Youth Workers as literacy mediators: Supporting Young People's Learning about Institutional Literacy Practices[i]

On their first day in a progam called *Mobili-T*, offered on the premises of Le Bercail, a community-based organization in Quebec (Canada), Tommy, a youth worker, introduced six young people aged 16 to 20, who were unemployed, had dropped out of school and experienced personal difficulties, to the activities they were to take part in. The aim of *Mobili-T* was to support young people's social integration by helping them return to education, find work, and address any other difficulties they might have.

The community-based organization's employees, called 'intervenants' in French, supported young people through workshops, training and counselling. Although their role was similar to that of social workers, we call them youth workers. In Quebec social workers have to have a specific degree and be member of a particular professional organization, which the participants of our study were not.

The participants of *Mobili-T* received a small financial stipend. But first they had to sign a contract with the organization offering the program, *Le Bercail*. This is what happened when Tommy asked the group to sign the contract:

> At the start of a new project in *Le Bercail*, the newly arrived participants had to sign several forms. Tommy summarized one of these forms and then asked the young people to sign it. They all did so without reading it. Tommy then told them that they had just signed a contract which stipulated that they had to give him half of their weekly pay (which they received for attending the activities at *Le Bercail*). The young people were astonished, and they did not know what to say. They all looked again at the form and realized that it was really the case. After asking the young people to destroy this mock contract, Tommy emphasized that it was important to read forms or contracts before signing them. The participants were relieved and tore apart the document, laughing and exchanging expressions of relief. (3 April 2012)

Tommy used the fake contract to make the new participants of *Mobili-T* aware of the power of official documents and the bureaucratic procedures they entail. By introducing the

contract to them, Tommy acted as a literacy mediator. Literacy mediators are people who help others with written texts. They read and/or write for and with others, explaining the function and meaning of specific texts, sentences or paragraphs (see, for instance, Baynham & Masing, 2000). Literacy mediation is a common feature of everyday life and work. People often make use of literacy mediators when they enter a new social context and have to deal with new institutions, organizations, or businesses (Papen, 2012).

In educational contexts, reading and writing are generally seen as abilities that people have to acquire individually (Papen, 2016). Outside schools though, literacy is often accomplished as part of a collaborative activity, people supporting and helping each other (Barton, 2009), acting as literacy mediators.

In 2012 and 2013, Virginie (Thériault, 2015) conducted a qualitative study of the role of literacy in the work of two community-based organizations supporting young people in Quebec. Drawing on this study as well as on Uta's prior research on literacy mediation, we examine the role of youth workers as literacy mediators, focusing on one of the organizations Virginie worked in: *Le Bercail*.

In Quebec, the term '*jeunes adultes*' (young adults) is used in academic literature and policy documents to refer to young people aged 16 to up to 35. The youth workers at *Le Bercail* supported young people who experienced a situation of precarity. Precarity is defined in broad terms, going beyond financial instability to include difficulties with housing, family and social relationships, mental and physical health, education or substance abuse (Barbier, 2002). Community-based organizations and social services offer personalized support for young people who experience precarity (Bourdon & Bélisle, 2015). In Quebec, these tailored services are called 'social and professional insertion' (Thériault, 2015).

As they needed to access social benefits, find housing, or deal with the criminal justice system, the young people in our study often had to communicate with public institutions. Communication with such institutions was mediated by written texts and the young people had to understand official letters or complete bureaucratic forms. Many of them felt disempowered and frustrated by these forms of literacy. They did not understand them and were not clear about the role these texts played in the bureaucratic process that controlled access to resources (Thériault, 2015). In these situations, they asked the youth workers for help. In response to their requests, Tommy and his colleagues at *Le Bercail* took on the role of literacy mediator, helping the young people with letters or forms, sharing their knowledge of genre specific writing conventions, terminology, and institutional practices.

When youth workers acted as literacy mediators, they did more than to help the young people with their immediate problems; they also created opportunities for literacy learning. An essential ingredient for this to happen was the literacy mediators' ability to work with the young people's often negative emotions that erupted in the face of the official texts they had to deal with.

The link between literacy, emotion and learning that comes to the fore in the literacy mediator's work is not unique to the kind of context we researched, but should be of interest to many educators, in school and in informal education contexts. Equally, the role of institutional literacies as a barrier to accessing resources and opportunities is relevant to all teachers of adolescent and adult literacy providers in particular those working with people from non-privileged backgrounds.

