as the primary goal of the Act, however, it now imposed time limits on child welfare interventions, after which a permanent living plan must be implemented for a child whose development and safety were deemed to be compromised (Goubau, 2014). These modifications to Quebec's *Youth Protection Act* in 2006 emphasized the notions of stability, relationships and the importance of permanency in youth, consequently acting to modify the manner in which child welfare is addressed in the province (Goubau, 2014). The core documentary sources used in this research, therefore, were limited to those published after this period, in order to have a more accurate depiction of the realities faced by youth and children that have experienced child welfare placements in Quebec.

With the use of the previously identified key words and inclusion criteria, a total of 1,160 French articles and 6,660 English articles emerged from searches on Google Scholar. In order to

limit the total number of articles, the articles retained were selected from the first 3 pages of the search results, based on their relevance to the research topic, which was determined after reading the summary and skimming through the first few pages of each article. The ‘cited by’ feature was also used to find other related sources pertaining to the research topic. A total of 12 documents were retained as the core body literature, from which patterns and themes were identified and analyzed. Table 2 depicts the category and quantity of the sources that were retained for this research. In addition to these core documents, further sources were added to the body of literature, following the completion of the data analysis step, where information on certain themes emerging from the core body of literature was deemed unclear or insufficient.

Table 2: Categories and Quantity of Core Sources Retained

Category	Number of documents
Government reports	3
Academic articles	8
Dissertations or theses	1
TOTAL	12

2.4 Methodology

2.4.1 Characteristics of the Thematic Analysis

Since the purpose of this research project is to better understand the experiences of youth in Quebec as they transition out of the foster care system, the use of a qualitative methodology is most appropriate, as it emphasizes the exploration of individual experiences, emotions,

worldviews, perceptions, assumptions and realities in the understanding of a given social phenomenon (Azungah, 2018). Further, an inductive approach is also utilized in this research, which involves the extraction of key concepts and themes from a body of data that is related to the research question (Azungah, 2018). The researcher does not begin with predetermined themes or a grid for analyzing the data corpus and, rather, the themes emerge from the data (Azungah, 2018). In this approach, the research findings are influenced by the research question, which is outlined prior to the data analysis process (Azungah, 2018).

This research project utilizes the method of thematic analysis in order to derive themes and patterns from a selected body of literature on the experiences of youth aging out of foster care in Quebec. This analysis was conducted with the objective of identifying major themes surrounding different social, structural and relational factors and challenges that influence the process of exiting foster care, in an attempt to better understand the experiences of these youth.

The purpose of conducting a thematic analysis is to identify and analyze patterns or themes that exist within a body of qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Lochmiller, 2021; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The central process in a thematic analysis of research data is *thematization*, where researchers identify and organize themes and subthemes in a data set, which can then be used as units of analysis (Labra et al., 2019). These identified patterns or themes are then used to make reflections about a given research question or issue, such as youth aging out of care (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). A thematic analysis, however, is more than merely summarizing the contents of a set of qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Rather, it attempts to interpret and make sense of it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). A thematic analysis is an appropriate method for researchers that seek to understand the experiences of individuals, groups or populations from a set of data, much like this research project seeks to do (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

According to Clarke and Braun (2013), the method of thematic analysis is theoretically flexible, as the exploration and analysis of patterns or themes in a body of data does not require the researcher to adhere to any particular theory or epistemological framework for the interpretation of data. The method can also be applied to a scope of different research questions and sample sizes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Furthermore, there are two levels of themes in a thematic analysis. The first level, semantic themes, involves the surface meaning of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). With these themes, the researcher limits their interpretation to what is being said and does not look beyond this explicit meaning (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The second level, latent themes, involves investigating beyond what is being said in the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher, rather, identifies and examines the underlying meaning, ideas and assumptions that may be hidden beyond the explicit data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

2.4.2 Steps of the Thematic Analysis

There are six steps to conducting a thematic analysis. This process is not linear and is, rather, a recursive process, with phases that can be revisited or repeated as needed (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The first step of the thematic analysis is for the researcher to familiarize themselves with the body of data (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Once the data corpus for the research project has been selected, the researcher must conduct a preliminary review of the literature, in order to familiarize themselves with the data within each source (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this first phase, notes must be taken of relevant information, such as key terms or concepts and quotations pertinent to the research objective, and the researcher must take note of any initial observations about the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The second step of a thematic analysis is the generation of initial codes or labels, where the researcher organizes important data related to the research question in a meaningful and

systematic way (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this phase, the data is reduced into smaller pieces of meaning (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In the following step, the search for themes, the initial codes that were previously established are grouped into broader categories or themes based on their similarities and their significance to the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), a theme is defined as a “pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question” (p. 3356) and the themes identified during this process must be mutually exclusive.

The fourth step of the thematic analysis involves a review of the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This involves, more specifically, the process of reviewing, adjusting and further developing the preliminary themes that were identified in the previous step in order to determine whether they make sense in the context of the entire set of data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this phase, the researcher must take the time to clearly define the nature of the themes identified, as well as the relationships between them, and consider whether the data supports the existence of these themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This process can also involve the creation of sub-themes, as well as the collapsing, splitting or discarding of themes, when appropriate (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

The fifth step, defining and naming themes, involves the process of refining, naming and writing a detailed analysis of each theme identified in the data corpus (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this phase, the researcher should also take the time to identify the ‘essence’ of each theme, which includes, for example, their meaning and how they interact with one another, to the main theme and to the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Finally, the sixth and final step of a thematic analysis is the writing process, which is the end point of the research, and involves the production of a report, article or dissertation where one reflects on the identified themes and their significance to the research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this stage, a researcher must take the time to develop an analytic narrative and tell a story about the themes and sub-themes identified in the data set, as well as contextualize them in existing literature surrounding the social issue or the topic of the research (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

2.4.3 Emerging Themes

Following the steps of the thematic analysis with the selected core body of literature, a total of four overarching themes were identified and used to regroup the sub-themes presented in this research paper: (1) socio-historical and geographic location, (2) variability, (3) linked lives and (4) lifespan development.

2.5 Limitations of the Study and Ethical Considerations

Given my background in regard to this research topic, I acknowledge that it is possible that these past experiences taint my view of this research topic. I also recognize that, as researchers, we can never fully be objective, as the data that we collect is interpreted through our perspective and lived experiences. Furthermore, as a white woman from a middle-class family, I recognize that my privileges and worldviews can impact the manner in which I interpret the data collected through this research, as well as the manner in which I perceive the experiences and realities of youth. A major challenge that I will face in my research will, thus, be to adequately represent the voices and experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care in Quebec.

During the data analysis process, maintaining a critical and self-reflective perspective will be integral to my research. As discussed by Labra et al. (2019), during the process of data analysis,

it can be extremely difficult for researchers to set aside their previous knowledge on the subject under study, which can have an influence on the thematization and categorization of research data. Although it is unrealistic to believe that my personal biases and experiences will have no impact on my research, I will ensure that I take frequent steps back during the data interpretation process in order to question my position and reflect on the themes that I have identified in the data corpus, as well as the manner in which I have decided which components or excerpts are significant or not (Labra et al., 2019).

Further, the current study is a theoretical research project, which utilizes secondary data gathered from a corpus of academic articles and grey literature, and not an empirical research project, which utilizes data collected from participants through methods such as interviews, observations or other research methods, to explore a research topic. As this data collection method does not directly gather data from research participants, this can pose some challenges in regards to accurately representing the voices of the populations directly concerned and affected by the social issue being explored. Moreover, this factor, in addition to the small scale of this research project, also poses limitations in regards to the generalizability of the study and research findings. While certain realities and experiences depicted in the literature may be shared by a number of youth aging out of foster care, it cannot be assumed that they are shared by all youth exiting care in the province of Quebec or across Canada.

CHAPTER III: SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Through a life course perspective, the study of youth as they transition out of the child welfare system must be understood in the historical time and place in which these transitions occur (Elder, 2003). As individuals in a given society live their lives in distinct social, cultural, economic and political contexts, any attempt to understand their unique experiences must consider the influence of these contexts, as well as the conditions or events that occur within them (Black et al., 2009; Elder, 2003; Mitchell, 2003). According to Elder (2003), historical times and places are in constant evolution. These changing contexts consequently shape human development and the manner in which individuals live their lives (Elder, 2003). The emerging themes discussed in this section demonstrate the role that dominant social and cultural ideologies and discourses, such as societal expectations towards adulthood, play in shaping the trajectories of youth as they transition out of foster care.

3.1 Societal Expectations of Youth Transitions to Adulthood

The literature surrounding child welfare in the province of Quebec largely associates the notion of ‘adulthood’ with the attainment of the age of majority identified in the province’s *Civil Code*, enacted in 1991 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022a, 2022b). Prior to attaining this established age of majority, a young person under the *Youth Protection Act* is considered by law to be a ‘child’, with a right to protection, security and attention, as well as a right to have decisions made in their best interest (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022b). Once the identified age of majority is attained, a young person ceases to be a ‘child’ (or minor) and can fully exercise all of their civil rights, such as the right to vote or own property (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022a, 2022b). During this period, the individual’s protection, security and well-being shifts from being perceived as the

responsibility of the state or collective, to the responsibility of the individual. It is assumed that an ‘adult’, at the age of eighteen, is capable of living independently, caring for themselves and acting in their own best interest. In the literature, therefore, it can be identified that the notion of ‘adulthood’, as a distinct period in one’s lifespan, is primarily associated with age-based factors, such as the attainment of the age of majority outlined in provincial legislation (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022a, 2022b; Goyette et al., 2022; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017).

3.1.1 Indicators of Adulthood

Beyond age-based factors, the literature discussing the notion of ‘adulthood’ as a life period also identifies an individual’s ability to live independently of their parents, family or guardian as a major indicator of the successful attainment of this life stage (Gauthier, 2018; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). This is further defined as the ability to be financially self-sufficient, which consists of having an adequate and stable income in order to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter and other material needs (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette et al., 2022; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). The literature also identifies the ability to care for oneself by means of basic life skills as a crucial component of independence and self-sufficiency, which can include abilities such as planning and following a budget, cleaning after oneself and preparing meals (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette et al., 2022; Laurent et al., 2021). In addition, the act of moving out of a family home and into an independent dwelling, whether by means of renting or buying property, is another factor deemed essential to the achievement of ‘adulthood’ (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021).

