

# **Promoting Professional Inclusion for Young People in Difficult Situations through a Supporting and Educating Project: A Realist Evaluation**

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## **Abstract**

*This article proposes the use of realist evaluation (RE) to describe and explain how and in what circumstances supporting and educating intervention work in professional insertion of young people in difficulty. The research design is a case study incorporating a systematic review and qualitative data. Two business representatives, six supervisors, ten trainers, and fifteen beneficiaries participated in interviews and three focus groups. The content analysis was used for data analysis. Findings show that professional inclusion is the result of the interactions between implementation contexts and intervention mechanisms as the young motivation and their commitment and confidence in the trainers. In addition, meeting intervention goal depends on youth buy-in, the organizational environment and the involvement and commitment of the supervisors and trainers.*

**Keywords:** *realistic evaluation, professional integration, causal mechanisms, context.*

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## **I. Introduction**

Although widely deployed, experimental evaluations are criticized for their simplified design of causality in focusing on whether an intervention worked, rather than on how and why it worked (A. Fletcher et al., 2016). To address these limits, theory-based evaluations (TBE) explain how and why outcomes are achieved (Mackenzie et al., 2010). TBEs are part of the fifth explanatory generation of evaluations that integrates context and causal mechanisms (Brousselle & Buregeya, 2018). One such approach is realistic evaluation (RE) (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), an application of generative causation that provides a means of unraveling the context and mechanisms of causality (Pawson, 2013). RE is affiliated to critical realism (CR) which attempts to explain the invalidated mechanism through contextual conditions and compensatory mechanisms (Devaux-Spatarakis, 2014). CR emphasizes the generating mechanisms by proposing articulations responsible for the observed events (Bhaskar, 1979). Thus, CR offers a promising alternative to the impossibility of isolating a context or mechanism in order to randomize it. RE is considered more suitable to evaluate complex and complicated intervention where the path between input and output is not linear. It's the case of professional integration on young people living in difficulty.

This article begins with a synthetic systematic review of professional integration, then moves to a description of the methodology deployed, the theoretical approach, the setting up the case study and finally presents the research findings.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Professional integration**

Fournier and Monette (2000) defined professional integration as the successful transition between training and working life. They proposed that the transition from education to the labor market depends on the individual's adaptability in the working environment (Fournier & Monette, 2000). Along similar lines, Jose (2000) went beyond training and employability matching by advocating a training-employability-education-socialization logic. He proposed a proactive approach that integrates all stakeholders (individual, company, and state) in socioprofessional inclusion. Furthermore, Allard and Ouellette (1995) grouped the factors likely to influence socioprofessional integration into three major dimensions: sociological (economic, political, cultural, geographic, and demographic factors), sociopsychological (family, school, work, friends, and media environments) and psycho-professional (factors related to the construction of personal and professional identity).

Najah project, case under study, aimed to enhance the employability of young people between the ages of 18 and 30 in difficult situations living in the City of Casablanca. The project was funded by the French

Development Agency and implemented by the Apprentis d’Auteuil (AA) association and l’Heure Joyeuse (HJ) association. This project seeks to train, accompany and guide young people to find work. They are generally people from underprivileged backgrounds without any vocational training or qualifications.

This kind of project is characterized by its complexity, the substantial role of the context, and the importance of the reasoning of the actors in the project implementation. The relationship between cause and effect in this type of initiative is not always linear and the mechanisms responsible for achieving results are not always obvious (Befani & Mayne, 2014).

Therefore, the aim of this study was to generate causal understanding by explaining why, how, and under what circumstances project Najah results are achieved.

