



## “HOW TO USE THE FORCE WITHIN US” INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE POWER OF EDUCATORS AND BENEFICIARIES IN THE FIELD OF YOUTH AND ADULTS AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

#### *The empowerment of the individual and the collective*

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We are going to review what we mean when we talk about *empowerment* or *the power to act*. This presentation is called “Supporting the personal and collective empowerment process: a tailored model”.

As you know, the theme of this conference is “How to use the force within us”. I like this phrase, “the force within us”, because when we speak about empowerment we talk a lot about building capacities, support proactiveness, collective change... But there is still a big question to be answered: how can we reach these goals? How can I exceed the good intentions? We started asking ourselves this initial question many years ago.

The first thing we have to do is to believe in people’s strengths; that’s what you called *the force*. And it’s not so easy because the people we meet in the context of our work are faced with difficulties and hard times. As individuals, we often experience failure in our daily life..However, even though we experience repeated failures we persist in the belief that we can and will eventually succeed. Otherwise, we would become static and lose our capacity to act.

Today I bring you good and bad news. Why is empowerment such an important concept? Because it is the basis of the psychosociological process. Its motivational effect is very important and long-lasting and thus is essential. We will face obstacles on the road to overcome our failure, but if we repeat the same mistakes we made before, we will lose hope. If we keep making the same mistakes for a long period of time, we will lose the possibility of doing things for ourselves. People who suffer from this become sceptical. They don’t believe they’ll be able to overcome their failures anymore.

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There are young people, teenagers, who experience, in different periods of their lives, that feeling of losing the capacity to project themselves into the future. They know what they're doing today but they don't know what they'll be able to do in the future. Go and ask young people in social work institutions what they want to do with their lives; you won't get a lot of answers.

And there are a lot of people living under the same circumstances. Apathy is the loss of hope. Despite our good intentions, our desire to help those people can turn into a pressure that strengthens apathy.. That was the bad news. The good news is that failure is also the center of power, it is a reversible concept. This means that if you fail, if you make a very big mistake and you don't succeed, you can still get astonishing results once you succeed in the same field. But we also take the risk that this could be transformed into a vicious circle. When you are continuously failing you start thinking you will never be able to succeed and so you keep failing. The situation gets worse and worse. But we have discovered that when you keep on trying and finally succeed, a personal revelation happens: you discover hope. And that's how we can transform this vicious circle.

How can we achieve this transformation?

The first step is to reconnect the successful experience with what matters here and now. How can we build the power to act? By connecting empowerment with what is relevant. It's not about having power for the sake of having it. You may have been told that *empowerment* means 'gaining power'. However, we can be more specific and see empowerment as being conscious of what is the type of power one needs to succeed. From there you can develop an intervention tailored to one's situation. That is empowerment.

*If the power that I'm seeking for you, is not important for you, that is not empowerment. What do we need to create that specific change? It could be something so small but that has tremendous importance for the person. For example, a person who feels isolated and is scared of taking public transports may perceive the simple act of taking the bus as a big challenge. This essentially symbolic act then becomes the first step in a process of reintegration. In other words, if I want to go there, I have to start here. And if I have an obstacle just in the front of my feet, at the starting point, and I try to get there, I will fall down. So sometimes the first one, the first obstacle, the first step, consists in recognizing what is the problem here and now. Not there but here and now. And that's why it could be more symbolic because what could be blocking you, it could be something very specific, very small.*

What you have to be sure of, is that *gaining power* and *what matters here and now* are related to one another. Because here and now is the only place where you can act. There is no space for action in the future or in the past. You can't rebuild the past; you can't project the future into the present. The only space where you can work, where you can bring a change, where you can build a future, is here and now.

So, one of the most important aspects of this approach is that you need to be rooted in the here and now place. So when you meet someone who wants to change something in his life, the first question we should ask is: "What do you think is the problem for you here and now?" This question will completely change the direction of the process of change because you don't project a future problem into the present as, for example, being unemployed. You can't project a problem from the past either, as having been injured. That's why your history and your expectations are an obstacle for here and now, for changing what you want to change.

