

Quebec's adult educational settings: Potential turning points for emerging adults?

Identifying barriers to evidence-based interventions

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Abstract

Using the new “emerging adulthood” developmental period (Arnett, 2000) as a theoretical framework, this article emphasizes the challenges faced by emerging adults (17- to 24- year-olds) enrolled in adult education. First, emerging adulthood as a developmental period and the additional difficulties experienced by youths with emotional, behavioral and school disabilities during this period are briefly discussed. Then, a description of adult education within the Quebec's school system and its potential role as a turning point is presented. Finally, barriers to improvement are identified and the need for better knowledge about this clientele to establish evidence-based interventions is asserted.

1.0. THE EMERGING ADULTHOOD PERIOD

Recently, Arnett (1998; 2000; 2005; 2007) coined the term “emerging adulthood” to define the period encompassing the years from the end of high school through the mid-twenties. Maintaining that this period is distinct from adolescence and adulthood, many authors have argued that emerging adulthood is a period of identity exploration and self-focus, as well as of possibilities in terms of career and relationships (Arnett, 2007; Carbonell, Reinherz, & Beardslee, 2005; Sneed, Hamagami, McArdle, Cohen & Chen, 2007). However, this bridging time is also characterized by instability and flux and is often experienced as the age of feeling in-between, which is distinctive from the traditional adult status attainment of three decades ago (Arnett, 2005; 2007, Fussel & Furstenberg, 2005).

Two major contemporary aspects contributed to the new delineation of this developmental period (Fussel and Furstenberg, 2005). The first aspect, linked to the identification of emerging adulthood as a distinct period, is the prolonged transition to adulthood. The idea of young adults refusing to grow up in order to take on lesser responsibilities highly portrayed by popular culture in recent movies or books, is a myth overly channeled in scientific circles as well (Arnett, 2007). It is a fact that most emerging adults prefer the moratorium state that prevails during those years as they define themselves neither completely as adolescents nor as adults (Arnett 1998; Côté, 2006). They experience a sense of freedom and possibilities as never before and probably as they never will again once they embrace fully blown adulthood (Arnett, 2007). However, as Arnett (2007) suggests, the extension of the transitional period reflects upon societal mechanisms much more complex than the simple unwillingness to grow up.

Indeed, the fact that a high school diploma is not sufficient to obtain a well-paying and specialized job is one of the main factors slowing the transition to adulthood. As never before, youths access postsecondary education, and what was previously considered “further education” is, nowadays, closer to the norm. Over the past fifty years in America, access to enrollment in postsecondary education went from 14% to 60% (Arnett, 2000; 2007; Fussel & Furstenberg, 2005). However, among the 60% entering postsecondary education directly from high school, only 32% complete four years of postsecondary education by the time they reach age 25 (Bianchi & Spain, 1996; US Bureau of the Census, 2005). This figure is particularly indicative of the instability and the reversibility of educational pathways followed by the emerging adults (Riele, 2004). This nonlinearity is also found in a Canadian survey in which

44% of the 20- to 22-year-olds put their studies on hold for several reasons (work, travel, etc.) and return to school months or years later (Charbonneau, 2004, Statistics Canada, 2002). Given this trend in education, it is expected that youths will become financially independent and take on family responsibilities later on in life (Aquilino, 2006).

The second aspect contributing to the identification of this contemporary developmental period is the continuation of financial support from the family during those years. Emerging adulthood implies a period of semi-autonomy during which youths typically remain dependant on their family for various kinds of assistance. Some of them remain at home, others start to live on their own but come back at some point during those years. Many youths draw on parental resources for partial payment of groceries, rent, school fees, automobile, etc., and most of them mention their parents as a crucial emotional and social support during this transition (Goldsheider & Goldsheider, 1999; Foster, Flanagan, Osgood & Ruth, 2005).