## II. Methods

### Theoretical approach

This study employed RE approach (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Affiliated with critical realism, RE is based on research in natural environments with contextual information. The purpose of RE is to socially explain significant regularities whose underlying mechanisms are elements of the actor’s reasoning about an intervention (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). RE’s objective is not to seek an immutable law that associates an intervention with the production of an effect, but to identify half-regularities (Pawson, 2008). RE involves indigenous viewpoints using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005) and takes the form of context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations. Pawson (2013) advocated creating a matrix with three CMO columns and linking them in such a way as to have  $C+M=O$ . According to Lacouture and other researchers (2015), the context is the set of circumstances in which the intervention is implemented while the mechanism is an element of the reasoning and the actors’ reactions according to the resources available in a given context. However, the causes of complex intervention outcomes can be interpreted in terms of either mechanism or context depending on the focus of the causal chain analysis (Shaw et al., 2018).

The RE iterative process relies on identifying hypotheses about CMO configurations as well as on testing and refining the intervention theory (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The majority of surveys conducted in RE are semistructured interviews with a predominance of exploratory questions (Manzano, 2016). The purpose of the interviews is to clean up the intervention theory, and then refine it before consolidating the produced knowledge (Manzano, 2016).

Although RE generates operational results that improve the programs (Punton, Vogel, & Lloyd, 2016), it has methodological limitations and implementation constraints. Dissociation of context elements from the mechanisms represents the major challenge for RE’s operationalization (Ridde et al., 2012).

For purposes of this study, the RE steps consisted of developing the initial theory of intervention (CMO), collecting data, analyzing data, testing the hypothesis, and refining the theory.

### The four steps of realist evaluation

Driven by the Pawson and Tilley model, this study proceeded in four steps as depicted in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The realist evaluation process

Step 1	Elaboration of intervention initial theory
Step 2	Establishment of hypotheses on how the intervention works: CMO configurations
Step 3	Data collection
Step 4	Data analysis, hypothesis testing and theory refinement

#### *Step one: Elaboration of intervention initial theory*

As a qualitative study, this research adopted the realistic approach as its theoretical framework.

Based on exploratory interviews with those in charge of the project and on related documentation, an intervention theory was developed. At this level, the first elements of context and presupposed mechanisms were identified. Emmel (2013) recommended an in-depth study of the grey literature on interventions before conducting interviews. Further, Manzano proposed (2016) that interviews should begin with individuals who are more familiar with the intervention, such as those responsible for implementation.

#### *Step two: Establishment of hypotheses on how the intervention works: CMO configurations*

In the second step, the assumptions were developed about how the intervention would work in CMO configurations. The hypotheses were formulated on the basis of a literature review on the professional integration, the concepts emerging during the research, the exploratory interviews with the project managers of project, and related documentation.

#### *Step three: Data collection*

The third step concerned the data collection to test hypotheses. To this end, an interview guide was developed and semi structured interviews were conducted. Data collection was also based on project documentation. Interviews should be designed through both the stakeholders’ experience of the intervention as well as the

researcher's hypotheses (Dalkin et al., 2015). The semi structured interviews and the focus group topic guides were based on both exploratory interviews with those responsible for implementation and a review of the literature on professional integration and the various concepts identified and emerged during the research. A realist interview method was adopted (Pawson, 2008) to answer the fundamental question of the RE: how, why, for whom, and under what circumstances did the intervention work? Realist interviewing requires that the interviewer critically examine the interviewee's responses by exploiting resources and information external to the interview context (Smith & Elger, 2014).

*Step four: Data analysis, hypothesis testing and theory refinement*

At the fourth step, the hypotheses were tested, data analyzed, and theory refined. The evidence collected was verified before it was used in the data analysis. The content and accuracy of the evidence was analyzed by using triangulation. The statements of the different actors were grouped together to check their content and accuracy. Such analysis was not limited to the intervention but was also applied to what preceded its implementation. Indeed, Archer (2012) proposed enriching the C+M=R formula by integrating historical data (cited in E De Souza, 2015).

Data analysis was conducted by the two members of the research team independently. Using Nvivo software, the interviews and focus groups transcripts were analyzed to identify some trends and to answer the realist question: how, why, for whom, and under what circumstances did the intervention work?

