

**Youth Empowerment: A Qualitative Study**

By Stephanie Bozzer

A Thesis submitted to  
The Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Social Work

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**BY**

**Stephanie Bozzer**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study examines the relationship between advocacy and youth empowerment and was designed to collect information from an organization run by and for youths, called the Federation of British Columbia Youth in Care Network. One purpose was to examine the organization's impact on the recent changes that have occurred in the legislation, policies and structures of youth services provided by the British Columbia government, and the other was to examine whether the process of engaging in these change initiatives was empowering to those involved. Youth members of the Federation and professionals working with youths in care were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format to elicit their thoughts and perspectives on youth empowerment. It was hypothesized that youths participating in a youth run advocacy group would become empowered through their actions in three governmental decision making processes: the Gove Inquiry, the creation of the Child, Family and Community Services Act and the restructuring of the Ministry for Children and Families. The first area of inquiry focused on the activities of the Federation and its impact on governmental processes. The second area focused on youths' feelings and perceptions regarding empowerment based on their participation in Federation activities. The last area explored whether youths felt that they were causal agents in decision making processes. The results show that youths are starting to feel empowered and that they can impact the world around them. There was a difference in responses by the youths and professionals regarding the processes that lead to empowerment. Youths focused on the day to day activities that helped them to gain skills which lead to empowerment while professionals focused on the need for youths to have opportunities or the ability to stand on their own. It was also found that youths gained a sense of empowerment from their participation in the decision making processes even if they did not impact the outcomes of the processes. Youths also stated that they themselves gained a sense of personal empowerment from the involvement of other youths in these processes.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank-you to my family for all their love and support

I would like to thank my committee members for their efforts on my behalf

Dr. Brad McKenzie

Professor Pete Hudson

Professor Anne McGillivray

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

Empowerment is an often cited concept in the discipline of Social Work, but it is also a confusing term because it is used to describe a number of different ideas. The widespread use of the term empowerment has made it difficult to define and conceptualize. Research has examined the process of social workers supporting clients to gain power in settings and situations that are identified as personal, professional, political, economic, social, psychological, educational, and cultural. A person's sense of power can come from many avenues: participating in decision making processes; gaining access to material resources; learning interpersonal skills; developing communication skills; and finding alternative methods and solutions to problems. Empowerment focuses on ensuring that clients, professionals, agencies/organizations, communities, and society, as a whole, are able to use power, in its many forms, to improve their life situations. This means that an empowerment process can be created and implemented according to the different settings, situations, and people to which it is applied.

Empowerment is a concept that is open to interpretation and conceptualizing regarding its underlying ideology, highlighting its strengths and limitations, and creating strategies or technologies for practice. There are many ideas contained in the term empowerment which can be hypothesized, theoretically constructed, practiced and studied. Despite the popularity of the

concept, there is currently little research that focuses on the specifics of empowerment processes, especially as it relates to youth within our society. This lack of accumulated knowledge regarding empowerment definitions and practices makes it difficult to theoretically construct a framework around which research can be organized and conducted. The diversity of the terminology, the concepts, the individual and group practice and the possible implications that arise out of empowerment are all areas which will be discussed within this study. Empowerment is, currently, a catch all concept that has been studied on a general level but it lacks specificity regarding its presence or impact on certain populations within our society.

I became aware of an overall lack of specificity regarding empowerment, and its applicability to youth, during research completed for class assignments. There is a scarcity of youth focused studies relating to empowerment and this study was designed to collect data that relates to youth and their perceptions of empowerment, and its effect on their lives. This study focused on the target population of British Columbia youth in care and was designed to gather their thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of empowerment. The target group of young people was chosen due to my experiences working with Vancouver youth in a variety of alternative care placements: a psychiatric institution, a foster parent home, and a treatment group home. All of these work experiences have helped to create my personal view that youth are constrained within society as a relatively powerless and disadvantaged group of people. By this, I mean that youth are expected to be responsible for their lives and the decisions they make but they are not given the power to adequately carry out these actions. I feel that

youth need to be supported and encouraged to gain the necessary knowledge and skills so that they can make a genuine contribution to decisions affecting the direction of their lives.

This study was designed to collect information from an organization run by and for youth, called the Federation of British Columbia Youth in Care Network, and more specifically, this organization's impact on the recent changes that have occurred in the legislation, policies, and structures of government provided youth services in British Columbia. I have chosen to carry out the study within B. C. because of the many far reaching governmental changes that have occurred here over the past five years. B. C. has had to deal with the Gove Inquiry (1995) and its findings regarding the deaths of children in care, the enactment of the new Child, Family and Community Services Act (1997) that re-arranges the scope and direction of government interventions into the lives of children, families and communities, and the restructuring of services that pertain to children and youth that were within the Ministry of Social Services, the Ministry of Attorney General, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry for Women's Equality and the Ministry of Education. These services have now been combined into one ministry called the Ministry for Children and Families. Each of the above Ministries remain autonomous when dealing with the adult population, but all of these governmental changes have focused attention on B. C. and its endeavors to deal with youth in a manner that is comprehensive while also being responsive to their needs. I was interested in examining the concept of youth empowerment within the context of these three large governmental

changes to see if the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network had input into or impact on the decisions that were made for children and youth who are in alternative care.

## 1.2. Background Information

### 1.2.1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children

The General Assembly of the United Nations, on November 20, 1989, approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child which has the potential to improve the life of every child in the world. The Convention aims to promote the well being of children and to protect them from exploitation and abuse. It is also the most comprehensive expression of human rights ever developed on an international level.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child obligates governments to protect and promote the rights of children as set out in the Convention. Canada was one of 50 countries that signed the Convention in 1990, and in 1991 Canada ratified the Convention and agreed to these obligations. The Convention consists of 54 articles or statutes which cover every aspect of a child's life: child abuse and neglect, youth justice, play and recreation, and the right to be heard. The Convention asks people to think about the child as a person which forms a backdrop for involving youth in the decision making processes that are a part of their lives. The beliefs and values supported by the Convention provided the basis for the development of the Federation of B. C.

Youth in Care Network, the recommendations from the Gove Inquiry, the development and enactment of the Child, Family and Community Services Act, and the creation of the Ministry for Children and Families.

### 1.2.2 Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network

Over the past seven years, the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network has become a strong voice for the children and youth who are placed in the government's care. The Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network is affiliated with the National Youth in Care Network of Canada and the International Youth in Care Network. The initial concept of a Youth in Care Network started as a result of a youth presentation which took place at the First International Child Care Conference held in Vancouver in 1985. A group of three youth - one who had just come into care, one who was preparing to leave care, and one who had been out of care for sometime - and several staff members were asked to present a lecture at the conference on the experiences and perceptions of youth who had been under the care of child welfare authorities. The decision made by the staff members was to empower the youth by letting the young people create the format for the presentation and that the staff members' role would be "facilitating the young people to do things for themselves rather than directing them in how to do it or doing it for them" (Garfat, Graig & Joseph, 1989, p. 5). Once the youth became aware of the process for creating their presentation they felt they needed the input of other youth to adequately present a variety of experiences and perceptions. The purpose of doing the presentation was to -

represent to a group of professionals a broad spectrum of the opinions of young people within the system with the hope that sensitizing the professionals to the experiences of youth in care would improve services. (Garfat, Graig & Joseph, 1989, p. 6)

They collected the needed information from the other youth by conducting a survey and then creating a booklet from their responses, which was not a statistical representation of youth opinions but, rather, provided the youth with a means of voicing what they wished to say. The primary outcome from the conference was that the youth had shown they were capable, with support, of undertaking the huge task of publicly sharing very personal information for the benefit of others. The other unexpected result was that they were asked to repeat their presentation on several more occasions at the conference because professionals who had heard their presentation felt that more of their colleagues needed to hear their message. Some of the youth involved in this project went on to become members of the National Youth in Care Network of Canada.

Raychaba, an author of a book published by the National Youth in Care Network (1993), was in the care of child welfare authorities while growing up and he is currently a member of the National Youth in Care Network. Raychaba describes the national network as a non-profit organization comprised of young people, 14 to 24 years of age, who are or have been in the care of child welfare authorities in Canada. Directed and staffed by and for young people, the network attempts to give voice to the concerns of youth in care. They have four primary goals: to voice the views and opinions of youth in and from care; to promote the improvement of services to this group of

people; to support the development of youth in care groups at the local or grassroots level; and to encourage support and friendship among youth in and from care.

The Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network originated in March 1991 in the city of Port Moody and was called the Fraser North Youth in Care group. Two years later, in February 1993, a provincial youth in care network was formed and renamed as the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network. In April 1993, the youth selected nine adult advisors. The next step was to put forward a three year proposal for three paid positions to oversee the development of regional/ municipal branches. This proposal was approved in August 1993 and again in August 1996. Between March 1993 and November 1995, 18 branches of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network were opened. This organization has been incorporated under the B. C. Societies Act.

The mission statement of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network is as follows:

The Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network is dedicated to the promotion and development of local groups run by and for youth from government care. These local groups primary functions are giving support, friendship, self help, information, and representation of youth in and from government care. (Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Network, 1995, p. 1)

Their goals are prefaced with the intent to work in partnership with the government, the community, caregivers, and the public in order to:

to promote the improvement of conditions for youth in and from government care; to promote, encourage, and when invited assist in the development of local groups across B. C.; to promote friendship and support youth in and from government care; to promote the views, opinions, and concerns of youth in and from government care; to provide information to youth in and from government care regarding services, rights, and youth activities; to research the needs, opinions, views, and concerns of youth in and from governmental care; and to promote the physical, mental, and emotional well being of youth in B. C. (Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Network, 1995, p. 1)

The youth involved in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network have already done ground breaking work and they hope to continue forging new paths in the future.

### 1.2.3 Gove Inquiry

The Gove Inquiry into the death of Matthew Vaudreuil, ran from June of 1994 to November 1995. The purpose of the Inquiry was to look into the circumstances surrounding the life and death of a 5 year old child killed by his mother, but the investigation was expanded to carry out a review of B. C.'s child protection system.

The Inquiry report is divided into two parts. Part One includes the evidence gathered from those people who had been involved with the deceased child and his family. Part Two focuses on information that was gathered from the public, including youth who are or who had grown up in care, social workers, government officials, labour leaders, associations of foster parents, community organizations and groups representing parents and



grandparents. Judge Gove stated, in a letter sent to the Attorney General outlining the process and outcome of the Inquiry in the Executive Summary, that he had -

learned a great deal, from children and youth, about what it means to live in an abusive or neglectful home, or to be removed from one's parents to grow up in foster care. The Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network, an association of community youth groups from throughout the province, helped me greatly. (Gove, 1995, p. 5)

Judge Gove was so impressed with the input from the youth involved in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network that he hired a member of the Federation to work on his staff. He further stated that "the youth proved to be most important in providing real life input" (p. 5).

The Inquiry involved a thorough review of the child protection system and at the conclusion of the inquiry Judge Gove made 119 recommendations that covered how the Ministry protects children, quality assurance within the Ministry, death and injury reviews, qualifications for social workers and contract service providers, training, new legislation, designing a new child welfare system, and making the transition from the old system to a new system that was child focused (Gove, 1995). The Gove Inquiry was composed of several types of information gathering techniques. There were formal hearings, meetings with individuals and groups, symposia and workshops, and a review of Ministry case files. Over the 18 month period, Judge Gove met with several branches of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network. Seven different meetings were held to gather input from youth who are or were in the care of the B. C. government.

This thesis will focus on two areas of the Gove Inquiry's recommendations: the new legislation and the redesigning of B. C.'s child protection system. The recommendations concerning the Child, Family and Community Services Act were incorporated into the Act in January 1997. The reorganization of the B. C. child welfare system, the creation of the Ministry for Children and Families, was started in the spring of 1997 and is still continuing. The overall effects of both of these changes will not be determined in the near future but hopefully the effects will be positive for the youth of B. C..

#### 1.2.4 Child, Family and Community Services Act (1997)

The Child, Family and Community Services Act was created in 1994 but was not enacted until January 7, 1997. This Act replaced the 1981 Family and Child Services Act under which children and their families received support from the province. The Gove Inquiry made several recommendations that were directed at the new Act and which were incorporated before the Act was passed by the legislature. There are two key sections to this Act which are relevant to this thesis. The first is the guiding principles of the Act which states that -

this Act is to be interpreted and administered so that the safety and well being of children are the paramount consideration and in accordance with the following principles... the child's view should be taken into account when decisions relating to a child are made...(Child, Family and Community Services Act, 1997, p. 7)

The Act further includes a section on the best interests of a child which reads -

where there is a reference in this Act to the best interests of a child, all relevant factors must be considered in determining the child's best interests, including ... a child's view...(Child, Family and Community Services Act, 1997, p. 7)

These two sections of the Child, Family and Community Services Act clearly outline a belief that children's views are an important concern when decisions are being made regarding that child's life and future. The Act does not define the limit for the child's input being utilized so it leaves open a large area of interpretation for both the youth and professionals. This ability to provide input into decisions is seen as a major step for youth in gaining empowerment.

#### 1.2.5 Ministry for Children and Families

On September 23, 1996 the Office of the Premier released a news bulletin announcing that the B. C. government was planning to strengthen the province's child protection system and streamline child and family services with the creation of a new Ministry for Children and Families. The Ministry integrated the child and family programmes of the Ministries of Social Services, Health, Attorney General, Education and Women's Equality, and then to further streamline the focus on intervention and prevention, the income assistance responsibilities of the Ministry of Social Services were transferred to a new Ministry of Human Resources. The overall belief behind these wide sweeping changes was that the consolidation of programmes from

five ministries into one would provide for better coordination, lead to improved services to those most at risk, and would not cost the tax payers additional dollars.

This course of action was a response to the recommendations made by the Gove Inquiry at the conclusion of its 18 month investigation into B. C.'s child protection system. The mandate of the Ministry for Children and Families will include a province wide early intervention and prevention strategy, the integration of service delivery in communities, processes to include communities in planning and system redesign, and the implementation of the balance of the change agenda initiated by the Gove Inquiry's recommendations. The hope for this new system is that the clients, B. C.'s children and youth, would come first.

### 1.3. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to collect information on whether individual youth who are involved in advocacy become empowered, by their participation in the change process. There are three areas of interest that form the basis of this study's research questions. The first area of inquiry examines the collective activities of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network, in relation to three recent governmental changes, and the possible impact that Federation activities had upon the government's decision making processes. The second area of study focuses on youths' participation in the activities of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network and the possible influence this had upon youths' feelings of self empowerment. The third area of interest examines youths' participation in these activities and whether the outcome

of their participation had an impact on their sense of empowerment. Each of the three research topics were divided into two categories, youths' perspectives and professionals' perspectives. Within these two categories are included several questions that further focus the study on the issue of empowerment.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Empowerment is a current and popular tenet within the discipline of social work. The concept of empowerment has been cultivated from a variety of ideas, thoughts, and values. These sources include, but are not limited to, literature on theories and studies of self-help, structural inequality, client directed services, collaboration, power dynamics, and empowerment. Empowerment is a relatively new concept that is open to differing interpretation about definition, underlying theoretical concepts, strengths and limitations, strategies for practice, and the implications it creates for use with and by clients. The concept of empowerment covers the practical techniques of enabling a client to master their lives and it also is an attitude that refers to how professionals treat people who are seeking help and support. Further, empowerment is not only limited to individual interactions but can also be applied to interactions that occur on a collective level within many areas of society. Empowerment can occur both for an individual and a group of individuals.

There are several definitions that have been put forth over the past 15 years by both researchers and professionals to try and explain their conceptualization or vision of the term empowerment. The definitions are presented not in a chronological order but according to the following grouping of ideas: individual change from an outside force; individual change due to an internal personal process; organizational or agency-based

empowerment; multi-level societal empowerment; and empowerment of the change institutions including those which employ social workers. The empowerment literature also encompasses the articles and books written about self-help groups. The final area to be explored focuses on empowerment as it relates directly to youth.

The first area of empowerment presents empowerment as an individual change due to an outside force. Mondros and Wilson (1994) state that empowerment is "a psychological state, a sense of competence, control, and entitlement that allows people to pursue concrete activities aimed at becoming powerful" (p. 228), while Reisch, Wenocur and Sherman (1981) defined empowerment as "the ability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge and/or material resources in such a way that effective performance of valued social roles will lead to personal gratification" (p. 111). Bush and Gordon (1982) conceptualized empowerment as the participation of clients in decisions about social welfare services. All of these definitions focus on the increase of personal empowerment through the changes that the client undergoes with the intervention of a social worker.

The next vision of empowerment, change due to an internal personal process, is identified by Garfat et al. (1989) and they suggested that "facilitating clients to do things for themselves rather than directing them in how to do it or doing it for them" (p. 5) would lead to people becoming empowered. Keenan and Pinkerton (1991) echoed this idea but focused on empowerment being a series of choices that have an impact upon the clients lives. Levy-Simon (1990) determined that professionals empower others through

"providing a climate, a relationship, resources, and procedural means through which people can enhance their own lives" (p. 32).

Empowerment is not defined as an extremely intellectual or technical concept and therefore it is seen as something that every person can attain with some hard work and guidance.