Socio-professional insertion is also identified in the literature as a major indicator to the successful attainment of ‘adulthood’ (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette et al., 2022; Laurent et al., 2021;

Marion et al., 2017). This generally involves one's integration into the labor market and the obtention of stable employment, which is often accomplished through the completion of a degree, such as a secondary or post-secondary (i.e. trade, collegial, undergraduate or graduate) education, in view of developing the skills and competencies necessary to enter the workforce (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021). This indicator is also a significant factor in the acquisition of financial independence (Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021). Finally, the literature also identifies relationships as a central component to the successful attainment of 'adulthood' (Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021). This generally involves entry into a stable long-term relationship with an intimate partner, marriage and parenthood (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021).

As demonstrated in the literature, there is great emphasis on the notions of autonomy and civic engagement as central components of this life period, stressing the importance of being entirely self-sufficient, both financially and in regards to basic life skills, as well as the importance of contributing to society through education and participation in the labor market (Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). These common indicators of 'adulthood' emerging in the literature place significant emphasis on a linear pathway to adulthood, through the identification of key milestones that must be met in order for an individual to be considered an 'adult' in Quebec.

3.1.2 Desynchronization of Transitions to Adulthood

Although there is no recognition of an age-based period between youth and adulthood in provincial child welfare legislation in Quebec, this transition is identified in the body of literature as a critical developmental period in one's lifespan (Gouvernement du Québec, 2022b; Laurent et

al., 2021; Rutman et al., 2007). It is perceived as an unstable and high stress time in which young people progressively appropriate themselves with their power over their lives, while gradually building their autonomy and shaping their identity (Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017).

In recent decades, the path to adulthood has largely deviated from its traditional course, which was previously understood as a linear process with conventional goals (e.g. finishing school, finding a job, moving out, having children, etc.), to a de-standardized, individualized and gradual process involving non-linear movements between the norms widely associated with youth and adulthood (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Marion et al., 2017). Finishing school or living in independent housing, for example, are traditional markers of 'adulthood' that now occur much later than in previous generations, prior to the 21st century (Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). Furthermore, young people are more likely to experience back and forths between the roles and responsibilities traditionally associated with 'adulthood', as well as de-standardized pathways, such as going back to school after working for a number of years or moving back into a family home after time spent in independent housing, travelling or living abroad for work or studies (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). These deviations from the socio-cultural norms of entry into adulthood observed in recent decades in Quebec have been referred to by Goyette and Frenchon (2013) as the prolongation of youth and the desynchronization of transitions to adulthood.

The literature identifies two major emerging factors that have greatly impacted this prolongation of youth, namely the transformation of the labor market and the extended duration of time spent pursuing education (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Laurent et al., 2021). Transformations in the labor market in recent decades have caused increased job insecurity

and precariousness for young people, creating challenges for the attainment of stable income and employment (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021). Furthermore, young people entering the labor market also face higher demands in regards to education than in previous generations, which has consequently caused increased delays in the completion of schooling for youth in order to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to enter the workforce and pursue career goals (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Laurent et al., 2021).

According to the International Labour Organization (2020), the challenges faced by young people during this transition period have been further amplified by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused greater instability in regards to employment and education. Since 2020, the pandemic has had disastrous effects on young people, in the province of Quebec and around the world, by limiting job opportunities, increasing job instability and jeopardizing career prospects (International Labour Organization, 2020; Labesse et al., 2021). Many young people that were employed prior to the pandemic were forced to stop working altogether, particularly affecting young workers between the ages of 18 and 24 in clerical, sales and skilled trade occupations, as well as those in low-wage service sectors such as accommodation and food services (International Labour Organization, 2020; Labesse et al., 2021). Furthermore, the total number of hours worked by young people decreased significantly during this period, causing a decline in their overall earnings (International Labour Organization, 2020). These prolonged work interruptions and job losses over the course of the pandemic also further contributed to the situation of housing instability faced by a number of young people who reside predominantly in rental housing (Labesse et al., 2021). During this period, many young people impacted by widespread job losses and rising rents faced increasing food insecurity, residential instability and difficulty meeting other

basic needs, as housing costs grew to represent the largest share of their expenditures (Labesse et al., 2021).

These social and economic realities have caused many young people to reside with their parents for longer periods of time and rely more heavily on their guidance and financial support (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Marion et al., 2017; Sukumaran, 2021). Across Canada, for example, it is estimated that nearly 60% of young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 still live with their parents (Sukumaran, 2021). Due to the prolongation of this transition period between youth and adulthood, it is increasingly referred to in the literature as a time of identity exploration and development (Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017). Marcotte et al. (2019), more specifically, make reference to ‘radical modernity’ and ‘reflective modernity’ in the 21st century as concepts that force individuals to work on themselves, plan for the future and develop their sense of belonging in view of building a stable and coherent identity which will set the precedent for their adult life. During this life stage, young people progressively develop their independence by slowly taking on more adult roles and responsibilities, as they shape the person they want to become (Arnett, 2000; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017).

3.2 Realities of Youth Leaving Care

The analyzed body of literature identifies that youth leaving foster care at the age of majority in Quebec experience more significant hardships during this period of transition to adulthood, in comparison to their peers in the general population, as they face greater institutional pressure to rapidly become autonomous and take on roles and responsibilities associated with adulthood (Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017). Moreover, youth aging out of foster care have also been found to be less equipped for this difficult transition than their same-aged

counterparts, due to a lack of preparatory services, access to resources and stable support network (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017).

In the province of Quebec, youth in foster care are able to remain in their placement until they reach the legal age of majority (Laurent et al., 2021). At the age of 18, however, they are required to leave this placement, unless they are in the process of completing their general secondary education (Laurent et al., 2021). In addition, the majority of existing support services for foster youth in Quebec come to an abrupt stop at the legal age of majority, without consideration of the individual's ability and capacity to live independently without access to these support services (Laurent et al., 2021). These service cut-offs further amplify the challenges faced by young people as they transition out of the child welfare system and into independent living (Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). In their research on the role of relationships and social networks in youth transitions to adulthood, Marion et al. (2017) noted that:

Such accelerated transitions [to adulthood] are often described as *instant adulthood*, and for youth leaving care, this not only includes the requirement to live independently, but also removes them from the emotional and personalized support they may have received while in care. (p. 1)

The final report of the *Commission spéciale sur les droits des enfants et la protection de la jeunesse* in Quebec, led by Laurent et al. (2021) also emphasizes the lack of continuity of support that youth previously in care face during this crucial transition period:

Pour réussir leur transition vers la vie adulte, les jeunes en besoin de protection sont de loin plus vulnérables que la moyenne québécoise. Ils ont des besoins plus importants et ne sont souvent pas prêts à vivre de façon autonome. [...] D'ailleurs, la continuité des services offerts par le système de protection de la jeunesse n'est pas assurée lorsqu'ils atteignent la majorité. (p. 266)

This report goes on to further describe the challenges faced by a young person leaving care in the province of Quebec regarding the continuity of care, who explained that, “le jour de mes dix-huit (18) ans, j’ai perdu mon éducatrice de réinsertion sociale et ma travailleuse sociale au cours de mon processus en appartement supervisé” (Laurent et al., 2021, p. 265). Under these conditions, youth aging out of care are forced, upon their eighteenth birthday, to rapidly become autonomous with little to no external support, in contrast to the generalized pattern of prolongation of youth that has been documented in the general population in recent decades (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the literature also identifies that young people with a history of foster care rarely receive adequate preparation for independent living, in addition to facing a discontinuity between youth and adult support services (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Royer, 2009; Laurent et al., 2021). Due to their time spent in foster homes or youth centers, youth leaving the child welfare system are often lacking the basic skills to take part in activities of daily life, such as planning and respecting a budget, cooking, doing laundry and scheduling appointments (Laurent et al., 2021). Laurent et al. (2021) explain that many young people placed in long-term rehabilitation centers in Quebec also face limited opportunities to develop these crucial life skills, to learn to organize themselves and to be contributing members of society.

Limited relational capital, which includes relationships with parents, family or other supportive adults, can also make this transition increasingly difficult for ex-foster youth, when compared to youth in the general population (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). While youth in foster care must leave their placements at the legal age of majority, many other young people have the opportunity to remain in their family household until they are ready to make the leap to

autonomous living (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). In addition, some youth may also receive financial support from their parents in order to cover expenses such as schooling, food, clothing and other necessities (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Marion et al., 2017). Marion et al. (2017) explain that there is also a tendency for youth leaving foster care to have previously experienced significant psychosocial difficulties and troubled family dynamics, which can have a negative impact on their transition process. Despite these realities and additional challenges placed upon youth leaving foster care, they are thrown into the roles and responsibilities of adulthood in a manner that is much more accelerated and irreversible than youth in the general population, in addition to losing access to vital support services to assist them through this transition (Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017).

CHAPTER IV: VARIABILITY

Despite common variables that may exist between members of a given group or cohort, such as young people transitioning out of care, there exists great variability in the manner in which they may experience this life period (Mitchell, 2003; Shanahan, 2000). While this transition period can be greatly shaped by socio-historical and geographic realities, individual experiences are also largely shaped by the social organization of opportunities and resources, as well as the constraints faced during this life period (Mitchell, 2003; Shanahan, 2000). Although young people leaving foster care in Quebec can in fact act in a strategic manner, set out life plans and pursue them, they are also impacted and constrained by the resources and opportunities that are readily available to them (Shanahan, 2000). A young person's movement through this period, as well as their experiences, can, thus, vary significantly depending on the accessibility of resources and services to support them (Mitchell, 2003). The emerging themes discussed in this chapter will explore the role that support services, their structure and their accessibility (or inaccessibility) play in shaping the trajectories of youth as they age out of the foster care system in Quebec. This includes the exploration of the *Programme Qualification Jeunesse* and other supports, such as the extension of foster care placements, transitional housing and the *Projet Clé*.

4.1 Programme Qualification Jeunesse

In the province of Quebec, only one national program exists to support youth as they exit the foster care system at the age of majority (Laurent et al., 2021). The *Programme Qualification Jeunesse* (PQJ), also known as the *Programme Qualification des Jeunes*, was developed by the *Association des centres jeunesse du Québec* and implemented in 2006 to support a portion of youth between the ages of 16 to 19 in their transition to adulthood, after they reached the age of majority

and were no longer eligible to receive youth protection services (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021).