In the following sections, we present our understanding of literacy and literacy mediation, explain our methods and present the context of our study. We then discuss two examples of literacy mediation. The paper ends with a discussion of our findings and their implications for education.

Our Understanding of Literacy

In this paper, we understand literacy as a social practice (Barton, 2007; Gee, 1991; Street, 1984). While literacy involves cognitive skills, it is best described as activities happening in specific social contexts and situations. Such activities are patterned by recurrent forms of behavior and language, and informed by values and ideas (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

We use the term literacy practices to capture both the visible activities of reading and/or writing in specific contexts as well as the invisible values, norms and rules that shape them.

The concept of literacy practices has been used to study reading and writing in everyday life and in education (see Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Papen, 2016). It is particularly useful for examining the institutionally regulated forms of written communication that are common in work contexts as well as in interactions between citizens and state or private institutions (Jones, 2000; Papen, 2012). Such practices can also be described as 'dominant literacies' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The use of the plural here is intentional; this is to signal that there are many different forms of literacy, some of which are 'dominant' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Dominant literacy practices are shaped by the rules and procedures of state institutions or other influential bodies. In this paper, we refer to these dominant practices as 'institutional literacy practices'. Such practices require a formal register and compliance with the rules of standard grammar and spelling. Institutional literacy practices are connected to the concept of 'sponsors of literacy', coined by Deborah Brandt (1998; 2001). This term refers to distant and often powerful bodies (i.e. state institutions) which initiate and require (sponsor) certain types of literacy in people's lives.

Literacy Mediation

The phrase 'literacy mediation' is used to describe activities where one person helps another (or several others) deal with a written text The people who offer this support—the literacy mediators—can be professionals or members of the social networks such as friends and family (Baynham, 1993; Orellana et al., 2003; Papen, 2010). Literacy mediators may also be called scribes (Kalman, 1999), literacy agents (Kalman, 2008), literacy/language/cultural brokers (Mihut, 2014; Orellana et al., 2003) or ghostwriters (Brandt, 2007). While these terms have slightly different meanings, they all refer to similar situations (Papen, 2010). For the purpose of this paper, we therefore use the term literacy mediator only.

Literacy mediation is about sharing literacy and one's understanding of specific texts, their language and function with others. Although the term suggests a focus on reading and writing, literacy mediation may incorporate gestures, visuals and spoken language (Baynham 1993; Jones 2000; Papen, 2010).

Research on literacy mediation has shown that it is omnipresent in everyday life and institutional contexts (Jones, 2000; Mace, 2002). A recent study into the effects of austerity policies on people living in subsidized housing in the Midlands (United Kingdom) showed that family members constantly helped each other with forms and learned from each other (Jones, 2014).

Other studies too have revealed the important role literacy mediators play in supporting access to specialized and dominant literacy practices and in challenging the power of dominant literacies (Jones, 2000; Kalman, 2001; Papen, 2010). The role of youth workers as literacy mediators, though, has not received much attention from researchers. The present study seeks to address this gap.

Methods

The insights we present in this paper are derived from a secondary analysis of data collected as part of a wider study into youth work and literacy which Virginie conducted in 2012 and 2013 in Quebec (Canada). Quebec is the second largest province of Canada in terms of population with about 8 million inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2014a). The majority (about 80%) of Quebec's population has French as its mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2014b). All the excerpts of interview transcripts used in this article have been translated from French (the native language of the vast majority of the youth workers and young people) to English.

Fieldwork included two phases of data collection: April to May 2012 and April 2013. The first phase involved participant observation and individual semi-structured interviews. In the first phase, Virginie conducted approximately 122 hours of participant observation, focusing on group activities that involved young people in two community-based organizations. Twenty-seven people took part in the participant observation sessions, and 21 participants were interviewed: 14 youths and 7 youth workers. The average time for an interview with the young people was 43 minutes, and 60 minutes with the youth workers. The interviews focused on the place of reading and writing in the activities observed in the organizations, and also the participants' literacy practices at school, home, and with family and friends. The interviewees attended the observed activities on a regular basis and thus Virginie got to know them well. Throughout this paper, we use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the people and organizations Virginie worked with. Figure 1 provides an overview of data collected at Le Bercail.

INSERT Figure 1 near here

In the second phase of the fieldwork, Virginie organized participatory workshops with youth workers and young people in the same two organizations. These workshops included activities such as mind mapping on topics which emerged from the data collected in the first phase. For example, the youth workers created maps of all the institutions and organizations that initiated literacy demands in their everyday work, to examine needs for literacy mediation.