Rappaport, Swift, and Hess (1984), broadened the scope of empowerment by stating that empowerment is "a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives" (p. 4). Gutierrez, GlenMaye, and DeLois (1995) refined Rappaport et al.'s definition so that empowerment was explained both as a goal to be attained and a process to be completed. This inclusion of organizations and communities as entities which can become empowered enlarged the focus of empowerment from an exclusive process only for individuals. This idea started the process of seeing empowerment as applicable to the collective as well as the individual. The revision of Rappaport et al.'s definition by Gutierrez et al. expanded the definition of empowerment because in the latter case empowerment was defined as both an outcome and a process. Empowerment could now be gained through a wide variety of methods over a variable period of time by a large contingency of people.

Before one can discuss the methods and practices which can be utilized with clients, one needs to take a step back and look at the role that organizational empowerment has upon the individual process. At this point in time there is limited literature available on the topic of empowered agencies/organizations that currently exist or the methods needed to empower an agency/organization. Shera and Page (1995) focus on the idea of



organizational empowerment supporting individual empowerment through the examination of structural components including the way in which members of an organization are arranged in relation to one another, and the prescribed relationships and rules, whether informal or formal, that define organizational authority and responsibility. The authors further state that an empowered agency is expected to share leadership and responsibilities, base communication and interactional patterns on the principles of empowerment, use organizational changes that are both bottom up and top down. In addition the people involved share a common vision. For an agency or organization to empower their clients, it too needs to follow a model of empowered practice and interaction within its' internal structures. Gutierrez et al. (1995) concur with Shera and Page's ideas and begin their article with the assertion that the process of individual empowerment will not be effective if the agency itself does not follow the same principles with its own inner workings. They conclude their article by stating that their overall finding was that -

those organizations that empower workers by creating an employment setting that provides participatory management, the ability to make independent decisions about their work, communication and support from administrators, and the opportunities for skill development will be more capable of empowering clients and communities. (p. 256)

It is accepted that empowering the individual will not be successful if the structure of the agency or organization providing services to clients is not empowered as well. This idea encourages professionals to start empowering clients by empowering their own work environments. The skills and knowledge for empowering both the individual and the collective are exactly the same and begin from a place of open communication.

The next perspective presents empowerment as a multi-level societal process. Hasenfeld's (1992) statement defines this outlook -

It is important to recognize that empowerment must occur on at least three levels. First, it must be undertaken at the worker-client level and be directed at improving the client's power resources. Second, it must occur at the organizational level, aiming generally at harnessing the agency's power advantage to increasingly serve the needs of the client. Third, it must occur at the policy level so that the formulation and enactment of policy decisions are influenced by those directly affected by them. (p. 270)

The inclusion of policy in the concept of empowerment widens its focus to a global level. It is beginning to seem possible to empower the individual and the collective not only through the daily interactions that occur between people but also at a theoretical level as social policy is created and implemented within our society.

Labonté (1992) stated that empowerment happens at three levels that directly influence the individual. The first level occurs intra-personally where a potent sense of self is developed to enhance an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy. The second level assesses the individual's construction of knowledge and social analysis based upon personal and shared experiences which then forms the inter-personal level. The third level focuses on the individual's cultivation of resources and strategies for personal and socio-political gains within the community. This vision of empowerment conceptualizes it as being composed of a hierarchy of levels through which an individual proceeds starting at an introspective level and gradually working outward to include a wider variety of perspectives that come from outside of the individual. Moreau, Frosst, Frayne, Hlywa,

Leonard and Rowell (1993) combined the individual and personal perspective with the systemic structural perspective to create a definition that included 5 ideals. They listed these ideals as: the defense of the interests of the clients; the reframing of problems from the individual to the collective; the linking of material conditions to the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the clients; the equalization of client/staff relationships; and the focusing on power that comes about through personal change.

The concepts and assumptions that relate empowerment to people and practice are formulated once the professional has chosen her/his own preferred definition of empowerment. Bush and Gordon (1982) based their assumptions about youth empowerment on two inter-linked premises: if youth were given the chance to participate in the decisions being made about their lives, they would be able to make appropriate decisions for themselves with the guidance of professionals; and that "options must be available to choose from and the client must know and understand these options ... to be empowered" (p. 312). Levy-Simon (1990) adds the following concept when she defines the process of empowerment as something that is not done for the client, but rather as something that is completed with the client in a collaborative, learning environment. Reisch et al. (1981) approach the underlying concepts of empowerment both as a set of skills to be learned and as a set of values to be embraced. Gottlieb (1992) proposes three assumptions regarding empowerment: it is to the advantage of the client to increase their sense of power and control over the circumstances of their lives; clients need to understand the political aspects of their adverse circumstances; and they need to develop the skills to use that power, both individually and collectively, to try and change the troublesome conditions of their lives

(p. 304). There are eight components of empowerment discussed by Schwerin (1995) and they include: self-esteem; the experience of one's self as a causal agent; knowledge and skills that cover literacy, practical knowledge and self-knowledge; political awareness that encompasses the concepts of social justice; social participation; political participation; political rights and responsibilities; and both material and non-material resources. The difficulty with delineating the assumptions or concepts, that provide the foundation of empowerment, is related to the wide variety of definitions that are used to explain empowerment. This difficulty with characterizing empowerment extends into the methods and practices that professionals use to engage clients in a process of empowerment.

Levy-Simon (1990) asserts that for social workers to begin empowering their clients, they must assess their own beliefs and values through raising their consciousness, questioning the dominant ideology, and participating in further training. Along with the methods used to encourage people to become empowered, social workers must also acknowledge the ideology that is the underpinning of empowerment. Staples (1990) proposes a process that includes the idea that empowerment needs to be egalitarian, stressing the competence and the rights of people to take charge of their own destiny by actively participating in the creation and implementation of policies, decisions, and procedures. A holistic approach is discussed by Pinderhughes (1983) in proposing that treatment should focus on strengthening the individual while reinforcing the appropriate support that can be provided by their families, communities, or other societal systems. She also feels that clients need to be taught to recognize the power dynamics that impact their lives, the systems in which they live, and the behaviour patterns that come

out of life. Payne (1991) sketches out two levels that are required for an individual to gain empowerment. The first level begins with positive experiences in early life which give individuals confidence and competence in social interactions and this then reinforces their ability to manage social relationships and use social institutions to gain further competence later on in life. The second level addresses the client focused aim of empowerment which is to enable clients to see themselves as causal agents in finding solutions to their problem, to see that social workers have knowledge and skills that the client can use, to see social workers as peers and partners in solving problems, and to recognize that power structures are complex but partially open to influence. The social worker role in helping clients become empowered focuses on the following tasks: being a resource consultant who links clients to resources; being a sensitizer who assists clients to gain self-knowledge; and being a teacher/trainer who helps clients to gain skills which will ensure that clients can complete tasks.

As with the definitions and concepts surrounding the topic of empowerment, there are many theorized and implemented practices that shape the nature of the professional's and client's processes of empowerment. The process of empowering a client can involve several steps. Mulender and Ward (1991) define these initial steps as seeing the clients as people first, valuing the strengths of the clients, giving clients choices about possible interventions, hearing what the client has to say and using collective action in dealing with the client's problem (p. 32-38). Smale, Tuson, Biehal, and Marsh (1993) see these initial steps as being divided into two areas. The first area includes engaging the client on equal terms, being open, listening, advocating, and looking for alternatives. The second area refers to both

actions and attitudes that the professional should avoid such as confronting the client and racist attitudes. Sohng (1992) feels that empowerment practice "emphasizes the primacy of client participation in the process of defining one's problem and generating solutions and strives for mutuality between worker and client" (p. 1). All of the researchers agree that empowerment starts with the professional's initial approach in interacting with a client and that this respectful attitude sets the tone for any further development of empowerment for the client. As the saying goes 'actions speak louder than words' and for professionals, what they do with the client is sometimes more important than what is said to the client.

Gutierrez et al. (1995) developed themes emphasizing -

the education of consumers to enable them to comprehend the social environment, the need to involve consumers in developing concrete skills for surviving and developing social power, the importance of recognizing and building on strengths, and the use of democratic processes in working with clients. (p. 250)

Moreau et al. (1993) declare that there are four requirements for professionals to be able to help clients become empowered: defending the interests of the client; linking material conditions to thoughts, feelings, and behaviour; equalizing client and staff relationships; and supporting personal change through the use of power. Levy-Simon (1990) states that the role of the social worker to empower the client is to -

counsel, serve, assist, enable, catalyze, foster, nurture, mobilize, advocate, comfort, inspire, facilitate, broker, teach, train, lobby, and organize in myriad ways that help clients. They do so by providing a climate, a relationship, resources, and procedural means through which people can enhance their own lives. (p. 32)

Rose (1990) suggests that social workers "assist the client to express, elaborate, externalize, and critically reflect upon the feelings and understandings she/he has about him/herself in the context of daily life" (p. 47-48). Labonté (1990) looks at this issue from a slightly different angle by discussing the role that social workers play as a resource for clients rather than providing a service to clients. He advocates the development of small groups to decrease isolation by providing opportunities for people to come together for self-help, therapy, informal social functions, and educational experiences.

The final area of practice that needs to be discussed is the route by which clients become empowered. Rappaport et al. (1984) conclude that -

the content of the process is of infinite variety and as the process plays itself out among different people and settings the end products will be variable and even inconsistent with one another. (p. 3)

The overall message they are conveying seems to be that success cannot be defined in a single way due to the complexity of the problems and their possible solutions. Empowerment, a multi-variable concept, is not a series of concrete actions that can be followed, but a new journey that is embarked upon by the social worker and the client. This open and vague concept allows professionals to create new practices and seek new alternatives which suit the specific needs of each client. Further support for the argument that empowerment is not a defined process comes from Schwerin (1995) as he promotes the idea that there is -

not one optimal path to empowerment. The approach taken depends on each individual's unique needs, the relevant cultural values, the available resources for empowerment, and any other factors which might have an impact on the process of empowerment. (p. 85)

Along with this view of empowerment being composed of many methods that can help clients become empowered, is the parallel assumption that the client's setting or environment should also contain the ideology of empowerment, thereby creating a greater chance of success for the client. By combining a variety of methods and settings, empowerment strategies would contain a multitude of available options.

Raychaba (1993) examined the growing number of professionals and researchers who endorse the use of alternative modes of service delivery or treatment approaches that stress collaboration with youth. He then declares that if we are to think seriously and productively about empowering young people -

we must examine the ways in which they may be assisted to influence the forces that control their lives. This does not mean advocating for the child, unless he/she is too young to speak for themselves. Rather, it means bracing ourselves for a radical shift in our manner of helping. Rather than doing for them, we must instead give them the skills, then quietly step aside so that they can gain power for themselves. Perhaps we are standing behind, supporting them. Perhaps we offer technical assistance or consultation when asked. But to truly empower, we must stop making the decisions and plans for youth. Instead, we can help strengthen them to demand and acquire what is their right - equal resources: opportunities equal to that of other children not in care; just laws; and the choice to determine their lives. (p. 45)

This statement echoes the words of other professionals who seek to empower their clients. Raychaba further argues that -

the absence of choice, participation, and collaboration in decision making - generally speaking, a lack of youth involvement during, and control over the treatment process, emerged as one mode of treatment deemed distinctly ineffective. (p. 34)



The focus on teaching youth how to become empowered by showing them how to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to act appropriately becomes the most important, but also the most difficult, part of a social worker's job.

Another related body of literature is the self-help movement. Adams (1990) proposes that "self-help may be viewed as one form of empowerment" (p. 1). Reissman and Carroll (1995) emphasize that self-help philosophy promotes latent inner strengths and the special understanding that comes from proximity to the problem. Essential to this conceptualization is the emphasis on self-determination, self-reliance, and self-empowerment, all of which stress the internal resources of the client. They state that the self-help unit can be the individual, a group, a community and even a nation. Self-help is highly personal, competence is based on experience, it does not have a highly differentiated division of labour, and it is typically non-hierarchical. The practice of self-help revolves around allowing people to convert their needs and problems into assets. Roles within the group are interchangeable and there is a positive atmosphere that is non-competitive and cooperative. Reissman and Carroll conclude that -

the thrust of a self-help or mutual aid group is action, dispatch, effort, responsibility, endeavor, and problem solving rather than accepting it as a helpless sufferer. Whether or not a person succeeds at this task, and in many cases a partial or even incremental improvement is counted as a victory, the very fact that members have taken active rather than a passive stance becomes an enlightening and even rehabilitative experience. In this broadest of senses, the self-help medium is also the self-help message. And that message is empowerment. (p. 25)

There are acknowledged limitations to the self-help philosophy. Reissman and Carroll acknowledge that while self-help groups are an important and

encouraging development, "they are often more a response to symptoms than to underlying problems" (p. 171), and these problems can include the unequal and unjust distribution of resources and power and the tendency to blame the victim for their circumstances. The self-help group, because of its intense focus on internal qualities, runs the risk of becoming total and thereby exclusionary, shutting out significant external factors that may be required to assist in growth.

Traditional populist themes of self-help, as outlined by Reissman and Carroll, include: cooperation and collective action; empowerment, both individual and social; opposition to bureaucratization; self-determination; emphasis on the informal, the personal, the simple, the direct; a reaffirmation of basic core values related to the role of community, neighbourhood, caring, and self-reliance; anti-elitism and anti-expertism; and a strong antagonism to drugs, hedonism, corruption, and violence. The potential power of self-help rests on its basic principles: self-determination; decommodification and freely donated services; a democratic philosophy exemplified in its shared leadership and non-hierarchical structure; emphasis on the importance of experiential learning; and the struggle against expertism, exclusivity, elitism and professional privatization of knowledge (Reissman & Carroll, 1995, p. 196-197). The next phase of the self-help movement is to include external expert knowledge in order to change the underlying patterns of behaviour and social consciousness that exist within society. It is this transition area that will provide a meeting place for the ideas and practices of empowerment and self-help to meet and work in tandem to produce positive and long-lasting changes.

The ideas and the processes that surround the term empowerment have implications, both positive and negative, for the clients, the professionals, and the organizations. There are barriers to overcome when assisting a client or an organization to become empowered, as well as ourselves. There are two arguments against empowering clients which are espoused by Bush and Gordon (1982). The first argument is that empowerment is not a popular idea because some social workers believe it threatens their professional expertise, while the second argument holds that clients, because they are disadvantaged, lack the knowledge and wisdom to make good decisions when included in the empowerment process. Payne (1991) acknowledges three negative aspects of empowerment. He states that social workers concentrate on improving the client's empowerment but do not seek to change the oppressive social structures that have an impact on the client's progress. He also states that the literature on empowerment strongly supports the notion that all clients can be empowered but this might not always be the case; therefore careful consideration must go into planning and implementing this process with certain populations. The last concern Payne expresses is that empowerment may not generalize to the wider community and may set up conflict between individuals in a community rather than uniting them as they compete for scarce resources. This relates to the underlying purpose for client empowerment: is empowerment to be used by clients for specific tasks or is empowerment to be used by clients to appropriately deal with their environments and their lives? The last impediment to be discussed relates to the idea that social workers benefit from the system being unequal as they try to teach people to strive for equality. In order to avoid this dilemma social workers must be -

fully aware of the ways in which we have used and enjoyed power, its benefits and costs, and the ways in which we have experienced powerlessness and defended against it, we are better prepared to empower our clients - to teach them about power, to empower them to use it, to share it with them. For sharing our power means empowerment for our clients and empowerment for our clients means empowerment for ourselves. (Pinderhughes, 1983, p. 338)

The message behind the above quote is that professionals must learn to share power and not to hoard it because this type of behaviour leads to rigidity, intolerance of differences, and lack of growth for all concerned. Shera and Page (1995) emphasize that the ability of staff to support clients becoming empowered is weakened by the clients being seen as having insurmountable pasts rather than as people with a future.

There are several benefits to the process of empowering individuals and groups. The first, as outlined by Gutierrez et al. (1995), focuses on the goal of effective practice being "an increase in the actual power of the client or community so that action can be taken to change and prevent the problems that clients are facing" (p. 250). Empowerment is also seen as a dynamic process due to change occurring as an individual's skills and abilities grow, and as they form a positive self-definition, foster confidence, personal dignity, self-respect, and self-esteem (Staples, 1990). Labonté (1990) supports this sentiment when he suggests that an empowering practice supports -

the improved status, self-esteem and cultural identity of clients; the ability to reflect critically and problem solve effectively; the ability to make choices; increased access to resources; increased collective bargaining powers; the legitimation of people's demands by officials; and the self-discipline and the ability to work with others. (p. 66)

Empowerment is an influential concept that can provide people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to experience their lives to the fullest while having an impact on people, organizations, communities, and society as a whole. Empowerment can have an impact on the client, the professional, the agency, the community and society because its basic premise is allowing people to define and create solutions to their own problems in a manner that respects their experiences, their knowledge and their abilities.

The concept of empowerment is a relatively new one that contains many ideas and practices, but there is little research completed that provides an in depth look at the meaning of the term empowerment today or the current practice trends. This lack of specificity means that the topic of empowerment is still a generalized field of study that requires further research on a variety of levels. Definitions of empowerment need to be consolidated: the term needs to take on a specific meaning, or series of related meanings, rather than being a catch all phrase; underlying theories and concepts need to be delineated; and, from all of these, a coherent structure of practice needs to be developed. The literature shows an astonishing lack of focus on youth even though this group of people are looking for both a direction to take their life and a way to solve their problems which would allows them to feel confident while being responsible individuals. Youth are the future of our society and society must ensure that youth are equipped with the appropriate tools to be able to meet the future if there is to be any hope for success. Empowerment principles stress that people need to be aware of their values and have insight into the problems they face while devising solutions that they can act upon and, hopefully, create success. These are all skills that youth need to gain as they make the transition to

adult status. The final area that is lacking in the literature is a clear method or practice for gaining empowerment or teaching others to become empowered. The literature is very vague on how to go about accomplishing the task of empowerment.