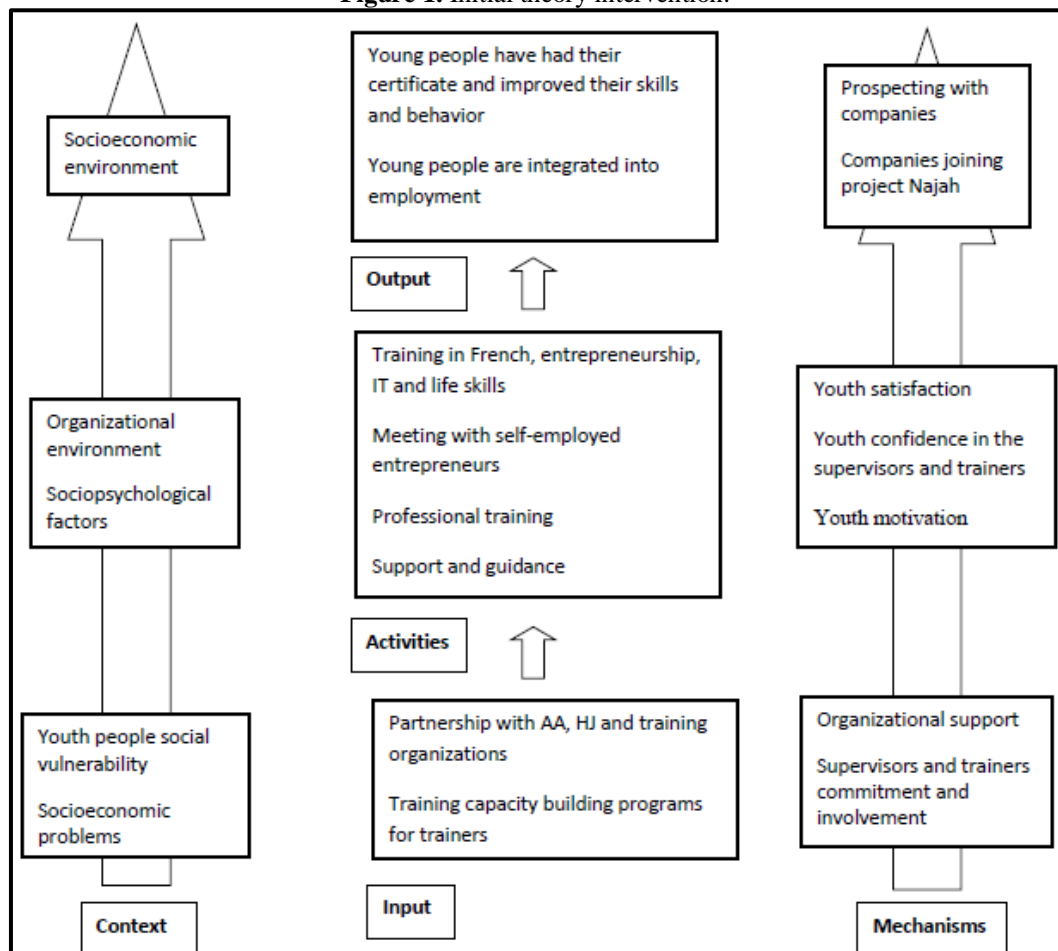
As result of data analysis, the initial theory was updated and refined.

**SETTING UP THE CASE STUDY**

**Step 1: Elaboration of intervention initial theory**

The conceptualization phase of the theory was deductive insofar as it was based on existing theoretical knowledge to explain how the actions carried out within the Najah project had contributed to young people's professional integration. Development of the initial theory, as shown in figure 1, was based on three exploratory interviews with those responsible for implementation (a director and two project managers from HJ), a literature review on professional integration and the theoretical concepts identified during the research, and project documentation.

