EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AMONG QUEBEC YOUTH IN RESIDENTIAL CARE WHO ARE AT THE EDGE OF TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

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Abstract: This article explores the development of aspirations among young people in residential care who are on the cusp of adulthood, and the relationship between their aspirations and their educational experience. We examine the specific aspirations of young people, what shapes those aspirations, and how they interact with their educational experience. This article is based on a qualitative study that aimed to better understand the educational experience of young people in residential care in the Canadian province of Quebec. Biographical interviews were conducted with 35 young people aged 14 to 18. Our analysis demonstrates that, while many seem quite able to project themselves into the future, some appear to see their placement situation and its accompanying uncertainty as an obstacle to doing so. It also suggests that educational and professional aspirations can transform young people's educational experiences and the meaning that they attribute to formal education, as well as influence their intention to pursue further education. Finally, our results offer a critical look at how youth construct their aspirations, and demonstrate the importance of providing conditions that allow and encourage youth in residential care to develop and pursue varied aspirations.

Keywords: aspirations, educational experience, residential care, care leavers

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Over the years, studies from Canada, the United States, and Europe have documented the disparities in educational outcomes (e.g., high school completion) between youth in the general population who have never lived in care or received child welfare services and those who have experienced or lived in out-of-home care (Brownell et al., 2015; Dietrich-Ragon, 2020; Flynn et al., 2013; Goyette & Blanchet, 2019; Maclean et al., 2017; Snow, 2009). Moreover, studies show that youth in residential care have lower educational outcomes than youth in foster care (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Goyette & Blanchet, 2019). Not only does educational attainment predict better long-term outcomes in earnings and employment for youth in out-of-home care (Okpych & Courtney, 2014), but it is considered by them to be a pathway towards achieving work and life goals (Tilbury et al., 2014). The premise of this study is that educational achievement can make a meaningful difference in the lives of youth in residential care, facilitating their access to employment, improving their living situation, and increasing their social participation.

Developing Aspirations in Order to Address Educational Disparities

In Quebec, Canada, many youth enter residential care, after an initial investigation, between the ages of 14 and 17 (Esposito et al., 2013). For youth between 13 and 17 and their families, the most common reasons to become involved with youth protection services in Quebec include severe behavioral issues, neglect, and psychological abuse, followed by the risk of neglect and physical and sexual abuse (Directeurs provinciaux, 2020). The young people received by residential care settings mostly present severe behavioral issues, mental health issues, or substance abuse issues. Residential care includes two major types of facility: open facilities, such as group homes that are living environments in the community where services are offered by youth workers who generally do not live there and where youth are able to work and go to school in the community; and closed facilities, such as rehabilitation centres for young people whose challenges may include severe behavioral difficulties, social adaptation problems, and mental health issues. The majority of youth in closed facilites attend special education or specialized programs.

It has been documented that multiple factors related to pre-care and care experiences influence the educational outcomes of these young people (Marion & Mann-Feder, 2020). Mental health issues, psychological distress, and trauma can impact their educational experience (Townsend et al., 2020), as can placement instability (Goyette et al., 2021; McClung & Gayle, 2010), and changing schools (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021). Indeed, by the time they enter residential care as adolescents, only limited opportunities may be available for state interventions capable of affecting school outcomes and addressing the gaps in educational attainment (Berridge, 2007).

To understand how to facilitate academic success for these youth, we have considered "educational resilience" — the likelihood of school success despite adverse conditions (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Tessier et al. (2018) have investigated risk and protective factors as predictors of school success on a large sample ($N = 3,659$) of youth in out-of-home care aged between 11 and 17. They found that female gender, youth educational aspirations, caregiver

educational aspirations for youth, time with current caregiver, internal developmental assets, and positive mental health were associated with better school success. Moreover, encouraging higher educational aspirations among marginalized young people appears to be a common strategy employed by youth programs attempting to address educational and social disparities (Tzenis, 2018). Numerous initiatives base their activities on the notion that disadvantaged young people can best be helped to improve their educational attainment and progression into employment through programs focused on "raising aspirations", which are understood to play a key role in shaping young people's engagement with education and politics (Archer et al., 2014). Thus the development of aspirations can be considered as a possible way to address educational disparities of young people in residential care.

Aspirations and Transition from Care to Adulthood: Current State of Knowledge

What do we know about the aspirations of young people in residential care? Previous research suggests that despite their placement situation and the uncertainty surrounding it, many young people in residential care have a positive attitude towards their future and put the same amount of effort into creating a better future for themselves as their peers do (Tilbury et al., 2009). However, the challenges young people encounter due to their placement in residential care can make it more difficult for them to project themselves into the future through positive, stable, and realistic aspirations (Malo & Sarmiento, 2010). For others, the uncertainty regarding the duration and the stability of their placement represents an obstacle to their capacity for future projection, as does simply being in a stage of life where all seems unclear and vague (Tilbury et al., 2011). Also, young people's aspirations are negatively impacted when they have limited knowledge about what is required to enter a chosen occupation and how to find that information (Tilbury et al., 2011). Improving conditions in residential care, through paying more attention to what young people are communicating, and providing them with support, encouragement, and greater consideration, seems to help them develop and pursue their aspirations (Tilbury et al., 2009). Finally, carers must ensure that they support young people's aspirations while helping them evaluate what knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will need in order to make a successful transition to adulthood (McMillen et al., 2003). When carers demonstrate that they have high expectations by investing in young people's education, and give proper support, young people are likely to strive to achieve at school (Mendis, 2015).