The project was originally implemented in order to study its impacts on the well-being and outcomes of youth exiting the child welfare system in Quebec, as well as to aid in identifying and developing new socio-professional integration strategies for young people receiving services from youth centers across the province (Goyette et al., 2007). At the time of its development, the project was implemented in only four regions of Quebec, namely Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Laval, Outaouais and Montreal (Batshaw), and was gradually implemented in all regions of Quebec (Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022). The program has allowed intervention workers to adopt a more in-depth approach in supporting the personal and social development of foster youth, which extends beyond the age of majority and does not fall within the scope of the regular services offered by youth centers in the province (Goyette et al., 2007).

4.1.1 Purpose of the Program

As defined by the CISSS de l'Outaouais (2017), the PQJ is an intervention project that seeks to prepare and equip youth aging out of care for their transition to independent living, as well as ensure their qualification through social and professional integration. This is accomplished through various intensive individual and group interventions that occur over a three-year period (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022; Sansone et al., 2020). The educators and intervention workers employed through the framework of this project accompany youth in the realization of their objectives related to their socio-professional insertion and preparation for independent living (Goyette et al., 2007). The approach adopted by the program aims to create an intervention environment in which the young person develops goals, makes

decisions for themselves, takes concrete action and works to develop and implement their ‘life project’ (*projet de vie adulte*) (CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017).

The individuals and entities in the young person’s environment, such as friends, parents or family members, are perceived to be essential actors in their progress, skill development and successful transition to adulthood (CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017). These informal networks, therefore, are one of the many areas targeted by the intervention (CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017). Through the program, the young person also learns to understand, identify and access services from local and community organizations that can support them in meeting their needs as they become independent adults (CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017). The literature identifies three main components to the intensive interventions under this program: (1) the development of a stable social support network, through the creation and consolidation of ties with key people in the young person’s life; (2) the preparation for independent living, through the development and strengthening of competencies in different areas of daily life; and finally, (3) socio-professional integration and qualification, through training and the development of skills (Bussi eres et al., 2015; CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022; Sansone et al., 2020). An individualized intervention plan, often referred to in the literature as a ‘life projet’ (*projet de vie adulte*) is developed with each young person based on these central components (Goyette et al., 2007).

4.1.2 Admissibility Criteria

In order to be eligible to receive services through the PQJ, a young person must be referred to the program by a case worker from a CISSS or *Centre int egr e universitaire de sant e et de services sociaux* (CIUSSS) that has been involved in their life (CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017;

Sansone et al., 2020). The program is offered on a voluntary basis and the young person must be willing to commit to the program for the three-year intervention period (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2022; Sansone et al., 2020). In addition to this referral, the request to receive services must be accepted based on the other criteria in place, which is assessed by a team of educators and program coordinators to determine the necessity of such services (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022). At the time of the referral, the young person must be 16 years old, have an active file under the *Youth Protection Act* and/or the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* and have an extensive history of foster care placement (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022). The young person must also be deemed, by the case worker making the referral, to be at risk of poor outcomes and marginalization once they attain the age of majority and are no longer eligible to receive youth protection services (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017, Goyette et al., 2022). Moreover, the young person must demonstrate a need for support in autonomy-building in view of this service cut-off, as well as a poor social network, no possibility or a very low probability of returning to live with their family of origin, a lack of plans in place regarding their education or vocational training, poor self-esteem and behavioral problems, such as difficulties following directions and trouble setting boundaries or personal limits (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022).

The selected body of literature identifies the restrictiveness of the program's eligibility criteria, as well as its lack of resources, as factors that have acted to hinder the well-being and outcomes of youth aging out of care in the province (Bussi eres et al., 2015; Laurent et al., 2021, Goyette et al., 2007). Laurent et al. (2021) mention that the restrictive eligibility criteria of the PQJ acts to exclude many young people in need by prioritizing only to the most extreme cases (e.g.

those deemed ‘most vulnerable’ or ‘at-risk’ of being marginalized). This is particularly true in regards to the need for youth to demonstrate a lack of plans for the future, an extensive placement history and no possibility of returning to live with their family (Laurent et al., 2021). Laurent et al. (2021) also discuss the strict age of eligibility, set at 16 years of age, as a factor limiting the length of time a youth can enroll in the program, without reducing its overall duration.

Moreover, Bussières et al. (2015) identify that the admissibility criteria of the PQJ in Quebec is more highly restrictive than similar programs that exist in the rest of Canada and other Western countries, which generally only identify having a history of foster care placement and voluntary participation as the sole criteria for participation. The literature mentions that youth selected to participate in the PQJ had, overall, more complex needs profiles and were deemed to present a significant number of risk factors in relation to their future socio-professional insertion and outcomes than those that were not selected to participate (Bussières et al., 2015; Goyette et al., 2022). The strict selection criteria for the program, however, neglects that many youth may share the same needs of preparation for independent living after a history of child welfare placement, regardless of the length of their placement and perceived level of risk or vulnerability (Bussières et al., 2015). Of the 2,000 young people that age out of foster care every year in the province of Quebec, the literature estimates that only 820 youth currently benefit from this program (Laurent et al., 2021).

4.1.3 Length of the Program

Depending on the age of the young person at the start of the program, they are able to continue to receive support services under the PQJ until they reach the age of 19 (Goyette et al., 2007). The literature identifies that the length of the program is not determined based on the needs

expressed by the young person and their level of development or preparedness for independent living, but, rather, by their age (Bussières et al., 2015; Laurent et al., 2021). Bussières et al. (2015) identify that the length of time in which youth participate in the program varies considerably from person to person, but the average length is estimated at two years. This is due to some youth entering the program slightly prior to or after the age 16 and others completing the program earlier or later than expected (Bussières et al., 2015). The literature explains that the PQJ's prioritization of age over preparedness, and other factors, neglects to take into account that many youth today experience more desynchronized transitions to adulthood, which take longer than in previous generations, and deviate significantly from the traditional sociocultural norms of entry into adulthood (Bussières et al., 2015; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017).

4.1.4 Lack of Resources

In addition to the restricted admissibility criteria, the literature also emphasizes the lack of resources that currently exists for the services offered through the PQJ, which has made it challenging to offer the program to all youth in need of support as they prepare to transition to adulthood and independent living, following the end of a foster care placement (Laurent et al., 2021, Goyette et al., 2007). While being interviewed by Laurent et al. (2021), a youth program director mentioned the importance “[d]’allouer un nombre suffisant de ressources dédiées à la transition à la vie adulte, notamment celles œuvrant au sein du *Programme qualification des jeunes*, dans chaque CISSS et CIUSSS” (p. 271) in order to ensure that all youth in need of support may benefit from such services. The lack of harmonized service delivery across all regions is also

a major challenge that has been identified in the literature, which has led to difficulties in the access of post-majority services for youth living in certain regions (Laurent et al., 2021).

4.2 Other Support Services

The other options available to youth in Quebec as they leave foster care at the age of majority are highly limited and the body of literature emphasizes that such options present similar challenges as the PQJ in regards to the prioritization of extreme cases, strict eligibility criteria and limited resources (Laurent et al., 2021).

4.2.1 Extension of Foster Care Placement

Although youth must leave their foster care placement at the age of 18 in Quebec, this stay can be extended to the age of 21 under exceptional circumstances, which includes the completion of general secondary education (Laurent et al., 2021). This option, however, remains unavailable for youth pursuing other studies, such as post-secondary education or vocational training (Laurent et al., 2021). This reality was outlined by Laurent et al. (2021), in the final report of the *Commission spéciale sur les droits des enfants et la protection de la jeunesse*, who shared the experience of a young person as they reached the age of majority in the province and wished to extend their services as they pursued their studies:

J'avais entamé le cégep, je poursuivais mes études en sciences humaines. Mais arrivé à l'âge de 18 ans, on m'a dit : « Gabriel, tu dois quitter ». Puis je me souviens à ce moment-là d'avoir demandé qu'on rallonge, qu'on rallonge ce délai-là. Puis on m'a répondu : « Mais il y a d'autres cas plus urgents, ça fait qu'on doit passer au prochain » [...] Donc, au moment où j'avais besoin d'un support réel, je me suis senti un peu abandonné. (p. 272)

In this excerpt, it is identified that enforcing such restrictive eligibility criteria for the extension of a foster care placement places many young people leaving care in a major service gap once they

reach the age of majority (Laurent et al., 2021). Under such circumstances, the literature demonstrates that many youth are unable to receive the services that they need due to the prioritization of cases perceived by case workers as more ‘urgent’ and youth perceived to be more ‘at risk’ of negative developmental outcomes or marginalization in the future (Bussi eres et al., 2015; CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017, Goyette et al., 2022; Laurent et al., 2021).

4.2.2 Transitional Housing

Transitional housing offered by organizations in the community sector are also identified in the body of literature as a resource which can be used by youth aging out of care in Quebec that require housing or support services during this transition period (Laurent et al., 2021). Laurent et al. (2021), however, explain that the space available for youth in such specialized housing organizations is often scarce, due to a lack of recurring and long-term funding for such organizations to carry out their mandate and a shortage of such resources in specific regions. This is further amplified by a lack of services that are adapted to the complex and multi-faceted needs of young adults with a history in foster care (Laurent et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Projet Cl e

The retained body of literature also briefly identifies the *Projet Cl e*, developed in 2015 by the *Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Mont er gie* and the *CISSS de la Mont er gie-Est*, as a resource which supports youth previously in foster care through the process of their post-secondary education (CISSS de la Mont er gie-Est, 2020; Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Mont er gie, 2022; Le Courrier, 2020). This project seeks to provide financial and emotional support to youth pursuing post-secondary or vocational studies by means of a yearly scholarship and the support of

an adult mentor that accompanies the young person throughout their academic career (CISSS de la Montérégie-Est, 2020).

The yearly scholarships are provided in monthly installments to assist youth with their basic living expenses while they focus on their studies (CISSS de la Montérégie-Est, 2020; Le Courrier, 2020). Although the project is managed by the *Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie* and the *CISSS de la Montérégie-Est*, the financial support granted to youth through the program is sourced through donations rather than government funding (CISSS de la Montérégie-Est, 2020). The mentors involved in the *Projet Clé* are made up of adults that are willing and able to regularly volunteer their time to support a young person in their transition to independent living as they age out of foster care (Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2022). The mentors maintain contact with the young person they are assigned to via text or phone, as well as through monthly meetings (Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2022). As identified by the *Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie* (2022), the role of the mentor is to act as a positive presence for the young person, as well as to encourage, accompany, empower, guide and support them through their academic journey.