**Figure 1. Initial theory intervention.**



**Step 2: Establishment of hypotheses on how the intervention works: CMO configurations**

The practice of RE emphasizes mechanisms operating at the individual level rather than at the organizational level (Westhorp, 2018). This research focused primarily on the reasoning of actors, and therefore, the analysis of mechanisms was more concerned with the micro level (individuals). The project context analysis was based primarily on the four factors that shape context: people, interpersonal relationships, institutional rules, and norms and infrastructure (Pawson, 2013). Thus, after the development of the intervention theory, the CMO configurations were developed inductively and deductively (Funnell & Rogers, 2011) through exploratory interviews with the implementers and a systematic review of professional integration and the different concepts emerging during the research such as trust, motivation, satisfaction, and commitment. The intervention was divided into three areas that correspond to three causal chains, namely, adhesion of young people to the project, youth training, and youth professional integration.

For example, trust and motivation were identified as two parts of the mechanism that led to improved skills and behavior of beneficiaries. Indeed, behavioral change depends on two factors: trust as a mediating mechanism and motivation as a moderating mechanism (Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). Trust is a key element in motivation within organizations, Morgan Hunt’s (1994, cited in Heavey, Halliday, Gilbert, & Murphy, 2011) implication-trust theory states that trust is a prerequisite for involvement and motivation. Based on the above and the synthesis of the three exploratory interviews, we hypothesized that young people’s motivation and involvement was due to their trust in supervisors and trainers. The summary of the CMO configurations is shown in table 2.

**Table 2. CMO Configurations**

Components of the theory	Context	Mechanisms	Outcomes
Youth buy-in to the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Precariousness</li> <li>▪ Social vulnerability</li> <li>▪ Socioeconomic problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Technical, financial and organizational support</li> <li>▪ Supervisors and trainers commitment and involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Integration of the young people in project</li> </ul>
Youth training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organizational environment</li> <li>▪ Sociopsychological factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Youth satisfaction</li> <li>▪ Youth confidence in the supervisors and trainers</li> <li>▪ Youth motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Obtaining a certificate</li> <li>▪ Improvement of skills and behavior of young people</li> </ul>
Youth professional integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Socioeconomic environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prospecting supervisors</li> <li>▪ Business buy-in to the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Youth employability improvement</li> </ul>

**Step 3: Data collection**

The third step concerned data collection to test hypotheses, CMO configurations, and to analyze the intervention context. Data collection from July to December 2019 was carried out through 17 semi structured interviews and three focus groups, and completed by documentary research on the intervention. As the mechanism is latent, invisible, and highly context-sensitive in nature, Pawson has advocated (2008) extracting the tacit theory of intervention from interviews with stakeholders. Thus, the interviews and focus groups involved all stakeholders (beneficiaries, trainers, supervisors, and representatives of partner companies). The selection of respondents was based on purposive sampling, and the questions were adapted according to the respondents.

Variations in context affect the questions that must be adapted to the circumstances, time frame, and sub-groups (Manzano, 2016). For example, the choice of beneficiaries was focused on young people who had completed their training and were still looking for work, those who were able to find a job, and those who had worked but had left their jobs. Interviews were completed after saturation and completeness of the data were reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The wording of the questions was based on the realist interview. For example, can the engagement of trainers occur if there are other mechanisms? Is there a single observation that explains youths staying in their jobs? To explore the mechanisms, the questions included: how do you think the expertise of the trainers influenced the youth’s buy-into the project? To explore the results: how do you think the project changed your behavior?

To reduce confirmation bias with regard to interest in the data that support the hypothesis at the expense of those that do not (Fairfield & Charman, 2019), all evidence was ranked according to inferential power or probability.