We should define the change in operational terms. What is important is not to decide that there are more possibilities than you thought: "I thought I wasn't able to do anything and I talked to you and now I see I have opportunities". It's something more concrete. The first thing we have to do is to be sure that there will be something to try when the group or the person leaves the room. What will you try? Where do you want to move to?

So, it should be defined in operational terms and this is very difficult for Europeans because in European culture, it is very common to talk about theory, about concepts and visions, which are useful but not at this stage. At this stage we should be more concrete, pragmatic and rooted in the here and now. This was the first step.

The second step consists in gathering the necessary conditions to transform the action into a success. As I said before, in order to transform the vicious circle into a virtuous circle you have to be sure that the first time you try to help someone getting over an obstacle, you will succeed. To transform the action into a success, you need to gather the necessary conditions. Sometimes it could be changes in the space or the environment and sometimes it will be helping people resolve their problems with organizations or with the administration. It could be any kind of obstacle but you have to work at the same time on the personal aspect of the problem. So you have to create the conditions to transform the action into a success.

We often learn in the professional school that we have to learn the good way to do things, the good technique, the good model, the good recipe. But one thing we have discovered is that even if I am the best social worker in the world, a Nobel Prize winner, I still need to know how to use the person's this personal experience. "People don't know that they know" and we need this expertise to find good solutions. I personally can't give a good definition of the problem and a good definition of the solution. If I don't consider the person or the group's perspective, I will fail to help them. I will only to say ok it wasn't sound bad. On the hale, I have achieved something". But you can't contribute exactly to change things if there is not a combination of the professional expertise and the personal expertise. That's why we use the Maïeutique (maieutic), which is Socrates' way of questioning in order to transform a big challenge into a manageable one. So if people come to you with a big problem (normally big problems are seen as bigger than they are), start here and now, on this particular point, on the first step. So, that's the first step to towards initiating an effective empowerment process, individual or collective. The first part of your job is to translate that big challenge into something we can try to do once we leave out of the room.

How to transform action into a success?

I said we have to transform action into a success but how can we do that when we are employed in an institution or something like that? Twenty years ago we started asking ourselves three questions:

- What is empowerment? (Big question)
- What are its processes and impacts?
- Can we reproduce it?

*What is empowerment?*

*"Empowerment is a process, a mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs."*

This definition is 30 years old. It comes from Julian Rappaport, the researcher who put empowerment into the public place. He said that empowerment is a process, it's dynamic not static. It's a mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs. We will see how we can understand that.

*What are its processes and impacts?*

It is a process, so, because it is a process, it must fit within a context. You will never be able to have a general way of working on empowerment which will be good for everywhere and for everyone. What you will have is a set of common principles that take different forms and apply differently in a variety of situations. It means that we have to adapt our interventions to the

context. That is a big problem for researchers because you can't define a set rule. You can't create a formula and say "empowerment = x". You can write that, but you have to write a long side that "x" may change with the context, and it will.

Empowerment doesn't exist unless we are rooted in pragmatic knowledge, unless we are constantly in dynamic adjustments and unless we include a process of development of a social consciousness. That's mainly the process or, at least, the important part of the process at this point.

The impact of the empowerment process will translate into a growing feeling of mastery over what matters. Imagine you try to act on the world and the world says back: "nice try, you've partly succeeded". If you receive this message from the world, you will not be empowered because you won't feel as though you have fully succeeded. But it is not only a question of perception, it's not a trick of your mind. It's something more concrete. There should be an actual improvement of mastering what matters to you here and now. To you, to your family or people you care about, or to your community (it's always on three levels).

What matters to the people we're helping? What can be negotiated with them? When we talk about empowerment we always have to include the way people think of the problem and the solution. If you are someone who tries to work in a perspective of empowerment but don't know how the people you're helping define the problem and the solution, you can't empower them. There is an easy way to test that. If you talk to your colleagues and someone says, "What can I do with kids in this neighborhood? They gather in the stairwell and it could be a source of trouble.. What do they need? What should we do for them?" The simple question you can answer is "Did you ask them?" And often people say, "Oh, I didn't think about that." I have met people, social workers, who had built an intervention program by themselves, gathered money, fought against institutions to implant new services, and after building those new services they sat down and waited for participation but nobody came. Why? No one had asked them what kind of social work they were looking for. That is why your intervention should include what matters to the people you want to help and what can be negotiated with them.