The literature identifies that many challenges exist in the accessibility of the project, as it is only available to young people residing in the Montérégie and Laval regions of Quebec (CISSS de la Montérégie-Est, 2020; Le Courrier, 2020). Moreover, the project has a strict eligibility criteria and, in order to meet the admission requirement, youth must have a history in the foster care system, as well as a developed personal post-secondary or vocational education project (Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2022). The youth that have applied to the *Projet Clé* must also be willing to be interviewed by the coordinators of the project and are required to

present their personal project (Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2022). Following the interview process, the young person must agree to respect all of the conditions of the project, which include attending school full time, passing all of their courses, providing their transcripts for each completed semester, registering for the Government of Quebec's Student Financial Assistance program, creating and following a budget, accepting to receive the support of a mentor and accepting that a professional from the project communicate with them regularly to follow up on their progress for the duration of the project (Fondation du Centre jeunesse de la Montérégie, 2022).

CHAPTER V: LINKED LIVES

As one attempts to understand the lived experiences of youth as they age out of the foster care system through a life course perspective, it is essential to understand the ways in which they relate to and interact with the individuals in their environment (Moen, 2003). According to Marshall & Mueller (2003), individual lives are not experienced in isolation from others, but are, rather, experienced interdependently. Moreover, individual lives are “intimately connected to those of others, and [...] [are] bound to, and shaped by, those ties” (Moen, 2003, p. 261). As individuals are embedded in their social relations, it is crucial that they are understood within the social matrix of these relationships, including the opportunities and constraints that may derive from them (Drobnic, 2003; Moen, 2003). Through this perspective, the realities and experiences of youth as they age out of foster care are largely shaped by the nature of their connections to those in their formal and informal social networks (Drobnic, 2003; Moen, 2003).

Furthermore, Moen (2003) identifies that the family unit (e.g. parents, family members and/or guardians) plays a significant role in shaping the future biographies of youth. Links between family members can be a source of important resources and opportunities, but they can also act as a burden or constraint, which can hinder a young person’s development (Drobnic, 2003). Family members can also serve as a primary source of emotional and economic support when one faces hardships, but have the potential to act as an inhibitor to these difficulties (Drobnic, 2003). The nature of these familial relationships can, thus, be harmful or supportive in a young person’s development (Drobnic, 2003). However, although the influence of the family unit is the most evident expression of the concept of linked lives, individuals can also be largely shaped and influenced by other key people in their environment, such as friends, peers, intimate partners and

professionals, which comprise the network of ties in which they are embedded (Drobnic, 2003; Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Moen, 2003).

This chapter aims to highlight the transversal themes that have emerged throughout the selected body of literature pertaining to youth's relationships with various actors in their environment. These themes include the notions of relational permanency and social capital, as well as the role of formal relationships, with child welfare professionals, foster parents and mentors, and informal relationships, with the family unit, friends and intimate partners, in inhibiting or facilitating youth's transition out of the child welfare system.

5.1 Relational Permanency and Social Capital

The selected body of literature identifies formal and informal relationships as fundamental elements contributing to the well-being and development of youth (Doucet, 2020b; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013). However, youth aging out of foster care have been found to be more likely than their peers to lack relational permanency in the form of stable, enduring and meaningful connections with their family members and other adults in their environment (Doucet, 2020a, 2020b; Rutman et al., 2007; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013). Youth leaving care have also been found to have limited relationships, in terms of their quantity and diversity (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). Doucet (2020b) specifically makes reference to the notion of 'social capital', which posits that close relationships are a source of support that largely benefit youth and contribute to their growth and adjustment abilities throughout the life course. These relationships are generally grounded in the family unit, but can also extend to the larger community, and they provide crucial resources such as information, norms, values and trustworthy environments for youth to grow (Doucet, 2020b). Such relationships are identified in the literature as a supporting factor for youth in their

transition out of foster care, however, it is also identified that many of the connections formed by youth in such contexts lack trust, stability and reciprocity, which are essential components of social capital and relational permanency (Doucet, 2020b).

5.2 Formal Relationships

5.2.1 Child Welfare Professionals

The body of literature identifies that connections between a young person and the child welfare professionals involved in their trajectory are considered to be a source of emotional support that can positively impact the transition process as youth age out of foster care (Marion et al., 2017). A study conducted by Marion et al. (2017) on the role of social networks in the transition to adulthood found that, out of 70% of the youth participating the study that had identified having access to a significant adult in their life, over 33% of them had identified a youth worker or other formal figure encountered in the child welfare system, such as staff members, therapists or a foster parent. Further, 62% of youth in the province of Quebec believed that their youth worker, in the context of the PQJ, was a crucial factor in facilitating their transition out of foster care (Marion et al., 2017). This data demonstrates the central role that healthy and constructive relationships with such formal figures can play in youth's well-being and transition out of care. Moreover, the literature identifies three key factors in the relationship between a young person and a child welfare professional that can significantly contribute to their positive development and successful transition, namely accompaniment, empowerment and 'doing with' youth, rather than 'doing for' them (Marion et al., 2017).

In Quebec, many young people perceive their PQJ youth worker as a significant adult figure in their lives, that they could count on during difficult times and that inspired them to do

their best (Marion et al., 2017). The PQJ youth worker often acts as a primary support figure for young people transitioning out of the child welfare system, providing the majority of the total emotional support received by youth during this period (Goyette et al., 2007). Goyette et al. (2007), for example, found that, in the context of youth support networks, such youth workers provided two to five times more support than all of the other actors in the young person's immediate environment, such as family, friends and partners (Goyette et al., 2007).

The literature, however, also discusses the temporality of such formal relationships between youth and child welfare professionals, whose services specifically target youth under the age of majority or in a specific age group (Marion et al., 2017). Due to limited relationships in their informal network, many youth primarily rely on child welfare professionals, such as intervention workers and other staff members, as a formal source of emotional support (Marion et al., 2017). Those that benefit from such positive relationships, however, often abruptly lose access to these connections once they age out of the foster care system or attain the age-based service cut-offs identified by the program providing them with support (Marion et al., 2017). This social network disruption is identified by Marion et al. (2017) as a great source of psychological distress for many young people aging out of care.

5.2.2 Foster Family

Although the majority of youth in Quebec stop receiving services from their foster family once they attain the age of majority, the body of literature identifies foster parents as a major source of support in youth's preparation for their transition out of care (Holland, 2009; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017). Foster parents are recognized as being in a unique position to support youth through skill and knowledge building activities throughout their

placement, which can aid in the development of basic life skills and preparation for independence, as well as the ability to carry out their goals once they leave care (Children’s Bureau, 2018). The literature identifies that foster parents can take on a number of different roles as they support the youth in their care, such as that of coaches, to empower them and provide them with opportunities to develop new skills, that of advocates, to support them in learning their rights, that of networkers, to help them build a network of support, and that of facilitator in the fostering of connections and relationships between youth and their community (Children’s Bureau, 2018).

In addition, a foster family can also play a major role in encouraging youth’s personal development and the exploration of new experiences in a safe and secure environment (Children’s Bureau, 2018). In a study conducted in the province of Quebec by Marcotte et al. (2019) on the transition to adulthood of foster youth, a young person interviewed in the context of this study supported this notion of the foster family as a key actor in their positive development, stating that: “Ma famille d’accueil [...] [c]’est elle qui m’a appris pas mal tout. Elle m’a appris à parler, elle m’a appris à écrire, à lire” (p. 249). Although this may not be the reality for all youth, a young person’s placement in a supportive foster family may provide them with a number of opportunities for growth and development, aiding them in the long-term as they prepare to leave foster care (Holland, 2009; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017).

5.2.3 Mentors

The analyzed body of literature also identifies the positive role that mentors can play in the provision of emotional, social and practical support to youth during this transition period (Doucet et al., 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018; Marion et al., 2017). As not all youth have access to long-term and stable forms of support during their transition out of the foster care system, access to formal

mentors that have previously been in foster care and share lived experiences with youth can present as an opportunity to fulfill this need (Mann-Feder, 2018; Marion et al., 2017). Mann-Feder (2018) identifies the important role that peer mentoring can play in cultivating feelings of belonging, as well as reducing isolation amongst youth that have left a foster care placement. Such mentoring networks can also support youth as they manage and navigate any stigma faced in relation to their involvement in the child welfare system, through meaningful engagement and connections with individuals that have similar experiences (Doucet et al., 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018). Opportunities to form such connections, however, have been found to be limited and challenging to implement (Doucet et al., 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018).

5.3 Informal Relationships

The literature pertaining to youth's access to support during their transition out of foster care through the means of informal relationships, such as relationships with family, friends and intimate partners, demonstrates significant variability in these experiences (Goyette et al., 2007; Marion et al., 2017; Shook et al., 2009). While the body of literature identifies that many youth feel that they have at least one person in their informal network that they can rely on and receive some form of support from during this transition, it has also been identified that many youth report having access to very few informal relations which present themselves as active and supportive figures in their integration during this period (Goyette et al., 2007; Marion et al., 2017).

5.3.1 Family Unit

The literature identifies that, in the general population, the transition period between adolescence and adulthood is considered to be a family affair, where parents act as a primary source of residential, financial and emotional support to youth as they navigate this period (Goyette

& Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Turcotte, 2004; Marion et al., 2017). Many youth leaving foster care at the age of majority, however, often receive very little support from their family of origin, with nearly half reporting that they do not feel close to their parents and feeling that they are 'useless' to their transition (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Royer, 2009). In addition, the literature finds that many young people that have maintained ties with one or both parents tend to view these relationships as inhibiting or blocking their successful integration after leaving care (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). Many young people, therefore, find themselves navigating this difficult transition alone or with minimal support from their family unit (Goyette & Frechon, 2013). Goyette et al. (2007) found that this lack of support particularly affects young women, who are less likely to be supported by their family in comparison to their male counterparts, who are more likely to live with their parents and count their biological parents as part of their informal social network.

