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**Paone Molly (6605)**

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# Experiences of a recreation based support program in a Norwegian city: young people's voices

Molly Paone

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Supervisor Professor Dr. Paul Anthony Stephens

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# Abstract

**Title:** Experiences of a recreation based support program in a Norwegian city: young people's voices

**Author:** Molly Paone

**Key words:** youth voice; positive youth development; trauma informed care; trauma; resilience; peer support; recreational therapy; activity mastery; relationship building; youth participation; youth empowerment; transition to adulthood; social exclusion; strengths perspective; ethnography; social work; recreational programs; support programs; youth programs

Youth with difficulties in their home lives are an often invisible minority in Norway. Norwegian policy makers fund many youth recreational programs attempting to interrupt the social exclusion of young people. Yet, concerns persist that universalist approaches may not be effective at targeting marginalized populations. This study provides an ethnographic look at one recreation based program using trauma-informed care to provide specialized support for young people with difficulties in their home lives. Through over-night camp experiences Ventilene seeks to offer opportunities to accomplish activities and to nurture positive peer and mentor relationships.

In my research, I highlight the voices of some of the young people in the Ventilene program. As a volunteer with Ventilene, I interviewed 4 participants and 2 former participants and leaders, all 18+ years old. Emphasizing their perspectives on the role of Ventilene in their lives, I explore how some of Ventilene's stated goals compare with what the young people think about the program. Across a month of weekend camps I also conducted overt participant observation with about 20 youth participants and 10 adult leaders. These observations included the experiences of minors and illustrate Ventilene's practices.

A thematic analysis of the data characterizes Ventilene as a safe space to be seen, heard, and accepted. Interview participants expressed the sense of belonging they developed by having this space to build loving relationships with peers and mentors with similar difficulties. Some interview participants indicate these relationships helped to diminish their risk of social exclusion and suicide. Concerning youth participation and empowerment, I recommend Ventilene offer more leadership and cooperative power together opportunities for young people. Doing so may empower the young people in their transition to adulthood.

These findings are relevant to Norwegian policy seeking to interrupt social exclusion. Beyond the Norwegian context, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child article 31 guarantees all children the right to recreation. Ventilene uses many intuitive practices which could be replicable in a variety of settings. As recreation programs continue to develop globally, it is important to give their potential as a youth outreach space more consideration. Developing recreational programs targeting an under-served population of young people may better provide them with specialized supports and empowering relationships.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction & Context

## 1.1 Introduction

In 2017, Norway drew international attention when it was named the happiest country in the world by the World Happiness Index. This assessment paints Norway as an excellent nation to grow up in, with some of the most committed legislation on children's rights and the lowest average of material deprivation in the world (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, 2017). Yet, even in Norway young people can face significant social challenges.

As in most countries, the lives of many young people in Norway have been touched by difficult conditions in the home. A report on Norwegian Youth Policy by a council of European Partnership experts urges readers to remember that wealth does not guarantee happiness. Specifically it states: "Although most children and young people in Norway live in safe and good economic conditions, lack of care, poverty, violence, drug use, sexual abuse, and difficulties at school are a part of everyday life for an increasing number of children in Norway" (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 20).

Unlike most countries, Norway has an extensive social democratic welfare state designed to promote social responsibility and equality. Within this context, a variety of social supports exist to help young people facing social challenges. The aforementioned report on Norwegian Youth Policy (Wolf et al, 2004) warns the effectiveness of these services can be undermined by a societal unwillingness to recognize and address the problems some young people face. Among the European council, "There was a sense that perhaps Norway had become too comfortable – possibly to the point of complacency— about the needs of those young people who were not growing up in a secure environment. Such challenges had, too often, remained invisible" (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 20).

This warning is important. Even so, it is encouraging to note that there are many Norwegians working conscientiously with young people who are at risk of social exclusion. This study focuses on one such program named Ventilene. Ventilene is at the fore-front of the outreach work to connect with young people at risk of social exclusion in the West coast city of Stavanger, Norway.

## 1.2 Study Aim

Over the past year, I have volunteered with Ventilene. Over the past semester, I have conducted research on Ventilene's work with young people. Specifically, I have investigated the experiences of a group of 20 Norwegian young people who participate in the local Ventilene program. In this study, I have sought to make the voices of some of these young people better known.

