



Towards a rights-based approach to youth programs: Duty-bearers' perspectives



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ABSTRACT

This study applies a rights-based approach (RBA) to examine a municipal youth program in Montreal, Canada, from duty-bearers' perspectives – staff working in either municipal governments or youth organizations. Considering the complexities of actualizing the four dimensions of an RBA, we assess progress and ways of moving toward actualization. While embracing *universality and equality*, duty-bearers identified the challenge to mobilize youth and to respond to the changing ethnocultural diversity. *Collaboration* between local actors was considered most effective, although it required working through conflicting viewpoints. *Accountability* called for stronger relationships and sharing among duty-bearers across the city. *Youth participation* was most difficult because there was no consensus on its meaning or importance. Furthering an RBA requires supporting state and non-state actors by building capacity in multilevel skills, critical thinking, and broader approaches to assessment.

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1. Introduction

Urbanization, immigration, and changing lifestyles call for new approaches to designing and evaluating youth programs. Viewing youth as mere recipients of program activities and operating programs in isolation from other community processes is insufficient and ineffective for dealing with pressing social problems in urban areas (Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; Urban, 2008). Nurturing youth's developmental pathways and citizenship calls for more responsive, engaged, and community-integrated activities (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008).

In this article, we apply a rights-based approach (RBA) to examine youth programs in Montreal, Canada. The RBA incorporates human rights principles including those described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, while considering empowerment, structural causes of problems, and process goals (Lansdown, 2005). This approach is relevant to studying Montreal's *Programme d'Intervention de Milieu Jeunesse* (PIMJ) which funds youth organizations to undertake after-school activities for 12- to 30-year-old youth across the city's 19 boroughs, based on a requirement for community mobilization, collaboration, and intersectorality. The approach resulted from a shift taken by the city in 2007 to deal with the growing diversity and complexity of youth's realities, including the rise in school drop-out rates, high unemployment rates, and inactivity (City of Montréal, 2013).

The RBA has become an integral part of the development lexicon, but remains nebulous in practice (Singh, Wickenberg, Astrom, & Hyden,

2012; Wearing, 2011). While the experiences of rights-holders are essential to understanding the implementation of an RBA, our study focuses on the perspective of duty-bearers from two entities: municipal governments and youth organizations. Their views on the opportunities and challenges of implementing an RBA are equally important because of their responsibility in the design and delivery of programs.

We found that the RBA provides a lens to understand what is working, while shedding light on moving toward a comprehensive approach to youth programs. Before presenting the findings, drawn from interviews, an on-line questionnaire, and a discussion group, we define the RBA as well as identify issues in applying its four dimensions.

2. Perspectives on a rights-based approach

Generally, there is agreement that an RBA acknowledges that people are key actors in their own development, and that duty-bearers have responsibility to enable rights-holders to recognize and exercise their rights (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Given its focus on addressing key systematic obstacles that prevent people from exercising their rights, the RBA marks a shift away from a need and welfarist approach (Uvin, 2007). The approach has been heralded as a means of addressing inequalities by empowering marginalized groups and strengthening accountability (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003). Ife (2009) welcomed the move as an opportunity for human service professionals to embrace a strength-based approach to interventions, increasingly recognized as more effective than deficit-based methods that emphasize people's deficiencies (Saleebey, 2000).

In the absence of an authoritative definition, the RBA has been broken down in several ways (Gauri & Gloppen, 2012). UNICEF (2004), for example, identifies 6 core principles to guide understanding of

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rights: universal and inalienable; indivisibility; interdependence and interrelatedness; non-discrimination and equality; participation and inclusion; as well as accountability and the rule of law. Schmitz (2012) centers on behavior change and quality of services, inclusion, and sustainability, in analyzing use of an RBA by a child-centered international organization. Singh et al. (2012) focus on non-discrimination, participation, and empowerment to assess water access for children from an RBA. Others deal with the requirement and implications of an RBA for children's participation in research and evaluation (Ahsan, 2009; Lundy & McEvoy, 2009).

Drawing on our literature review, this study centers on four dimensions of the RBA (Collins, Pearson, & Delany, 2002; UNICEF, 2004):

- Universality and equality: the requirement to apply programs holistically to all young people, regardless of gender or ethnicity.
- Participation: recognizing program recipients as subjects of their own rights, placing an obligation on duty-bearers to give due consideration to young people's views.
- Collaboration: stakeholders work together to effectively form an intersectoral response to the political and social contexts of issues instead of developing narrow sectoral programming.
- Accountability: duty-bearers have obligations to act in the best interests of young people.

Considering that duty-bearers include both state and non-state actors, we focus on staff both with the municipality and with youth organizations. The RBA applies equally to non-state actors although the UNCRC emphasizes state obligations (Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). Several studies have focused on non-governmental organizations' application of the RBA because these operate at the interface between the state and rights-holders (see Kindornay, Ron, & Carpenter, 2012; Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003; Schmitz, 2012).