To analyse our data, we identified and carefully examined all the material that related to literacy mediation.   Using qualitative data analysis software, this resulted in a new content analysis (Gibbs, 2008), which focused on the emotional and educational aspects of literacy mediation. Together, we developed a new set of codes (themes). Uta's earlier work on literacy mediation contributed in particular to our understanding of the place of emotions in literacy mediation.

Le Bercail: a Community-Based Organization for Young People

Le Bercail offered services to young people aged 12 to 20. The services included shelter for runaways, supervised gathering places for teenagers, individual counselling services, and social and professional insertion workshops on topics such as woodwork and arts, multimedia uses and radio hosting. The young people were enrolled in a distance-learning program at a local adult education center. Two of the youth workers at *Le Bercail*, Ève-Lyne and Frédérique, were employed by this adult education center (see Table 1 below). They supported the young people with their academic work as well as with their wider personal situation.

INSERT Table 1 near here

The young people who took part in Virginie's study did not talk in detail about literacy mediation during the interviews. While they shared with Virginie their problems with letters and forms, they did not mention that the youth workers helped them with these documents.

Literacy mediation was not a term the youth workers were familiar with. But when Virginie told them about it, all the youth workers were unanimous that this was an important part of their role. The frequency of their interventions (from once a month to many times a week) as mediators reflects the prevalence of situations that demanded use of literacy in the young people's lives. For that reason, our secondary analysis focusses on the youth workers' experiences as literacy mediators, as they recalled them in the interviews.

In the following sections, we present two examples taken from an interview with a youth worker at *Le Bercail*, Frédérique, in 2012. Frédérique shared with Virginie incidences of literacy mediation she had encountered at the time when the study was conducted. Frédérique recalled many details of these two situations. Based on the data collected, we consider Frédérique's experiences representative of the kind of literacy mediation that the youth workers at *Le Bercail* offered.

Example 1: Writing a Letter to a Foster Mother

In our first example of literacy mediation Frédérique helped a young woman with a letter she wrote to the woman who looked after her child. Delphine wanted to receive news about her daughter and get a photograph of her. Delphine's child was looked after by a foster mother, on behalf of the *Direction de la Protection de la jeunesse* (DPJ), a public institution in charge of protecting children and young people in Quebec.

Frédérique did not explain why Delphine's parental authority had been taken away, but this only happens if the DPJ considers the children's safety to be compromised when

remaining in their family (ÉDUCALOI, 2015). In such a situation it is likely that the child will later be adopted. This is how Frédérique described the situation:

When I supported a young woman who wanted to find her daughter, she had written a letter to the lady. So, she had written the letter [in French] herself from home, English is her first language. She had lived in Ontario for a while. I looked at it with her. It was very personal. It's about what she was experiencing, how she perceives the fact that she is not able to see her daughter anymore. […] When young people show me their writing, I won't mention right away the mistakes. […] I don't think it's the correct way of doing it. Because, I don't think I would personally want to show my writings if the first thing one would tell me is: "Wow, it's full of errors!" I think everything can be said. However, there is a way and there is a time to do so. So, when she brought her letter, I warned her. "I will look at the content, not the [mistakes]. The content is what is it written there, and what it tells me." Afterwards, we looked at the letter together again and we rewrote it so that it could be ready to be sent... I introduced it this way: "You're going to write to a lady who takes care of your daughter, she is working with the *centre jeunesse*. Do you think that it's an official document that could also be seen by the *centre jeunesse*? It might be good then to do it properly. Use paragraphs, add some space, handwrite clearly or type it out." There is a way to do it. We should support them to do it in that direction.

Extract 1, Audio recorded interview with Frédérique, *Le Bercail*, 10-05-2012

Frédérique's account reveals the youth worker's careful approach towards helping Delphine with her letter. Her initial reaction to the letter shows that Frédérique was fully aware that writing this letter had been a difficult emotional task for Delphine. In the letter, Delphine asked for news about her daughter. Writing it, Delphine would have had to address her feelings about herself as a mother who lost custody for her daughter.

Frédérique knew that in its initial form the letter would not have been received favorably by the *DPJ*. As literacy mediator, Frédérique relied on her understanding of institutional practices and the forms of literacy these require. That Frédérique felt empathy towards Delphine is visible in the way she reacted to being shown the letter, not immediately and directly pointing to its deficits.