Ventilene not only believes that there is *Room For All* young people in society, but also strives to make this happen (cf. Kirkens, 2017). The aim of Ventilene is to help the young people cope and increase resilience through accepting relationships and activities. During over-night camps on weekends or school vacations, young people participate in an array of recreational activities intended to help them socialize, build relationships, and gain confidence in the activities and in themselves. Ventilene is funded by the Stavanger branch of the Norwegian Church City Mission (Kirkens Bymisjon). The Church City Mission supports Ventilene to provide safe and fun over-night camps for youth with difficulties in their home lives.

Young people come to Ventilene for a variety of reasons. Many are in contact with social services owing to challenges at home. Such challenges may involve, out-of-home-care



arrangements, mental health difficulties, substance use, refugee experiences, abuse, and neglect. The program recognizes that many of the young people have life missions that may remain unresolved and out of their control, such as healing a sick or addicted parent, or reuniting with loved ones separated by conflict (Kirkens, 2015).

For present research purposes, I have mainly used participant observation and interviews. The participants in the participant-observation include both Ventilene's participants and leaders. For the interviews, four current and two former participants over 17 years old were selected. Older participants were selected both to assuage ethical concerns about interviewing minors, and to emphasize the voices of young people with more experience in the program. I collected my data while volunteering for Ventilene. I joined Ventilene for three full weekend camps in the period of February-March, 2018. This research was overseen by my thesis supervisor, Paul Stephens, a professor of social pedagogy at the University of Stavanger.

This is an ethnography, set in one specific context in one specific time frame. Thus, generalizability is limited. Still, the voices of the young people included in this text have valuable perspectives on the outcomes of this recreation-based support program. Along the way, I also consulted a number of official documents which have a bearing on Ventilene's theory and practice. Existing literature on positive youth development, recreational therapy, empowerment, child participation, trauma, trauma-informed care, and resilience were drawn upon to position the meaning of observations and responses in a broader context. Based on participants' perspectives, the literature, and my observations in the field, I propose some recommendations pertaining to both Ventilene and recreational programs more broadly.

### 1.3 Rationale for study

One of the first things that attracted me to Ventilene was their use of recreation to create a therapeutic setting. Much of my professional experience has been related to recreation. In the United States, in my home state of New Hampshire, I worked for four years at a summer camp, first as a counselor (in the summer camp sense of the word) and later on the management team. While studying for my bachelors degree in Child Development, I volunteered as an event planner at my alma mater Colby-Sawyer College and stayed on to work there for a year after graduation as well. Through these experiences, I have seen firsthand how recreational activities can breakdown social barriers and help participants connect, challenge themselves, and grow. In event planning, recreation may offer people an escape in stressful times, or expose them to new ideas or experiences. In the summer camp setting there is the opportunity to work with recreation on a more individualized level. It makes me smile to think of my campers who were anxious at the start of the summer, ending the summer with greater confidence, and usually some new skills and friends too.

Sometimes returning campers would arrive at camp the next Summer with their confidence lowered from the stress of the school year, from difficulties at home, or from being outside of a fun and accepting environment for such a long time. A lot of the young people I have known who struggle in the rigidly structured environment of school, are able to thrive at camp. I wished there was a way for campers to get to reunite during the school year, accomplish their favorite activities, and be confidently themselves in this more accepting setting. When I first heard about Ventilene, I had a thrill of recognition. I realized this vague hope of mine actually existed in an exciting dynamic intervention program. Of course, I immediately wanted to get involved. My excitement to investigate the therapeutic effects of a long-term recreational activity program was the initial point of interest for this whole dissertation.

The benefits of recreational activities for young people are recognized in the preeminent document on international children's rights, The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child. The UNCRC secures the right of all youth to recreational time in article 31, which calls upon nations to "recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural

life and the arts” (Committee, 2013). In accordance with ratifying the UNCRC, Norway is compelled to respect, secure, and encourage the rights to recreational activities of all children. Norway seems to be following through on that commitment, with nearly 85% of Norwegian children participating in some form of organized activity (Norwegian, 2017). Studying the therapeutic outcomes of recreation based programs can better equip program providers with strategies for practices and interventions that encourage positive youth development. Implementing intentionally empowering recreational programs could help promote positive youth development, not only in Norway but internationally as well.

## 1.4 Context

What follows is my attempt to weave together the pieces of Norwegian culture and policy that I found relevant to this study. I do so with full acknowledgement that, as an outsider, my understandings of the Norwegian context are limited. Wherever possible I position literature and the lived-in expertise of the study participants over my own knowledge.