1.1. EMERGING ADULTHOOD FOR AT-RISK YOUTHS: GREATER CHALLENGES

For most youths, being an emerging adult with the contemporary aspects it entails is a somewhat enjoyable and fulfilling period. In fact, most 17- to 24-year-olds enjoy the freedom of adult life while avoiding typical adult responsibilities (parenting, marriage). However, given that those years deeply influence the rest of adult life, it is crucial to keep in mind that some youths who experienced adversity in childhood and adolescence may react differently to the challenges associated with emerging adulthood (Davis, 2003). Youths who exhibit (or exhibited) personal, social and family problems that impede their school abilities, performance and success are at higher risk during the transition to adulthood. These vulnerable youths' families may be unable or unwilling to offer them the support that is so helpful and that is given to others during those years (Shoeni & Ross, 2005). Thus, youths' characteristics and varying degrees of support received contribute to diverging pathways in which personal and family resources contribute to some youths having advantages over others (Kerckhoff, 1993).

Additionally, many social and school services provided to youths with difficulties during adolescence come to an end on their eighteenth birthday. For example, youth protection services or special education services usually end when individuals are no longer considered as children. From this moment on, the state or the institutions assume less responsibility for them (Osgood et al., 2005). This combination of greater challenges, often reduced or nonexistent family support and ending of social programs and support is likely to put these vulnerable

youths at greater risk during their transition to adulthood (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Marcotte et al., 2005; Osgood et al., 2005).

Recent research demonstrated that the transition to adulthood, similar to the passage from childhood to adolescence, is a critical period in the life cycle when there are high rates of mental health problems, especially for people who encountered hardship earlier in their development (Carbonnell & al., 2005; Davis, 2003). Similarly, longitudinal research on antisocial behavior, depression, alcohol and drug abuse and early parenthood tends to reveal that emerging adulthood is a decisive time during which problems may reappear, persist or even worsen in the face of the challenges intrinsic to this transitional stage (Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington & Milne, 2002; Arnett, 2005; Tucker, Ellickson, Orlando, Martino & Klein, 2005). Moreover, problems encountered by youths during this transition are gender specific; young women tend to show internalized (depression and anxiety) as well as externalized behavior problems while men typically maintain externalized behaviors exclusively (Marcotte et al., 2005). Results from studies on prevention also suggest that this age period as a crucial phase in the female intergenerational transmission of aggressive behavior (Stack et al., 2006), maltreatment (Pears & Capaldi, 2001) and behavioral problems (Paquette, Bigras, Emery, Parent, & Zoccolillo, 2006). In sum, because of its particular features, emerging adulthood deserves enhanced attention which should be targeting, among others, gender-specific adjustment in at-risk youths.

1.2. CONTINUING OR RETURNING TO SCHOOL: A POTENTIAL TURNING POINT FOR “TROUBLED” EMERGING ADULTS

Dropping out and early school failure often pave the way for failures across a wide range of areas, including unemployment, involvement in crime and substance use, as well as unsatisfactory personal relationships (Foster et al., 2005). As Stack et al. (2006) demonstrate in their study using the Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project data, leaving school could represent a critical juncture. Hence, nine months after dropping out of school, girls exhibiting aggressive behavior are likely to become pregnant and are at elevated risks of passing their difficulties on to the next generation.

Although a majority of studies demonstrate that continuity of individual functioning and adjustment prevail before, during and after the transition to adulthood (Marcotte et al., 2005; Masten, Burt, Roisman, Obradovic, Long & Tellegen, 2004; Moffitt et al., 2002), several authors illustrate the discontinuity in some trajectories, especially for youths with serious behavioral

disorders (Schulenberg, Bryant & O'Malley, 2004). In fact, for these youths who experienced hardship in their development, emerging adulthood and its new possibilities can represent a unique chance to bloom, out of the contexts of infancy and adolescence that were often marked with failures and difficulties (Roisman, Aguilar & Egelend, 2004). According to the "turning points theory" (Laub, Sampson & Nagin, 1998), both continuity and discontinuity can be found in the involvement in deviancy during the transition to adulthood. In some cases, deviancy is still present during adulthood but has worsened or otherwise changed (for example, alcohol abuse may become multi-substance abuse). Conversely, life events like marriage, becoming a parent or obtaining a rewarding job can lead to a change of pathway towards conformity and represent a turning point in a person's development (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Enrolling in a different and gratifying school setting can also represent a major turning point for youths whose school itinerary was punctuated with failure and rejection (Rönka, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003). In fact, entering adult education settings or second chance schools, for example, may serve as a springboard for youths who dropped out of school or simply gave up on getting an education due to major problems encountered during their high school years (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). Continuing or returning to school and obtaining a high school diploma can constitute a great protection factor for emerging adults with difficulties of all sorts. For at-risk youths, obtaining at least a GED diploma can make an enormous difference in their adjustment as they experience greater self-confidence, find better jobs and rely less on social welfare for subsistence (Courtney & Huring, 2005; Foster et al. 2005).