RBA principles are in line with research on youth programming which has found that young people's participation results in greater effectiveness and relevance of programs and services, and that youth have knowledge, skills, and ideas that make them important actors in developing healthy communities (Checkoway, 2011; Hart, 1997; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). But the principles also recognize that realizing children's participation necessitates the support of adults and their institutions; hence, the importance of duty-bearers (Author et al., 2013; Kirshner, 2007). When youth and adults work democratically over a sustained time period, they are in theory particularly powerful in promoting youth development within the concept and practice of youth-adult partnerships, which have gained credence in the field of positive youth and civic development (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). Also consistent with the research is the need for collaborations and new mechanisms of accountability between all actors who affect young people's everyday lives; this is a growing need given the increased complexity of young people's lives in urban areas (Blanchet-Cohen, 2006; Chawla et al., 2005).

2.1. Applying a rights-based lens

Moving toward an RBA entails profound shifts away from traditional practices that impact structures, resources, and work styles (Kindornay et al., 2012). The General Comment of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2011) states: "A child rights-based approach to child caregiving and protection requires a paradigm shift towards respecting and promoting the human dignity and the physical and psychological integrity of children as rights-bearing individuals rather than perceiving them primarily as 'victims'" (para. 3b). The RBA is transformative, and hence, moves away from the historical role of adults as providers of services to young people who are in need of protection and are incompetent to make decisions (Linds, Goulet, & Sammel, 2010). In an RBA, duty-bearers have a responsibility to create opportunities for young people to exercise their rights and live up to their potential (Bennett, Hart, & Svevo-Cianci, 2009).

As normative principles, the four RBA dimensions constitute in many regards ideals which make it difficult to determine when and how the dimensions are achieved once and for all (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Therefore, to apply the RBA dimensions as an evaluation framework, it would be inappropriate to use conventional forms of evaluation that judge programming based on predetermined and measurable outcomes related to these dimensions (Patton, 2011). Instead, similar to developmental evaluation, the principles are best used as powerful touchstones to determine whether the programming is on track, and most significantly, to orient ways of moving toward further realization of rights (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2010).

Actualizing the four dimensions of the RBA is indeed complex, and so it requires paying attention to what can facilitate the move toward an RBA. Wearing (2011), for instance, contends that a rights-based and inclusive practice for marginalized young people in Australia would require youth and social workers to develop multilevel skills that include building relationships with young people, having the capacity to manage and integrate services holistically, and advocating in the community and at the policy level. This type of holistic training for professionals is currently lacking in many places, including Canada, as noted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2012). Below, we assess how the RBA is reflected in duty-bearers' perspectives and views that could inform further development.

3. Research design

3.1. Background

The PIMJ was created by the City of Montréal to respond to the growing needs and diversity of the youth population. One fourth of the total population is between 15 and 29 years old, and a third belongs to visible minorities (City of Montréal, 2013). The PIMJ approach has been applauded: it has been renewed since 2007, and informs the 2013–2017 *Montreal youth strategy*. Applying the RBA to duty-bearers' perspectives of the PIMJ was appropriate because funding requirements reflect certain dimensions of an RBA: community mobilization, collaboration, and intersectorality in a given territory of greater marginalization. Given that a primary objective is to "offer youth between 12 and 30 activities of quality, that are diversified, accessible, and adapted to their needs" (unofficial translation), the PIMJ also reflects the City of Montréal's "for, with, and by youth" policy. The program specifically requires that projects result from local action plans and consultative committees (i.e., *tables de concertation*). Proposals and reporting are jointly made by the individual boroughs and the local organization to the City of Montréal which manages the funding, with some financial support from Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

As such, selection criteria for the proposals are loosely enforced. The program operates in a context of decentralization, and the 19 boroughs are wary of interference. Our study was therefore not conducted on preselected duty-bearers, but instead reflects dominant views. While the funding is small (between \$5500 and \$33,500 per project), the PIMJ has contributed to activities throughout the city providing a unique opportunity to connect the staff from various boroughs and youth organizations to one another. More specifically, in 2010 the funding supported 47 after-school programs reaching over 6000 youth and involving 180 partners. One of the reasons for its broad impact is that PIMJ funding mostly complements other financial sources, and in only in one fifth of cases does PIMJ funding cover all program costs (Blanchet-Cohen & Bedeaux, 2011). The four priority areas for activities in 2010 were: social development (42%), leisure and culture (30%), physical activity and sports (26%), and the environment (2%). Examples of funded programs included supporting sport activities, posting a youth animator in parks where youth congregate, and offering job training to youth at-risk.

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