Schwerin (1995) hypothesizes that empowerment can be a plan of action, a symbolic ideology, a way of being and a model for policy. He further states that empowerment, as seen by society, is a positive concept that is associated with autonomy, human growth and/or development, social justice, self-actualization, peace, and altruistic behaviour. Levy-Simon (1990) summarizes that the range of definitions for empowerment originate from a variety of viewpoints that include political, economic, social, psychological, educational and cultural aspects. Staples (1990) concludes that there is a necessity for empowerment "to be conceptualized, operationalized and measured in collective as well as individual terms" (p. 37), and he further warns that -

individual empowerment is not now, and never will be the salvation of powerless groups. To attain social equality in power relationships ... there must be a transformation. This requires a change in the structure of power. (p. 36)

Levy-Simon asserts that for individual and structural changes to occur, social workers must acknowledge that -

the one function that social workers, or for that matter, anyone else cannot perform for another person is that of empowerment. Empowerment is a reflexive activity, a process capable of being initiated and sustained only by the subject who seeks power or self-determination. Others can only aid and abet in this empowerment process. (p. 32)

Staples echoes this sentiment by stating that "one can foster and facilitate the empowerment of another, but it cannot be done for another" (p. 32). Keenan and Pinkerton (1991) caution that the process of empowerment -

is neither a matter of the worker offering power in heroic alliance with the service users or giving up power to users in an act of cathartic altruism. Rather, it requires that the worker confront their own values and power to become sufficiently uncomfortable to use that power to generate empowering choices for others. The worker must be prepared to step back as others make their own choices from the opportunities that he/she has helped to generate. (p. 123)

Staples concludes his ideas with the question "Empowerment for what specific purpose?" (p. 41), and suggests that the reasons for empowering clients must be examined thoroughly to ensure that helping clients gain power is in their best interests and will not in the long term be detrimental to their identity or their abilities to complete activities.

The gaps that were found in the literature on empowerment, especially as it relates to youth and their perspectives, shows that there is a great need for this subject to be researched. There is still a need to gather general data, particularly from the youths' point of view. The literature also demonstrates that empowerment begins with respecting the views, opinions, and beliefs of the client and encouraging them to come forth confidently with their own information to generate, in collaboration with others, a plan of action. Youth need to be given the opportunity to take responsibility for their lives and empowerment provides a method to complete this course of action. The youth of today soon become adults and they need to be encouraged to develop the skills to manage their lives in an effective and responsible manner. The

purpose of the study is to gather information on empowerment from youths' perspectives and to then compare those views to the views held by others on youth empowerment.

I believe personal empowerment means that the individual has the power, skills and opportunity to make decisions in their life. I feel that empowerment is something that you foster in others through your interactions with them, as well as your actions on their behalf. Empowerment can only be fostered when there is mutual respect between the parties, the professional is able to provide the person with several options, the individual is able to make use of these options, and there is an environment that is supportive of this process. I feel that empowerment is earned by the individual through their efforts to improve their life. I see empowerment as both a process and the outcome. I believe people become empowered by being a part of a process of interactions with others. But I also see empowerment as an end goal to be attained by completing a series of steps or tasks.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. General Research Questions**

There are three main areas of inquiry that form the basis of this thesis. These areas are then examined from two perspectives; youths' and professionals'. The first question revolves around the nature of the Federation's involvement in the B. C. government's decision making processes regarding the Gove Inquiry, the Child, Family and Community Services Act, and the Ministry for Children and Families. It investigates the Federation's activities, the impact the Federation had upon decision making processes, and the involvement of youth members in the Federation's activities. The second question relates to the youths' feelings and perceptions regarding empowerment based on their participation in Federation activities. Specifically, youth gaining a sense of personal empowerment from a collective activity. The third question explores the idea of whether youth feel that they are causal agents in governmental decision making processes.

#### **Question 1.**

What is the nature of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network's involvement in the B. C. government's decision making processes regarding the Gove Inquiry, the Child, Family and Community Services Act, and the Ministry for Children and Families?

### **A. Youths' Perspectives**

- i. What activities were undertaken by the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network in relation to the Gove Inquiry, the Child, Family and Community Services Act and the Ministry for Children and Families?
- ii. What impact did the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network's Activities have upon the Gove Inquiry, the Child, Family and Community Services Act, and the Ministry for Children and Families?
- iii. Which youth members were involved in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network's activities and how extensive was their involvement?

### **B. Professionals' Perspectives**

- i. How did professionals view the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Networks and its activities in relation to the Gove Inquiry, the Child, Family and Community Services Act, and the Ministry for Children and Families?
- ii. How do professionals view the youth members and their participation within the Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Network's activities?

### **Question 2.**

How does the participation of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network's in the governmental decision making procedures relate to youths' feelings and perceptions regarding personal empowerment?

**A. Youths' Perspectives**

- i. Do youth view the process of their participation in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Networks as building their sense of personal empowerment?

**B. Professionals' Perspectives**

- i. Do professionals view the process of youths' participation in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network as helping youth find or create a sense of personal empowerment?

**Question 3.**

What is the outcome from youths' participation in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network and its activities?

**A. Youths' Perspectives**

- i. Do youth feel that their involvement in the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network made a difference to the decisions made by the B. C. government during its recent restructuring?
- ii. Do youth feel that they were causal agents in the recent governmental changes?

**B Professionals' Perspectives**

- i. Did youth involvement have any impact on recent governmental changes?

### 3.2. Research Design

Research that delves into the meaning behind social interactions is complex and therefore challenging. There are two methods by which researchers can study an area of interest. Quantitative research is based on the use of empirical paradigms. Reichardt and Cook (1979) state that quantitative inquiry "is said to have a positivistic, hypothetico-deductive, particularistic, objective, outcome-oriented, and natural science world view" (p. 9). Quantitative research includes but is not limited to the following methods of data collection; randomized experiments, quasi-experiments, paper and pencil objective tests, multivariate statistical analysis, and sample surveys (Reichardt & Cook, 1979, p. 7). In contrast, qualitative inquiry, as stated by Reichardt and Cook (1979), "is said to subscribe to a phenomenological, inductive, holistic, subjective, process-oriented, and social anthropological world view" (p. 9-10). Qualitative research includes the following methodologies: ethnography, case studies, in-depth interviews, and participant observations (Reichardt & Cook, 1979, p. 7). The choice between these two research methods, qualitative or quantitative, depends, at least partially, on the social problem being studied. Reichardt and Cook (1979) state that "quantitative methods have been developed most directly for the task of verifying or confirming theories and that to a large extent qualitative methods were purposely developed for the task of discovering or generating theories" (p. 17). Qualitative research is used for the following purposes: to understand the meaning, for participants, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with; to understand the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence this

context has on their actions; to identify unanticipated phenomena and influences; to understand the process by which events and actions take place; and to develop causal explanations.

Qualitative research methods were chosen for use in this study because the topic of empowerment is a relatively new open concept, particularly in relation to young people, that requires an exploratory approach to data collection and analysis. Within the scope of the study it was necessary to have a flexible approach to the interviews to ensure that the participants were able to discuss their views in as complete a manner as possible. The overall design of the study was to gather data of a personal nature, from participants through a semi-structured interview and to then analyze the data to highlight themes. Since the data was gathered using an exploratory interview, there was a large amount of raw data collected that needed to be analyzed. The raw data represented the thoughts and feelings of the participants as they related to the questions that were asked. The design flexibility allowed me to follow new ideas, that had not been anticipated, when the participants presented them. The use of qualitative research also permitted me to learn several techniques of data collection and analysis while completing the study.

The nature of the research questions, which are exploratory, suggested a qualitative approach to data collection. Qualitative methods provide more opportunity to explore different perspectives through an engagement style that allows participants to respond to general themes and questions in their own words. Patton (1990) believes that creative thinking is essential to the success of the qualitative research process. Keeping this in mind, he asserts that qualitative inquiry has several requirements that researchers should

observe throughout the course of their study. Researchers must: be open and generate options; start by exploring a variety of directions and possibilities before focusing on the details; make use of the wide variety of stimuli that are available for utilization in a study; side track and circumnavigate to ensure that linear thinking is not the only process used; change the patterns of their own behaviour; make linkages between diverse data; trust themselves; and enjoy the experience while working hard. He concludes that if researchers are planning to use qualitative methods that they have to have a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, inductive analysis and holistic thinking.

Marshall and Rossman (1989) state that qualitative research methods are used as "a process of trying to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human interactions" (p. 21). They further state that, in order for the study to provide this knowledge, the researcher must "build a logical argument supporting the endeavor, amass evidence in support of each point, and show how the entire enterprise is integrated conceptually" (p. 12). The overall process of any type of research involves gathering information, reflecting on meanings, arriving at and evaluating conclusions, and putting forward an interpretation of the whole study (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Researchers need to show how, in examining specific settings or sets of individuals, they are studying a case of the larger phenomenon and then discuss the significance of their findings in relation to this concept. The use of qualitative methodology allows the researcher to study, in depth and in detail, selected issues. It also provides a flexible design that is able to reflect the differences and changes discovered regarding people, settings and their

interactions. Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to collect a large amount of descriptive data which can increase the insight one has about the issue under scrutiny.

"Qualitative inquiry cultivates the most useful of all human capacities - the capacity to learn from others" (Patton, 1990, p. 7,) and based on this statement he advises researchers to never forget the source of their data and knowledge: people and their activities and experiences. Patton also expounds upon two overriding principles that need to be taken into consideration when using qualitative research methodology. He asserts that qualitative research is a framework for action which means that "strategy provides basic direction. It permits seemingly isolated tasks and activities to fit together; it moves separate efforts toward a common, integrated purpose" (p. 36). Qualitative research allows the researcher to link together a broad range of tasks in order to find an overall pattern from diverse data sources. Patton further states that flexibility in design will "specify an initial focus, plans for observation and interviews, and primary questions to be explored. The design is partially emergent as the study occurs" (p. 61). Flexibility permits the study to adapt to new and/or unforeseen data sources, thereby ensuring that unexpected findings can be incorporated into the research. Farris and Ruckdeschel (1981) support Patton's ideas regarding research design and flexibility but they focus on the possible impact of the researcher's subjectivity on any study. They feel that reality is a series of symbolic interactions which must be contemplated in the context of current trends within society. The authors' preferred method of investigation focuses on qualitative research which upholds the notion that -

**data is data and can be gathered by any means possible, all data is useful, but the data is never treated as a set of objective facts. Rather data must be viewed in the context of one's larger theoretical and action orientation. (p. 130)**

**They then expand upon this idea and state that -**

**the best instrument for gathering data is the human actor. For it is by acting, participating and even manipulating where necessary that we develop understandings of situations. It is those understandings, those meaning structures which are the prime data of qualitative research, and in turn it is those which must be systematically observed and recorded. (p. 130)**

**Farris and Ruckdeschel argue that because researchers are people they therefore cannot be completely objective. They suggest that people acknowledge their subjectivity rather than deny its existence, and then utilize their values and beliefs to gather and analyze data. Researchers should always keep in mind that -**

**a given set of data inevitably reflects a given point of view. It makes no difference whether we agree or disagree with that point of view. What ultimately matters is that we seek out the data and that we have available those different points of view. (p. 131)**

**Researchers must acknowledge their own biases, values and subjectivity and then counteract this possible problem by ensuring that they either have several people from different perspectives studying the data or that multiple methods of data collection are used to provide more opportunities for alternative solutions to be discovered.**



### 3.3. Data Collection

#### 3.3.1. Target Population

The target population for this study consisted of two groups of people. The first was the youth population which included youth of both genders, ages 14 to 25 years. More specifically, sampling focused on youth who were or had been in the care of the B. C. government and/or were a member of the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network. Consent for the youth to participate was obtained from the youth as well as their legal guardian. The second was the professional population which included people of both genders. The professional population included influential, prominent, and/or well informed professionals, who worked with youth. This group included: social workers who worked with the Ministry for Children and Families; employees of the Office of the Child Secretariat and the Office of the Youth Ombudsman; members of First Call ( a political association); child care counsellors from group homes; school personnel such as counsellors and teachers; and foster parents. Consent was obtained from those asked to participate.

#### 3.3.2. Sampling

The issue of sampling is complex. Sampling techniques permit the researcher to select a portion of a larger population in order to study a specific phenomena. The techniques used to pick a sample from the greater population are varied but these methods are used to try and select people who are representative of the larger population. Qualitative research cannot

always be generalized to the larger population due to the inherent 'openness' of the design. When the study cannot be generalized to the larger population then the data can only be used to accurately reflect the sample population. If researchers can show that the sample is representative then they can generalize the findings of the study to the wider population with a stronger degree of confidence. If the sample is not representative then these generalizations cannot be made thereby limiting the implications of the study to only those people included in the sample. Within qualitative research methods, sampling techniques are chosen based on the desired study outcome. Sampling also determines which cases are selected. Patton (1990) asserts that -

sampling procedures and decisions should be fully described, explained, and justified so that information users and peer reviewers have the appropriate context for judging the sample. The researcher is obligated to discuss how the sample affected the findings, the strengths and weaknesses of the sampling procedure, and any other design decisions that are relevant for interpreting and understanding reported results. (p. 186)

Sampling defines the people and the knowledge base that they bring to the study, which then limits the data that can be collected. Therefore it was important within this qualitative study that the sample population contain a variety of people that would be likely to show a diverse range of responses regarding empowerment for youth. This required a sampling approach that was designed to recruit relevant participants.

The primary sampling technique used was purposeful sampling . Purposeful sampling is described by Maxwell (1996) as "particular settings, persons, or events that are selected deliberately in order to provide important

information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 70). He outlines four benefits that arise out of the use of purposeful sampling. It permits the sample to be typical or representative of the populations under study; it can capture the heterogeneity of those populations; it also allows researchers to deliberately examine cases that are critical to the study; and it can be used to illuminate the reasons for differences found between studied cases (Maxwell, 1996). The use of purposeful sampling allowed me to vary the sampling as required to ensure a broad range of responses from the participants.

Criterion sampling, snowball sampling and opportunistic sampling were also employed to increase the size of the sample populations. The first sampling technique, criterion sampling, focused on choosing subjects according to a set criteria. Within this study there were a couple of criteria to be met by each population to be sampled. The youth selected to be in this study must either have previously been in the care of the government or were currently in the care of the government. The professionals, as part of their employment, must have worked with youth who were in care. The youth participants were also required to either be members of the Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Networks or were aware of the organization and its activities. Once these criteria were met then snowball and opportunistic sampling were applied.

Snowball sampling identified prospective subjects from people who had already been interviewed. People were proposed based on the knowledge that they possess information relating to the topic being studied. I inquired of everyone interviewed if they had any suggestions of people who should be

contacted who would contribute to the study of youth empowerment. The other sampling technique used was opportunistic sampling which allowed me to follow new leads and take advantage of unexpected resources. This method allowed me to interview different subjects and gather information from sources that were relevant to youth empowerment which might not have been established when designing this study. Due to my involvement in several associations including; First Call, the Child and Youth Care Association of B. C., and the B. C. Association of Social Workers, I know several professionals who have been involved in either the Gove Inquiry or the discussions leading up to the enactment of the Child, Family and Community Services Act and the creation of the Ministry for Children and Families. Through these connections, I was able to approach people who I thought would have important information regarding the topic of my thesis. I requested their participation and also asked if they had any suggestions of other people that I could approach to invite to participate in this study. Due to the absence of an authority relationship no coercion was used to solicit their participation. Through my work and participation at conferences, I had made the acquaintance of several youth within the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network and a youth group called the Spirit of Youth who I invited to participate in this study. Their participation was voluntary. Again I asked for their input in finding other youth to approach regarding participating in my study. For both the youth and the professionals that were asked to be involved in this study, there were no consequences for them if they declined to participate.

In total 30 people were interviewed for this qualitative study. There were 15 youth interviewed and the interviews were completed between November 17, 1997 and July 27, 1998. The length of the interviews varied from 45 to 70 minutes with the average interview taking approximately 55 minutes. There were 15 professionals interviewed between November 26, 1997 to April 20, 1998. These interviews ranged from 25 to 90 minutes with the average interview taking approximately 35 minutes.

The setting for each of these interviews varied with each participant. When scheduling the interviews, a mutually agreed upon location was arranged between me and the participant. The interviews were arranged to take place in a setting that was most comfortable to the person being interviewed and the only constraint to this arrangement was that the place selected was quiet enough so that a clear audio recording of the interview could be done. Another factor considered was privacy. It was realized that some, if not all, of the participants would require a private setting to conduct the interview. I was asking for information that was of a highly personal nature and confidentiality needed to be maintained. The youth were not concerned with being audiotaped and agreed to this quite readily. Several of the professionals were concerned that confidentiality be maintained at all times and expressed concern that the interviews were audiotaped. This was incongruent with the fact that many of the professionals chose to meet me in a public place.

Interviews with youth were conducted at the following locations: the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network office, schools, group homes, foster homes, and the public library. Each of these interviews was completed

in a room with only myself and the participant present as all of the youth interviewed requested complete privacy for the conversations. The information provided by the youth was detailed. The youth spent a great deal of time elaborating on their responses and asking their own questions of me. The interviews with the professionals took place in private residences, coffee shops, offices, and schools. These interviews were conducted in more public settings as the professionals did not express a need for complete privacy. The professionals' responses were shorter in comparison to the youths' responses. The professionals did not seem to be worried about being overheard and most of their interviews took place in a public venue.