Given the incredible intervention leverage that school success may constitute for at-risk emerging adults, it is imperative that existing school infrastructures offer accessibility and services for "troubled" youths as their achievement in that area may represent a key feature in their subsequent adjustment in various areas. Quebec's educational system¹ has a long history of implementing structures for continuing education intended for less-educated adults to provide them with the possibility of obtaining a high school degree: general diploma (high school diploma), vocational studies (professional diploma) or others (GED, equivalency). The main features of these school settings and their "new" clientele are reviewed in the next section.

¹ Quebec's educational system consists of four main stages: primary education (kindergarden to 6th grade), secondary education (7th to 11th grade, high school), college (Cegep, duration: 2 to 4 years, technical or general programs) and university. The adult education settings discussed in this article are considered secondary education and provide students with a high school diploma (general or professional).

2.0. GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE ADULT SECTOR IN QUEBEC

General education in the adult sector is a distinctive feature of Québec's educational system. To be admitted into the adult sector, students must be at least 16 years of age and it entails 9 different instructional services: literacy, presecondary education, Secondary Cycle One education, Secondary Cycle Two education, vocational training preparation, francization, social integration, socio-vocational integration and pedagogical support (MELS, 2005).

Traditionally, general education in the adult sector was designed for "mature" individuals who were 25 years of age and older who wanted or needed certain qualifications to obtain a minimal diploma or to enter vocational or postsecondary programs. However, the profile of this clientele has changed considerably in the last 20 years. Statistics presented by Quebec's Minister of Education (2002) clearly show that the student population in general education in the educational sector designated as "adult" is getting younger. In fact, 61% of all students in this sector are 24 years old or younger and almost 50% are 19 and under. Among all the newly enrolled, 55% of students had interrupted their schooling before enrolling in adult education. Although, when the 19 and under age group was considered, 77% had made a direct transition from the youth sector educational services to the adult sector services (MELS, 2005).

Enrollment in instructional services in the adult sector varies from one age group to the other. Some students enroll in general education in the adult sector to acquire prerequisites through instructional services such as preparation for vocational training or preparation for postsecondary education. For many young people, general education in the adult sector is an alternative to general education in the youth sector and allows them to make up for their academic delays and acquire a diploma. In fact, the contribution from the adult sector to the rate of graduation from secondary general education in Quebec is one of the highest in North America (MEQ, 2004). This distinctive feature of the Quebec school system provides young people with more opportunities to return to school and thus improves their potential access to higher education. However, despite the popularity of the services of this sector and the alternative it represents, a number of students still leave adult school settings without a diploma or before they attain their objectives, often dropping out for the second time during their educational journey. As a matter of fact, although success is difficult to measure in these school

settings², it is estimated that almost 55% of youths attending Secondary cycle 2 are dropping out before obtaining their diploma. Among youths dropping out, however, almost half of them will try their “luck” again and will reintegrate adult education at some point (MEQ, 2004). Consequently, it is imperative to develop better understanding of these youths and their behavioral tendencies. The following section reviews the current state of knowledge about these emerging adults and highlights the aspects that need to be understood to develop more appropriate education intervenes for this clientele.