In addition, the literature identifies the existence of patterns in the nature of youth's relationships with their parents, where these ties have a tendency to act as inhibitors to the social and professional insertion of youth, in the instances in which these ties exist (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009). Goyette et al. (2007) found that, oftentimes, young people with a history of child welfare involvement come from families with parents that are more likely to be struggling with their own difficulties related to employment, housing or substance misuse, or from families that lack the personal and financial resources to adequately support their children once they leave care. In the circumstances where one or more parents are involved in the young person's transition out of foster care, the support provided is often limited to the provision of housing and material support (Goyette et al., 2007). They are, thus, less likely to provide other forms of support,

such as emotional and practical support in regards to their child's professional insertion (Goyette et al., 2007). Although, overall, the literature identifies relationships as a source of positive support in young people's transition out of care and into adulthood and autonomous living, unhealthy relationships can have the opposite effect by blocking or inhibiting this process (Goyette et al., 2007).

5.3.2 Friends

The literature exploring the role of peers in supporting youth as they age out of foster care has found that, since many young people leaving care lack support from their family unit and experience hindered or interrupted relationships with their parents, relationships with friends can play a significant role in the development of youth, as both inhibitors and facilitators of their transition out of care (Shook et al., 2009). While healthy relationships with peers can act as a positive influence on young people's behavior and development, unhealthy relationships can have the opposite effect, by acting as a negative influence (Shook et al., 2009). Shook et al. (2009), identified that relationships with deviant peers, for example, that partake in activities such as crime or substance misuse, are more likely to produce negative experiences and outcomes in young people. Positive peer relationships, however, can teach youth important life skills that cannot be learned in formal environments and can also support the development of one's agency, self-esteem, sense of self and capacity for autonomy (Mann-Feder, 2018).

In a study conducted by Mann-Feder (2018) on the role of friendships in the transition out of foster care in Montreal and Toronto, major overarching themes were identified in the discourses of youth as they were questioned on this topic. Many young people identified the existence of a 'special bond' and understanding between friends that share a similar background in foster care,

which acts to support them during this difficult transition (Mann-Feder, 2018). Youth participants stressed the importance of shared experiences with friends made during their placements in youth centers or foster families, stating that, “I still talk to a few people from group homes, and I don’t know, it is just easier to be myself” (Mann-Feder, 2018, p. 158). This demonstrates that such friendships can act as a significant source of resilience for youth that have experienced a foster care placement (Mann-Feder, 2018).

Youth participating in the study also identified that the development of lasting friendships with other young people in the community can be difficult to form and maintain, due to their lack of understanding of the foster care experience (Mann-Feder, 2018). Although many child welfare professionals encourage the formation of friendships with youth outside of the foster care system, as they provide opportunities for positive behavior modeling, inclusion in healthy family dynamics and the practice of social skills, many youth expressed that they felt that their peers did not understand their lived experiences, consequently making them more vulnerable to stigmatization due to their background (Mann-Feder, 2018). Moreover, youth in the study also expressed difficulty relating to peers in their community that did not share their lived experiences, with many feeling sentiments of inferiority, isolation and a lack of belongingness:

I would say that for some of them, they feel intimidated coming out of the system and having that label. I have a girl now who’s doing hairdressing but she feels she has nothing in common with the girls in her program.... She feels on the inside that she has nothing in common with these kids or she’s not equal to them. (Mann-Feder, 2018, p. 162)

Overall, the literature analyzed as part of this study identifies that youth in care face many complexities and challenges when making and maintaining friends, both with youth with shared foster care experiences and other peers in the community, which can impact the quality of support

that they receive from these actors during their transition out of the child welfare system (Mann-Feder, 2018).

5.3.3 Intimate Partners

Finally, the body of literature identifies similar patterns in the role of friendships and intimate relationships in the provision of support to youth as they leave foster care in Quebec (Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Royer, 2009). However, it is also identified that many young people transitioning out of foster care are more likely to lack emotional support in their relationships with intimate partners (Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Royer, 2009). This has been found to particularly affect young women with a history of foster care placement, among whom there is an increased prevalence of domestic violence (Goyette & Royer, 2009; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013).

CHAPTER VI: LIFESPAN DEVELOPMENT

The principle of lifespan development, as outlined in the life course perspective, posits that human development and aging are lifelong processes (Bengtson et al., 2012). Earlier life experiences and events, such as those lived during childhood and adolescence, as well as the meanings attached to these experiences, are carried into new situations that are encountered by the individual in later life (Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Wethington, 2005). The impact of new situations and events that one faces are, thus, shaped by these personal biographies (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). As stated by Elder and Rockwell (1979), “through an understanding of the life-course and its consequences for development, we are able to explain the process by which early life events are related to later events” (p. 4). Marshall and Mueller (2003) further emphasize the importance of studying individual lives over the life course, rather than within a specific period of time, in order to better understand the role of the past in shaping the present.

In addition, Wethington (2005) underscores the notion of time as a highly influential factor in one’s lifespan. Thus, the timing of certain events encountered in an individual’s life is recognized to play a crucial role in long-term development (Wethington, 2005). It is believed that exposure to specific events during more vulnerable life periods, such as emotional traumas in early childhood, may have greater and longer-lasting effects on how an individual develops over the course of their life (Laurent et al., 2021; Wethington, 2005). Exposure to certain events, for example, can affect an individual’s psychological well-being and development over time, as well as their relationships and their ability to adapt to change (Bengtson et al., 2012; Wethington, 2005).

The emerging themes discussed in this section demonstrate the role that events experienced in earlier life, such as exposure to various forms of maltreatment and foster care involvement, can play in influencing the well-being of young people as they transition out of care and in later life.

6.1 Early Emotional Traumas

The analyzed body of literature identifies that the traumas experienced by young people who have experienced maltreatment or abuse (e.g. physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, sexual abuse, familial violence and/or neglect) in earlier life can have a direct impact on their outcomes and development in later life (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019). Moreover, Laurent et al. (2021) explain that it can take several years to restore one's physical, mental and emotional well-being after they have experienced such forms of abuse. This reality particularly affects youth aging out of foster care, given that many have witnessed or experienced some form of maltreatment, abuse and/or neglect that led to their apprehension and foster care placement (Marcotte et al., 2019). As identified by Marcotte et al. (2019) in their research, many young girls with a history of foster care placement recount painful childhood memories and exposure to traumatic experiences. Many youth also report having previously experienced a number of psychosocial difficulties, as well as dysfunctional family dynamics, prior to their involvement in the foster care system (Marion et al., 2017).

Further, the literature also identifies instability as a traumatic factor that can significantly impact the long-term well-being of youth (Marcotte et al., 2019). The literature emphasizes that youth in foster care often face considerable environmental instability due to the amount of displacement that they experience as they move between their family of origin, foster families and/or youth centers, which continues as they exit foster care at the age of majority (Goyette &

Frechon, 2013; Marcotte et al., 2019). This creates great irregularity and discontinuity in links with individuals in their environment, such as family members, friends and foster parents, in their early life (Goyette & Frechon, 2013).

6.2 Developmental Outcomes of Youth Leaving Care

The literature demonstrates that early emotional traumas can have significant impacts on the overall well-being of young people with a history of foster care placement, which can negatively impact their transition out of the child welfare system, their ability to plan for the future and their outcomes in later life (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017; Goyette & Frechon, 2013). This can be further aggravated by the social, structural and relational factors explored in earlier chapters, such as pressures to become independent and self-sufficient at the age of majority, difficulty accessing support services during the transition period and instability in formal and informal relationships. Many youth with a history of foster care placement, thus, have been found to experience increased difficulties in adulthood, such as homelessness, housing instability, school attrition, unemployment, poverty, mental and physical health problems, substance misuse, early pregnancy and parenthood, relationship instability and incarceration (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Kovarikova, 2017; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017; Ordolis, 2007).

6.2.1 Housing and Homelessness

The literature identifies homelessness and housing instability as difficulties that impact a large number of young adults in the province of Quebec that have previously experienced a foster care placement (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021). The final report of the *Commission spéciale sur les droits des*

enfants et la protection de la jeunesse demonstrates this in a description of the housing situation of a young person in Quebec, after they were discharged from their foster care placement at the age of majority:

J'ai subi un choc émotionnel, très rapidement, j'ai tombé dans la dépression, et ensuite, je me suis ramassé à la rue. Des tonnes de bagages devant la porte de l'organisme sans savoir où trop aller. Ma vie a été suivie de chemins semés d'obstacles tels que des colocations non saines, des situations amoureuses désastreuses, des situations d'argent, de confiance, trouver où se loger, où se nourrir. (Laurent et al., 2021, p. 265)

Although not all ex-foster youth will become homeless, the literature estimates that one out of five young people in Quebec have experienced at least one episode of visible homelessness after leaving a foster care placement (Laurent et al., 2021). Visible homelessness is defined as a situation in which an individual sleeps in a public or private place without authorization (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). This can include, for example, sleeping on the street, in a park or in temporary shelters, such as cars or makeshift shelters (e.g. a tent) (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). Moreover, Goyette and Blanchet (2022) have identified that the number of episodes of visible homelessness experienced by young people has a tendency to increase with the amount of time they have spent out of foster care.

In the population of ex-foster youth that are not in a situation of visible homelessness, the literature identifies that they often face other housing difficulties, such as housing instability:

J'ai eu 18 ans, je me suis ramassé dans une certaine situation d'itinérance. J'ai dû aller vivre chez beaucoup de gens. Des parents d'amis m'ont accueilli, des amis m'ont accueilli. Je me suis promené beaucoup, je compte maintenant à mon actif 38 déménagements. (Laurent et al., 2021, p. 272)

It is estimated that almost half (45%) of young people leaving care in Quebec have experienced housing instability at some point after leaving care, with a total of 32% experiencing housing

instability in the one year period after leaving care (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). In such situations, the young person considers the place they are residing as a temporary solution as they search for a more permanent residence (e.g. temporarily living with a friend or relative) (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). Such housing situations are also often referred to as invisible homelessness (Rodrigue, 2016).

The literature identifies that youth that experience the most residential stability at the age of majority, following a foster care placement, are those that remain with their foster family or move in with a member of their family (Laurent et al., 2021). Further, it has been identified that housing stability has a direct impact on young people's pursuit of studies and their risk of experiencing homelessness (Laurent et al., 2021). Young people living in situations of homelessness are also more likely to identify health, physical and psychological problems in comparison to those that are in stable housing situations or those experiencing housing instability (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022).