### 3.3.3. Data Collection Methods

Based on the premise that qualitative research design requires an in-depth perspective in order to completely study the process of empowerment, I chose to use a semi-structured interview as the primary method of data collection. When interviewing people there are several principles to keep in mind: ask clear, singular questions; strive for neutrality in the questions; use open ended questions which allow the person to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want in order to represent what they have to say; take detailed and concrete notes that include the words and body language of the interviewee and the observer's feelings and reaction to the process; establish rapport; probe for clarity; and recognize responses (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the youth population, which included youth who were in care or members of the

Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Network. The interview guide ensured that key themes were discussed and it allowed a series of probing questions to be used to clarify any information that was divulged. This process allowed the participants to control the content of the information being provided while allowing me to completely cover relevant themes. The overall purpose of the interviews was "to find someone's inner perspective; their feelings, thoughts and intentions; and the meaning they attach to people, actions, and behaviour" (Patton, 1990, p. 278-279). The format of a semi-structured interview was also used when interviewing the professionals. This style of interview was chosen to allow the interviewee to have the greatest amount of control over the interview process and content. This process encouraged the participants to clarify and define the topic under discussion as the interview proceeded.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed through the use of the research questions as general guides, thus three sections were created. The first section examined the interaction that the participants had with the Federation of B. C. Youth In Care Network. Questions were asked about whether the participants were personally involved with the Federation, what knowledge they had of the Federation's goals and activities, and how participation within the Federation had changed their lives. The second section focused on the knowledge and involvement that participants had with the Gove Inquiry, the creation of the new Child, Family and Community Services Act and the Ministry for Children and Families. Questions were asked to elicit information about the participant's knowledge of the reasons for the governmental changes, when the changes occurred, who was involved in the changes and what the ramifications were of the

changes for B. C. and youth. Also included were several questions that revolved around the Federation's part in the three processes, the input that the Federation provided to these and the impact the Federation had upon the outcome of the processes. The last section then asked participants to discuss their ideas and feelings regarding youth empowerment. They were asked to give a definition of empowerment and to describe the process by which they thought someone became empowered. Participants were also asked to comment on whether they felt youth involvement or input was valued by individuals and society. The last question asked people to describe alternative ways that youth could gain empowerment other than participation in an advocacy group. These questions were initially created and then tested with several youth and professionals. Based on these experiences several of the questions were re-worded or taken out of the guide and the order of the questions was redone.

The interviews provided an extensive and varied amount of raw data. The qualitative interview format also enabled me to follow up responses with additional questions to clarify issues. The limitations of this technique were that salient topics might have been omitted inadvertently and the flexibility in the sequencing and wording of questions could have affected the results. These two problems made it difficult to compare the variety of responses collected.

A second style of interviews, focus groups, was to be utilized to gather data thereby allowing the researcher to use triangulation when analyzing the raw data (Berenbaum, 1993; Krueger, 1988). Focus groups work well to gather the opinions of a variety of people, which in this thesis included both the



youth and the professionals. The researcher was interested in ascertaining if one to one interviews and focus group sessions yielded the same categories of information across the population. During the course of this study the data collected from the individual interviews showed a strong pattern of consistency. The purpose of the focus groups was to bring together individuals who held differing opinions on the topic of youth empowerment and to see if their beliefs changed due to their interactions with each other. In consultation with my thesis advisor, it was decided that the information that would be gathered from the focus groups would not add any further insight on the topic as it seemed that the individuals interviewed held similar beliefs and had outlined these beliefs in great detail within the individual interviews. Because of this, it was decided that the focus groups would not be conducted.

In conjunction with the interviews, demographic surveys were completed by all participants. These surveys were handed out at the end of the interviews with the explanation that the demographic data would be used in conjunction with the interview data to see if patterns emerged between the individual answers and demographics such as age, racial heritage, schooling and/or salary levels. It did assume that characteristics and beliefs could be described or measured accurately through self-reports. The surveys were designed to collect data regarding the sex, age, ethnic background, education, employment, and salary level of all the participants. Also included in the youth survey were two questions relating to them being placed in care and the length of time in that placement.

#### 3.3.4. Reliability and Validity

Reliability focuses on consistency in the data collection methods to ensure that the findings of a study can be replicated by other researchers. One must be cautious because "reliability does not ensure accuracy" (Rubin & Babbie, 1989, p. 142): validity does. If a measure is found to be unreliable it produces random error which dilutes and obscures real differences found in the study. In order to control for this problem within this study, the interviews were completed with a guide to help maintain consistency between applications and further, each of the interviews was audio recorded to ensure accurate transcripts could be produced. Data ratings were standardized through the establishment of a code book to ensure that all data was judged against a set of criteria.

In order to strengthen the reliability of the study several procedures were employed. A pre-test of each interview guide was completed and the results from these experiences were used to further refine the questions that were utilized. Five preliminary interviews were completed with both youth and professional participants. These preliminary interviews were not included in the study and the data collected from them was destroyed once revisions were made to the interview guide.

During the collection of the interview data a codebook was developed for both the youth and professional interviews. The codebooks contained discrete response categories that were given to each question. Once several interviews had been collected and reviewed, more concrete answers were added to the list of codes as they presented themselves.

To assess the reliability of the analysis, a blind test was done with myself and my thesis advisor. I coded an interview and then enclosed it within an envelope, the same interview was sent to the advisor along with the codebook and he then coded the interview. A comparison of the coding for the same interview was done, matching correct responses and then dividing by incorrect responses, and it was revealed that the inter-rater reliability was 62%. Due to the marginal nature of this result further work was done to refine and clarify the codes used. A second blind test was completed and the inter-rater reliability was 83.7%. This suggests an acceptable level of consistency in the application of codes to meaning units in the analysis stage.

A measure is valid to the extent that it adequately captures or reflects the real meaning of the concept it is intended to measure (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). Maxwell (1996) states that the definition of validity is "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 87). If a study is not valid then systematic error has been introduced into the measurements.

There are several types of validity discussed by Maxwell (1996) which need to be addressed in this qualitative study. Face validity refers to the idea that the measure corresponds to accepted images associated with the concept of empowerment. The difficulty with face validity is that there has been little research done that defines empowerment, therefore comparing this study to accepted norms regarding empowerment is almost impossible. Descriptive validity, which relates to problems with inaccurate or incomplete data, was increased by gathering data with the use of audio recordings of all interview

sessions. This allowed me to create accurate and complete transcripts. Interpretation validity was controlled by attempting to understand the perspectives of the individuals studied. This was done by seeking to understand the meaning that the individuals applied to words and actions rather than applying my own framework. Theoretical validity was ensured by the collection and study of discrepant data and the consideration of alternative explanations for this data. Researcher bias validity, the phenomenon where the researcher's bias interferes with the interpretation of the data to suit their own theories, was addressed as data from all the interviews was collected and used, thereby ensuring that alternative interpretations were considered. I needed to assess my own values and the impact my biases could have had on the evaluation of data. The participant's reaction to my presence, called reactivity validity, was diminished by attempting to understand the impact of my presence on the participants and avoiding asking leading questions.

In order to ensure the validity of my conclusions and acknowledge the existence of potential threats to these conclusions, I must identify and analyze discrepant data, use multiple methods to triangulate results, gather feedback from participants and non-participants of the evaluation, and ensure that detailed and complete data is collected. Maxwell (1996) also states that -

validity is a goal rather than a product; it is never something that can be proven or taken for granted. Validity is also relative: it has to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusions. (p. 86)

A study should be designed to be both reliable and valid. This permits the study to be generalized from the sample population to the larger general population. With qualitative research, the researcher must be careful in generalizing the results from the sample to the larger population as the accuracy depends on how representative the sample is of the general population being studied. Usually the data collected and the analysis of that data is only applied directly to the subjects and then used as a foundation for further research that might be more structured in nature.

### 3.3.5. Limitations of This Study

There were three limitations to the design of this study. The first limitation involved the relatively small size of the samples which did not allow me to accurately generalize the results to the greater populations. More youth and professional participants would have provided a greater range of experiences from which to draw. Since this was an initial study the choice to use fewer participants was made. The second limitation was the choice to not complete the focus groups. The decision was made to not include this task as the data received from participants was found to have similar patterns. It was assumed that the focus groups would have provided the same data patterns already collected. Data from the focus groups could have provided an alternative perspective based on a collective definition and view of empowerment. The third limitation was concerning the interview guide. Several of the questions were not specific enough to the topic of empowerment to elicit relevant information. For example, several of the questions used a closed format and did not allow the participants the

opportunity to elaborate on their answers. As well there were questions that overlapped such that there was no clear difference in the answers provided for each of these questions.

### 3.3.6. General Approach to Data Analysis

Data analysis is a time consuming but important process in qualitative research. Marshall and Rossman (1989) summarize data analysis as "the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data" (p. 112). The first phase of data analysis, as proposed by Maxwell (1996), is for a researcher to recognize the processes, outcomes and linkages that are an inherent part of qualitative inquiry. In the second phase of the analysis, the requirement was to decide whether one should focus on people through the use of case studies and group studies or whether one should focus on issues that the study had revealed or whether one should use some combination of these two methods.

The examination of the gathered data was done by grouping together the information collected on each question and then identifying emerging themes. Data analysis gathered comprehensive, systematic, and in depth information about each person or theme of interest through the incorporation of interview data, observational data, documentary data, impressions and statements from others which then becomes a part of the written case record (Maxwell, 1996). From this overall analysis, a code book was created by which the data was categorized and the main themes and patterns were highlighted. The final step was to re-organize, edit and sort the data to provide the foundation for a case study narrative. Tutty, Rothery, and

Grinnell (1996) outlined a synopsis of the analytical procedures as containing the activities of organizing the data, generating patterns from the data, testing the emergent hypothesis against the data, searching for alternative explanations of the data and writing the report. The data was organized into two separate groups; one containing the youth data and the other the professional data. The data was then organized within each question in order to compare and contrast the answers between the youth and the professionals. Patterns were identified in both group's data that provided me with emerging support for the research questions. Explanations for the data analysis were formulated. The final step was the report writing stage. I was able to make sense of massive amounts of raw data by reducing the volume of the collected information through identifying significant patterns and completing an analysis of the findings.

In writing this report, I started with interview excerpts to highlight the participant's perspectives while also providing a framework for communicating the essence of what that data revealed. I then summarized descriptive data and linked it to more general theoretical constructs. The report was written in plain language so that the essence of the study was passed on to readers. Throughout the evaluation process, I kept detailed notes about the procedures I used, the rationales that I applied to decision making, and the thought processes that I carried out. I provided the respondents with enough information to support the consistency of the report. I kept in mind that data analysis should be flexible and be able to move back and forth between and among steps and tasks to produce rich and meaningful findings.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The results are presented in the following manner. The first section shows the demographic data and describes the characteristics of the populations sampled. The second section presents the results from the youths' and professionals' interviews. The interview data is introduced through the use of participants' quotes and tables.

#### **4.1. Demographic Data**

The demographic data collected substantiates the success of the efforts to obtain respondents who would reflect diversity in characteristics and background. Of the youth participants, 9 were females and 6 were males. Their ages ranged from 13 to 24 years of age with the average age being 18. Of the 15 youth interviewed 11 were of Caucasian descent, 2 were of Asian descent and 2 were of First Nations descent. All of the youth had been or were currently in the care of the government of B. C. For those who were presently in care, the average length of time in care was 12.8 months, with the range being from 2 to 29 months. In terms of placement in care, 1 youth (7%) was in the home of a relative, 2 youth (13%) were in foster homes, 4 youth (27%) were living in group homes, 2 youth (13%) were on supported independent living, 5 youth (33%) were living independently, and 1 youth (7%) was living on the street. The last grade completed in school ranged from Grade 8 to 2 years of college or university, while the average grade completed was Grade 9. With regard to the question about employment, 7 of the



participants (47%) were employed while 8 participants (53%) were unemployed. Of the unemployed youth, 5 of the 8 youth (63%) were seeking employment and those who were not seeking employment were currently attending school. For the 7 youth who were employed, their salary range was from less than \$10,000 to \$40,000 per year, the average annual income for those employed was \$16,400.

Within the sample of professionals, 9 of the people interviewed were female and 6 were male. The age range was from 26 to 55 years, and the average age was 45. All professional participants were of Caucasian descent. They all had several years of higher education, at the university level, with the average length of time being 5 years. All of the respondents were employed and all of them had job duties that included interacting with youth who were in care. The average salary was \$47,000 with a range from \$20,000 to over \$60,000 per year.

There are some issues to be aware of with regard to the demographic data. First, demographics presented by the Ministry for Children and Families does suggest that most youth in care are of either Caucasian or First Nations descent. Within the youth sample there were more Caucasian youth interviewed than First Nations youth. Second, most of the youth have little formal education and this could have impacted their knowledge of the issues being studied. This lack of formal education could also account for the low salaries that youth collect when they are employed.

There were several strengths to the sample. There was a wide range of ages included in the sample. Both males and females were adequately

represented in the samples; thus gender differences in responses could be examined. There was also an extensive range of placements for the youth which provided for a diversity of experiences from which to compile data. The last strength was that there was a wide range of time spent in care for the youth, although none had been in care long term. The above information suggests to me considerable diversity in the sample and this provided a diversity of opinions and a variety of perspectives. However, it must be acknowledged that the sample sizes were too small to be generalized to the broader population.

Several issues regarding the professional sample are also important to note. The professionals possessed a high degree of education that might not be true of all people that work with youth in care. The average salary for the professional sample was \$47,000. This is likely linked to the high educational levels noted as education and age is positively associated with job income. The next issue was that all of the professionals interviewed were Caucasian. The last issue was that the sample yielded an age range that was predominantly middle age. These concerns lead to difficulties in generalizing to the professional population as the opinions and knowledge base could have been affected by the racial background, the age and the education level of the participants. There was a fairly even split between male and female participants. There were also many professions that were represented which work directly with youth in care. These professions included social workers, foster parents, child care counsellors, teachers, and children's advocates. The diverse backgrounds of the professionals allowed the researcher to gather a range of opinions from different professions and occupational categories. It

also provides a perspective from professionals who are working with youth in care even if caution must be observed in generalizing to the general professional population.

#### 4.2. Interview Results

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews will be presented in four sections. The first section provides information relating to the participants thoughts and feelings regarding empowerment definitions, empowerment processes and the Federations' goals. The next section focuses on the activities of the Federation, its participation in three governmental changes processes and the impact it may have had upon these processes. The third section examines how the activities of the Federation and the participation of its members influences youths' perceptions of empowerment. The final section explores whether the outcomes of the three governmental processes affects youths' sense of empowerment.

Youth data will be presented, then professional data and then these two perspectives will be briefly summarized to highlight common or divergent response patterns.

##### 4.2.1. Responses Regarding Perceptions of Personal Empowerment

Youth were asked to discuss their definitions of empowerment, to define empowerment processes, and to provide alternative methods for youths to be empowered or gain empowerment outside of advocacy .

One youth prefaced the whole discussion by stating -

**I think that youth empowerment is really important because youth are so powerless within our society.**

The youths' responses to a definition of empowerment were varied but each individual had multiple answers to the question. The two most frequent answers, as seen in Table 1, were that empowerment involved having choices and acting on their own behalf. Youth also stated that gaining skills, having input into decisions which affected them, being listened to by the adults in their lives and being able to express themselves to others all helped youth gain a sense of empowerment. The youth focused on actions that they could complete in order to gain empowerment. This suggested that youth interpreted empowerment as an action or task that could be completed rather than as an abstract concept. Youth linked the concepts of having choices with the ability to act for themselves. This mirrors the development of independence that occurs during adolescence. The youth also thought that gaining concrete skills and having useful abilities were important and one youth explained that empowerment -

**was something that they can use for their own benefit and for others as well.**

The youth were very concrete in their ideas of empowerment. They also described how important it was for them to be able to express themselves, to be listened to by others, and to have input into decisions. Youth seemed to be extremely aware that their ideals needed to be based in reality so that they could attain their goal of empowerment. One youth commented on what empowerment meant for him -

**for me it means that somebody doesn't do something for me but helps me to learn how to do it for myself**

Another described it as -

**the courage to speak about what you want to speak about and the courage to think about who you are and where you've been and not knowing where you're going.**

Each youth interviewed saw empowerment as a worthy goal which had clear meaning within their lives.

Professionals also had a range of opinions regarding their conceptualization of empowerment, as presented in Table 2. The professionals perceived youth empowerment as youth acting on their own behalf, gaining skills or abilities, as being given opportunities to succeed, and as generally feeling in control of their lives. The professional sample appeared to focus on empowerment being both an outcome to achieve and a series of skills to be gained. One professional, relating empowerment to the environment in which a youth exists, stated -

**empowerment for me is the creation of an environment in which people can maximize their own potential to exercise control over their lives .**

Here empowerment is described as a end state rather than a task to accomplish. This interpretation of empowerment minimizes the individual control over the process.