Research Objective

The main objective of our research was to better understand the educational experiences of young people in residential care. As we listened to young people talk about significant elements that have positively or negatively affected their educational experience, one element that stood out was how the development of their aspirations was related to their educational experiences. In this article we explore the aspirations of youth in residential care and how they can contribute to both educational resilience and attainment, which in turn can enhance their transition to adulthood and their future. The general objective of this article is therefore to explore the development of

aspirations in young people in residential care who are on the cusp of adulthood, and how their aspirations relate to their educational experience.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Huijsmans et al. (2021) defined "aspiration" as "an orientation towards a desired future", and explained that "such futures may be individual or collective projects, [and] may refer to more immediate or longer term futures" (p. 3). An orientation towards the future includes imagining possibilities and doubting (Huijsmans et al., 2021, p. 3). Aspiration is considered to be "a process of young people hoping and imagining what their lives will be like in the future" (Tzenis, 2021, para. 1). Regarding their development, "aspirations may manifest at the level of the individual, but cannot be reduced to it" (Huijsmans et al., 2021, p. 5). Their rise and transformation are known to be formed not only by a youth's individual interests, but also by their biographical past, everyday practices, key life events, interactions with other people (social relations and specific encounters), institutions, and other aspects of their social lives and contexts, such as neighborhoods, schools, family, and popular culture (Huijsmans et al., 2021; Tzenis, 2021, para. 1).

Using this conceptual framework, we formulated three questions:

- What hopes do young people in residential care have for their their educational, professional, and personal futures, and what do they imagine those futures will be?
- What has contributed to the formation — or transformation — of these young peoples' aspirations over the course of their personal lives and placement histories?
- What are the relationships between the aspirations of youth and their educational experiences?

This article thus goes beyond simply reporting and describing aspirations. By considering that the construction of aspirations is always anchored in contexts and life histories, it seeks a better understanding of how aspirations are developed by young people in residential care.

Methodology

Using a qualitative interpretive method, we carried out biographical interviews in 2021 with 35 young people aged between 14 and 17 who were in residential care in Quebec, and were on the cusp of the transition from care to adulthood. Our goal was to better understand their post-primary educational experiences (Bertaux, 1997). This type of interview is particularly effective for exploring in depth people's recollections and interpretations of certain social experiences they have had (Schwartz et al., 1999). The interviews provided an opportunity for young people to reconstruct their experience based on their own perspectives, with little interference from the interviewer. We gave them the opportunity to look back on their school careers, and to talk about their aspirations for the future, whether academic, professional, or personal. We asked what caused them to have these particular aspirations and how those aspirations were formed.

We first transcribed the interviews, then analyzed them, looking at the educational experiences of each young person and constructing a chronological narrative. We noted any elements reported by the young person as having significantly influenced their educational experiences, whether positively or negatively. Since "having aspirations" was identified by young people as an element that positively influenced their educational experience, we continued our analysis of the narrative to better understand how and why this was the case. Next, we noted the aspirations mentioned and analyzed the narrative to understand how they had developed and for what reasons. That gave us an understanding of the elements that influenced the educational aspirations of our participants, and of young people in residential care more generally.

Results

This section presents results based on the narratives of 35 young people aged 14 to 18. The participants are quoted in this report using pseudonyms. Their average age was 15.5, with 40% ($n = 14$) identifying as female, 57% ($n = 20$) as male, and 3% ($n = 1$) as non-binary. Among these youth, 46% ($n = 16$) were in group homes and 54% ($n = 19$) had been placed in rehabilitation centres. As for their experience with youth protection services at the time of the interview, 57.1% ($n = 20$) were experiencing out-of-home care for the first time, 20.0% ($n = 7$) for the second time, and 22.9% ($n = 8$) for the third time or more. In reporting on their educational background, 42.9% ($n = 15$) were not behind in school for their age, while 27.5% ($n = 9$) were one year behind, and 31.4% ($n = 11$) were two or more years behind.

In the first section below, we describe the educational, professional, and personal aspirations of the young people in our study. We also examine the relationship between these different types of aspirations. In the second section, we analyze in greater depth what has contributed to the formation — or transformation — of these young people's aspirations over the course of their personal lives and placement histories. Finally, in the third section, we explore at some length the interaction between the formation of these aspirations and the multiple roles they play in educational experiences.

Educational, Professional, and Personal Aspirations

Educational Aspirations

Most of the youth in our study had specific aspirations or goals that they wished to achieve academically. Table 1 shows the highest level of education they said they hoped to achieve. Most of the young people aspired to pursue post-secondary education.