### 1.4.1 About Norway

This ethnography is rooted in a very specific context. As a nation, Norway is unique in many ways. It has great financial wealth, a culture predominantly homogenous in race and religion, and a relatively peaceful history. With a total population of 5.3 million, Norway is the 119<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world by total population, but ranks significantly higher as the 62<sup>nd</sup> largest country in the world by total geographic area (UN CountryStats, 2017; Bergan, 2017). About 40% of the population lives in the Southeast near the capital of Oslo, while the rest are spread out along the long West coast in cities, towns, and wilderness. Up until the 1960s, the majority of Norwegians lived off of farming and fishing. From the 1960s onward Norway has profited from a booming oil industry, which generated new jobs, technologies, and enhanced the services of the pre-existing welfare state (Storø, 2008). Norway’s national values are at once progressive and deeply embedded in tradition.

Norway’s social welfare system dates back to the 1800s. Following Norway’s occupation by Nazi Germany in World War II, the welfare system was consolidated and took on the social-democratic model it still exemplifies today (Storø, 2008). In the social-democratic welfare model social services are universal and public expenditure is high. Income redistribution is prioritized through heavy taxation on wages to minimize social stratification (Esping-Anderson, 1990).

Norwegians are largely supportive of the social welfare system. The free education, health services, public child care, unemployment support and old age pensions it guarantees to all citizens and most legal residents is a source of pride for many Norwegians (Wolf et al, 2004). Norwegians are described as generally having “a strong spirit of volunteerism,” positive attitudes about globalization, concern for protecting the environment, and a strong core belief in social responsibility (Huang, 2013 p. 3). Supporting the state as a system, however, does not necessarily mean approving the state’s involvement in their lives as individuals. Some Norwegians perceive state mechanisms to be intrusive, especially in regards to family life. This can create walls between public and private life (Wolf et al, 2004). The localized structure of the welfare state can also render the delivery of services and implementation of policy inconsistent between localities (Storø, 2008). That some services are popularly believed to be better or worse in different municipalities is a common criticism of the welfare state.

This study focuses on a population within the city of Stavanger, located on the South West coast in the municipality of Rogaland. The 4<sup>th</sup> largest city in Norway, Stavanger is small by global standards with a population just over 133 thousand (Statistics Norway, 2018). It is the type of city where one can find nearly every kind of shop, service, or restaurant, yet also find the streets deserted at 6:00pm. That is to say, Stavanger is an affluent, but quiet city. Hailed as

the oil capital of Norway, Stavanger has attracted many jobs and expats since the 1980s (Wolf et al, 2004). The industrial complex is strikingly cast against a broader natural backdrop of fjords, coasts, sea and farms. In Stavanger, one is never far from a factory or a mountain view.

#### 1.4.2 Growing up in Norway

*Youth Policy* - Concepts about what it means to be a child, youth, or adult vary across countries and impact the rights and treatment of people of all ages. In some contexts children are perceived as individual human *beings* with their own thoughts and agency, while in other settings children are considered human *becomings* who need to be protected and controlled by adults (Stoecklin, 2013). In the context of Norway, young people are seen as resources and given a relatively high level of respect and autonomy. Youth are recognized as human *beings* traveling along “a bridge between childhood and adulthood” (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 19).

Norway has ratified and implemented many of the articles of the *United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*. Everyone under 18 in Norway is legally considered children and protected by both the national *Child Welfare Act* and the *UNCRC* (Bergan, 2017; Norwegian, 2017). The Norwegian *Child Welfare Act* offers no definition or specific policies for “youth.” The act seems to indirectly identify young people between the ages of 12 and 23 years old as “youth” however, through policies that give young people of this age range greater autonomy and access to services. For example, the views of children 12 years and older must be heard and weighed in child welfare service decisions, and child welfare measures can be voluntarily extended up until the age of 23 years (Bergan, 2017). This latter law protects young people transitioning out of care in Norway from an abrupt loss of social supports upon turning 18 (Storø, 2008). Ventilene is included as one of those supports. Practically this means the child welfare services will pay for young people to attend Ventilene until the age of 23.

Bearing this legislation and the age range of Ventilene’s participants in mind, for the purpose of this study I will define youth as young people between the ages of 12 and 23 years old. The term *youth* and the term *young people* are approved and used interchangeably by the United Nations Secretariat (UN, 2013). Within the Norwegian context there is preference for the term *young people*, although this study’s participants seem comfortable labelling themselves *youth*. I will utilize both of these terms as appropriate during this study.