This idea is very important because you have a mandate to be able to do something in a particular area of work. If you are a social worker, you have some obligations, you have some duties. And you have to negotiate, you have to include your point of view but also the other's point of view, the other's position.

### *Can we reproduce it?*

Empowerment is a natural phenomenon; everybody in this room believes they have a possibility of empowerment in their daily life. If you want to go to the beach, you can go to the beach, you have the money and you have the body that may take you there. There is no problem. But, can we create the same confidence with people who are suffering a lot? Can we reproduce this possibility and ask them, "How can I help you?" Can I do something for you? and "What do you want to do?"?

If the answer is yes, then how can we, as social professionals, do something to support this process? We are not angels, we are social professionals. So we have a context, we have obligations, we have a mandate. We have to deal with that. So how can we promote the process of empowerment from our professional position? Is it possible to develop a framework to guide practitioners to support a personal or collective empowerment? Can we teach a way to empower people? It's not so obvious.

This is the philosophical root or frame of this approach:

*"Pain cannot solely be defined as physical or even mental suffering, but rather as a decrease in —if not a total loss of— one's ability to take action,*

*one's power to act, perceived as a blow to the integrity of one's self."*  
(Ricoeur, 1990).

The *force* of the sentence, "*how to use the force within us*", is directly linked to the quote above. When you fail frequently your feeling of integrity is challenged. That's why this sentence of Ricoeur is the basis of this approach. The possibility to restore your power to act and the possibility to change your relationships through action are something potentially very powerful. You can inverse the process of destruction to translate it into a process of construction, personal or collective.

*How to support the reproduction of personal or collective empowerment?* Here we have a problem because we need a conceptual framework but, it's not a simple matter of methodology. You can't just say: "*do this, then do that and then this other thing*" and at the end you will succeed in what matters for you". You can't work like that. So you have to invent a way to translate this conceptual framework into your practice.

Use a technique if you need it but invent a kind of practice that will fit as well as possible within the context.

As far as we are concerned we developed a conceptual framework to reproduce the empowerment process. It is grounded on four different roots.

- **A theory of justice:** What is a just society? How can we, as social practitioners, contribute to a more just society? Should we restrain our practice to our little job or can we do something to work for a more just society?
- **A theory of action:** What is action? How can action be enhanced?
- **A theory of change:** How can we change? Why do we change? What can be called a *change*?
- **And a theory of cognitive sciences:** What is the relationship between the thought and the action? What role plays action in the process of consciousness building?

From these we extracted four more specific concepts: **Capabilities**; derived from the acknowledgement that you can have the right to do something but if you don't have the resources, you're still unable to do it. **Hermeneutic phenomenology**; the action is not what it seems when you look at people but how it feels, the sense given to the action, the interpretation of the action and the feeling of the result. **Pragmatism**; change could not be mandatory, it should be decided with the context, the here and now, and it should be negotiated. **Enactivism**; how can the fact that I try something help me change my mind? What is the way in which the action can transform my thoughts?

The central issue to reproduce personal and collective empowerment, is, "Am I capable?". If I don't believe I am capable, I won't even try. So how can a little action give me the confidence that I can take another step? To answer that question, we established a tool derived from our conceptual framework. This tool is built around four axes of analysis.

The first one is the **adoption of a unit of analysis: actors in context**. It just means you will always confront one actor in a settled context. And you can't separate the two. You can't say, "He's a drinker". He is a drinker in his context, which could be the unemployment or a relationship problem. You have to keep the both elements, the contextual and the personal, as part of the same sentence.

**The second axis is the definition of the problem and the identification of the solutions with those who will have to deal with the change.** We mean that it is necessary to include the expertise of the people concerned with the change when developing an intervention. "Which problem does the person have? Do they have the problem I think they have? Do they have the

problem they think they have?" I talked to a friend yesterday, a social worker. He met a woman who said, "I am divorcing". And the social worker said, "Oh, it's sad, it is difficult." And she said, "No, he left with the car. That's my main problem because I live in the countryside. So, without a car, I have no autonomy. I decided to divorce. I'm not sad for that." There is a preconception that the divorce should be a problem. And, in fact, the problem here and now for this woman was to lose her autonomy which is easier to deal with than having to repair a relationship.