To better capture what they considered to be important, we asked young people about their broad aspirations; 20% ($n = 7$) either did not refer to educational aspirations or indicated that they did not know what their aspirations were. There were apparent differences between those who did and did not mention educational aspirations. For some participants, the uncertainty surrounding their placement situation prevented them from projecting themselves into the future, with some

stating that they were unable to plan because they did not know where they would be in the near future. Others preferred not to have a plan from a fear of being disappointed. For some, it was educational difficulties or the number of times that they had had to repeat a grade that reduced their motivation. Others mentioned the worries running through their heads, such as whether they would be able to complete secondary school, or whether they would be returning to live with family or moving to another placement facility; these anxieties made their futures seem vague and unclear to them. As Juliette (participant #13) noted, "Before, a few months ago, I wanted to be an architect or a lawyer. Now I don't know. It's still a blur. I'm at a stage where almost everything is a blur." This state of confusion made it difficult for Juliette to project herself into the future, and thus became a barrier to constructive thinking about her education.

Table 1. *Educational Aspirations*

Educational aspiration	Participants
Not discussed	4 (11.4%)
Do not know	3 (8.6%)
High school diploma	1 (2.9%)
Equivalency test (e.g., GED)	1 (2.9%)
Technical or career program (DEP)	11 (31.4%)
Pre-university program (CEGEP)	6 (17.1%)
University	9 (25.7%)
Total	35 (100%)

From what some of the young people told us, we also understood that academic delays and grade repetition played a role in formulating their educational aspirations. As Clement (#24) explained:

> You don't even need a high school diploma for rap. It doesn't require any qualification or training. All you need is you. So, I told myself that [school], it's a big waste of time, and that really demotivated me, then the first time I repeated a year made it worse, when I was held back again, that demotivated me even more, and by the time I was held back a third time, I was just fed up.

Still other young people preferred not to be too hopeful for fear of being disappointed if they failed to achieve their goals:

> So yeah, it's not bad, otherwise I don't really make plans because I tell myself that if I don't manage to complete them, I'll think of myself as a loser and then I'll be disappointed, so I prefer thinking small. Then, if something bigger comes along, I'll just be happy. (Camille, #23)

Professional Aspirations

We examined the young people's aspirations for their future educational and professional choices. Although 20% indicated they were not currently thinking about a career, a large majority of participants (80%) did have a specific career in mind. A wide range of career aspirations were mentioned. Table 2 compiles those career aspirations by Government of Quebec employment field categories[1]. Topping the list was "Education, community, and social services" (20%), which focuses on public needs and depends on people with expertise in fields like psychology and sociology. Psychologist and special education technician were the most common career aspirations reported for this field. It was followed by "Arts, literature, and communication" (14.3%). Some participants aspired to work in the arts as a photographer, interior designer, or video game designer. In the "Engineering and public works" field (14.3%), some participants wanted to pursue a technical program. In addition, some young people mentioned that they wanted to work in construction or as a mechanic. Finally, lawyer was the most popular career aspiration in the "Law and public safety" field (14.3%).

Table 2. *Professional Aspirations*

Employment field aspiration	Participants
Do not know	7 (20.0%)
Business, management, and administration	1 (2.9%)
Arts, literature, and communication	5 (14.3%)
Engineering and public works	5 (14.3%)
Education, community, and social services	7 (20.0%)
Law and public safety	5 (14.3%)
Health and medicine	2 (5.7%)
Other services (hair stylist)	1 (2.9%)
Other	2 (5.7%)
Total	35 (100%)

Multiple Personal Aspirations

In addition to having career and educational aspirations, most of the young people we spoke to told us about their personal aspirations for the future, which encompassed multiple dimensions of their lives: place of residence, possessions, personal stability, relationships, and family structure. We categorized these as two types of personal aspiration. First, we identified general aspirations that are typical of the transition to adulthood; that is, aspirations that any young person in their age

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[1] https://www.quebec.ca/gouvernement/travailler-gouvernement/travailler-fonction-publique/domaines-emploi/a-propos

group might have, irrespective of whether or not they had been in out-of-home care. The survey participants did not explicitly relate these aspirations to care. We discuss these in the next subsection, "To Have a Normal Life!". Second, we identified aspirations directly related to the placement situation and the future of a young person in care. We present these under "Next Steps: Stability and Independence".

To Have a Normal Life!

Most of the young people in our study, although currently in a placement situation, said they wanted to have a "normal life" and a happy future. For many, this meant making progress in the various areas that make up their lives. The desire to become independent, in the more-or-less long term, was prevalent. They wanted to become financially independent, get a driver's licence, and live in their own apartment, whether alone, as part of a couple, or with friends. In this respect, many mentioned the importance of surrounding themselves with good people in their relationships and friendships. Many mentioned wanting to start a family, either by having children or adopting them. In addition, many young people expressed a desire to make material acquisitions, such as a car or a house, or financial investments through a bank, in cryptocurrency, or in a lucrative business. Many also said they wanted to volunteer in community or humanitarian organizations. For example, one young person said they wanted to participate in food and clothing drives to help the homeless, and another mentioned wanting to go on humanitarian missions to help the poor and the sick.

Next Steps: Stability and Independence

In addition to having aspirations for their transition to adulthood that were similar to the aspirations of those not in care, many of the young people also had more specific visions regarding their placement situations. Placements typically have a set duration, which, along with the terms and conditions that govern them, is subject to regular review. Knowing that close to half (42.9%) of the youths in our study had already experienced two or more placements, and that some of them were approaching the end of care as defined by the youth protection system in Quebec (18 years old), they were wondering about their next steps. They pondered questions such as: Where will I go? When will my placement end? Will I go back to my family?