**Table 1. Self-Reports of Youths' Empowerment Definitions (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Having choices	9
Acting on their own behalf	9
Gaining skills or abilities	8
Having input into decisions	6
Being listened to	6
Being able to express themselves	6
Feeling in control of their life	4
Creating a positive environment	3
Having opportunities to succeed	2
Feeling powerful	1
Having an accurate picture of their situation	1

**Table 2. Self-Reports of Professionals' Empowerment Definitions (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Acting on their own behalf	9
Gaining skills or abilities	6
Feeling in control of their lives	6
Having opportunities to succeed	6
Being listened to	4
Being able to express themselves	4
Having input into decisions	3
Feeling powerful	3
Having knowledge	3
Creating a positive environment	2
Having an accurate picture of their situation	2
Knowing their rights	2
Connecting to advocacy	2
No definition	1

Overall both the youths' and the professionals' categorical responses were similar. When comparing their responses as outlined on Table 1 and 2, the only difference is in the frequency of their responses. However, there were differences in the responses of the professionals and youth when looking at their detailed responses to this question. Youth saw empowerment as concrete skills and abilities to be gained and used within a context of having choices and the right to be a part of the decision process. Professionals saw the importance of youth gaining concrete skills and being able to complete assigned tasks but professionals also saw empowerment for youth as a concept or ideal to be realized. The professionals perceived youth as having the opportunities along with the ability to act upon the chances that present themselves. Professionals did not seem to realize that the youth felt themselves to be disempowered and therefore viewed empowerment in a more functional and practical manner. This ability to see empowerment as active involvement allowed youth the opportunity to believe that they may one day gain empowerment by learning a specific set of skills, completing a series of tasks or being involved in an active process. Professionals placed more emphasis on empowerment as an end state and appeared to assume that youth would also see empowerment in this way. They seemed to downplay the everyday activities and skills that the youth identified as an essential component of empowerment. On the other hand, youth may need to broaden their perceptions of empowerment to include empowerment being an outcome that they achieve and not just a process that they complete.

In relation to the last question on defining empowerment, the two groups were also asked to outline their ideas on how youth became

empowered. The youth appeared to combine two divergent processes in their attempts to describe the methodology around becoming empowered.

Youth saw the process of empowerment as embracing two issues. The first was that they needed to become empowered through their own actions. Next they felt that they needed to make their own decisions and deal with the consequences that arose out of them. But along with their individual efforts, youth also included the need to connect with professionals and to encounter positive experiences within their lives. Youth stated that empowerment needed two components to be successful: their own efforts and the support of an adult. Youth acknowledged that the process required their own efforts in making decisions and dealing with consequences but that there were limitations to what they could achieve if there was no support from an adult. This insight, shown by youth, of a two level process was quite revealing. Youth seemed to be aware that the process of empowerment does not have one defined path but many. Youths' perceptions of empowerment processes are presented in Table 3. As one youth stated -

**becoming empowered means different processes for different people, particularly youth who have all sorts of ideas. It's not a perfect system but it is definitely something that everybody works on at their own speed and hopefully you will learn something along the way.**

Generally, the professionals' view suggests more individual control over the process. One professional stated empowerment is -

**a process and it's a process that is aided by youth being able to create solutions and to proceed with getting those solutions acted upon and it means making some mistakes but continuing to try.**



As shown in Table 4, professionals agreed with the youths' perspective that the empowerment process included two components: an action component and a support component. The professionals felt that youth needed a variety of avenues to achieve empowerment. They stated that it was important for youth to make their own decisions and to deal with the consequences but they also expressed the need for youth to be listened to and have a genuine relationship with another human being. One professional stated that –

**You cannot empower youth in isolation. Youth have to be encouraged to be empowered and that means being put in situations where they are allowed to be empowered so that people will respect them and accord them the same privileges and courtesies that you would an adult without judging them.**

It was acknowledged that youth were treated differently than adults and that this behaviour must be altered if youth were going to gain empowerment. In conjunction with the above statement it was observed that empowerment was also -

**seeing that youth have something valuable to contribute and that people should be willing to listen to them.**

One professional stated -

**we (*society*) don't know how to empower in the truest sense of the word.**

Many of the professionals recognized that this goal would require a great deal of effort to achieve.

**Table 3. Self-Reports of Youths' Empowerment Processes (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Youth need to make their own decisions	8
Through the youth's own actions	8
Youth need to interact with professionals	6
Youth need to have positive experiences	5
Youth need to have genuine relationships	3
Youth need to be part of a peer support group	3
Youth need support from others	3
People need to listen to youth	1

**Table 4. Self-Report of Professionals' Empowerment Processes (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Youth need to attend school	7
Youth need to make their own decisions	6
Youth need to be part of a peer support group	6
People need to listen to youth	6
Youth need to have positive experiences	5
Youth need to have genuine relationships	5
Youth need to interact with professionals	4
Youth need training	4
Through the youth's own actions	3
Youth need to know their rights	3
Youth need support from others	3
Youth need to have increased self-esteem	2
There is no process	1

Youth and professionals agreed that an empowerment process had two main components. They both agreed that the first step in empowerment was for youth to be involved in the decision making process, which included taking responsibility for the outcome of any actions. The second step was a recognition that youth needed the support of someone with whom they can have a genuine relationship. The main difference in the youth and professional responses was that the youth had a more narrow focus on how they thought that youth could become empowered, while the professionals expressed a wider range of options from which to choose. The professional sample also articulated the concern that empowerment was a difficult objective for youth to achieve within the current structure of our society. Youth did not acknowledge this obstacle.

The participants were asked for information regarding alternative processes or activities that helped youth become empowered other than advocacy through their membership in the Federation. Of the youth, 14 stated that they were involved in activities, other than participation in the Federation, which gave them a sense of power and control in their lives. Youth stated that they became aware of these activities either through participating in them or through creating them for other youth. Most of the youth also stated that their knowledge and participation within these activities was usually due to them living in care. Youth believe that there are a wide range of creative activities which assisted them to feel empowered and these options are presented in Table 5. They stated that participation in everyday activities, such as having a stable placement and participation in

family activities, such as parenting, gave them a sense of power. They also saw participation in programmes, including sports, culture , and art, as leading to a sense of empowerment.

All of the professionals interviewed stated that they were aware of alternative activities, beyond participating in the Federation, that they felt gave youth a sense of empowerment. Eleven of the professionals became aware of these alternatives through the course of their work with youth who were in care but only 6 of the professionals (43%) actively participated in activities with youth outside of their job duties. The professionals three most frequently identified methods for youth to gain empowerment were through involvement in social services programmes, participation in school and participation in employment programmes. Cultural and artistic endeavors, along with sports, were not commonly identified as preferred methods of gaining empowerment. Table 6 presents the professionals' responses to this question.

Professionals appeared to have a narrow and perhaps self-serving focus to their beliefs regarding what was an acceptable method to gain empowerment. They supported activities which are part of societal expectations and within which youth must conform to societal norms to be allowed to participate. This focus disregarded many alternative avenues through which youth may gain a sense of personal empowerment. For example professionals did not verbalize the idea that youth could gain empowerment through their participation in activities related to sports, culture, arts, employment, and family. Professionals appeared to be uncomfortable identifying methods that were not within the scope of their

**Table 5. Self-Reports of Youth' Alternative Methods of Empowerment (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Going to school	10
Involvement in social services programmes	10
Participation n sports/leisure activities	7
Involvement in cultural activities	4
Maintaining employment	4
Involvement in training	3
Parenting or family activities	3
Being active in the community	2
Involvement in artistic endeavors	2
Having stable housing	2
Involvement in committees	1

**Table 6. Self-Reports of Professionals' Alternative Methods of Empowerment (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Involvement in social services programmes	10
Involvement in training	8
Involvement in committees	6
Going to school	6
Participation in sports/leisure activities	4
Being active in the community	4
Deciding school curriculum	3
Designing recreation programmes	3
Maintaining employment	1
Parenting or family activities	1

interactions with youth. Professionals were not willing to discuss alternative activities in any detail. Youth, on the other hand, identified a multitude of methods that lead to empowerment. Youth appeared to be able to identify unique activities that gave the participant a sense of control. They believed that any activity that the youth found positive could lead to a sense of empowerment. Youth were willing to look at activities that were fun and in the process enlightened them. Youth were confident that their methods would lead to self empowerment. Youth and professionals need to work in partnership and hopefully, from this teamwork, youth can gain empowerment. People must start looking beyond the obvious to find paths to self empowerment.

All but one of the youth interviewed were a member of the Federation. The youth were then asked to describe their reason(s) for becoming a member of the Federation. Three main reasons were given. The two most frequent responses were to help other youth and to change the system. The third responses that was put forth was that they wanted to learn new skills and knowledge. The youth felt that their reasons for joining the Federation were important to each of them and the overall focus of these reasons was a desire to help themselves and others.

All of the professionals interviewed felt that the Federation was a worthwhile endeavor in which to be involved. One professional stated -

**I think it is a positive organization that focuses on the good it can do for youth and also looks at encouraging adults to work alongside youth to change the system.**

There was a high level of positive awareness regarding the existence of the Federation in both the youth and professional samples. The youth felt that they had valid reasons for being involved with the Federation while the professionals felt that it was worth investing their time and energy in the organization. These attitudes were expected as the sampling was done in such a manner to gather information from informed participants who were either aware of the Federation or participating within it.

The next question asked participants to describe the overall goals of the Federation to see if they had an understanding about the aims of the Federation. The two most frequent answers from the youth were to provide a voice for youth in care and to advocate for youth in care. One youth stated that -

**the main goal is to give youth a place to voice their concerns and solutions to current youth problems.**

Another youth stated that-

**I think it's a good idea for someone to be speaking for the youth that don't really have a voice and aren't really listened to , maybe in a bigger group people are going to listen and think about what's being said whereas one individual might not get what they are asking for.**

Another view which was expressed was that youth felt that the Federation was there -

**mostly to get youth together to talk about what it's like to be in care and what we want to change and how we want to change it.**

Other answers included: dealing with grievances from youth in care; supporting youth in care; looking at the youth care continuum; and organizing youth in care. When asked if they believed in the above stated goals, 13 youth (87%) stated that they were important goals to attain. When asked the reason for this belief one youth stated -

**it is very important for youth because youth need to be involved and to not sit back and let others talk for them.**

Two youth (13%) had a less positive opinion, with one youth stating -

**I think that they (*the goals*) are pie in the sky stuff because they talk about it but really don't do it. I guess I believe in the goals but the Federation doesn't seem to be getting anywhere with them.**

Overall the youth seemed to support the goals of the Federation even if they do not all see the Federation as achieving them.

Among the professionals, there were themes to their responses regarding the goals of the Federation. The most frequently noted response was that the Federation provided a voice for youth in care. The next two responses were that the Federation provided advocacy for youth in care and they organized youth who were in care. Several other responses were identified by the professionals and included the following, in order of importance: dealing with grievances from youth in care; supporting other youth in care; looking at the youth care continuum; and training for youth. When asked about their belief in these above goals all of the professionals



stated that they placed a high value in them. Two of the professionals gave these statements:

**it is important for youth to be given the power to make decisions in their lives**

and

**youth have an important perspective that they add to both legislative changes and service provisions.**

The youth and the professionals both identified the two most important goals for the Federation as providing a voice to youth in care and advocating for youth in care. The professionals identified one further goal as organizing youth in care. A high percentage of the participants interviewed believed the identified goals to be important to the Federation and to the youth and professionals involved.

The next question the youth were asked was about the influence that participating in the Federation has had on each of them. The most prevalent response (7 youth) was that the immediate result was an increase in the youths' sense of self-worth. Five youths also stated that the knowledge that they gained from participation was a positive benefit. One youth stated -

**it's definitely given me a lot more confidence in what I know or in how I think, like my logic process has definitely given me a lot more confidence in that because I have had the opportunity to problem solve with people around me to give me input on how that looks and the results of that and it has given me a lot more confidence in helping people...more courage to stand up for stuff that I don't think should happen and stuff that I think should happen.**

Youth stated that they learned new skills, gained peer support and increased their self-confidence through their participation in the Federation's activities.

One youth, who felt that gaining peer support was important, stated -

**once I started hanging out with the other kids in care I found out that I wasn't the only one and that the others had the same experiences as me and had different answers for problems. I learned to listen to others and to have others listen to me. It's an awesome feeling knowing that I am not alone.**

This sentiment was echoed by another youth who stated -

**it's given me validation that I'm not alone and that there are so many other youth out there who are just like me.**

Another youth supported the idea of learning new skills and stated -

**I think it has allowed me to develop some good relationships with other youths who are positive. I have learned to express my thoughts and ideas in ways that are also positive.**

Overall the youth feel that they are making a difference for other youth in care. One youth expressed the idea -

**I do feel like I am making a small difference and that makes me feel good about myself. I also know the system much better now.**

It should be noted that 3 of the youth felt that the Federation has had no influence upon their lives.

#### 4.2.2. Activities of the Federation of B. C. Youth In Care Network and the Involvement of the Study's Participants in These Activities

The Federation is involved in many activities and the next set of questions assessed the youths' knowledge of Federation activities and their participation in these activities. The youth were first asked to outline their awareness of Federation activities and their responses can be seen in Table 7. Most youth were aware of the Federation's two primary activities: the community meetings and the conference. The youths' awareness of other Federation activities was limited to those who were directly involved in running the Federation central office.

The second question then asked the youth to list the activities in which they were active participants. As seen in Table 8, the youths' personal involvement in the Federation's activities followed the same pattern as their awareness of the Federation's activities with most youth being actively involved in the community meetings and the yearly conference.

The third question asked the youth to comment on whether they found the Federation's activities to be worthwhile. The majority of the youth, 11 (73%), stated that they believed these activities to be worthwhile, while 2 youth (13%), felt they were not worthwhile activities to be involved in and two other individuals (13%) felt they had not been with the Federation

**Table 7. Self-Reports of Youths' Knowledge of Federation Activities (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Community meetings	12
Arranging and presenting at the conference	11
Information provided to youth	4
Newsletter	3
Training to professionals	3
Support for youth	3
Participation in governmental committees	3
Running a central office	2
Training to youth	2
Unsure of the Federation's activities	2

**Table 8. Self-Reports of Youths' Participation in Federation Activities (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Community meetings	11
Arranging and presenting at the conference	7
Training to professionals	2
Participation in government committees	2
Running a central office	2
Press releases	2
Information provided to youth	1
Newsletter	1
Support for youth	1

long enough to judge the worthiness of the activities. One dissatisfied youth stated

**the Federation is involved in useless stuff that accomplishes nothing.**

Overall there appears to be a high level of congruency between the youths' awareness of the Federation's activities and their participation in these activities. Most of the youth felt these activities were worth their time and effort.

The professionals were asked the same initial questions as the youth. The first question the professionals were asked was what awareness they had of the Federation's activities. Overall the professionals showed a high level of awareness regarding the Federation's activities. As seen in Table 9, they appeared to have knowledge of the Federation's participation in a range of activities. The two most frequent responses were the community meetings and the yearly conference. Other frequently noted activities were the information sessions that are provided to youth and the advocacy process with youth. When the professionals were then asked to comment on their personal involvement in Federation activities there was a drop in the numbers. This trend can be seen in Table 10.

Although the professionals seemed to be very aware of the Federation's activities this awareness did not transfer into direct involvement. Only 7 of the 15 professionals were actively participating in Federation's activities, while the other 8 professionals interviewed had no

**Table 9. Self-Reports of Professionals' Knowledge of Federation Activities (N-15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Arranging and presenting at the conference	11
Community meetings	9
Information provided to youth	6
Advocacy	5
Support for youth	4
Participating in governmental committees	4
Training to youth	4
Training to professionals	3
Running a central office	3
Press release	2
Newsletter	2
Unsure of Federation's activities	1

**Table 10. Self-Reports of Professionals' Participation in Federation Activities (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Not involved in Federation activities	8
Community meetings	6
Arranging and presenting at the conference	3
Support for youth	3
Information provided to youth	1
Training to professionals	1
Participating in governmental committees	1
Running a central office	1
Training to youth	1

direct involvement. The Federation is run such that there is little opportunity for professionals to be actively involved except in helping to run the community meetings and set up the yearly conference.

The professionals were then asked to comment on whether they felt the Federation's activities were worthwhile and all 15 of the professionals agreed with this statement. It was stated that -

**it is a worthwhile opportunity for kids to really show their leadership skills and develop new skills and it is an opportunity for them to have a voice and tell us what is working and what isn't working.**

Of those professionals who are currently involved, all 7 are planning to continue their involvement and are doing so because they either believe in the Federation's goals or they derive satisfaction from their participation.

When compared with the youth, the professionals were more aware of the range of activities in which the Federation was involved. However, there was a greater level of participation among youth respondents. The professionals' greater awareness could have been due to the requirements of their jobs in terms of them interacting with youth in care. All people connected with the Federation activities saw them as a worthwhile use of their time and energy. It is unfortunate that the youth were not as aware of the Federation's activities as the professionals since it is an organization dedicated to voicing youths' experiences and needs. This suggests that youth need to become more aware of the Federation and to then promote it to other youth who are in care.

**4.2.3. Responses Pertaining to Involvement in the Gove Inquiry,  
Child Family and Community Services Act and Ministry for  
Children and Families and Its Relationship to Empowerment**

The next series of questions was directed at the input and impact that the Federation has had upon three legislative changes: the Gove Inquiry; the Child, Family and Community Services Act; and the Ministry for Children and Families. These questions delved into the reason for the legislative changes and the outcome of the changes on B. C. and youths, in particular.