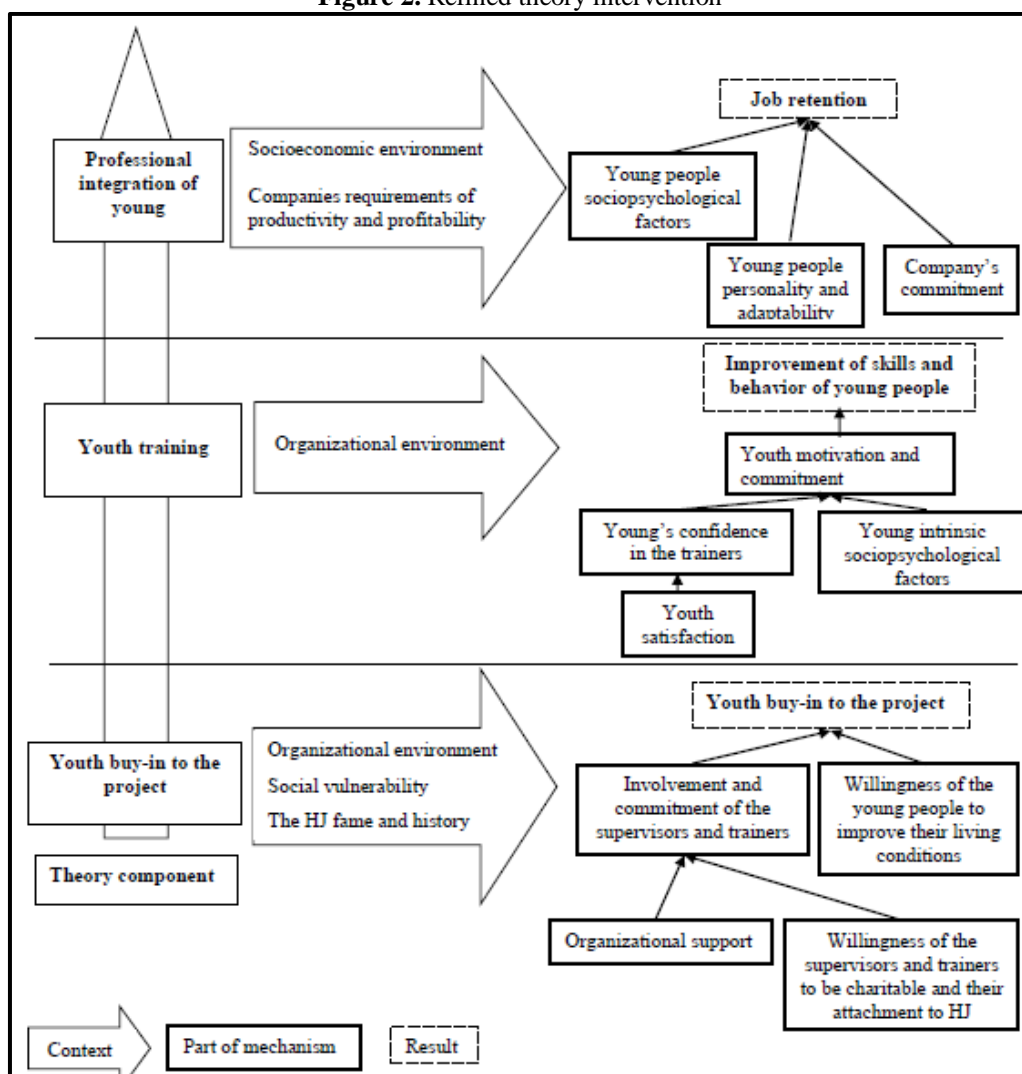
**Step 4: Data analysis, hypothesis testing and theory refinement**

The empirical material was evaluated. Thus, the content and accuracy of the interviews were analyzed using triangulation. Grouping the different stakeholders' statements allowed us to analyze the content before using it as evidence to improve our confidence in the absence or presence of causal mechanisms.

Data analysis consisted of content analysis of the semi structured interviews and the focus groups transcripts using Nvivo software. The semi structured interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and encoded. Based on the existing literature, the coding process was mainly deductive but was also flexible (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Subsequently, some developed codes (65) were deleted, others were added, and others were merged, ending up with 42 codes. Thus, the codes were connected to seven themes, taking into account the CMO configurations: the young people's expectations, the behavior of trainers and supervisors, the context, the supervision, the training, the professional integration, and the beneficiaries' personality. Nvivo was used to identify the most dominant codes and their connections, which were used to produce the half regularities. The codes were described using theoretical concepts to analyze factors that triggered the mechanisms responsible for the empirical observations (A. J. Fletcher, 2017).