2.1 CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF EMERGING ADULTS IN THE ADULT SECTOR

Recent Quebec statistics on education tend to show that school settings that provide general education (secondary level) to adults are particularly attractive to emerging adults with difficulties. In fact, among youths with emotional and behavioral disorders in the youth sector, almost a third (32%) makes a direct transition from the youth to the adult sector of education (MEQ, 2004). Moreover, a report from the “Youth Solidarity” program (Valois, Fournier & Parent, 2002), an alternative program to social welfare for 24-year-olds and under, indicates that in the group enrolled in this program, more than 59% of emerging adults chose to continue their education in the adult sector. Another source of enrollments for general education in the adult sector is the youth protection services. In fact, almost 15 % of youths who age out of the system enter adult school settings. Thus, these emerging adults join a general education program while plagued with a number of personal problems such as major debts, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, homelessness and lack of family and social support, which directly affect perseverance and success in school (Dessureault & Granger, 1995; Valois, Fournier & Parent, 2002).

In addition to the personal difficulties these emerging adults may encounter, some problems are directly linked to the perception they hold of the educational system. In fact, a study about the obstacles to adult participation in schooling showed that the educational itinerary followed by a majority of emerging adults entering adult education was often punctuated with rejection and failures. Their school experiences thus profoundly and negatively biased their perception of school and learning. These adults tend to have low self-esteem, to consider themselves incompetent and under-skilled and to depreciate themselves in terms of their school abilities. As

² The difficulty with measuring success lies with the fact that diploma is not necessary the goal for all youths enrolled in adult general education. Therefore, diploma is not the most reliable indicator of success for the whole student body.

a consequence, past experiences and feelings related to school make them doubt and apprehend an educational pathway that could, once again, discriminate and marginalize them (Lavoie, Levesque, Aubin-Horth, Roy & Roy, 2004).

When asked about the services offered by the school, youths enrolled in adult education mention that they receive only part of what they need. Orientation services are the most accessible, with 90% of youths mentioning that they received this type of intervention. However, only 50% of emerging adults consider that they received services that adequately related to their personal problems (Bourbeau, 1992). Indeed, despite the popularity of adult education for youths who experienced adversity in their adolescence, many emerging adults drop out before attaining their goals, which often represents a second failure in their school journey. Reasons given to explain their departure from programs are often linked to personal and family problems, employment and academic difficulties (Panet-Raymond & Goyette, 2002).

Adult education institutions' development and policies, without robust research results to lean on need to be adjusted to more meaningfully address demonstrable issues for this clientele. In fact, Quebec's educational system still has a fragmented picture of these youths; much of what is known is based on statistics on enrollment in the adult sector from different social services. To our knowledge, no existing study has attempted to draw the complete portrait of this particular clientele and its distinctive features (Marcotte, Fortin & Cloutier, 2006). Yet, this step is indispensable to create or to adapt interventions in these institutions to face the variety of problems which may hamper school attendance, perseverance and graduation. Moreover, it is essential to gain better knowledge of gender differences as problems faced by emerging adults may have distinct influences for young men and women, especially regarding intergenerational transmission which is prominent during those critical years and because, the experience of second chance schools may be quite dissimilar for both sexes. In fact, studies demonstrate that academic perseverance may impact more positively and pervasively the lives of woman than those of men (Stack et al., 2006). To a larger scale, it is also essential to increase knowledge to establish policies that are efficient and helpful to these emerging adults. As Foster et al. (2005) pointed out, to improve programs and policies aimed at this segment of the population, it is essential to consider various aspects that hinder the efficiency of the interventions. The next section presents these aspects in detail.

3.0. BARRIERS TO IMPROVING PROGRAMS, INTERVENTIONS AND POLICIES

Foster et al. (2005) and Davis (2003) have identified a number of barriers which prevent the creation, networking and effectiveness of interventions intended to help emerging adults make their transition to adulthood. These barriers can be divided into three categories.

3.1. LOW LEVELS OF FUNDING

Recent Québec statistics showed that among all of society's age groups, the one consisting of youths from 18 to 24 years old was the least targeted with social programs and funding (MSSS, 2002). Indeed, the low funding allocated for emerging adults in the United States and Canada clearly demonstrates the North American emphasis on prevention, young children and families (Marcotte, Fortin & Cloutier, 2006). Transition-support services are often viewed as a luxury and no public agency is mandated to serve youths in transition to the age of 25. This creates a gap that translates into a lack of funding (Davis, 2003). Services provided to this age group are often locally initiated interventions or programs with no scientific grounds or evaluation. Providers of these services must often expend enormous efforts to put together fragments of funds "that are generally time-limited, age-limited, service-limited, disability-limited or income-limited" (Davis, 2003, p. 502).