Due to the uncertainty of their situations, it was a struggle for some to make projections for their future. Of the 35 participants, 7 (20%) either did not discuss educational aspirations at all, or said they did not know what they were. Others had ideas of where they would like to go, despite not knowing when it would be possible. For example, 17-year-old Carl (#27) said:

> As soon as a vacancy opens in the [intermediate resource], I'll be leaving the [rehabilitation] centre…. It could be next week, or the week after, or it could be in two months. So, I'm living more from day to day until I leave here.

This uncertainty seemed to prevent Carl from making plans in other areas of his life. He preferred to wait for this life change to be complete before thinking about other things that he wanted to accomplish. It was not just Carl: many youths shared their concerns about where they would like to live after their current placement. Some hoped to leave the group home — or leave youth protection care altogether — as soon as possible. Thus, the placement situation often had a negative effect on educational and personal aspirations. We also saw that a young person's desire to quickly leave residential care often led to a decision to continue their education. The youths explained that generally they must respect official requirements (e.g., attend and perform well at school, and respect group home rules) and develop certain skills, such as autonomy, to reach their goals.

To meet expectations or requirements to leave care, some participants (11, 31.4%) expressed a desire to enter a technical or career program. In Quebec, this usually entails a short course (600 to 1800 hours) leading to a vocational diploma (DEP). As Clarke (#12) told us, "Yeah, I want to work in construction, make money that way, and try to invest. Start a family. I want to succeed in school and then get my DEP and leave residential care as soon as possible."

The Construction of Aspirations

To understand how young people in residential care develop their aspirations in adolescence, we analyzed the thoughts they shared with us. Several elements contributed to the development of their educational and professional aspirations.

"I've got everything planned out!": The Role of Formal Support and Planning

We noted that for some youth, formal support and planning played a significant role in the construction of their aspirations, whether they received help from a professional counsellor or from a professional in the care system. Some participants pointed to the contribution of an adult who had helped them form a clear vision of their goals, which had influenced the process of developing aspirations. As Alix (#19) shared, a guidance counsellor had helped her explore some options:

> Well, with the guidance counsellor, we got a small overview of the professions that interested me, and when we came to psychologist, there were different types. And I don't know how we got there, but when we looked at industrial psychologist, I was like, that sounds interesting. And it was a fit.

Claire (#33) pointed out the role that her math teacher had played in providing guidance on potential educational trajectories:

> I've already got everything planned out for my school career. Yeah, my math teacher gave us a notebook of, you know, to kind of figure out what we can become later…. She gave us that. So, I was able to see what I wanted to become, you know? Now I have plans to go to Lionel-Groulx College for CEGEP. Then after that, I'm going to go do a bachelor's degree at Laval University.

Understanding the pathways to different occupations has encouraged these young people to identify their aspirations and helped them consider the steps they could take, or need to take, to acquire the qualifications they want.

For some young people, being placed in the rehabilitation centre gave them the opportunity to take time to look at the future: "Yes. I am quite determined to take my future seriously. I have to admit that I wasn't before I came to the centre. But since I've been at the rehabilitation centre, I've thought a lot more about the future" (Claire, #33). For those experiencing family or personal problems (psychological, behavioral, etc.) in particular, the rehabilitation centre became a space that allowed them to distance themselves from or deal with these problems, so that they could be mentally and physically more available for schooling and for conceptualizing their future. For example, for Claire, it was thanks to the support she received in her placement situation that she was able to begin to see her future:

> I used to have suicidal thoughts and attempted it a few times. So I didn't really want a future. And now, since, you know, I don't have suicidal urges any more, now I want a beautiful future for myself — I think about it, you know. I think about it more now that I'm in a much better place emotionally, and I've found more things now that my life is going much better. I really started to think about what I was going to do when I grew up, what I wanted to be.

"I'll give it a try!": The Role of Relatives and Experimentation

We noted the influence of interactions, social relationships, and specific encounters in the lives of youth. These could be with relatives, individuals from their primary social network, or any inspiring people that they had met. Parents and other family members contribute to the development and pursuit of youth aspirations. Not only do they act as role models for their children, but they also provide opportunities for new experiences, thus allowing youth to form their own ideas about the path they wish to take. The following excerpt shows the role played by parents in Myriam's (#34) choice: "Well, my mother is a nurse, so that's something that inspires me. Whether you like it or not, your mother will always be your model." It appears from Myriam's statement that the experience and support of her family network enabled her to choose the career path that she felt was best suited to her.

Marco (#26) found satisfaction and enjoyment in working in his stepfather's workplace. He was able to learn about this environment, become interested in it, and consider being a mechanic as a career choice:

> My stepfather, my mother's current boyfriend, has his own garage. So, you know, I used to work at his garage sometimes. And you know, at one point, he said to me, "Oh, you know, would you like to work here?" I was like, "Well, okay. I'll give it a try. Why not?" In the end, I really liked it. So like I was going to do my DEP, and for my DEP internship, I was going to do it there.

Philippe (#9) mentioned that he had abandoned his childhood dream to instead pursue his father's career path:

> Basically, it was my parents. In the beginning, I wanted to be a professional soccer player, because I loved soccer and being on a team. Later, at the age of 16, I stopped playing soccer for a year because I had to go to work, etc. Then, I said to myself, let it go. So, I turned to electricity, because that's what my dad was doing, and occasionally he would teach me little things and I liked it.