**The third axis consists of working with the complexity and dynamism of reality.** Everything moves all the time. Nothing is fixed. So you can't just decide that "this is the situation, this is the person in context, that is the problem and that is the solution", fix it in time and apply it uniformly. Because the situation changes and you have to deal with that. It means you have to always deal with the fact that things change. A group may be well motivated to participate in a project and one week later they won't want to have anything to do with it. Something happened while your intervention plan was being built. In this approach, this is not a problem: why can't you do it right now? If the situation changes, then change your intervention plan.

And the last axis, but a very important one, is **introducing a process of critical analysis**. It is not only important to bring change, but also to give meaning to that change you're bringing. So if you succeed in doing something, there must be a part of the action which can help you to know why you succeeded, why it was possible and why it worked this time. And then some learning comes from the reflection and this is quickly transformed into consciousness.

To be simple, but not simplistic, we use four questions to guide the line of empowerment practice.

The first question is **who wants what, for whom and why?** Just take this sentence the next time you find yourselves in front of a group or a person and say, "who wants what for whom and why?" And then you use an actor in his context as a unity of analysis. You get a picture that will help you see in what situation you are.

**What does the target person think about our definition of the problem and the solution?** Often, social workers say, "I have a good idea. I saw a need in this population. We should change something to make it right. I'll make a proposal, send it, finance it, and apply the solution on the ground." But what does our person affected by the intervention think about our definition? This is a fundamental part of the approach. You can't empower anyone without answering this question. It just means that your professional pathway must shift in a simple way. You can't take any initiative without looking for what the target population thinks about the definition. It's one of the first things we, empowerment supervisors, ask you: "Do you ask them what they want? Do they agree with your definition?" If they don't, you have to start over again.

**What can be tried here and now?** As I said before, we can't act in the future or in the past. Often people say, "I want to do something to change the past or to remove fear from the future, to know the future". There is no way of resolving your situation because you can't go into the past to change it and you can't go into the future to remove the uncertainty.

**What do we learn from this experience?** This approach means that we need to take time to stop and try to synthesize what we learned from our experience.

Thank you.



### Discussion with the participants...

**Question 1:** *I work with children from 6 to 9 years old. I wonder at what age we can start asking children to decide for themselves what they want?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** When do you start to learn in your life? When you start talking to children? You don't take the answer at the same level. Sure, if you are with a child who is 3 years old, his answers don't have the same form as a 9 year old. I have a story for that.

A young girl, six years old, was stuck between her father and mother in their divorce. And each one used the girl to send messages to the other. And there was a conflict about the date of the holidays and she felt very bad with this situation. The social worker asked her, "What can you do?" She said, "I don't know." "What do you feel and what do you want?" And she said, "I don't want to be in the middle of them". He gave her homework, she'd have to think about what she could try to do to change that situation. And she found her way of telling them: "I don't want to be caught between the two of you".

**Question 2:** *The problem is that, at least where I work, until they're 12 years old children don't have a word to say. For example, they can't go to legal proceedings. We, as social educators, are their only voice but they can't always speak out and express what they feel or what they want.*

**Yann Le Bossé:** But the problem is still the same. What does the child want? What does he want to obtain and what does he want to avoid? If we ask ourselves these questions, we will get close to what that child wants to express. It is a very useful tool, a mechanism that always works.

I once met a woman who worked with disabled people and every time she asked them what they wanted to obtain and avoid, they were able to give a form of answer.

**Question 3:** *That is a big problem in my work because there are many adults who don't listen to the children. They don't listen to what they want and they decide for them. They don't trust them. Being in the middle, as social educators, is very difficult.*

**Yann Le Bossé:** And can you give these children the message that they can trust you?

**Question 4:** *Of course we can but we are only educators, so when we are in front of a judge... I don't know, sometimes we fight, I fight, but it's difficult.*

**Yann Le Bossé:** It is difficult but if there's one possibility, try it. If there is none, just accept it. But in the social practice there are very few situations in which there is no room for change. Sometimes the area in which we would be able to act will be very small but there will be there. We need to be able to recognize when there's room for change and when there isn't. In a car accident, for example, you can get very hurt, you can even lose your arm and in that case you'll have no choice but to accept that you lost it.