3.2. INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS, LACK OF SYSTEM INTEGRATION

Some barriers to adequate service delivery come from the institutions themselves or the perception emerging adults have of them. Indeed, many emerging adults who need services during the transition to adulthood are hesitant to subscribe to programs because they mistrust the system. Emerging adults who received youth protection services or special education services during their childhood or adolescence often feel that their needs were not met and that their voices were not heard during those years. This mistrust is often a barrier that prevents them from requesting or using the services offered. Also, given the new freedom gained during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2005), it is possible that these youths would be uncomfortable with the idea of dependency and would prefer to make it on their own from that point on (Schulenberg et al. 2004).

A second barrier is related to the lack of continuity in the services provided and the lack of system integration. This lack of continuity is often the result of conflicting eligibility: special education students may not qualify for mental health services and vice-versa (Davis, 2003). Also, in the educational system, youths with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBDs) who

make a transition to adult education settings become virtually “persona non grata,” which means that educators are not aware of their past or present difficulties and may not be prepared to adapt their interventions. Conversely, some authors could argue that accessing this new setting can be an opportunity for emerging adults to structure their lives away from contexts in which they were often associated with failures and problems (Schulenberg et al., 2004).

A third institutional barrier is that supports do not focus on emerging adults (Davis, 2003). Indeed, by design, services usually aim to help children and adolescents or adults with families. A survey conducted by Davis and Butler (2002) found that a quarter of emerging adults receiving services in group settings are served with people much younger or older than them. Also, when actions target emerging adults they often take the form of a transition plan which generally focuses only on vocational issues or independent living without considering mental health issues and adjustment (Davis, 2003). The “transition to independence process” may represent an exception to the usual transitional programs tailored for emerging adults (Clark, 2004). The guidelines of this promising program are described in the next section.

3.3. LACK OF EXPERTISE AND TRAINING

Often, the new features of the emerging adulthood developmental period are unknown to educators and professionals working with them. “Most of the helpers tend to define themselves as adult or child workers and are often uncomfortable with this in-between age group” (Davis, 2003). Curriculums of colleges and universities that train educators and professionals who provide human services often lack courses related to this developmental period and do not offer training that relies on a theoretical framework which promotes balance in self-determination and guidance. Moreover, as some settings such as adult education have traditionally dealt with adults, the shift to emerging adults may be difficult, and professionals may tend to use the same methods with both groups (Davis, 2003; Foster et al., 2005).

4.0. EXISTING GUIDELINES AND BEST PRACTICES FOCUSING ON EMERGING ADULTS

Given the critical period that emerging adulthood constitutes, especially for at-risk youths, the importance of school achievement and perseverance in subsequent adult adjustment and the potential turning point that the adult education sector may represent for these youths, it is imperative to establish interventions that will serve those emerging adults enrolled in these school settings, as it may be the last chance to take action during that developmental period

and prevent subsequent maladjustment. To improve service delivery to this segment of the population, programs must be created with respect to the developmental status and features of emerging adulthood (Marcotte, Fortin & Cloutier, 2006).

Emerging adulthood is a period during which youths can access a wide range of new abilities to understand situations and to make sense of the challenges they have faced. This reworking of experiences and self-explanations is part of the identity process which characterizes emerging adulthood. Cognitive, self-determination and strength-based (versus deficit-based) approaches are to be favored as these youths acquire a new understanding of the past and how it can explain their present situations. Also, the diversity of experiences and possibilities typical of emerging adulthood calls for a balance in individualistic intervention targeting one's goals and development of social ties and support. The latter is a central feature of an adult's well-being, satisfaction and adaptation (Carbonell et al., 2005; Clark et al., 2007).