In contrast, for others it was a desire to escape their family situation, or at least to not reproduce the same pattern, that led them to choose one path over another. For Clarke (#12), what was most important was to have a stable financial situation for herself, which she seems to have missed in her childhood with her mother. Clarke said, "My mother is in a tough situation and that motivates me to want to make a lot of money. To make sure my children do not experience the same predicament as my mother." Many others mentioned the lack of stability in their lives or the precarious situations in which their families found themselves and the influence of these contexts on their personal and professional aspirations. They mostly hoped to break the cycle and build a more stable situation for themselves and, later, for their families, for those who wanted one.

"I want to make a difference!": Specific Encounters and the Desire to Contribute

A variety of factors can lead young people in residential care to want to pursue one goal over another. For example, some participants spoke of entering the education and health sectors "to help" or "to make a difference" in people's lives. Some, like Clarke (#12), referred to the influence of their own personal lives:

> Because I want to help young people who may have made the same mistakes I did or who, like, have a similar background to mine, you know, I want to help the light bulb come on in their heads that they can change.

They also acknowledged that their own experiences had made them aware of their environment. They recognized the importance of the help they had received from professionals who had accompanied and encouraged them. By working in this field, they wanted to help other young people facing challenges similar to their own. For example, Camille (#23) explained:

> … the fact that I was in a centre, and that the people here helped me become a better person. It made me want to go and help people, because so many people need help and they don't necessarily have the help they need, so I want to get involved. I want to help them.

For Marjorie (#21), a significant contact made such a difference in her life that she decided to make a difference in the lives of others:

> I'd say that the idea started to germinate when I entered a youth centre because before, although I'd had social workers since I was little, they would come and go,

and it happened so often that I was like, "Oh, there's no use", but later I was placed, and I had a social worker for over a year, and I got along really well with her, and I was like okay, but you know there are social workers like them who make a difference, so that's when I decided to make a difference.

"I've always been very creative!": Passions, Hobbies, and Highlighted Strengths

We identified other personal experiences and individual factors that contributed to the participants' aspirations, such as long-term interests and hobbies, and sudden events that could prove pivotal for their future lives. Another element that emerged from our analysis is the role of identified personality traits and passions in the development of young people's aspirations. Claire (#33) said:

I want to work in the arts.… I've always been very creative. You know, it's often said that people who are very emotional have a lot more imagination, a lot more creativity. Well, I'm one of those people. I like drawing a lot. I like creation very much.

The personality traits and strengths of some participants had clearly influenced their career preferences. Some had taken their interests and skills into consideration when making career choices. For example, a number had come to the realization that their goals had been formed in childhood, as was the case with Axelle (#20):

Well, ever since I was very little — since I was very little, like, I really like children. And I see a lot of them here, and, and I don't know, I've always, I've always had a facility with children, so I think it'll be beneficial for me, working there.

Thus, childhood dreams and related experiences can influence the process of developing aspirations.

Influence of the Media

It was clear that the media had influenced the aspirations of a few youth in our sample by exposing them to new opportunities or fields they otherwise may not have heard about. Some of the young people we interviewed felt a connection to what they saw on the internet or TV and based their aspirations on that. For example, Laura (#8) wanted to be a midwife, based on what she saw on TV: "Uh, well I was watching a show when I was in my first confinement, it's called Baby Boom, and then it was people helping other people give birth. It looked nice." Marc (#7) said that aspirations came from "looking on the internet". When asked, "What made you want to go in this direction?", Charlie (#14) responded, "The programs I watched." The internet and other media appear to influence young people's aspirations, in the sense that they expose them to a view of what it would be like to work in fields they may not have considered before. The media, programs, and documentaries they consumed provided them with details that helped them better understand the reality of some professions, as well as helping them identify with people they would like to emulate.

Elements Add Up Over Time

For many youths, the combination of several of the elements discussed above formed, confirmed, or transformed their aspirations: several interrelated factors working together can influence how youth develop their aspirations over time. To present an overall view of our results, we have broken down the elements that contributed to the development of our study participants' aspirations into several categories. It is, however, important to note that for several young people, it was a combination of multiple elements that led them to progressively build their aspirations. To illustrate, this section presents one young person's journey. It details the contributing elements and how she connected them to explain how she gradually came to develop her aspirations.

Samantha (#35) was 17 when we met her for the interview. She told us that her aspirations started emerging in her childhood, stating that, "I've known it for a long time, really since I was 9 years old. I want to be a hairdresser". Indeed, a meaningful experience with a relative — her grandmother — gave rise to her professional aspirations:

> Yeah. Well, when I was 9 years old, my grandmother was getting married, and we had to have our hair done and everything. And I saw how very, very beautiful my grandmother was … So, you know, I was curious. I liked the way my hair smelled, the shampoo, the relaxation, chatting. You know, we often talk. We must be social to entertain our clients and stuff. Then it really came to me that I wanted to be a hairdresser. Because I like helping people feel good and when they go, "Oh, that smells good!" You know? That someone is taking care of their well-being.