The letter posed a challenge for Delphine at several levels: content, register, format and audience, all of which Frederique mediated. Initially, she focused her attention on the

content of the letter. She also took over the important job of inquiring to the *DPJ* about the process of initiating contact with the foster mother. Frédérique had to make several phone calls. The *DPJ* was uncertain who was responsible and she was repeatedly referred to other staff in the institution. We include this here to show that the writing as such was only one aspect of what Delphine needed help with. Frédérique supported her both with the letter itself as well as with understanding the institutional processes through which it had to be channeled.

The above example shows that for parts of the task, the mediator took over, to find out who they had to address the letter to. But when it came to revising the letter, it is clear from Frédérique's words that this was done jointly. Here, mediation had the goal of teaching Delphine to understand the need for a specific register and format and to encourage her to change her own writing.

Example 2: Completing a Form to Receive Maternity Benefits

Delphine's case illustrates the kind of difficulties the young people in our study faced when having to communicate with institutions or people they did not know personally. Our second example also concerns a young woman dealing with an institutional literacy practice. In this case, the text in question was an online form.

When Lea-Maude, who had been attending support sessions at *Le Bercail*, was pregnant, she asked Frédérique to help her with the online application form to receive financial support through the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP, *Régime québécois d'assurance parentale*).

Like many of the other young people in our study, Lea-Maude was socially isolated and not in close contact with her family. Lea-Maude did not have anybody but Frédérique to

support her during her pregnancy. The young woman regularly contacted Frédérique on Facebook to ask her for advice about her pregnancy.

The QPIP form that Lea-Maude had to complete is available as a 'practice' version online (http://www.rqap.gouv.qc.ca/formulaires/RAP-0001-01_en.pdf). That this document exists and is, as stated at the top, "intended to help [you] prepare the application,' is a first indication of this being a demanding text.

When she first asked Frédérique for help with the form, Lea-Maude simply said she did not know anything about how to complete it. For example, she told Frédérique that she could not write down on the form when her child was born since she had not given birth yet. For this reason, she could not access some sections of the online form. She saved what she had done and planned to complete the remaining parts after the birth of her child. But she was not certain if she had done the right thing. Frédérique confirmed that Delphine had understood correctly: "It's perfect, that's what you had to do!"

The form includes terms and phrases which require contextual knowledge and understanding of the specific bureaucratic language used in Québec. "Employment insurable benefits" and "income replacement indemnities" are two examples. The applicant may also have to explain personal circumstances for which there might be complex reasons. For example, if applicants cannot provide information on the other parent, they have to explain why.

Application forms are a dominant literacy practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Wording and layout are prescribed by the institution that sponsors them. Even though their purpose might seem empowering (access to benefits), because the questions and words used on forms are often difficult to understand, they are experienced as practices of domination (Fawns & Ivanič, 2001).

For Lea-Maude, having to complete the form was stressful, because it made her aware that her child was to be born soon. We do not know the details of Lea-Maude's situation, but it was clear that she would be on her own looking after the child.

Frédérique remembered how Lea-Maude, like others, easily became 'stressed' ('*stressés*') and 'fed up' ('*découragés*') with institutional documents. She added that at times the process of dealing with forms was simply 'too heavy' ('*trop lourd*') for them; it was emotionally too demanding. Frédérique explained that dealing with the young people's emotions was as much part of the task as dealing with the form itself. In such a situation she would take it in stages, working with the young person on parts of the document, doing other things in between, and then returning to the form at a later time. But she would not complete the form for the young person, because her goal was to help them in such a way that when they next had to deal with an official document, they would need less help or could do it on their own. When a young woman or man asked her for help with a form she always made it clear that they would complete the form together.

Lea-Maude's difficulties with the form were partly exacerbated by the fact that the QPIP was a 'faceless' institution (Jones, 2000), with no local office where an administrator could be asked questions about the form. In such contexts, literacy mediators are often sought. Frédérique talked about how the young people at *Le Bercail* often said they were too 'embarrassed' to phone state institutions to asks questions about documents.

A key point to make about Frédérique's intervention as literacy mediator for Lea-Maude is that, as the youth worker said, her aim was to encourage the young woman's autonomy, and to some extent empower her to complete the form on her own. The youth worker was familiar with the form and the application process, because she had a young child herself. As in our first example, her ability to empathize with Lea-Maude's situation was

important. As literacy mediator, through her 'work of affinity' (Mihut, 2014, p.75), Frédérique was able to 'humanize' this otherwise impersonal process (Mihut, 2014, p. 59).