The findings of the study allowed for the update of intervention theory as shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2. Refined theory intervention**



The summary of the results, as shown in table 2, was formulated as an answer to the question how, why, for whom, and under what circumstances did the intervention work?

**Table2.** How, Why, for Whom, and Under What Circumstances the Intervention Worked

What works?	The good contact between beneficiaries and supervisors and trainers strengthens the young people's confidence in the project team, which, according to the trainers, is necessary for the learning process. The organizational environment, the reputation of the HJ, good atmosphere, warm welcome, feedback from former beneficiaries and the nature of the training (mainly life skills) encourage young people to join the project. Familiarization is necessary to keep the beneficiaries in the project. A friendly relationship between the young person and the trainer promotes learning. Maintaining employment is mainly due to the personality of young people and working conditions. The role of the young person's close entourage is decisive: friends and family are a source of motivation and the role of the latter in the young person's education influences his ability to adapt in the company.
For whom	It seems that motivated, adaptable, better and faster learners, educated, patient, serious, interested, self-reliant, diligent, and self-confident beneficiaries are more likely to obtain and maintain a job.
How	Trainers and supervisors build a relationship of trust that encourages young people to get involved and improve their skills and behavior. The young person's personality, adaptability, maturity, and education are determining factors in the professional integration process. Young people appreciate the caring nature of the trainers. In addition to the values shared within the HJ, the supervisors and trainers are animated by a love for associative work. Young people sometimes refuse a job because they cannot afford to pay the costs of mobility. The supervisors opt for direct contact with the parents to increase their involvement and to follow the young people's progress. The organizational support to the Najah project, the willingness of the supervisors and trainers to be charitable, and their attachment to the HJ reinforce their commitment and involvement. The adhesion of the young people to the project is due to their willingness to improve their living conditions and the commitment and involvement of the supervisors and trainers. Maintaining employment depends on the commitment of companies as well as the personality, adaptability, and sociopsychological factors of young people.
Under what circumstances	The social vulnerability and dependence of young people on their families hamper their professional integration and ability to stay employed; The partnership with the companies is not stable and depends strongly on their requirements of productivity and profitability; The support of HJ management with a positive working environment contribute to the involvement and commitment of the supervisors and trainers; The fame and history of the HJ contribute to the adhesion of the beneficiaries; Organizational constraints: team is not dedicated to the project and dependence on other stakeholders: the main partner, AA, is in France.

### III. Discussion

The results of the research have increased our confidence in applying RE to describe deeply and explain how and in what circumstances supporting and educating interventions work in professional insertion of young people in difficulty.

This research was structured according to the Pawson and Tilley model. The starting point was a theory derived from a hypothesis formulated through the literature and the stakeholders. It was then tested and refined through a case study.

The study aimed not to produce generalizable results but to understand and explain the process of professionally integrating young people in difficult situations. Nevertheless, the theoretical conclusions can be nested within a broader research framework. The results of RE can generate transferable lessons for similar projects (Wand et al., 2011). However, the ambition is not to attain perfect certainty about mechanisms but to formulate hypotheses about their existence and to look for evidence in an attempt to increase or decrease confidence in such hypotheses (Befani & Stedman-Bryce, 2017).

However, the research has some limitations. First is the bias of the face-to-face interviews with the different stakeholders. Secondly, families, whose influence is decisive in professional integration, were not interviewed due to the difficulty of reaching them. Thirdly, the research was limited to a focus group in which the findings were presented to key stakeholders to receive their feedback, whereas RE advocates iterations (CMO of the updated theory, testing of hypotheses, and refinement of the updated theory) to refine the theory. Finally, the research was time consuming to assess rigorously the probative value of different pieces of evidence.

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