This section starts with the Gove Inquiry. Seven of the youth (47%) knew that the inquiry was held to look into the death of a child in care. The other 8 youth (53%), did not know the reasons for the inquiry. When asked what this inquiry had accomplished for B. C., the youth overwhelmingly answered that they were unsure of its accomplishments. The only other answers that the youth could provide was that it restructured the child protection system and raised public awareness. When asked further if this inquiry had changed anything for youth, again the overwhelming answer was that they were unsure of its impact. The only answer that youth were cognizant of was that awareness regarding youths' rights and issues was raised. Youth appeared to be unaware of the details surrounding the Gove Inquiry, when it had occurred, who was involved and what the ramifications were for B. C., in general, and youth, in particular.

Professionals stated two reasons for the Gove Inquiry: the investigation into the death of Matthew Vaudreuil and the overhaul of the child welfare system. Fourteen of the professionals were aware of the investigation into



Matthew's death; as well 12 of them were also aware of the overhaul to the child welfare system. The professionals showed a high level of accuracy in the answers to the above questions. It was apparent that most of them were familiar with the Gove Inquiry, the process, and the outcomes.

The professionals' most frequent replies to the question of what the inquiry accomplished for B. C. stressed the creation of public awareness around social services. Many of the professionals also stated, at the time of the interviews, that the ramifications of the Gove Inquiry on B. C. were unknown. The restructuring of the child protection system was also noted as an outcome. There was less certainty when professionals were answering the question of what the inquiry had accomplished for youth. Some of the professionals stated that the Gove Inquiry raised awareness regarding youth rights and issues but then other professionals felt that the Inquiry had not impacted youth in any manner. The professional sample was aware of the reasons for the inquiry. They had definite opinions about the outcomes as they related to both B. C. and youth. Professionals were more confident in their opinions regarding the impact on B. C. but their answers regarding youth were less precise.

There was a wide discrepancy between the knowledge that the professionals had of the inquiry and the youths' perceptions of it. In part this may be explained by the fact that most professionals came into contact with the information provided by the report as part of their jobs. The Gove Inquiry document was released publicly and most people who deal in any way with the child welfare system would read the report to ascertain the recommendations within it. It may be expected that youth would be less

likely to access this information unless they had direct dealings with the process. Youth are not expected to have read this report even though it directly relates to their circumstance of being in care. This lack of awareness in youth does speak to a deficiency in our society, that is the people most affected by this report are often the ones with the least amount of knowledge about its contents. A few select youth were invited to be a part of the inquiry but it does not appear that the information they gained filtered down through the organization of the Federation to the general youth in care population. In contrast there were many adults involved in the inquiry and it seemed that the report has been distributed and read by a large section of the professional population.

The new Child, Family and Community Services Act is the second part to be analyzed in this section. For the youth, 13 were unaware of the reasons for enacting this new legislation. One youth was aware that protection services were redefined and one youth felt that it laid out services which were offered. When asked what this Act had accomplished for B. C., most stated that they were unsure of its accomplishments or they felt there were no changes. Youth had very little knowledge of the impact this Act had for the province of B. C..

Youth were also asked to comment on their perceptions of what the new Act had done for youth. The most prevalent answer from the youth was that they were unaware of its accomplishments or they felt that there had been no real changes relating to youth. Again, like the Gove Inquiry, youth had very little knowledge of this specific piece of legislation that speaks

directly to them and their lives. They only had slight knowledge of its ramifications for the province and for themselves specifically. Overall they were unaware of the process and its outcomes.

Of the professional sample, 11 stated that the Act revamped an act that was out of date. Five professionals specified that it redefined protective services for children. Other responses also included the following: it clarifies services; it defines post majority services; it defines children's rights; and it defines abuse. The professionals had three clear answers as to what the Act had accomplished for B. C.: they felt that it defined abuse, it defined the services available to youth, and it tried to link legislation with practice. The professionals were then asked to discuss the impact this Act had upon youth. The professionals indicated that the new Act created independent living consents for youth. These consents allowed youth to collect welfare without permission being granted by their legal guardian. They also felt that youth were asked to participate in planning interventions and programmes designed to support youth. Youths' rights were also seen as being laid out and clarified with this new Act. As with the Gove Inquiry, the professionals had more extensive knowledge of the Act and how it came into being. They were also more conscious of its impact on B. C. and the youth population.

It can be theorized that professionals who interact with youth in care were aware of the legislation that defines abuse and the services that can be provided to youth because of their job role. These results also indicate that people who were affected by the legislation, that is youth, were the ones with

the least amount of insight into its application and affects. Moreover professionals saw this Act as being in support of youth rather than including youth in its creation or implementation.

The next section asked about the creation of the Ministry for Children and Families. Youth stated that there were many reasons for the creation of the Ministry for Children and Families. The most prevalent response (6 youth) was that the reasons for the creation of new Ministry were unknown. The next most frequent response, with 5 youth, was that the new Ministry increased government service efficiency. Three youth also stated that it came out of recommendations from the Gove Inquiry, 3 asserted that it consolidated services from 5 ministries, 2 felt it focused on children and 1 saw it being created for budgetary reasons. The youth felt that the new Ministry either created chaos or they felt that the accomplishments were unknown at the time of the interviews. One youth thought it "created one Ministry to deal with" while another youth felt that needed resources were not provided. The youths' responses to the implications for youth ran along similar lines. They stated that the new Ministry created chaos for them personally and also that it accomplished nothing as it did not relate to youth. The youth were able to give some reasons for the creation of a new Ministry but they had very marked opinions about the accomplishments of this Ministry with the answers either being very negative or unknown. It is likely that the youth were more aware of this governmental change, as opposed to the Gove Inquiry and the creation of the new Act, because it affects their lives in more concrete ways. They are intimately connected with the Ministry for Children and Families by being in its care.

Eleven professionals felt that the reason for the new Ministry was to consolidate services from five ministries. The next most frequent answer, with 7 respondents, was that the Ministry resulted from the Gove Inquiry recommendations. The next response was to improve service efficiency. Budgetary reasons and a focus on children were chosen by 2 professionals as their answer. The responses to the accomplishment of the new Ministry are that it created chaos for B. C., its outcomes were unknown at the time of the interviews, and it created one ministry to deal with. The professionals' responses to the question about the impact on youth included some very negative answers. They stated that its impact was unknown at the present time or that it has done nothing that benefits youth. It was also felt that the new Ministry created chaos for youth. The professionals were all very aware of the reasons for the creation of the new Ministry, the date it was created, and who were a part of its creation. The professionals were also in agreement with the youth in finding the accomplishment of this new Ministry as either unknown, or negative, both for B. C. and youth.

There appeared to be a high degree of congruency between the responses of the youth and the professionals within this section. There is consensus among both groups that the outcome of this endeavor was either negative or unknown at the time of the interviews. This high degree of awareness about the Ministry could be the product of the media's condemnation of the new Ministry for Children and Families. Many articles were published in the newspapers and several news programmes featured major stories discussing the creation of the Ministry and its difficulties. The high awareness could also be a result of direct interactions that gave rise to strong opinions regarding the Ministry and its functioning. There was still a

discrepancy between the youth and professional answers regarding the details of the reasons for the new Ministry's creation. Youth showed a superficial knowledge of the process while the professionals appeared to have more in-depth knowledge.

Youth appeared to be unaware of the details surrounding the processes of the Gove Inquiry, the new Child, Family and Community Services Act and the new Ministry for Children and Families. These findings were distressing because all three of these processes included youths' participation and also because they had such a direct impact upon youth and their lives. The professionals seemed to have a high awareness of the impact but this appeared to be due to the nature of jobs that put them in close contact with both the processes of these governmental changes. The disparity of the knowledge levels between the youth and professionals was not unexpected but it is a concern considering youth were included in the processes. Professionals, as part of their job duties, are expected to keep current with the latest legislative and practice trends. This expectation leads them to maintain a high awareness around these types of governmental changes. Youth, on the other hand, do not keep abreast of changes unless it directly impacts them. It appears that few youth were included in the processes.

The next set of three questions delved into whether the Federation was a part of the above noted governmental processes, whether the Federation provided input from youths' perspectives to these processes, and whether the Federation had an impact on the outcome of these processes. The first question began with an analysis of whether participants thought the Federation was a part of the process of the Gove Inquiry, the new Child,

Family and Community Services Act and the new Ministry for Children and Families. Within the youth sample 13 youth (86%) thought that the Federation was a part of the three processes but most did not know the nature of its involvement. One youth stated that -

**we (*the Federation*) provide a collective voice that the government cannot ignore because there are too many of us.**

The youths' felt that the Federation's involvement had included youth presentations and recommendations. The youth seemed to assume that the Federation was involved in these processes but were unable to provide any of the details of this involvement. The two youth who did not feel that the Federation was involved stated that neither the Federation nor youth input was sought or valued. One youth stated that he thought that the reason the Federation and youth were not involved was -

**because I don't think that youth would have been asked to be a part of these things by the people who were in charge. Youth are not seen as having anything valuable to say about life.**

Youth who did not think the Federation was involved all felt that youth were not given a place in the proceedings because they were not valued and therefore not asked to participate.

Most professionals (12 people or 80%) felt that the Federation was a part of the three processes. The other 3 professionals thought that the Federation was involved but they did not know the nature of their involvement. The professionals stated that the Federation was a part of the processes through youth presentations (6 responses), youth recommendations (5 responses),

youth forums or focus groups (3 responses), or youth workshops (2 responses). The professionals all believed that the Federation had been invited to participate in the government's changes.

The youth were more likely to feel that the Federation was involved but they were not sure what manner that involvement took while the professionals stated quite clearly their belief in the inclusion of the Federation in the process of change. Youth were less likely to see their involvement straying outside the bounds of individual presentations whereas the professionals saw the youth involvement occurring both on a collective and individual level. Several of the youth felt that the Federation was not included in the process instead they saw the process as one more empty action on behalf of adults to patronize youth. The professionals did not appear to acknowledge the possibility that youth or the Federation might not have been a part of the process.

The second question was whether the Federation provided input from youths' perspectives towards these governmental processes. Of the youth, 10 of them (67%) felt that the Federation provided input from a youth's perspective. One youth's explanation was that -

**I think they (*the Federation*) let people know what it is like to be a youth in care.**

Two youth (13%) felt that the Federation did not contribute input from a youth's perspective, citing a lack of an invitation to participate as the reason. Three of the youth felt that the Federation may have provided input but they were not sure of the content of that input. For those that did feel that the



Federation was involved they included the following methods of involvement: youth presentations of their individual experiences; youth consultant hired; youth forums or focus groups; youth written or edited reports; and individual participation. All the youth who stated that the Federation was involved believed that due to the nature of the group's composition, that is people under the age of 25, that the perspectives of youth were presented.

Again, 12 of the professionals interviewed stated that the Federation provided input from youths' perspectives. As part of this youth input, they included: youth presentations of their experiences (11 responses); individual youth involvement (8 responses); youth wrote or edited reports (4 responses); youth forums or focus groups (3 responses); and youth consultant hired (2 responses). None of the professionals felt that the Federation had not given input from youths' perspectives. This belief that the Federation was able to give youth input was rationalized with the statement -

**I presume that by their very existence and the way that the political process works that they've been able to be consulted and to have, you know, some kind of creative involvement.**

The professionals did not appear to consider the idea that youth input might not have been provided to the processes.

The professionals' belief that the Federation provided input from a youths' perspective appeared to follow from their belief that the Federation was involved from the beginning. They stated that because the Federation was composed of youth that the perspective provided would be from a

youths' perspective. There was little doubt that the professionals saw the youths' perspective coming from a multitude of avenues. The youth were not as sure that the input was from a youth's perspective, although many did believe that their views were being voiced.

#### 4.2.4. Responses Regarding the Impact of Participation in Governmental Decision Making on Youths' Feelings and Perceptions of Personal Empowerment

When asked to comment on the impact that the Federation has had upon the governmental processes, the responses of the youth respondents became less certain. Only 3 youth (20%) felt that the Federation had an impact upon the three governmental changes. They all agreed that the reason for their answer was that youths' experiences were seen as important and youth were seen as experts on youth related issues/needs. One youth stated in support of this belief -

**I think that giving input no matter how it is used has an impact because people have heard what we have to say and that then colours how they see that issue because you can't ignore what has been said.**

Six of the youth thought that the Federation may have had an impact but they did not know the nature of its impact. There were 6 youth (40%) who felt that the Federation did not have an impact on the proceedings. They supported their opinions by stating that youth were not valued, youth were not listened to, and youth were not asked to participate. One youth put it succinctly -

**I don't think they had any impact cause adults just don't listen to what youth have to say.**

The youth sample seemed to be split between assuming that the Federation had an impact and stating that it had no impact. The youth who did not believe they had any impact saw youth as being undervalued and underutilized in dealing with youth related issues and problems. The youth who felt that the Federation had an impact took the opposite stance stating that youth were seen as experts about youth related issues and that their experiences were valued by society.

The professional sample roughly divided in the middle in response to the possible impact of the Federation. Within this sample 7 people (47%) stated that the Federation may have had an impact but they did not know the nature of it. As one professional declared -

**I would hope that people would listen and respect the information that youth have to offer, but I'm not sure if their recommendations were heard or acted upon.**

Six professionals felt that the Federation did have an impact on the government's changes. They supported the ideas that youth experiences were seen as important (4 responses), youth were seen as experts on youth issues/needs (2 responses), youth services were offered by the Ministry for Children and Families (1 response), and things were different now (1 response). There was one professional who stated that youth did not have an impact and the reason for this statement was that adults did not listen to youth. Responses to this third question showed a pattern that was much more pessimistic than the previous two questions. There seemed to be some

doubt that the Federation had an impact on the Gove Inquiry, the creation of the new Child, Family and Community Services Act and Ministry for Children and Families.

The youth seemed to feel that the Federation may have been included in the government's change process but they were not truly aware of the process itself. When asked if the Federation input was from a youth's perspective the response became much more positive with youth stating that youth perspectives were provided by the Federation. Fewer youth believed in any youth driven changes. The professionals were optimistic about the Federation's involvement and their ability to present youths' perspectives, with both questions having an 80% 'yes' response. Their opinions became less positive when examining if people saw youth as having less opportunity to impact decisions being made at the government level. Both groups agreed that youth did not have a clear impact on the three processes.

Youth were then asked if they had personally been involved in the three governmental processes. Four of the youth (27%) had direct experience in these processes. They were involved in activities which included: personal interactions (1 youth), report writing (2 youth), committee work (1 youth), and Federation activities that involved them (2 youth). The youth that were not directly involved in the three governmental change processes related their participation in federation activities as relevant to the changes that occurred. The lack of direct participation in the governmental processes appeared to be due to a lack of communication between the people in charge

of the Federation and the general members about the activities that youth could be involved in. It seemed that few youth actually participated in the government's changes in a meaningful way.

When asked if they see their involvement in the three processes as being beneficial to youth, 12 of the youth (80%) replied in the affirmative. Table 11 outlines that youth felt that they gained two important things from being involved in the processes: they gained self-confidence and a sense of self-worth; and they gained skills and knowledge. As one youth succinctly put it -

**being able to voice your own opinions matters.**

Another youth supported this stating -

**it helps cause I get to say my stuff and that makes me feel good about myself, that at least I am trying to make a difference.**

The three youth who did not see youths as benefiting from the process said that the process was not relevant to them as individuals. Many of youth felt that one youth's involvement had an influence upon their sense of self empowerment. Youth seemed to feel that if another youth had participated and felt empowered by their input then that positive outcome transferred indirectly to all youth. The benefits were seen to have a vicarious impact on all youth in care. Youth appeared to be able to generalize one youth's experiences to themselves and to believe that it was a positive occurrence for both of them.

**Table 11. Self-Reports of Youths' Regarding the Benefits to Youths of the Governmental Change Process (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Youth gain self-confidence/sense of self-worth	10
Youth gain skills and knowledge	10
Youth see they can impact the world around them	5
It highlights the positives in youth	3
Youth seen as experts on their lives/needs	3
Youth are provided with integrated services	1

**Table 12. Self-Reports of Professionals Regarding the Benefits to Youths of the Governmental Change Process (N=15)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Youth gain self-confidence/sense of self-worth	9
Youth gain skills and knowledge	9
Youth see they can impact the world around them	8
It highlights the positives in youth	4

The professionals' answers to this question were a mirror image of the youths' responses, with 14 of them (93%) stating that the Federations' involvement in the process was beneficial to youth in general. As seen in Table 12 they felt that the youth gained self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, as well professionals felt they gained skills and knowledge, and the ability to see that they had an impact on the world around themselves. As one professional stated -

**I think that any way that youth can come together as a group is good. I think that there is a lot of good in young people that can be tapped. I think it helps them become more responsible adults. They learn that they can have an influence and impact.**

The professionals also saw one youth's involvement as benefiting all other youth. Generally professionals appeared to see that the benefits to youth were linked to their participation and they stated that the more youth were involved in the process the more the youth would personally benefited.

The youth and professional responses were highly congruent regarding the benefits to youth arising out of their involvement. Each group believed that one youth's experiences could be transferred to others and perceived as positive experience. They saw all youth as gaining necessary skills, knowledge and beliefs from the efforts of a small number of youth. The process of seeing youth benefit in such a vicarious fashion was out of step with the pessimism shown in other areas of the interview, especially for the youth sample.