Discussion

The young people who participated in this study mirror the profile of many other young adults who experience a disrupted education, financial difficulties, health problems and complex personal lives. Institutional literacy practices and the bureaucratic procedures they are part of, our examples have shown, can hinder young people's attempts to address some of these difficulties. Two important issues emerge from our discussion of these attempts: 1. the importance of institutional literacy practices, and, 2. literacy mediation as an opportunity for learning.

The Importance of Institutional Literacy Practices

The young people in this study had to engage with many institutional literacy practices, for example, in order to access financial support. The examples discussed above show that institutional literacy practices, with their 'prescribed ways of being, reading and writing' (Mihut, 2014, p. 59) can be confusing and even threatening. Some institutional practices can be so constrained that they make access to resources nearly impossible (see also Taylor 1996). Lea-Maude and Delphine's examples also show that institutional literacy practices easily provoke feelings of powerlessness, as people are being 'rendered passive by bureaucratic text' (Jones, 2014, p. 63). Such feelings can be exacerbated when, like the young people in our study, feelings of exclusion and powerlessness have been confirmed by years of living in a situation of precarity or when mental health issues are contributing to social isolation.

Some people may argue that the key move for young people like Delphine and Lea-Maude is to re-enter education, gain a qualification, and access vocational training or the job market. We do not disagree that access to education and employment is crucial. But to focus exclusively on these implies understanding precarity in too narrow a sense.

There are other literacies these young people need to become better acquainted with in order to gain access to resources and opportunities. It is here that youth workers play an important role in supporting young people's ability to engage with these practices and become more confident in dealing with institutions. Crucial to the mediator's work, as Mihut (2014) has shown too, is their understanding of both parties involved; the institution as sponsor of literacy and the young person as its recipient.

The young people's reactions to official documents reveal the negative emotions these dominant literacies evoked. Frédérique said that young people like Lea-Maude would come to her with a bureaucratic text and say: "I don't understand anything!". According to her, young people generally felt overwhelmed by such texts. These reactions limited their ability to engage with these documents, and thus to learn how to deal with situations that imposed texts on them. Their negative emotions also limited their access to resources and opportunities. We can see here the real material consequences practices such as form-filling can have.

Frédérique explained that the general goal of their intervention as literacy mediators was to support the young people in such a way that in future situations they could act with less or without support. Frédérique said: "If I can empower (*responsabiliser*) the young people to call and find information, ideally I'll do it. [If I can't, I'll say] 'Now, I'll do it, listen how I do it, and next time you'll make the phone call. This is not negotiable'."

Literacy Mediation and Learning

Earlier work by Uta (Papen, 2012) has shown that the need for literacy mediation often arises in a context where an individual or a group have limited experience of institutionalized literacy practices through which access to resources and information are channeled. For Maddox (2007), the implication is that people can be disadvantaged because they have to rely on literacy mediators to allow them access to these resources. The mediator seems to be taking charge of the literacy work involved without necessarily sharing the expertise with the person they mediate for, leaving them dependent on the mediator's support (see also Brandt, 2007).

The incidences of literacy mediation at *Le Bercail* which we studied were different in nature. While in some cases, in particular when crises arose, youth workers had to take charge, the ultimate goal always was to enable and empower the young people on whose behalf they mediated. Literacy mediation, in the context of youth work, is best seen as a process of sharing of experiences, facilitating and thus, for the young people, learning.

Frédérique, as we saw earlier, sought to enable the young people's learning and autonomy so that they could deal with institutional and dominant literacies in a more informed and confident manner.

There is little doubt then that learning was involved in the processes of literacy mediation we found at *Le Bercail*. Learning was informal and problem-oriented, situated in 'authentic' contexts—a real situation to be addressed, not a school lesson. Learning included understanding bureaucratic processes and institutions and writing according to the conventions of specific genres and registers.

Youth workers facilitated the acquisition of new literacy-related competencies. In some cases, they used more explicit teaching strategies to achieve this. It is important to emphasize

here that learning was made possible because the youth workers were able to address the young people's affective reaction to institutional literacy practices. Their empathy and sensitivity allowed them to turn situations shaped by negative emotions which hinder learning into opportunities for empowerment and this had the potential to lead to the young people changing their perceptions of themselves and their abilities (cf. Lewis and Tierney, 2013).