6.2.2 Education

In regard to education, the analyzed body of literature demonstrates that young people that have a history of foster care placement tend to experience lower graduation rates, both in secondary and post-secondary education (Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021). Further, in the population of ex-foster youth that seek to pursue their post-secondary studies, many are held back by the financial costs associated with such endeavors (Laurent et al., 2021). The literature also identifies that, when young people leave care, they often express a desire to work, rather than pursue their studies, in order to ensure their financial independence (Goyette et al., 2007). In Goyette and colleague's (2007) analysis of the PQJ in Quebec, for example, it was

demonstrated that the number of long-term youth objectives related to education steadily declined between 2003 and 2005 (Goyette et al., 2007).

Environmental stability has also been identified in the literature as a crucial factor for young people to be available for learning, which is not often the reality for youth in care (Laurent et al., 2021). Marion et al. (2017) further emphasize that not all young people have access to the social, emotional and practical support that they need during their transition out of foster care, which can make the pursuit of education increasingly difficult. These challenges pertaining to the pursuit of education are further amplified in young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability (Goyette et al., 2007).

6.2.3 Employment and Income

The body of literature demonstrates that a young person's level of education plays a significant role in their employment outcomes and, thus, ex-foster youth are more likely than their peers to be affected by unemployment (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Kovarikova, 2017; Laurent et al., 2021). In the province of Quebec, it is estimated that only between 31% and 54% of youth leaving care are employed in the first few months after leaving the child welfare system (Goyette & Frechon, 2013). This reality is exacerbated in young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability (Goyette et al., 2007).

In addition to higher rates of unemployment, the literature identifies that the young people that are employed often tend to occupy positions that are more poorly paid and unrewarding than their peers, with many considering that their income is insufficient to meet their basic needs (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Kovarikova, 2017). As many do not receive financial support from their family of origin, it is estimated that one third of young people with a

history of foster care live below the poverty line (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009). A study conducted in 2005 found that approximately 77% of young adults across Canada that had left the child welfare system earned less than 20,000\$ a year (Kovarikova, 2017). These young people are also more likely than their peers in the general population to receive social assistance (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Kovarikova, 2017).

6.2.4 Mental Health

The literature establishes that young people leaving foster care often face more mental health problems than their peers, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and social phobias, which have been linked to the traumas they often face in earlier life (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019). Furthermore, they have also been found to be at an increased risk of substance misuse, particularly with substances such as alcohol and marijuana (Gauthier, 2018; Marcotte et al., 2019). When confronted with a traumatic experience, Marcotte et al. (2019) explain that individuals must attempt to cope with the event and integrate it into their lives. In doing so, however, the experience can become intrusive and lead to traumatic thoughts and feelings that can keep the individual bound to the past, which can ultimately interfere with their ability to thrive in the present (Marcotte et al., 2019). Individuals that have experienced some form of trauma (e.g. intrafamilial abuse, mistreatment and/or neglect) are, thus, more likely than others to experience mental health difficulties in later life, particularly if these experiences are not appropriately addressed or resolved (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019).

In the general population, the period in which individuals face the highest rate of reported mental health problems is during young adulthood, between the ages of 20 and 29 (Ziemann,

2019). It is also during this period that foster youth are expelled from government care and lose access to vital support services (Ziemann, 2019). Despite the prevalence of mental health issues during this period among youth in care, the literature identifies that many continue to face unmet mental health needs, due to the inaccessibility of mental health services, as well as a lack of services that are trauma-informed and tailored to their complex needs (Kovarikova, 2017; Laurent et al., 2021; Ziemann, 2019). In an interview conducted by Laurent et al. (2021) with an individual that was previously in foster care in Quebec, the ex-foster youth denounced the lack of accessible psychological support during the years they spent in youth protection, as well as the fact that no free public services were available to them once they left the system, during a period where trauma can resurface for many young people. This reality leaves young people in Quebec to process and cope with their difficulties and traumas on their own once they leave foster care (Kovarikova, 2017; Laurent et al., 2021; Ziemann, 2019).

6.2.5 Parenthood, Pregnancy and Relationships

The literature identifies that young people with a history in foster care are at a higher risk of early pregnancy or parenthood than their peers (Goyette et al., 2007; Ordolis, 2007). It is estimated that 40% of young adults leaving foster care in Quebec have reported having experienced a pregnancy or having one or more children by the time they reached adulthood (Goyette et al., 2007). Further, Laurent et al. (2021) have identified that ex-foster youth are at an increased risk of relationship instability and divorce in later life.

The literature has also found that exposure to violence as a child, whether as a victim or witness, can increase the risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence as an adult (Kovarikova, 2017; Ordolis, 2007). Although not all parents with a history in the child welfare system will

commit violent acts, they may be at an increased risk of perpetrating child maltreatment (Kovarikova, 2017; Ordolis, 2007). This risk is increased in young parents (Kovarikova, 2017; Ordolis, 2007). Such behaviors can also be linked to a lack of adequate support and preparation for the roles and responsibilities associated with parenthood, as well as unemployment and low educational attainment, in addition to other socioeconomic risk factors (Kovarikova, 2017; Ordolis, 2007).

6.2.6 Criminality

Although there is limited information on the topic of criminality in the analyzed body of literature, it is identified that individuals with a history of foster care placement have a general tendency to experience higher rates of arrest and incarceration than their peers (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019). This reality particularly impacts individuals that have experienced at least one episode of homelessness, who were twice as likely to have been arrested over the course of the previous year in a study conducted by Goyette and Blanchet (2022). Overall, the literature reveals an association between growing up in a foster care setting and contact with the justice system in later life (Gauthier, 2018; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019).

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous chapters have demonstrated that the experiences of youth aging out of care in Quebec are extremely diverse and shaped by a multitude of complex social, structural and relational factors emerging over the life course. This includes, for example, societal conceptions of ‘adulthood’, norms surrounding the transition to this life period, access to support services, formal and informal relationships with individuals in one’s environment and traumas faced during childhood and adolescence, which can act as both barriers or supports to young people during their transition out of foster care. Following the examination of these factors and their impacts on youth, it is also possible to identify a number of challenges that are unique to this transition period. It is crucial that these challenges be further explored and addressed if we seek to ensure that young people aging out of care in Quebec have access to opportunities and resources which promote their health, well-being and development. However, it is also important to keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting these youth and that each individual requires access to different resources in order to thrive. The following chapter, thus, identifies and expands on key recommendations, based on the emerging themes identified in the body of literature analyzed in this research paper, to improve support for youth as they transition out of the foster care system in the province of Quebec. These recommendations include modernizing youth protection legislation, expanding admissibility criteria for support services and programs, encouraging youth to set realistic goals, expanding determinants of success and well-being, supporting the development of social capital and improving long-term data collection on youth leaving care. A more expansive list of recommendations can be found in Appendix A.

7.1 Modernizing Youth Protection Legislation

Although there have been multiple amendments to Quebec's *Youth Protection Act* in previous decades and, most recently, in 2022 with the passing of Bill 15 at the National Assembly of Quebec, this legislation remains largely disconnected from the diverse and evolving realities of youth in the foster care system, and fails to recognize and account for the complex realities and challenges faced by these youth during their transition out of care (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022; Gouvernement du Québec, 2022b; National Assembly of Quebec, 2022). As demonstrated in this research paper, youth transitions to adulthood and independent living are significantly impacted by the social and cultural context in which these transitions take place. Not only are such transitions taking much longer than in previous generations, but they are also increasingly de-standardized, displaying great diversity in terms of advancements through this life period and a number of back-and-forths between traditional youth and adult roles and responsibilities (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). This is mainly due to a number of social, economic and political factors, such as increased demands for education, job instability, rising costs of living and the COVID-19 pandemic, that have largely altered the opportunities of young people, as well as the environment in which this transition takes place (Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Goyette & Royer, 2009; International Labour Organization, 2020; Laurent et al., 2021; Labesse et al., 2021). Further, the literature has also demonstrated that these new realities particularly affect youth leaving the foster care system in Quebec, who are thrown into adult roles and responsibilities in a much more rapid and irreversible manner than their peers, forcing them to conform to dominant ideals of 'adulthood' (e.g. living on their own, obtaining stable employment, being financially independent and self-sufficient, finishing school, etc.) as soon as they attain the legal age of majority and lose access to vital support services (Goyette et

al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). These ideals imposed upon youth aging out of care, however, no longer coincide with the current climate and realities of the 21st century.

Despite extensive research and literature emphasizing this dichotomy, youth protection legislation in the province continues to maintain the status quo and impose unrealistic expectations on young people leaving foster care (Gauthier, 2018; Laurent et al., 2021). Modernized youth legislation can improve outcomes for youth aging out of care in Quebec by acknowledging these new and evolving realities and adapting youth protection practices to reflect them, such as allowing young people to stay in their foster homes for longer periods of time as they navigate this challenging life period (Laurent et al., 2021).

7.2 Expanding Admissibility Criteria for Support Services and Programs

As demonstrated in this research paper, young people leaving foster care in Quebec are also significantly impacted by the opportunities and resources that are accessible to them during this life period. Existing services which act to support youth as they transition out of foster care, however, are strict in their admissibility criteria and ultimately limit the number of youth that can access such services (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022; Sansone et al., 2020). Some services and programs in Quebec, such as the PQJ, are only available to youth deemed to be more highly 'at risk' of marginalization or negative developmental outcomes than their peers (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017, Goyette et al., 2022). This interpretation of 'risk', however, depends primarily on a professional's interpretation of the needs of a given youth and their situation, rather than the young person's own interpretation or expression of their needs (CISSS de l'Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022). This is further mirrored in other services and programs that are only accessible to those pursuing post-secondary

studies, such as the *Projet Clé*, where only youth that are deemed to be ‘better off’ or on a ‘positive’ pathway to adulthood are deemed to be worthy of support services (CISSS de la Montérégie-Est, 2020; Le Courrier, 2020). Such service dynamics create a hierarchization of difficulties for young people leaving care, ultimately implying that a young person must either be deemed to be the ‘best’ or ‘worst’ case scenario, in comparison to their peers, in order to be entitled to help. This creates major service gaps for those that fall between these two extremes.