**Question 5:** *Thank you for your presentation. I liked it a lot. I often hear people using empowerment as a verb, "to empower somebody". And I was just wondering what you think about this. Do you use empower as a verb?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** You can use it as a verb for yourself but you can't empower other people. You can just create the conditions for the empowerment to grow. In our last book there was a gardener who took care of his garden but he run into difficulties and he couldn't make the flowers grow. He just couldn't create the conditions to let them grow.

**Question 6:** *My question is almost the same as the first one. When we are social workers and work with adults or young people with difficulties I agree with you that we don't need to have the answer for them because they have the answer. But sometimes they don't want to be helped. And my question is "How can we create the desire for them to change?"*

**Yann Le Bossé:** Yes, how to restore the belief that they can change themselves, right? If they give you the responsibility of change it's because they don't believe that they can do anything by themselves. And if they succeed, it will be your challenge; it will be your work. But you have to reverse this; in this approach you have to think that when someone says, "It's because of your help that I've succeeded", you lost. They should say, "I have succeeded by myself". So, how to transform it? By trying to find what kind of different steps can be taken that may work and restoring the relationship to action by experience? "You did it, didn't you?" "I didn't do anything".

**Question 7:** *When you're a social educator working with a minor and you find a situation you don't feel appropriate in how it is being managed (drugs, abortion, separation from parents...) and you think the minor's point of view is not right, you don't agree with what he wants to do in that moment, is it acceptable for us to tell them "you have the right to think as you do and I respect that right" or should we make an intervention and say to him, "you're wrong, you need to readjust your point of view"? Where is the balance between both options?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** There are different things you can do here. The first one is, if someone doesn't want to listen to anything about the good or bad idea it is planned to do, at least, you can ask the person to *do it consciously*. They need to take a look at their actions, at their behavior. And being conscious of one's behavior is the first step, a very important step, to come up with a description. And if they trust you, you can suggest to them some other way of obtaining what they are looking for. So, again, if you try to see what he wants to obtain, where he want to go, and if there is a better of getting there, a less dangerous way of obtaining that, you can have a deal with the concerned person.

When we work on a situation with addiction, we ask, "Do you want to stop doing it? Why do you have the addiction? What role does the addiction play in your life?" And often people don't know that they know the answer. They say, "I don't know". And we say, "OK. Then, observe. When you use the addiction again, do it consciously. If you do it consciously, you will create an observer." And if we separate the creator from the observer, there'll be room to have a look at what you are doing. We need to understand what are the reasons that led that person to this consumption. It's a very different way of seeing the problem. The assumption is that if you know why you do that, you can find a way to resolve your problem in another way. But if you don't know why you do that, if you do it unconsciously, you don't have any freedom to change

**Question 8:** *Hello. Thank you so much for your presentation. You said before that the first important question should be "What do the concerned people think about my definition of their problem?" So my question is "Are they always able to correctly identify the problem, here and now?" and, if they are, "Do they always feel comfortable about sharing it with us?"*

**Yann Le Bossé:** First, they don't know that they know. So, if you ask them, "give me the clean, short and sweet answer", you won't have it. Part of your work is to elicit the answer from them. And they will discover at the same time as you that they know, in fact.

The second thing is that you must not judge them and if they don't feel any judgment from you they will feel free to express what they feel. Sometimes, we use some codes. These are necessary because they may be shy or uncomfortable to feel what they feel. Try to use these key questions: what is the problem and why is it a problem for you here and now? And this is a very big root in which you can build a lot of things.

**Question 9:** *Thinking about the presentation you've just done, I'm curious to understand how we can train for these kinds of things everyday as educators. Which kind of questions can we ask to train ourselves for this, to prepare ourselves for this and to better understand what the advantages of this approach are?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** There is a first step, which is necessary but not sufficient. You should have the empowerment attitude with you. Because you have to show what you talk about and what you say. If you say, "give the people you help more space," the best way you can contribute to the definition of the problem-solution is doing so with your colleagues. If you don't, you are in contradiction.