Clark (2004) created a program that targets the complex challenges of the transition period for these young people with emotional and behavioral disorders and their unique needs, which pose major hurdles to parents, practitioners and educators. He designed a transition system around a solid framework of promising strategies. Many research findings identify transition programs like the TIP (transition to independence process) system and its guidelines as promising best practices (Bullis & Fredericks, 2002; Bullis, Morgan, Benz, Todis, & Johnson, 2002; Karpur, Clark, Caproni, Sterner, & Whitfield, 2003; Cheney, Hagner, Malloy, Cormier, & Bernstein, 1998; Clark, Pschorr, Wells, Curtis, & Tighe, 2004). Each of these studies reported progress for the young people who were served using the TIP system or a variation of it (Clark, 2004). The essential guidelines of the TIP system can be resumed as follow:

1. Person-centered, strength-based and future-focused interventions:
 - Use assessment methods that can easily target the emerging adult's strengths
 - Personalize the intervention
 - Set accessible and realistic educational and professional goals
 - Invest in the resiliency process
2. Tailor services and support to be accessible, coordinated and developmentally appropriate to enable the young people to pursue their goals across all areas of transition.
 - Coordinate or provide services across all transitional areas (difficulties in one area often result in problems across all of them)

- Acknowledge the importance of other developmental spheres and the multiple challenges faced by at-risk emerging adults
3. Acknowledge and develop personal choice and social responsibility with emerging adults
 - Balance self-determination and interdependence in interventions
 - Place the emerging adult as an expert in his own development/future
 - Allow mistakes to be made, as emerging adults can self-explain and learn from them
 4. Involve young people, parents and other community partners in the intervention process.
 - Emphasize interdependence and importance of relationships
 - Maximize the use of natural and community supports

These guidelines provide a framework for the development and operation of programs and interventions that are intended for youths with EBDs as they make the transition to adulthood. However, as promising as these guidelines are in personalizing the intervention for emerging adults and, thus, overcoming one of the institutional barrier identified earlier, it is imperative to keep in mind that other barriers also represent obstacles in the service delivery. For example, in order to apply those guidelines in an adult educational setting, the need for such a program must be clearly established. In fact, even if it is believed that a majority of emerging adults who are enrolled in adult education have major personal or familial difficulties, the portrait of this clientele is still fragmented.

To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted to get a clear and explicit picture of the emerging adults in Quebec's adult education settings. Without such a picture, financial support of any program, even if it is based on best practices, is less likely to be found. Furthermore, political orientations and priorities may also interfere with the development of programs and research conducted for these emerging adults. Actually, recent concerns have been raised in political, social and educational circles regarding the transition to adulthood and among those concerns, the importance of minimal qualifications for society's economic health and growth (Government of Québec, 2005). In fact, in a life long learning perspective, adult education is not only an economic issue: adult's education is believed to have beneficial effects on a political level by fostering citizen's engagement and active participation. "Learning for civic and cultural purposes contributes to citizen's acquisition of competencies that will enable them to be agentic actors of political and social changes and to be leaders in decisions regarding their personal and professional lives" (OCDE, 2005, p. 17).

The research our team is conducting aims at drawing a complete and multidimensional picture of emerging adults who are enrolled in adult education in Quebec. This research has been partly funded by the Ministry of Education of Quebec which reveals the institutions' rising concern about this segment of population. This is a first step in increasing knowledge about the new transition to adulthood for youths with difficulties and disabilities in Quebec.

5.0. CONCLUSION

The new features of the transition to adulthood constitute greater challenges for youths who experienced adversity in childhood and adolescence, partly because they accumulated delays in their schooling and did not obtain their high school diploma. In Quebec's educational system, many of these emerging adults attempt to obtain a minimal diploma or make up for their delays in an adults' educational setting. As a consequence, the clientele of these settings has gotten considerably younger over the past decades and this shift has not necessarily been followed by an adjustment in programs and service delivery. Yet, these educational settings could be potential turning points in lives of emerging adults with difficulties. In order to foster those potential turning points, several barriers to service delivery must be overcome. A first step is to improve knowledge about this clientele and overshadow the fragmented picture of emerging adults in these school settings. The research proposed by our team is aimed at drawing a complete and multidimensional picture of emerging adults enrolled in Quebec's adult education.

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