The professionals were asked if they thought that the Federation's input into the recent changes related to youth had been effective in helping

youth to gain empowerment. The professionals clearly stated that they felt it was effective for the youth who were involved but not youth in general. Three professionals felt it was not effective but that awareness was growing for the youth and one felt that it had only been minimally effective in empowering youth. As one professional stated -

**I think if an institution or organization that is dedicated to youth empowerment is empowered, then by extension youth get empowered but how much of that trickles down to an uninvolved young person then I think it's very little. So I see the empowerment of the representatives of the organization as a good first step but the next step is to get it down to the individuals.**

It appeared that the majority of professionals saw the process of youth empowerment as a long and difficult task that involved a process of helping one person at a time and then hoping that they will in turn help to empower others around them.

The youth had a great number of opinions regarding youth involvement in changes. One youth summed it up in support of youth involvement -

**I think that youth need to be consulted about what youth want and need. We are the ones with the problems and usually we know what will help things get better but nobody asks us because they think we are twits or something. Youth know youth best not adults so I think it's important that adults start talking to us not down to us.**

Six youth agreed that it was great for youth to be involved while seven stated it was essential for them to be involved. Thirteen of the youth (87%) agreed that youth involvement was necessary. Two expressed the opposite opinion



stating that it was tokenism for youth to be involved; instead real involvement was necessary. One person stated -

**Youth are not involved as much as they should be. More youth need to be asked cause they only ask a small number of youth to be involved.**

Another put it this way -

**I would hope that youth were there but I don't think that they are really a part of it because youth aren't asked.**

A number of the youth saw youth involvement as important and therefore something to fight for, and one youth stated -

**I think that it is really important that youth start to speak up for themselves. Most adults see us as troublemakers or fuck ups and we have those moments but that is not the only us. We have good ideas and people need to hear them whether they want to hear them or not.**

Another youth supported this stating -

**I think that if it is something that you want you got to take it one step at a time and eventually you're going to end up at the door pounding on the door saying let me in, let me in and eventually youth will get what they want but it will take more than an hour, more than that.**

The youth saw their involvement as something that had to be gained or won not as something that was their due.

When they were asked to comment on how they think professionals saw them they became unsure in their responses. Ten youth were unsure as

to professionals' opinions. One youth felt that professionals would think that youth involvement was unnecessary while another three youth felt that the professionals viewed their involvement as tokenism. Only one youth thought that professionals saw youth involvement as good and only three thought they were seen as essential to the process. The youth showed a great deal of pessimism surrounding the professionals' opinions of youth involvement. This pessimism could be due to the lack of control youth in care feel they have over their lives while they see the professionals in their lives make all the decisions, especially regarding their placements. Youth seemed to strongly feel that they needed to be involved but they did not think that others shared this belief.

All 15 professionals felt that it is either great or essential for youth to be involved in the change process. One professional said -

**I think that the youth bring a perspective to the table that is clearly youth and is driven from where they are at their point in time and their development cycle and as such their orientation often will bring the other people back to a sense of reality in the room.**

Their answer to what other professionals felt about youth involvement was less certain. Seven professionals stated they were unsure as to what other professionals thought about youth involvement although five professionals still saw other professionals as thinking that youth involvement was good or essential. The professionals interviewed were definite in their belief that youth were a necessary part in any change process relating to youth issues.

For both the youth and the professional samples, there was a strong personal belief that youth needed to be a part of any change process. This

belief wavered when asked to comment on how professionals thought other professionals saw the matter. This personal valuing of youth spoke to a concerted effort to see the world in a positive light and they carried within them a powerful conviction that youth were important.

The question of whether youth input was valued by individuals revealed a surprising twist as the assumed answer was that the youth would believe in a negative stereotype regarding the value that people place on them. In the youth sample, 9 of the youth (60%) replied that if the person involved valued youth then they would value the youth input but if they did not value youth then they would not value the youth input. The youth appeared to have had both positive and negative interactions with professionals and adults in their lives. This range of experiences allows them to accurately delineate the value others place on them. A couple of the youth stated -

**It really depends on who it was. If the person values youth then they valued the input but if the person does not know you then it can be passed off as just another fucked up teenager**

Along the same vein another stated -

**I think it is valued by adults who value youth. If the adult thinks that youth are people with good things to say then they listen to us but if they think that youth are screw ups then they ignore us and impose their views on us.**

Three of the youth felt that youth involvement was valued but it comes with the proviso -

**because I make it valued. I expected to be treated as if I had something relevant to say.**

This statement implied that it is due to the efforts of the youth that youth input was valued rather than the willingness of the audience to value the input. There were three youth who described youth input as tokenism. They believed that -

**people don't listen or hear what youth have to say about anything**

or that -

**Sometimes we are listened to and sometimes we're not. But some of it also depends on the questions because on some we are heard but on others we're not. I think for the most part we get lip service from adults.**

These same two perspectives were seen when the youth were asked to comment on whether society valued youth input or involvement. The answers were an exact mirror to their thoughts on an individual's perspective. It was quite startling for the interviewed youth to show such insight into other people's perspectives. They were very capable of telling which people valued them and which people gave 'lip service' to their ideas and from there made judgments about these peoples' ability to value youth input.

The professional sample showed a much different pattern than the youth. The group split down the middle with either the belief that youth input was being valued or that they hoped it was being valued but thought

that the youth were being treated with tokenism. When the professionals were asked to comment on the value that society places on youth input and involvement, seven professionals saw it as tokenism and five saw it as valued. Only one professional stated that if youth were valued then their input was valued but if youth were not valued then their input was not valued either. This professional stated -

**If people see youth as valuable then they value the input that youth have to offer but there are still many people out there who do not value youth to begin with. I still think it depends on the mind set of the adults involved and its an uphill battle for youth to be taken seriously.**

The professional group seemed to see this issue in shades of black and white with very little grey.

The youth seemed to be aware of the value individuals and society place upon them and their views. Currently in our society there is a strong negative social perception of youth, as seen in the controversy surrounding the Young Offenders Act. Society blames youth for many of its problems and issues. Youth were able to see that people who truly saw them as worthwhile would also think the same of youths' efforts, while those that saw no strengths in youth would undervalue their input. Professional respondents seemed to view the matter in an either/or fashion: youth are valued or it is tokenism. Professionals appeared to espouse a conservatively based opinion regarding youths' value. Youth appeared to be more insightful into the fluctuating value that society places upon minors. I would have expected the opposite response with regard to this question, that the professionals would be more insightful and flexible in their view of the value placed on youth

within our society due to their knowledge of the obstacles that youth face in their day to day lives to be accepted and valued. The professionals could be choosing to conform to societal norms when presenting their viewpoints to me. There is a great deal of pressure for professionals to see youth as a problem to be fixed rather than as a productive and positive segment of society.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The theoretical premise supporting this study of youth empowerment is that collective advocacy, within a political sphere, helps disadvantaged youth in care gain a sense of personal empowerment. The second premise is that collective advocacy would have a direct impact on youth involved in the processes. This study collected the perspectives of youth who were in care and the professionals who worked with them. There were marked similarities and differences between the perceptions of youth and professionals regarding the concept of youth empowerment, as well as the processes of empowerment. Each groups' perceptions will be summarized through the identification of themes that emerged from the data and then these themes will be compared to highlight any patterns between the two perspectives. The next section considers the findings of this study and discusses them within the context of the existing literature. The final section outlines the implications this study has for legislation and practice.

#### **5.1. Themes**

##### **5.1.1. Personal Empowerment**

The first theme addresses the idea that youth can become empowered and then bring about changes to the environment and people around them.

One youth stated that empowerment is -

**a process between people - it's the interactions or dynamics that occur when two or more people get together to do something.**

Youth are starting to believe that what they say and do can have an impact on the world around them and this includes the adults with whom they interact. I feel that youth have a great capacity for positive change if they are given the support and encouragement to be a part of the process rather than the recipient of it. Youth in this study are starting to feel that through their actions and value systems, they make a difference to others. The youth saw that some people around them encouraged their efforts and this supported them to try their alternatives when problem solving. Youth have the ability to find creative and new solutions to difficult and complex issues. I feel that youth intimately know the issues and problems that face many youth within our society and this knowledge should be accessed. One youth felt that empowerment is -

**the courage to stand up for stuff that I don't think should happen and the courage to stand up for stuff that I think should happen.**

The idea that youth can take a stand for what they believe is beginning to take hold of them. They see this action as a positive method of supporting one another, while in the process making a difference for themselves and others.

The next theme to emerge was that youth are learning new skills that allow them to gain empowerment. It begins with youth feeling that they must speak for themselves. As one youth stated -



**I think that it is really important for youth to start to speak for themselves. Most adults see us (youths) as troublemakers or fuck ups and we have those moments but we also have solutions for our problems too.**

Youth are learning to express their thoughts and ideas in ways that allow them to take responsibility for the actions that arise out of these expressions. Being able to express themselves allows youth to gain confidence in their abilities. One youth defined empowerment as -

**confidence in what I know because I have had the opportunity to problem solve with people around me and to give input on how things should look and to see what the results can be.**

Youth believe that empowerment comes from gaining new skills and techniques which will help them make decisions and implement plans. The benefits of these gains were as follows: youth gained self-confidence and a sense of self-worth; youth gained knowledge; youth saw that they had an impact on the world around them; it highlighted the positives to be found in youth; and youth were seen as experts on their lives and needs.

The first theme from the professional data was that the professionals needed to allow a voice mechanism for youth. There was support for youth having their say in the decisions that impacted their lives. One professional in support of this premise stated that

**empowerment comes when you give people the opportunity to do for themselves and to speak for themselves.**

The professionals appeared to believe that by allowing youth to voice their experiences and beliefs they would feel empowered. Professionals feel that voicing an opinion gives people power. While this is partially true, it avoids the fact that many youth are not heard within our society. The next step is to examine the power that exists when one voice is added to others, as the collective voice of youth is more powerful than one voice by itself. One professional, in support of a collective voice stated that -

**empowerment is youth voices which are heard through an organization which gives them a collective voice.**

I feel that professionals must support youth to have both an individual voice and a collective voice in order to encourage empowerment.

The next theme to be discovered dealt with the meaning, or lack of meaning, that professionals ascribed to actions that lead to empowerment. The youth population read a great deal of meaning into a myriad of actions thereby enhancing their sense of empowerment. Professionals, on the other hand, seemed to see the actions leading to empowerment as just a series of steps to be completed that had no inner meaning. Youth empowerment was described by the professionals as a concrete series of events whose final outcome was youth gaining personal power. Youth empowerment was described by professionals in the following ways:

- **empowerment is giving youth the ability to do things in an adult world**
- **empowerment comes from confidence and confidence comes from self-esteem, which is a skill base and an ability.**

- **empowerment is a person who is able to stand on their own and move forward towards their goals.**
- **empowerment is the creation of an environment in which a person can maximize their potential to control their lives.**

Professionals form their views on empowerment based on an ideology that only acknowledges the action and not the meaning that can be gained from the activity. Professionals focus on youths' feeling in control and having opportunities to succeed which disregards the reality for the youth.

Professionals seem to see empowerment as an intellectual ideal, in the realm of something that one thinks or feels and which then creates empowerment of and within the person. This view does not seem to acknowledge that youth are a disempowered segment of society who are given little opportunity to succeed.

#### 5.1.2. Activities in the Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Network

The next theme focused on the youths' belief that the Federation provided them with a collective voice which in turn gave them permission to provide peer support to each other. Youth felt that it was critical that they support one another in achieving their goals. They wanted to help others as they came into care. One youth stated that empowerment was -

**something that we can actually use not for our benefit but for the youth in the future.**

The loyalty that the youth felt towards each other was strong. They were committed not only to helping themselves but also to helping one another. Youth believed that what they did had ramifications not only for themselves but for the rest of society and towards this they needed to be responsible for their actions. As one youth states -

**youths need to take responsibility for their own lives.**

This need to be responsible was a central idea among the youth. They seemed to feel that once they were responsible for themselves they must then help other youth to do the same. This need to ensure a positive outcome lets youth see their actions as having meaning beyond themselves.

The next theme focused on advocacy and its role in youth empowerment. Professionals placed a great deal of emphasis on youth being involved in a community sanctioned collective political organization. Professionals felt that the Federation was a legitimate avenue for youth to apply pressure to the systems in which they live. They saw empowerment as -

**teaching or assisting youth to build their own capacity to speak and act for themselves.**

Professionals saw the Federation as a positive organization that presented youth in a strong leadership role that encouraged other youth to work within the system and were more concerned with the collective voice than the individual voice. There needs to be some acknowledgment from the

professionals that, as individuals, youth have few legitimate avenues open to them to be heard. The imbalance of power, both personal and political, makes it difficult for youth to gain power.

The youth appeared to have little knowledge of the full range of activities within the Federation. They were aware of two major activities, the community meetings and the yearly conference, but only those involved with running the central office had access to participation in all Federation activities. Knowledge of these other activities needs to be imparted to the membership to ensure that many youth participate rather than a select handful. Communication from the Federation to its' members needs to be improved such that all members are invited to participate in a wide range of tasks and events. Professionals, who were very aware of the range of Federation activities, need to support youth to become more involved in a variety of events rather than yearly or monthly tasks. Professionals must encourage all the youth they are in contact with to join the many activities in which the Federation organizes.

#### 5.1.3. Involvement in the Gove Inquiry, the Child, Family and Community Services Act, and the Ministry for Children and Families

Youth felt that they had little direct involvement and participation in these governmental processes. They do feel that they have benefited from the processes and that as youth were included in the processes their input was provided. However, many of the youth were not able to articulate what

these changes did for either B. C. or youth. Professionals, on the other hand, had a high awareness of these governmental processes. Since each of these governmental processes impacts youth, it is necessary that youth be made more aware of the impacts these changes have on their world and society.

#### 5.1.4. Impact of Participation

Another theme that was identified focused on the benefits that youth gained from the process of participation rather than the achievement of the goals. Youth seemed to feel that the process rather than the outcome had more to offer their development. They expressed the desire to have the outcome be in their favour but they felt that they did not lose empowerment just because they did not attain their goal. For most youth, the act of participation was a more powerful tool than achieving their goals. Youth also seemed to be able to transfer positive experiences from another youth to themselves even when there was no interaction between them. This ability for youth to vicariously affect the lives of other youth is not covered in either the literature or practice theories current to social work today. Youth appeared to see a link between themselves and other youth who participated in the process. This ability to vicariously experience another youth's success was a surprising finding. Almost all of the literature states that the individual must perform the actions to reap any benefits from the process but no mention is made that one individual can experience empowerment through another individual's efforts or actions.

The next youth related theme focused on youth being valued for their contributions. The youth stated that if a person values youth then their input is valued but if the person does not value youth then their input is not valued either. This comment shows a great deal of insight into the workings of interpersonal dynamics. Youth seem to be aware that for their opinions to be taken seriously and acted upon then the youth themselves must first be valued. They seemed to be aware that certain people value youth and their input while others still ascribe to the belief that children should be seen and not heard. This same trend was seen when youth were asked to comment on whether youth input was valued within our society. Youth are aware that they are an overlooked segment of our society and that many people do not wish youth to be given any power to affect change.

Overall, the youth appeared to believe that individual actions had a positive benefit for the collective and that collective actions then had a positive impact on the individual. This ability to creatively gather power was an unexpected finding. Further, it was found that youth appear to be able to embrace the collective meaning even though they do not personally participate. Youth have found a creative way to empower themselves that allows them to step outside boundaries set by society.

The final theme examined the ideal that youth need to support other youth. Professionals felt that peer support was a positive action that lead to empowerment. They stated that youth are aware of the issues that touch their lives and from this insight they can then provide the nurturing and support that is needed to overcome obstacles. As one professional stated -

**empowerment means enabling people, individuals and organizations or groups to achieve their potential through partnerships.**

These partnerships encompass both youth and adults supporting and encouraging youth to achieve their goals and realize their potentials. The professionals felt that this type of interaction was critical for youth to experience in order to develop their own sense of power. The premise that when you help others you also help yourself seems to be the dominant ideology behind the professionals advocating for peer support of disadvantaged youth.

## 5.2. Implications of this Study

This study has provided a great deal of information relating to youth empowerment, but there are several things that I would do differently if I could redesign this study. The first change would be to have a research question that explores the debate between process and outcome dimensions of youth empowerment. The second change would narrow the scope of this study so that the data collected would add clarity to the definition of empowerment. I would interview more people from a wider range of backgrounds in order to include additional perspectives. The interview guide would be less structured and have fewer questions with more open-ended formats. This would allow participants the opportunity to discuss their viewpoints in more detail without the researcher limiting their responses. I would also include focus groups to be able to compare individual perspectives with a collective perspective.



### 5.2.1. Implications for Research

Empowerment is a broad concept that encompasses several areas of study. Further research needs to focus on the development of a comprehensive understanding of empowerment and its processes through focusing on peoples' experiences. A grounded approach to research would help to build knowledge from experiences rather than testing out theoretical assumptions. Studies need to be conducted specifically with youth to seek out their perceptions and perspectives on empowerment within the context of societal norms and values. Youths' opinions and views need to be sought.

This study raises a number of questions. The first question is whether children and youth who are not in the care of the government, have the same ideas regarding empowerment as the youth interviewed. It would be interesting to ascertain if youth who are in care have different beliefs or values relating to empowerment than youth who are in parental care. The second question is whether adults who do not work directly with youth see youth empowerment in the same manner as the professionals interviewed in this study. The comparison of ideas and attitudes about empowerment from people not associated with governmental care would add a further dimension to the study of youth empowerment.