We suggest though that learning that is made possible by literacy mediation is not easily measurable in terms of quantifiable skills. Learning, for example in the cases of Delphine and Lea-Maude, was about a change in young people's confidence and attitudes and this, in turn, allowed them to change their practices (see Lave, 2011) and acquire new skills.

Implications for Education

While these young people's situations were to some extent unique, other youths too are likely to encounter demands for engagement with institutional literacy practices. Thus, teachers and adult educators are likely to be aware that being able to engage in an informed and critical way with institutional literacy practices is what we could call an important life skill. What then are the implications of our findings for youth workers and educators?

Firstly, it is important to note that the literacy mediators in our study, similar to what other studies have found (Kalman, 2008, Mihut, 2014; Papen, 2010), had mostly acquired their skills on the job, through experience. Youth workers in their early career might not have such experiences and this suggests that knowledge of bureaucratic texts and their language should be included in their training. Teachers, too, in secondary schools or adult education centers, are likely to be aware of the importance of such wider literacy practices in their students' lives but may have little experience with them.

More generally, our study suggests that educators can benefit from knowing about the everyday forms of literacy the young people in their charge deal with because of the influence such practices have on young people's access to resources as well as their sense of self and learning. The youth workers' success as literacy mediators relied on their understanding of young people's reactions to these practices. They avoided a deficit assessment of their writing and instead addressed the anxieties official documents often provoked.

Working with the young people in the role of literacy mediator, they countered such emotions through their empathy and their knowledge of institutional forms of literacy and their requirements. This allowed them to teach young people important skills. At the same time, they were able to teach them strategies to become more confident in their dealings with literacies, in particular those sponsored by institutions.

The role of emotions with regards to learning and literacies, in particular dominant literacies, as illustrated by our study, is relevant to all educators. It points to an important and yet not necessarily well understood aspect of literacy learning; the way specific literacies, through the reactions they provoke, facilitate or hinder learning. It also emphasizes the fact that learning is never just a rational process but involves feelings (Lewis and Tierney, 2013).

In schools too, students encounter dominant literacies (e.g. essays) and these, similar to the forms in our examples, may provoke emotions which—when repeated and thus sedimented—significantly affect students' identities and their ability to learn (Lewis and Tierney, 2013). While teachers in school cannot provide the kind of one-to-one support the youth workers in our study offered, they can create non-assessed activities where students can learn to engage in dominant literacy practices.

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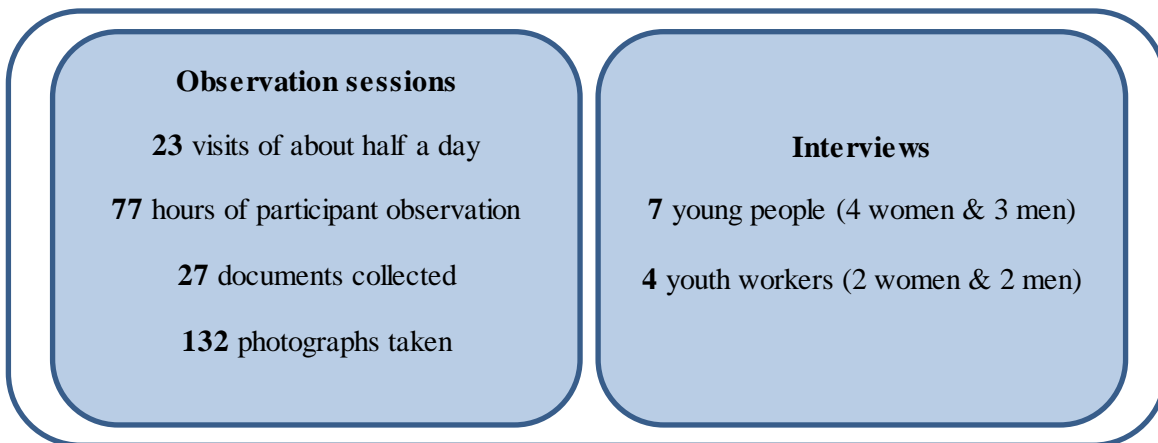
Figure 1 Overview of the field work at *Le Bercail*

Table 1 Employees at *Le Bercail*

Name	Sex	Role (according to them)	Education
Charles	M	Youth worker	Uncompleted Bachelor's degree (1 year) in special education
Ève-Lyne	F	Social integration teacher	Bachelor's degree in special education
Frédérique	F	Social integration teacher	Bachelor's degree special education
Tommy	M	Project coordinator / youth worker	Bachelor's degree in psychology