The second thing is that we try to provide ourselves with a tool, an easy tool, to let the process begin by itself and then just see what it means for you. And the seed will be sown. Sometimes it will grow and sometimes it won't. But if you work with professionals who are uneasy with their work conditions today, they'll probably find different ways of doing things in the book I mentioned before. They will adopt them or not. But they will see there is an alternative, that there is another way of doing things. And when it comes to training, we use the follow on system: we train someone who will then train another group, and so on.

When we worked with the national network the question was, "How can we avoid to declaring that the power to act approach of Yann Le Bossé is the truth? Can we avoid prescribing? Can we avoid defining what's good and bad?" And we decided to use different tools, like video tools, that could give workers the possibility of being in contact. We also decided to use the maieutic approach: why do you feel that way? Why do you think you can't do something? And if you let people discover that they know how to get out, you will see that suddenly the process is within them and they will repeat it again and again. This approach is a very powerful one because you are concrete. If someone came into your office and said, "Everything is out of order, I can't do any more", the first question should be, "What's the problem?"

You can push this strategy as far as you want. When I was in La Reunion island, they said, "We want to know what you think about DPA (development of the power to act) in a context of violence in school, drug addictions, family violence" and a number of different topics. And I said, "OK, but first be sure that I don't know anything about these topics". So, I asked them to choose one and they picked community violence. And I stood in front of the people and said, "So, what's the problem with this community violence?" And together we built a personal definition of the problem and before they went outside they had something to try. Not in a way to change but to try it in situ, where they were.

So just be sure to be empowered by yourself, get the people to feel your empowerment and then let it take them wherever it has to.

**Question 10:** *I think we spoke a lot about changing the person and I think you insisted in changing the individual and the collectives. What is your reaction to words of a German poet called Hölderlin, who said, "In a society when everything becomes dangerous, then is also worrying what could be fought against."? You know this sentence?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** I didn't know the sentence but I understand it.

**QUESTION 11:** *So, the sentence says, when everything is dangerous in a society, when the danger is growing, then also something else is growing, something that helps the society. Can you relate this to your approach?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** Yes, you talk about solidarity. In fact, that is another example of collective DPA. The main challenge is to build a common problem definition, a common objective and a common solution. And in the collective definition of the problem and the solution there must be a negotiation. Not a fight, but a negotiation. How can we bring a part of this definition, a personal definition of the collective problem, in a collective definition that everybody may be able to recognize? Sometimes the space where you can build something is very small but there is a very powerful *force* in the fact that you can do something together. Doing something together is a very solidary process.

So, the collective is very interesting if you have something in common—a block vision, the same condition or situation—and you can agree on one definition. But if you don't have anything in common, it's just a waste of time.

I remember one day I received a call from a Government responsible in Quebec and he told we had a problem. We had to apply a law and nothing was forth coming. We had a commission with many representatives, we were trying hard but anything was working. We had a problem.” I said, “Perfect. We will go to see the group and inquire what the problem is.” And we started working with them and asked each one of them, “What is the problem for you?” And every one said, “For me there is no problem. Things are getting worse but it is a good thing for me because it gives me more hours of work and more money ” or “ I learn a lot ” or “ it gives me access to an important network “ etc. So, at this table there was no one with a real problem except the person who asked for help. There was no common space. You can't build a collective action on that. You should find a common space. And as an individual, collective leaders don't know what they know. They have to build the collective understanding and bring out a collective definition.

**Question 12:** *In what kind of situation empowerment, as you defined it, doesn't work?*

**Yann Le Bossé:** I have some doubts about that. There is a place where it is more difficult and that is in mandatory context. There are limits in saying to someone who is in jail for his life, “We will work to sustain your empowerment.” I think it may be something possible but you have to be very cautious to guide that empowerment. I don't know if you know but the resources for prisoners are very rare, difficult to get, and they have to earn them. If they don't have any money, they can earn some, and sometimes the simple fact of being able to earn some money inside the prison can bring a big change in their lives. Because cigarettes or candies could be a big gift and mean everything. So, there is something possible but I will be very modest in saying that it is empowerment.

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