The literature on youth empowerment is limited. The general empowerment literature covers a wide range of ideas and practice but there is little agreement on the definitions of empowerment or the process by which

one becomes empowered. One of the main tenets of empowerment is expressed by Julian Rappaport (1984) in his Studies of Empowerment. He states that -

empowerment implies that many competencies are present or possible, given niches and opportunities. It implies that new competencies are learned in a context of living life, rather than being told what to do by experts. (p. 4)

His ideas support youths' contentions that many everyday tasks contribute to their sense of empowerment. These can include, but are not limited to: parenting, recreation, cultural activities, stable housing, social programmes and interpersonal relationships. Youth see that living and maturing helps them gain empowerment and if this takes place within an environment that is supportive and encouraging. This places the professional in a supportive role as a resource rather than as the expert who creates empowerment within youth.

Hasenfeld (1992) supports the premise that youth need a positive, supportive environment in which to flourish and states that -

empowerment is a process through which clients obtain resources - personal, organizational, and community - that enable them to gain greater control over their environment and to obtain their aspirations. (p. 270)

For youth to accomplish the task of gaining empowerment they need to be placed in an environment that sees youth empowerment as a viable option. Youth are currently not given the power to make decisions within their own lives. Durkin (1993) states that it is "counterproductive, if not hypocritical, to

want children to be responsible and yet be unwilling to risk giving them real responsibility" (p. 72). Society appears to want youth to be responsible but they are not willing to give them the power to deal with their lives. It appears that one of two things are feared: youths will run amok when given power or they will make unwise choices and ruin their lives. Both of these attitudes negate the enormous potential that rests within our youth, and maintains the balance of power in favour of the adults. It also discounts the fact that the youth of today become the adults of tomorrow and if we do not prepare the youth to deal with reality then the possibility exists that they will fail to maintain an egalitarian and productive society.

### 5.2.2. Implications for Practice

The limitations described in this study affect the implications for practice. Generalizations to the larger population must be made carefully due to the small sample sizes. Empowering youth does not mean handing over carte blanche to them, but it means that professionals must provide a safe, structured, but open environment in which youth can explore and practice self empowerment.

Professionals need to continue to support and encourage youth to be a part of the process of making decisions. "One must not only value empowerment, one must also operationalize it" (Shera & Page, 1995, p. 11). The professional role in youth empowerment is critical but professionals must first examine their own attitudes towards this role and make the necessary changes to see themselves as resources rather than experts. As stated in Garfat et al (1989) -

as we make the necessary transitions ... from being experts who do things to or for young people, to educators and facilitators who do things with them, we will see increasing involvement of youth and their families in the programs that provide services to them. (p. 16)

Professionals must give up their role of expert and show their clients how to gain the necessary power and skills to change their own lives. Youth must be encouraged to take responsibility for their lives and to make decisions for themselves. It is the professional's role to support youth in this process, not do it for them. Youth are expected to be responsible but they are allowed little of the power to make decisions. Youth must have both the power and the responsibility for their lives, but they also need the support and guidance of adults in order to develop and mature.

There are several actions that professionals can take to support and encourage youth empowerment. Decision making processes must be set up that meet the needs of all who are involved; youth, adults and professionals. As one youth stated "empowerment for youth comes with being a part of the decisions with adults". Professionals must support a decision making process that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Professionals must take the time to establish a positive relationship with youth in order to be able to effectively support youth in their endeavors. As one professional stated "empowerment will not work if the adults do not take the time to get to know the youth involved". The professionals' role is to provide structure and guidance, while providing a range of options from which youth can choose. Professionals must ensure that youth are aware of issues that impact their lives and towards this professionals must exchange information directly with youth.

### 5.2.3. Implications for Legislation

The first conclusion is that youth need to be involved in the process of creating legislation. They are capable of making important contributions, especially if the issues are related to youth. Youth expressed a desire to be involved in the process as they feel it has implications for themselves and other youth. They showed a great deal of insight into the issues and obstacles facing youth within our society. They also appeared to have many creative solutions to these issues and obstacles. Youth appeared to see this as a worthwhile task and they were prepared to work alongside others to accomplish the tasks set out for them.

It became apparent through this study that these youth were not aware of legislation that impacts their lives directly. They lacked knowledge about the processes and the outcomes of governmental changes. Information did not easily filter down to youth even though they are the most affected by changes to this system. Youth need to be aware of the events that touch their lives.

The opinions gathered throughout this study have supported the hypothesis that certain segments of the population affected are not a part of the decision making processes that leads to the creation of legislation. Legislation needs to be developed that meets the needs of society, and the different communities within it. Legislation needs to be put in place that honours the strengths of the people who are impacted by it. Legislation must

become accessible to all. This requires that it be developed, written and implemented in such a way that all people, including youth, can be a part of its creation and continued existence.

### 5.3. Summary

This thesis has explored the concepts of empowerment from two perspectives: youth in care and the professionals who work directly with them. Each of these groups provided me with a great deal of information regarding their thoughts and feelings relating to the impact of empowerment on individuals and the process through which individuals become empowered. The youth, who were interviewed, showed great insight into the effects that empowerment had upon their lives and futures.

During the course of this study my definition of empowerment changed. Empowerment became a richer concept that encompassed several different areas for me. I focused on people becoming empowered through socially accepted activities and attaining their goals. I dismissed the power that is inherent in being part of a process. I now realize that empowerment can also be gained by people being a part of an interactive exchange between people and groups. Although I was flexible in my approach to empowerment the youth in this study have shown me that there are many alternatives that I did not consider. People can become empowered through completing everyday activities that are not part of a supportive or therapeutic relationship. As a professional it was a bit humbling to realize that I did not know it all and that I had stopped looking for new methods and ideas to improve my practice skills.

In the final analysis, this thesis has only begun to explore the concept of youth empowerment. Further research and literature needs to be developed so that empowerment can be defined and articulated in such a way that professionals can implement empowerment processes directly with their youth clients. As one youth succinctly stated -

**empowerment is something you have to do one step at a time.**

Society needs to be shown that youth can be insightful, responsible and creative in problem solving. Youth are an under-utilized segment of our society, which overlooks the fact that the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. Youth need to learn how to live responsibly so that when they do have effective power, they can exercise it appropriately for the good of all people within society.

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## Appendix A

### Consent Form

## **Consent Form for Youth Empowerment Study**

### **Researcher:**

Stephanie Harding, R. S. W..

Telephone Numbers:

Home: 737 - 4804

Work: 273 - 5027

You are welcome to contact me at anytime to ask questions about the study and your involvement within it.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

I am a Master of Social Work student at the University of Manitoba, and I am studying youth empowerment. A definition of youth empowerment describes it as a method for youth to gain knowledge, skills, and confidence to experience their lives to the fullest while having a positive impact on people, organizations and government. The focus of this study is to gather and analyze information on the benefits that youth gain from their participation in the British Columbia government's process of re-designing legislation that relates to youth.

### **Procedure:**

You are being asked to participate in either an individual interview or a group interview. The individual interview includes a series of questions that you will be asked to answer that deal with the topic of youth empowerment. The group interview will be conducted with a group of 8 to 10 people who will also be invited to answer a series of questions relating to youth empowerment. These sessions should take approximately 1 to 2 hours to complete. The information gathered from both the individual interviews and the group interviews will be non-identifying in nature and as such the identities of the participants will be kept anonymous.

## **Confidentiality:**

The information that you share with me will be kept confidential. Data that contains identifying information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and the only people who will have access to this data are myself and my three thesis committee members. This identifying data will be destroyed once the final report is completed.

## **Final Report:**

If you would like to obtain a summary of the results of this study please provide your mailing address on the included form. The mailing address will only be used to send you a copy of the report and will not be linked to the information you provide. The final report will not include any information which will identify you to those who read the report.

## **Benefits and Risks of Participation:**

It is not anticipated that any of the questions that you will be asked will cause you any stress or difficulty, but if you find any of the questions unsettling and you need to talk with someone you may call me at the above listed telephone numbers. The benefit you will gain from participating in this study is that you have an opportunity to provide information and express opinions related to youth empowerment.

## **Participation:**

Your involvement is completely voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you decline to participate in the study or if you withdraw at any point during the study.

You also do not have to answer every question. You are free to answer the questions that you choose.

It is hoped that you will participate because I think that your views on youth empowerment are important.

## **Consent:**

You have the option of choosing the type of participation you can have within this study. Please make a check mark beside your choice of participation.

- Individual interview only
- Group interview only
- Both individual and group interview

I agree to participate in the study of youth empowerment.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of parent/ guardian if  
participant under 19 years of age



## **Mailing Address Form for Youth Empowerment Study**

Please fill out this form and hand in separately from the consent form.

Include the following information:

name (you can choose to leave this information blank)

apartment number

street number

city and province

postal code (if you know it)

Mailing address:

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## **Appendix B**

### **Interview and Focus Group guide for Youth**

## **Interview and Focus Group guide for Youth**

### **Question 1.**

#### **Background information on the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN)**

- Are you a member of the Federation of B. C. Youth In Care Network?
- How did you become aware of the FBCYICN?
- When did you become a member of the FBCYICN?
- What were your reasons for choosing to become a member?
- What are the overall goals of the FBCYICN?  
Do you believe in these goals? (look at each goal described)
- What activities is the FBCYICN involved in?  
Which of these activities are you involved in?  
Do you think these activities are worthwhile?
- How has your participation in the FBCYICN influenced your life?
- Are you planning to continue your involvement in the FBCYICN?  
What are your reasons for continuing your participation?  
What are your reasons for discontinuing your participation?

#### **FBCYICN involvement in the government's changes**

Please describe for me your knowledge of the following events.

- The Gove Inquiry  
What are the reasons for this Inquiry being completed?  
When did this Inquiry happen?  
Who was involved in this Inquiry?  
What did this Inquiry accomplish for B. C.? for youth?
- The new Child, Family and Community Services Act  
What were the reasons for enacting this new Act?  
When did the enactment occur?  
Who was involved in creating this new Act?  
What does this new Act accomplish for B. C.? for youth?

- **The new Ministry for Children and Families**  
 What were the reasons for creating this new Ministry?  
 When did the restructuring take place?  
 Who was involved in creating this new Ministry?  
 What did the creation of a new Ministry accomplish for B. C.? for youth?
- **Do you think that the FBCYICN was a part of these three processes?**  
 How was the FBCYICN a part of the three processes?  
 What were the reasons for the FBCYICN not being a part of the three processes?
- **Do you feel that the FBCYICN provided input from a youth's perspective towards these processes?**  
 What kind of input did the FBCYICN provide to these three processes?  
 What are the reasons for the FBCYICN not providing input to these three processes?
- **Do you believe that the FBCYICN has had an impact on the outcomes of these processes?**  
 What was the nature of the FBCYICN's impact(s) on these three processes?  
 What are the reasons for the FBCYICN not having an impact on these three processes?

## **Question 2.**

### **Youth Empowerment**

- **What is your definition or thoughts regarding empowerment?**
- **How do you see someone becoming empowered?**
- **Have you, as an individual, been involved in the FBCYICN's processes of giving input into the government's recent changes to youth related issues?**  
 How have you been involved?  
 What are your reasons for not being involved?
- **What are your feelings about your involvement in the changes?**
- **What do you think professionals feel about youth involvement in the changes?**

- Do you believe that your involvement or input was valued by individuals? by society?
- Do you see this process as beneficial to youth?  
How has it been beneficial for youth?  
What are the reasons for it not helping youth?

### **Question 3.**

- Are you aware of any alternative types of process(s) or activity(s) that have given youth a sense of power or control over their life?  
What was the process or activity?  
How did you become aware of the process or activity?  
Are you currently involved in these alternate processes or activities?  
Who else is involved in these processes or activities?
- Is there any further information you would like to share with the researcher?
- Are there any questions not asked which you think should have been asked?

## Appendix C

### Interview and Focus Group guide for Professionals

## **Interview and Focus Group guide for Professionals**

### **Question 1.**

#### **Background information on the Federation of B. C. Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN)**

- Are you aware of the FBCYICN?
- When did you become aware of its existence?
- What are the overall goals of the FBCYICN?  
Do you believe in these goals? (look at each goal described)
- What activities is the FBCYICN involved in?  
Which of these activities are you involved in?  
Do you think these activities are worthwhile?
- Do you personally participate in the FBCYICN?
- Are you planning to continue your involvement with the FBCYICN?  
What are your reasons for continuing your participation?  
What are your reasons for discontinuing your participation?

#### **FBCYICN involvement in the government's changes**

Please describe for me your knowledge of the following events.

- The Gove Inquiry  
What are the reasons for this Inquiry being completed?  
When did this Inquiry happen?  
Who was involved in this Inquiry?  
What did this Inquiry accomplish for B. C.? for youth?
- The new Child, Family and Community Services Act  
What were the reasons for enacting this new Act?  
When did the enactment occur?  
Who was involved in creating the new Act?  
What does this new Act accomplish for B. C.? for youth?

- **The new Ministry for Children and Families**  
 What were the reasons for creating this new Ministry?  
 When did the restructuring take place?  
 Who was involved in creating this new Ministry?  
 What did the creation of a new Ministry accomplish for B. C.? for youth?
- **Do you think that the FBCYICN was a part of these three processes?**  
 How was the FBCYICN a part of the three processes?  
 What were the reasons for the FBCYICN not being a part of the three processes?
- **Do you feel that the FBCYICN provided input from a youth's perspective towards these processes?**  
 What kind of input did the FBCYICN provide to these three processes?  
 What are the reasons for the FBCYICN not providing input to these three processes?
- **Do you believe that the FBCYICN has had an impact on the outcomes of these processes?**  
 What was the nature of the FBCYICN's impact(s) on these three processes?  
 What are the reasons for the FBCYICN not having an impact on these three processes?

## **Question 2.**

### **Youth Empowerment**

- **What is your definition or thoughts regarding empowerment?**
- **How do you see someone becoming empowered?**
- **Has the FBCYICN's processes of giving input into the government's recent changes to youth related issues been effective in helping youth gain empowerment?**
- **What are your feelings about youth's involvement in these changes?**
- **What do you think other professionals feel about youth involvement in the changes?**
- **Do you believe that youth involvement or input was valued by individuals? by society?**



- Do you see this process as beneficial to youth?  
How has it been beneficial for youth?  
What are the reasons for it not helping youth?

### **Question 3.**

- Are you aware of any alternative types of processes or activities that have given youth a sense of power or control over their lives?  
What was the processes or activity?  
How did you become aware of the process or activity?  
Are you currently involved in these alternate processes or activities?  
Who else is involved in these processes or activities?
- Is there any further information you would like to share with the researcher?
- Are there any questions not asked which you think should have been asked?

**Appendix D**  
**Youth Demographic Survey**

## Youth Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions by making an X in the appropriate box

1. What is your gender?

----- female  
----- male

2. What age category are you within?

----- under 12 years  
----- 13 - 15 years  
----- 16 - 18 years  
----- 19 - 21 years  
----- 22 - 24 years  
----- over 24 years

3. What is your ethnic background?

----- Caucasian descent  
----- Asian descent  
----- 1<sup>st</sup> Nations descent  
----- African descent  
----- Other (Please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Have you been placed in alternative care at any point in your life?

----- Yes - Please continue with question 5  
----- No - Please skip to question 7 and continue

5. What is your current place of residence?

- natural family
- relatives
- foster care
- group home
- semi-independent living
- independent living
- on own
- other (Please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

6. If you are currently living in care, how long have you been in your placement?

\_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months

7. What was the last grade of school that you fully completed?

- Grade 7
- Grade 8
- Grade 9
- Grade 10
- Grade 11
- Grade 12
- 1 or 2 years of college or university
- 3 or 4 years of college or university
- more than 5 years of college or university

8. Are you currently employed?

- Yes - Please complete question 9
- No - Please skip to question 10 and continue

9. What are your average yearly earnings?

- under \$10,000
- \$10,001 - \$20,000
- \$20,001 - \$30,000
- \$30,001 - \$40,000
- \$40,001 - \$50,000
- over \$50,001

Please skip to question 11 after completing question 9

10. Are you seeking employment?

- Yes
- No

11. Is there any further information that you think the researcher should gather?

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**Appendix E**  
**Professionals Demographic Survey**

## Professional Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions by making an X in the appropriate box

1. What is your gender?

----- female  
----- male

2. What age category are you within?

----- under 19 years  
----- 19 - 25 years  
----- 26 - 35 years  
----- 36 - 45 years  
----- 46 - 55 years  
----- 56 - 65 years  
----- over 65 years

3. What is your ethnic background?

----- Caucasian descent  
----- Asian descent  
----- 1<sup>st</sup> Nations descent  
----- African descent  
----- Other (Please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What was the last grade of school that you fully completed?

----- under Grade 7  
----- Grade 7 - 9  
----- Grade 10 - 12  
----- 1 or 2 years of college or university  
----- 3 or 4 years of college or university  
----- more than 5 years of college or university

5. Are you currently employed?

- Yes - Please answer the rest of the questions
- No - Please skip to question 9

6. What are your average yearly earnings?

- under \$10,000
- \$10,001 - \$20,000
- \$20,001 - \$30,000
- \$30,001 - \$40,000
- \$40,001 - \$50,000
- \$50,001 - \$60,000
- over \$60,001

7. Does your profession work directly with youth?

- Yes
- No

8. What profession are you currently working within?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Is there any further information that you think the researcher should have gathered?

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