Moreover, the literature has also identified that the majority of services and programs in Quebec are only available up to a certain age. This is the reality of the PQJ, which only allows youth to receive services until they reach the age of 19 (Goyette et al., 2007). The length of the program, therefore, is not determined by the needs identified or demonstrated by the young person, but, rather, by their age (Bussièrès et al., 2015; Laurent et al., 2021). Such age-based definitions of need imply that all young people receiving support services have similar life trajectories and realities, have access to the same resources and are at the same level of readiness once they reach the maximum age of service, which does not represent the vast diversity present in the population of youth leaving care.

These age-based service structures in Quebec focus on rapidly moving youth towards independence and complete emancipation from the supports of the child welfare system, without taking the time to adequately assess the emotional and financial readiness of youth, as well as their access to social support, capacities and resources during this transition period (Doucet, 2020a). While a large portion of youth in the general population are supported by their family unit and can prolong their transition into adulthood and independent living until they feel that they are ready and able to take on these new roles and responsibilities, youth leaving foster care do not have such opportunities. Thus, they are thrown into adulthood once they meet the age-based cut-offs

identified by the provincial government, regardless of their readiness to do so (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017; Sukumaran, 2021). As this research has demonstrated, however, such practices often discharge youth into situations of homelessness, housing instability, poverty and other difficulties (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Kovarikova, 2017; Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017; Ordolis, 2007).

Given these realities, it is crucial that post-majority services in Quebec drift away from rigid admissibility criteria and age-based service cut-offs and, rather, modify these services and programs to adopt a more readiness-based approach, which primarily takes into consideration the resources, capacities and needs of youth, rather than their age, as they transition out of foster care (Doucet, 2020a). In order to foster conditions in which youth can thrive and become healthy adults, it is essential to develop support services that are available to all youth in care, regardless of their circumstances, and to ensure that these services are adapted to their diverse realities and experiences. Further, it is crucial that young people be able to access these services in the long-term, until they feel that they are equipped and ready to function without them.

7.3 Encouraging Youth to Set Realistic and Attainable Goals

Through the various themes emerging in the analyzed body of literature, it is also possible to identify that the support services and programs in Quebec place a significant amount of pressure on young people leaving care to develop a number of long-term goals and objectives. This is demonstrated in the manner in which programs, such as the PQJ, require youth to develop and implement their “life project” (*projet de vie adulte*) (CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017). The language surrounding these long-term ‘life’ goals places unrealistic pressure on young people, generally aged 16 to 19 at the time of these interventions, to develop a concrete and actionable plan for their

entire adult lives, at a time in their life that is identified in the literature as a period of great instability and stress, where one begins their journey of identity development and autonomy-building (Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). Further, as such programs end once young people reach a certain age (e.g. at the age of 19 for the PQJ), youth are expected to continue to implement this plan without the continued guidance and support of professionals or a stable and supportive network (Goyette et al., 2007).

In order to support youth through this difficult transition period and into adulthood, it is important to ensure that they are adequately supported in setting and implementing realistic and measurable goals, both in terms of their timeline and achievability. These goals must take into consideration the diversity that exists within this population, in terms of needs, capacities, readiness and resources (e.g. access to a supportive informal social network). Youth should also be supported throughout the implementation of this plan, as they see fit, rather than being left to implement it themselves once they reach the maximum age identified by the program.

Moreover, it is equally essential that the language utilized to describe these goals does not place unnecessary and unreasonable pressure on youth. The use of terminology such as “life project”, for example, implies that the goals and objectives set by youth are rigid and cannot change or evolve over time, which is highly inconsistent with the realities of young people as they transition into adulthood, given the current social, economic and political contexts. Such changes in our language and expectations towards youth aging out of care will ensure that they do not feel overwhelmed by the goals that they set, that they feel adequately supported throughout the implementation process and that they feel that their capacities, resources and goals align.

7.4 Expanding Determinants of Success and Well-Being

The literature presented in this research paper has demonstrated the critical role that early life experiences and events, as well as their timing, can play in influencing long-term development (Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Wethington, 2005). The majority of young people with a history in foster care, for example, have experienced or witnessed some form of mistreatment, abuse and/or neglect that led to their apprehension and foster care placement, which can have a direct impact on their outcomes and development in later life (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019). Many young people previously in care have also experienced other significant traumas during their time in foster care, such as environmental instability, which can equally have impacts on their overall well-being (Marcotte et al., 2019). Further, the literature identifies that ex-foster youth are more likely to lack relational permanency and support in the form of stable, enduring and meaningful connections with their family members and other adults in their environment (Doucet, 2020a, 2020b; Gauthier, 2018; Rutman et al., 2007; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013). Many youth leaving care, therefore, carry the baggage of these traumatic experiences and relational conflicts with their families, which persist over time (Gauthier, 2018).

Despite this common reality, services and programs tailored to young people aging out of care in Quebec, such as the PQJ, prioritize the development of independence and ‘qualification’ of youth, through the development of goals and objectives pertaining to education, socio-professional insertion and the building of skills for independent living (Bussi eres et al., 2015; CISSS de l’Outaouais, 2017; Goyette et al., 2007; Goyette et al., 2022; Sansone et al., 2020). Rather than emphasizing the importance of well-being and health as the foundational elements of these interventions, and prioritizing young people’s interpretations of what these concepts mean to them in the development of their long-term goals, the PQJ places the notions of autonomy and

active citizenship at the forefront (Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). These intervention practices stress the importance of complete self-sufficiency and participation in the labor market as central components of the ‘successful’ attainment of adulthood (Goyette et al., 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013; Laurent et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2017). Considering that many ex-foster youth have experienced or been exposed to traumatic events prior to and/or during their time in foster care, and that many lack support from their informal social networks, these difficulties can pose as significant barriers to the outcome of such interventions if they are not adequately addressed (Laurent et al., 2021; Marcotte et al., 2019; Marion et al., 2017; Goyette & Frechon, 2013).

As stated by Gauthier (2018), the notion of social insertion does not limit itself to one’s independence or integration into the job market. The literature presented in this research paper has demonstrated that there is currently a great contrast that exists between the societal expectations imposed upon young people leaving care and their experiences during this life period (Gauthier, 2018). Taking these realities into consideration, it is important to challenge the manner in which we, as a society and as institutions, define success and well-being, and how these definitions impact the development of services targeted to young people leaving care (Doucet et al., 2018). If our priority is truly to foster opportunities, through service delivery, for youth to develop into healthy and ‘successful’ adults, we should ensure that they are able to learn and grow in ways that are meaningful to them (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022; Doucet et al., 2018). This involves deviating from independence and qualification-based determinants of success and well-being and, rather, giving youth the power to define what these concepts mean to them, develop their own framework of priorities, set realistic goals based on their life circumstances and identify the necessary resources and support that they need to thrive.

7.5 Supporting the Development of Social Capital

The themes emerging in this research paper have demonstrated the critical role that relationships, both formal (e.g. with child welfare professionals, foster parents and mentors) and informal (e.g. with the family unit, friends and intimate partners), play in supporting or inhibiting youth in their transition out of the foster care system. Despite formal and informal relationships being identified as significant contributing factors to the well-being and development of youth, the literature has identified that many youth aging out of foster care lack permanency, reciprocity and stability in their relationships (Doucet, 2020a, 2020b; Rutman et al., 2007; Stangeland & Walsh, 2013). In their informal networks, for example, many foster youth report having limited relationships with individuals that act as active and supportive figures in their transition out of the child welfare system (Goyette et al., 2007; Marion et al., 2017). Due to such limited relationships in their informal network, many youth, thus, rely on formal relationships with child welfare professionals (e.g. intervention workers and other staff members) and their foster family for emotional support (Marion et al., 2017). These formal relationships, however, are generally time-limited and these connections are often severed once they age out of care (Marion et al., 2017). The literature, therefore, unveils a dire need to fill this relational gap and unmet need for emotional support that affects a vast number of young people leaving care in the province of Quebec.

As every young person leaving care needs to feel that they belong and have someone that they can count on, opportunities for mentorship can play a powerful role in the lives of these youth, by fostering healthy and supportive relationships that persist over time, and positively altering their life trajectories (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022; Doucet et al., 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018; Marion et al., 2017). Research conducted by Mann-Feder (2018), for example, demonstrated the role that mentors with shared experiences can play in fostering feelings of belongingness and

understanding with young people previously in care. Although the literature reveals that opportunities to develop mentorship relationships are currently limited, investments in increased opportunities that encourage connections between youth leaving care and mentors that have similar lived experiences can support the development of long-term and stable forms of support to aid youth during their transition out of foster care (Doucet et al., 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018; Marion et al., 2017). Further, these mentoring relationships can support youth by cultivating feelings of acceptance and empowerment, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement, reducing feelings of isolation and facilitating the management and navigation of any stigma faced in relation to their involvement in the child welfare system (Doucet et al., 2018; Mann-Feder, 2018). In order to have a positive impact on youth, such relationships should be continuously nurtured and supported, both before, during and after youth transition out of care (Doucet et al., 2018).

7.6 Improving Long-Term Data Collection

The literature surrounding the outcomes of young people following a foster care placement in Quebec, as well as in the rest of Canada, criticize the fact that there are no systems in place to track data on the status of youth after leaving a placement, as there are in other countries, such as the United States (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Goyette & Frechon, 2013). This distinct social phenomena and life period is further identified in the literature as a period that receives very little attention in Quebec when it comes to data collection and research (*Étude longitudinale sur le devenir des jeunes placés au Québec et en France [EDJeP]*, 2022; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). This is further supported in the observation that the majority of published research reports and academic articles on this issue in the province are led by the same author, namely Martin Goyette. This reality is a major challenge in the support of young people aging out of care, as a lack of data on the trajectories and outcomes of youth during this period makes it extremely difficult to develop

adequate services and programs to support the needs of these youth and appropriately address this social challenge (Goyette & Blanchet, 2022).

In an effort to address knowledge and data gaps surrounding the transition period following a discharge from child welfare services in Quebec, the EDJeP was developed by the *Chaire de recherche du Canada sur l'évaluation des actions publiques à l'égard des jeunes et des populations vulnérables* to study the living conditions and transition of approximately 1,000 youth between the ages of 17 to 21 that had previously been placed in care (EDJeP, 2022). This study, which began in 2017 and continued over the course of a three year period, represented the first longitudinal study on this theme in the province of Quebec (EDJeP, 2022; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022). The purpose of the study was to improve understanding of youth trajectories after leaving care and to explore challenges faced during this transition period, in order to inform the improvement and modification of practices, services and policies (EDJeP, 2022).