In addition to the connection with her grandmother, Samantha shared her desire to help others feel good and to socialize with them. She also mentioned that she sees her career choice as being consistent with her artistic passion and talent, explaining, "I want to be a hairdresser.… Yes. And I am very artistic too. I dance, I sing, I make art. So you know, all of this, also becomes art." When she was older, an opportunity to enrol in a semiskilled trade training program solidified her choice. She completed an internship that allowed her to explore the field in a more hands-on way and to work with professionals who were able to share their passion with her. She really appreciated this experience and felt very welcome, which encouraged her to continue in this direction:

> They were very, very welcoming. Even the first day, they offered me a free haircut. They took me out for a special lunch to celebrate my arrival, all that. They couldn't wait for me to get there and everything.… That's where I want to work in hairdressing. I want to do my DEP there because it's so much fun there.

Convinced of the career she wanted to pursue, Samantha even developed a clear plan to achieve that goal. As she explained:

> I know that I need a DEP, Secondary 4 French, math and English. I already have it all planned out. You know, I'm going to — My path, basically, is that I'm going to

go to school at the same time as working in a hair salon, but you know, I'm going to get paid, but I won't be able to cut or dye hair because I won't have my high school diploma. You know, I'm going to …. I'm going to continue my education while I help out in hair salons. I'll be picking up hair, washing chairs, all that. But I'm still going to get paid, so I'll have some money. And when I'm in Secondary 4, I'll be able to do my DEP, and then I'll really be a hairdresser.

Relationship Between the Development of Aspirations and Educational Experiences

About 15 of our participants discussed the impact that developing their aspirations had had on their educational experience. Our results suggest that the development of aspirations can act as a turning point in young people's educational experience. Among other things, their aspirations helped them to see the purpose of formal education and influenced their level of perseverance.

"It's better that I like it than hate it!": The Influence Of Professional and Educational Aspirations on School Commitment

The development of professional aspirations allowed some young people to find meaning in their education. For example, when asked, "What are the things that matter to you in life?", Marie (#22) answered:

> Now it's — Well, finish my studies and all, do a DEP.… Each time I go to school, it gives me some self-confidence. And then I tell myself, "In the future, you'll go there and you're going to do the job that you've always wanted."

Some recognized the importance and usefulness of their learning experiences, which motivated them to develop a commitment to their studies, thus increasing their sense of personal efficacy. Thomas (#4) said, "My motivation is to be a photographer. I tell myself every day that if I want to be a photographer, I have to study." Axelle (#20) mentioned explicitly that her professional aspirations have made her more motivated:

> Well, I'm much more motivated because I have a better idea of where I'm going in life now. Like last year — Well when I started grade 10, I didn't know what I wanted to do. And then I was like, "I will never go far in life", but now that I know I have a goal, it's easier to work on.

Philippe (#9) expressed that recognizing the importance of education helped him to see the bright side when it came to school:

> I like going to school because I learn new things. I like math, I like certain courses.… I could go to work and then make money. But I figure that if I want to do what I want to do in life, I need to go to school, so it's better that I like it than hate it. So to motivate myself, I find more positive reasons to go than the possible disadvantages.

We noted that some young people had a positive attitude about their school commitments: they perceived a need to do their best at school to succeed later in life. While describing her motivation to go to school, Marjorie (#21) explained:

> Right now I'm going to school, even if I'm done … I still find motivation [to go to school and read] because next year I'll be in CEGEP and then I must go to university to do the work I want to do. I still find motivation because I say to myself that at the end of the day, I'm going to do what I want to do with my life. I don't want to be a cashier at Walmart until I'm 60.

This positive attitude towards the future was greater for those young people who perceived a need to succeed. They strove to get good marks and be accepted into the program of their choice, and they put strategies in place to achieve their goals. For others, professional aspirations constituted the source of motivation to complete high school. As Clara (#17) explained, "I also got motivated because I want to finish high school because I want to have a job, I want to do something, but I want at least to finish high school". Having professional aspirations appears to inspire young people to identify the possibilities and reflect on the resources they need to mobilize to pursue their studies and persevere in academic tasks.

"Before, I thought that there was only one way!": How Planning a Path to Achieve Professional Aspirations Influences School Engagement

The ability to choose a program that matched their skills and interests allowed youth to better tailor their educational experience to their needs and thereby improve their prospects for success. Our results demonstrate that knowing that there are different educational and professional opportunities allowed young people to implement processes and plans that reflected their interests, personal characteristics, skills, ambitions, and influences. Also, participants planned and prepared their educational pathways based on what they saw as necessary to be accepted into the program of their choice. Therefore, they felt more motivated and committed to pursuing their studies, as Claire (#33) explained: "In fact I've already planned everything about my education.… You need to work, go to school, and do your best. That's my motivation: I really want to work in this field, I really want to study art."

Knowing that they needed to finish certain courses, or that it was possible to obtain educational credits at an accelerated pace to qualify for the career they aspired to, motivated these participants to finish high school. Philippe (#9) stated:

> I want to do a DEP in electricity. You need to do grade 10 prerequisite courses … and yes! I am doing well in school. This year, I've almost finished my Grade 10 English, and I completed my Grade 9 two months ago. It really motivates me even more to finish two years of English in one year.