Currently, the limited number of research conducted in Quebec on youth aging out of care means that researchers, organizations and policy developers must rely on longitudinal data stemming from one individual study (i.e. research conducted by the EDJeP) to inform all initiatives developed in the province. This can become problematic due to data interpretations, limited sample sizes and demographics (e.g. limited participants from certain regions), and evolving social, economic and political contexts (e.g. impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising costs of living). Large-scale longitudinal studies such as the EDJeP should, thus, continue to be funded and promoted in order to ensure the continuation of data collection on the trajectories and outcomes of young people leaving foster care in Quebec. Further, the Government of Quebec should inquire into developing a provincially-funded system or delegated organization for collecting long-term data on youth after they age out of care. Such provincial research and data collection initiatives

would ultimately facilitate the evaluation of programs and services, by measuring and assessing their impacts and effectiveness in supporting youth through this life period, as well as improving their outcomes and overall health and well-being. This data would ultimately allow for readjustments to be made to existing programs and services, and for further services to be developed where service gaps have been identified.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This research has demonstrated the complex role that dominant social and cultural ideologies, services, relationships and early life events can play in shaping the experiences and trajectories of young people as they age out of the foster care system in Quebec. As presented throughout this research, there is currently a great dichotomy that exists between our social and cultural conceptions of ‘adulthood’ and the realities faced by young people in Quebec during their transition out of care. These dominant ideologies have had a significant impact in shaping the nature of the services and programs offered to young people aging out of care in the province, the types of interventions that are prioritized with this population and the accessibility of these services. Furthermore, this research has revealed the significant role that relationships, both formal and informal, can play in either supporting or inhibiting this transition, depending largely on factors such as permanency, opportunities for growth, reciprocity and trust. Finally, this research has demonstrated the role that the interaction of these factors, in addition to unresolved trauma, can play in shaping the trajectories of young people leaving care, by increasing their susceptibility of experiencing difficulties such as homelessness, housing instability, school attrition, unemployment, poverty, mental health problems, early parenthood and involvement in the criminal justice system.

All in all, the maintenance of the status quo in regards to post-majority care will continue to lead to inequitable outcomes for young people exiting the foster care system in Quebec. Given that social, economic and political realities are constantly evolving over time, it is essential that we, as a society, act to adapt our institutions, legislation, policies and services to these changing realities. In the context of youth aging out of care, it is, thus, crucial that we challenge our

conception of adulthood in order to match the current experiences of young people transitioning out of care in the 21st century, and understand the role that such ideals can play in molding our services, intervention practices and expectations towards youth. In order to improve long-term outcomes for young people leaving care, it is essential that we listen to their needs, as well as their definitions of success, health and well-being, and that we work to ensure that they feel secure and supported in their relationships. Further, it is important that these youth have access to support services that take into consideration their readiness, abilities, capacities and resources, and that these services are accessible to all, regardless of their age or circumstances.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Three major implications for social work practice can be identified, based on the findings of this major research paper. These include the importance of adapting intervention practices and services to the unique circumstances of youth, advocating for young people leaving care and ensuring collaboration between sectors.

This research has demonstrated that the population of youth aging out of care in Quebec is not homogenous. Intervention approaches that aim to tackle the difficulties faced by these youth must, therefore, be anchored in equity and intersectionality, recognizing that every child has different life circumstances, origins and identity factors, and requires access to different supports, resources and opportunities in order to succeed and reach outcomes that are equal or comparable to those of youth in the general population (Doucet, 2021; Ziemann, 2019). Moreover, youth interventions should not limit themselves to building qualification, autonomy and employability, but must also act to develop social capital, address the adversities and traumas that youth may have experienced prior to and during a foster care placement and dismantle structural pressures placed on youth to meet rigid and unrealistic standards of ‘adulthood’ immediately after attaining the legal

age of majority (Rebbe et al., 2017). These interventions must also be based in trauma-informed practices, as many youth leaving the child welfare system live with various forms of trauma that can manifest themselves in a number of different ways throughout their life course (Doucet, 2021). Failure to take these factors into consideration in the development of legislation, policies and services can have both short and long term consequences on the health and well-being of youth that have previously experienced a foster care placement.

It is also essential for social workers and child welfare professionals to act as advocates in defense of the interests and rights of youth aging out of care. This can take place on an individual level, for example, by ensuring that youth have access to the information and resources that they need to understand their rights and make informed decisions about their future (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022). This can also be accomplished by including youth as central decision-makers in their transition process and providing them with opportunities to define what success, health and well-being mean to them (Doucet et al., 2018). Advocacy can also take place at an organizational or structural level, by questioning and challenging institutional practices and standards that directly impact young people, as well promoting and ensuring access to specialized youth-centered and trauma-informed services (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022; Doucet et al., 2018). In addition, youth protection organizations should also act to foster environments in which youth workers have flexibility in regards to their intervention approaches and have the ability to inspire and lead system and culture changes (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022).

Finally, as a society, we cannot continue to overlook the interconnection of social issues, such as poverty, education, housing, health and child welfare, and must act to develop holistic approaches to tackle these complex challenges. Since social problems do not exist in a vacuum, it is important for social workers, child welfare organizations and governments to foster

collaboration between sectors (e.g. education, health, community services, etc.) to share the responsibility of young people in care and ensure that they have continued access to services that meet their diverse needs and tackle difficulties faced in multiple interconnected spheres of their lives, before, during and after involvement in the child welfare system (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022).

Avenues for Future Research

Although this research explored the principles of socio-historical and geographic location, variability, linked lives and lifespan development in relation to youth aging out of care, the fifth principle of the life course perspective, namely human agency, was not explored in the context of this research due to time, scope and length limitations. In order to further develop the findings of this research, however, the exploration of this fifth principle would allow for a more complete analysis of this transition period through the lens of this theoretical framework. This could allow for a better understanding of how an individual's choices and actions are shaped by the opportunities that are available to them, as well as the constraints of the environment in which they exist (Mitchell, 2003). This additional research could further explore the role that dominant social and cultural ideologies surrounding the 'successful' attainment of adulthood play in influencing the development of policy, services and programs targeted to young people leaving foster care, which consequently shapes their perceptions of this life period (e.g. setting of goals, conceptions of 'success' and 'independence', etc.) and the choices that they make. Further, as this theoretical research was limited to the use of documentary sources, there is a need to further develop these findings by conducting interviews with youth to better understand the impact of these dominant social and cultural ideals, as well as other interconnecting factors (e.g. pressures to conform to

norms surrounding adulthood, access to services, the nature of formal and informal relationships and traumas), on their transition out of care.

Finally, future research on the topic of aging out of care in Quebec should also seek to explore the unique realities and experiences of Indigenous youth, who are significantly overrepresented in the foster care system, as they leave care and navigate this transition period (Fayant & Bach, 2021; Gagnon-Dion et al., 2017; Indigenous Services Canada, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021). This could include, for example, the exploration of various factors and barriers that particularly affect Indigenous youth in care and their families, such as the continued imposition of colonial child and family systems and intervention practices, pressures to conform to Western ideals of ‘adulthood’ and ‘independence’, the inaccessibility of culturally-adapted post-majority services, as well as disconnections with culture, family, territory and community experienced during foster care placements. Such research is necessary in order to support the well-being of Indigenous youth and the development of post-majority services, programs, practices and policies in Quebec that are tailored to their distinct needs and realities.

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Appendix A

List of Recommendations

This appendix includes a non-exhaustive list of recommendations to better support youth leaving foster care in the province of Quebec, organized by overarching theme.

Theme	Recommendation(s)
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Developing long-term post-placement housing, without predefined age or time limits (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022; Laurent et al., 2021); and● Ensuring access to housing supports and/or subsidies (Laurent et al., 2021).
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Covering tuition costs for youth pursuing their studies at all levels (e.g. collegial, university, vocational, etc.);● Providing long-term psychosocial support services to youth after leaving foster care in order to support them with schooling throughout their academic career; and● Adapting teaching methods and environments to the needs and realities of youth in care (Laurent et al., 2021).
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Developing accessible mental health services that are tailored to the needs and realities of youth with a history of foster care, both during and after a placement; and● Developing supports to assist youth in their transition from youth to adult health services, as well as in accessing and navigating such services (Laurent et al., 2021).
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Establishing a guaranteed minimum income, that is adjusted to meet inflation and local living costs, in order to meet basic needs (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022).

Theme	Recommendation(s)
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allowing youth to remain in their foster families past the legal age of majority (Laurent et al., 2021); ● Providing long-term psychosocial support to youth after leaving foster care in order to help with housing, schooling, income, accessing health or social services, and any other areas in which they may need support (Laurent et al., 2021); ● Moving away from age-based service cut-offs and replacing them with readiness-based cut-offs that take into consideration the needs, readiness, resources and capacities of youth (Doucet, 2020b, 2021; Rebbe et al., 2017; Ziemann, 2019); ● Ensuring that child welfare professionals and other professionals working with ex-foster youth receive adequate training to provide trauma-informed services (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022); and ● Developing holistic intervention programs that provide support in multiple spheres of an individual’s life (e.g. housing, income, relationships, education, etc.) (Laurent et al., 2021).
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supporting continuity in formal relationships between young people and professionals; ● Promoting healthy informal relationships through awareness initiatives and skill-building/trauma-sensitivity workshops (e.g. for parents, friends, family members, etc.); and ● Creating opportunities for youth to develop social capital (e.g. mentorship opportunities).

Theme	Recommendation(s)
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing a key organization that defends the rights of ex-foster youth, ensures that their rights are respected and that their voices are heard (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022); ● Creating opportunities for key stakeholders and youth workers to discuss successes and challenges in relation to the provision of care/support services, as well as the development of initiatives and solutions (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2022); ● Supporting the accessibility of information in order for youth to make informed decisions about their future and facilitate access to services or supports (Kovarikova, 2017); and ● Ensuring active youth participation in the development of services, intervention programs and policies (Laurent et al., 2021).
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensuring access to equitable services across all regions of Quebec; ● Ensuring that organizations providing services to ex-foster youth have the resources and financial support necessary to fulfill their mandate (Laurent et al., 2021); and ● Improving long-term data collection on the impacts of services and outcomes of youth after leaving a foster care placement.