Similarly, coming to the realization that higher education is not the only pathway to a qualification or degree appeared to be important for some young people, as shown in Guan's (#2) statement:

> … learning there is another way to have a job that pays well. Instead of going to the university and all of that.… When I found out there was a DEP program instead of having to go to University [I was very relieved], before I thought that there was only one way. I didn't know there was a DEP.

When Guan discovered that it was possible to achieve his goal of a well-paying job by taking a specialized program that provides work experience, it had a positive effect on his motivation to invest in his courses. Aspiring to a particular career path not only allowed young people to appreciate their school experience more and motivated them to finish their studies, but these aspirations also allowed them to project themselves into the future and see themselves as happy in a career that suited them. In addition, learning of an alternative path helped moderate the pressure they felt and gave them more realistic expectations regarding their education, which allowed them to focus more intently on learning.

Discussion

The results of our study provide a better understanding of the different ways in which the aspirations of young people in care develop and evolve over the course of their journey, and how these aspirations influence their educational experience.

Aspirations of Youth in Care Are Similar to Those of Their Peers

Our results reveal the diversity of personal, academic, and professional aspirations the young people in our study had in relation to their futures. Ultimately, the personal aspirations of young people in care are quite similar to the aspirations of any young person in their 14 to 18 age group (NSMC, 2010; Royer, 2009). In general, the youth in our study all wanted to "make it in life" in their own way, based on what they felt was most important to them as individuals, such as having a family, owning a car, being independent, having a home, and making money.

Concerning their educational aspirations in particular, the youth in our study had goals (technical, postsecondary, and university studies) that were broadly similar to those reported in other Canadian studies of youth in care. An Ontario study that documented the educational aspirations of 406 youth aged 18 to 20 who were enrolled in extended care and maintenance (ECM) revealed that the youth aspired to at least a high school diploma and that 52.2% of men and 79.5% of women hoped to attain a college, apprenticeship, or university qualification (Flynn & Tessier, 2011). In British Columbia, "more than two-thirds of youth who had ever been in government care indicated that they planned to continue their education after high school" (Turpel-Lafond & Kendall, 2015, p. 58).

In the narratives of young people, the articulation of their various aspirations differs from one individual to the next. It is relevant to emphasize that each aspiration has a different meaning in the life of each young person. Some aspirations are formulated in response to an expectation (e.g., an educator asking a young person to plan a life project to support his or her transition to adulthood), while others emanate directly from the young person (e.g., a dream, a deep desire, or values they hold dear). The distinction we have raised here is also present in the work of Baillergeau (2019). Her work evokes the paradox of the current context that pushes young people to develop a professional project above all else, when this does not necessarily guarantee a successful social integration in which they find their place and feel fulfilled within it, and are able to make sense of their own experience. Thus, for some young people, professional aspirations will take precedence over others, hence the importance of "positioning professional aspirations in a framework of other structuring aspirations that make enough sense to orient day-to-day choices of personal involvement" (Baillergeau, 2019, p. 36).

Relationship Between Aspirations and Educational Experience

With respect to the relationship between the aspirations of youth in care and their educational experience, our results reveal that for many youth, having professional aspirations helped them envisage a trajectory through formal education. Young people verbalized positive effects related to motivation, commitment, and perseverance that allowed them to develop an understanding of "where they are going in life". Thus, the results of our study illustrate that the development of professional and educational aspirations in many young people can be seen as levers that are essential to their academic, personal, and professional success. Aspirations can indeed provide "an impetus, capable of inspiring and guiding their daily actions and commitments, both in and out of school" as Baillergeau (2019, p. 36) stated. On the other hand, this implies that young people who are unable to project themselves into the future and develop their aspirations are deprived of this impetus, and thus of its positive influence on their school experience.

Supporting the Development of Aspirations

Given the positive influence of aspirations, it is essential to discuss their development in order to help us understand how to better support youth in residential care. First, in agreement with Tilbury et al. (2009), our results suggest that support is fundamental to the development of young people's educational and career aspirations. Indeed, support for young people in care from a variety of sources (e.g., mentors, parents, and carers) appears significant in the development of their future-oriented projects (Tilbury et al., 2009). The forms of support are also varied: emotional support, encouragement for academic achievement and higher education, information sharing, and advice and guidance all have an influence on the way aspirations are realized. Historically, service providers have prioritized the medical, social, emotional, and mental health needs of children and youth in out-of-home care (Trout et al., 2008). Our results show the importance of providing an environment that sustains the development of aspirations. As stated by Stoddart (2012), spending time with youth, building relationships, and understanding their hopes and dreams are known to enhance educational outcomes. Moreover, Clemens et al. (2017) have shown the importance of

caregivers, teachers, and other professionals engaging with youth and demonstrating an interest and belief in their dreams, aspirations, and struggles.

Forming aspirations for their future was challenging for some of the young people we met; indeed, one fifth of them felt unable to plan for their education because they did not have clarity in relation to their date for leaving care. Adolescents living in out-of-home care have only limited opportunities to develop the sense of personal agency and autonomy that could help them navigate what Samuels (2009), in an extension of ambiguous loss theory, called the "ambiguous loss of home" (p. 1229), and could in turn help them to look forward. Providing more such opportunities could support them in the development of their aspirations.

As Dimakosa et al. (2022) pointed out, even for those young people in care who have developed aspirations, knowing how to move from aspiration to realization remains another challenge. The results of their study, which involved seven young adults in Ontario who had been involved with child welfare, showed that although the youth had high hopes for their futures, they still faced many obstacles. The researchers also highlighted the confusion of some youth, who had no idea how to approach achieving their goals. In another study, by NSMC (2010), youth expressed a need for help in deciding what to do, what training to choose, and what steps to take to achieve their chosen careers. Therefore, as our own results highlight, support in planning is critically important to help youth achieve their goals and make informed choices. In agreement with Tilbury et al. (2009), our results demonstrate the importance for some young people of operational support from teachers or career counsellors who help them plan their paths step-by-step and support them in making the program choices that will allow them to pursue their preferred careers. Having a specific, practical, actionable plan helps youth develop their potential and motivates them to achieve their goals, whereas a lack of planning can cause youth to worry about the steps they need to take to reach their goals (Tilbury et al., 2011). In some studies, many of the participants noted a lack of support and encouragement from their teachers and schools, which limited their capacity to achieve their aspirations and reduced their opportunities to pursue their goals (Driscoll, 2013; Tilbury et al., 2011).

Even though their path to achievement is likely to be more arduous than that of their peers (Dimakosa et al., 2022), different avenues are available to help young people from placement realize their aspirations (Tzenis, 2018). Tzenis (2021) suggested that programs in which youth document their plans for their futures should incorporate activities that help them learn to rely on social support and to recognize possible obstacles, such as social barriers. In her 2018 article, Tzenis suggested encouraging youth to be reflexive and to take creative action to overcome barriers, highlighting that "while discussing obstacles to aspiration achievement might be viewed as discouraging, the data suggest the contrary" (Tzenis, 2018, p. 144). Moreover, Tzenis (2018) suggested that "activities that address constraints on freedoms related to students' social identity (as discussed by Tikly & Barrett, 2011) can bring about opportunities for them to be and do what they consider valuable in the future (Sen, 1999)" (p. 144).

Finally, for many youth in our study, aspirations and hope for the future emerged from significant experiences such as hobbies, a previous professional experience, and interactions with relatives or inspiring people close to them. Some had not changed their plans during their time in care, and several of those participants had gone through a combination of experiences that reaffirmed their future life choices, despite their placement experience and the various changes in their lives. All these elements can inform practices to support youth in care with the development and realization of their aspirations.

Role of Placement Setting in Developing Aspirations

It is important to consider the role that placement settings can play regarding the aspirations of youth. Some young people reported feeling that they are cut off from "real life" and social relationships during their placement period. Thus some young people in residential care feel that they lack options. Yet, as stated by Baillergeau (2019), "The more adolescents grow up in an environment that offers them a broad social network and a variety of experiences (e.g., travel, various extracurricular activities), the broader the horizon of possibilities will seem" (p. 38). It is therefore necessary to broaden the horizons of young people in care. In Kintrea et al.'s (2011) study of secondary students in the United Kingdom, 43% of the participants indicated that their activities influenced how they perceived their future and what they wanted to do later. While this study seems to highlight the impact of leisure activities available to youth — activities they enjoy and engage in regularly — others mention the relevance of vocational activities, such as immersion programs. This is reflected in findings from Tzenis (2018), which indicate that campus immersion programs allowed youth to better picture the reality of college life and imagine their future lives as college students; many youths in the study stated that they felt more comfortable about entering college after completing the campus immersion program.

For some of our participants, the guidance they received during their placement experience had helped them reflect on their future. For others, the placement experience itself had led to a change in their aspirations. Indeed, 20% of the youth in our study said they wanted to work in the field of education or in social and community service, with some specifically stating that their own experience in a centre or home had influenced their aspirations. Many were grateful for the help they had received and wished to help other young people who might be going through the same thing. These findings are consistent with those of Tilbury et al. (2011) as well as Baillergeau (2019), which indicate that youth develop not only self-focused aspirations, but also other-focused aspirations — aspirations that will allow them to become agents of improvement for a cause they are sympathetic to, sometimes a cause they share with a group of peers.

Conclusion

The overall objective of this article was to explore the development of aspirations among young people in residential care who were at the edge of transitioning from care into adulthood, as well as the relationship of these aspirations with their educational experience. This study contributes to

the existing literature by highlighting the variety of educational, professional, and personal aspirations held by these young people. It also demonstrates that young people's orientations towards their futures are grounded in their biographical pasts, shaped by key events, and influenced by ideas about the future that flow from different social contexts, including that of being in residential care. Results also show that these aspirations influenced the educational experience of these young people. Although previous research has demonstrated that care-experienced youth are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to enrol in post-secondary education and, if they do enrol, are less likely to graduate than are other young adults, our results suggest that developing aspirations can be a positive influence on their educational experience by enhancing their school engagement, an important determinant of educational achievement. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to study practices that have been implemented to support the development of young people's aspirations, and the repercussions on their level of engagement or perseverance in school. It would also be interesting to consider the roles of gender and intersectionality in the development of these young people's aspirations, as well as how we support them. Comparisons on these topics would also be relevant to exploring the aspirational differences observed among young people who did not experience out-of-home care.

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