*Youth Participation* – There is a strong emphasis in Norwegian policy on the participation of children and young adults. In the opinion of The European review board for Norwegian Youth Policy (2004), there is something specifically Norwegian about this emphasis, stating “the participation of young people in their own life domains is patently about a preparation for participation in adult life, which is a governing expectation of all individuals in Norwegian society” (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 19).

The social responsibility to participate and contribute to society is a part of Norwegian culture instilled in young people since childhood. Young people in Norway can independently access free health and psychological care as young as 13 years old. They also often have opportunities to travel and study internationally, and more than ever young people are pursuing higher education. Young people in Norway appear to be more engaged in political, environmental, and humanitarian issues than the total population. (Huang, 2013).

In Norwegian history, youth participation is linked with youth recreational organizations. After the establishment of the modern welfare state in 1946, the National Office of Sport was also in charge of youth policy. Perhaps this early link between leisure policies and youth services is part of why non-governmental youth organizations remain a “cornerstone of Norwegian youth policy” still today (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 15). It appears there was an early recognition that investing in constructive and healthy leisure activities could serve as preventative social measures, particularly for young people.

Participation in social activities is not exclusively for the young in Norway. Looking at the total population, 90% have experienced membership in a club or organization (Wolf et al, 2004). This figure provides some indication of the popularity of organized activities among adults as well. Given the recreational focus of Ventilene, this is a relevant element of the cultural context to consider. Playing football or music, taking participants rock-climbing or to the theater, are measures that not only offer relief in the current moment, but may help participants develop the mastery to continue these activities into adulthood. There is potential for recreation to connect participants with social networks and supports beyond their Ventilene experience.

*Social Challenges* – Looking at young people in Norway from a broad perspective, it can be easy to forget there are many young people who do have significant difficulties in their lives. The World Happiness index (2017) cautions that in rich countries financial stability is not as great a predictor of well-being as mental-health and personal relationships (Helliwell et al, 2017). There are concerns that mental health difficulties are on the rise in the Norwegian population as a whole, and the population of young people in care specifically (Storø, 2008; Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014).

The transition to adulthood is longer for young people now than for previous generations, leaving them exposed to greater uncertainty and vulnerability for an extended period of time (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). These uncertainties can be extenuated for young people with difficulties in the home (Storø, 2008; Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014). One commissioner articulated the disparity between the material resources of Norway and the uncertainty many young people feel as: “we have got everything, and that is all we have got” (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 21). From a strengths perspective, however, I maintain that having “everything” includes a variety of strengths and resources that can promote the resilience of young people and facilitate their transition to adulthood.

Within the context of Norway, there has been significant strides towards overcoming child poverty and promoting child-centered policies. With the majority of Norwegian children living lives that look secure on paper, the needs of children growing up in insecure or difficult environments often do not get the specialized care they may need (Wolf et al, 2004). Programs that promote secure environments and help to ease stresses on mental health are needed in this context. As the European review of Norwegian Youth Policy recommended: “Traditional universal social planning models of youth policy need to be replaced by measures targeting particular groups and meeting the needs of individuals” (Wolf et al, 2004 p. 19). Ventilene fits within the popular recreation model of youth outreach in Norway. At the same time it is innovative in how it specializes in caring for a population of young people who may not feel recognized by more universal social programs.

### 1.4.3 Background on Ventilene

Ventilene began in 2004 with a Summer camp near Oslo, and has now expanded to a year round camp in Stavanger. Ventilene is technically open to all young people, although their focus remains on including young people with difficulties in the home. The director says this is necessary to assure specialized care, because “if there are too many what our kids [consider to be] successful young people, doing everything right, never had a problem in their life, then it’s gonna be a scary place for the young carers. We need most of [the participants] to be young carers.”

The director collectively refers to all the young people in Ventilene as young-carers. In the director’s definition, young-carers “can be children with parents with alcohol problems, mental illness, violence problems, it can be refugees, it can be that their mom has cancer, it can be that their sister has Downs and needs much attention from the parents.” This definition encapsulates a broader spectrum of experiences than the literature on young-carers. Primarily the term refers to children who have a parental role-reversal with their caregiver(s), meaning the young person’s role in the family is more of the caregiver or support system to the parent

(Ellingson, Shemmings and Størksen, 2011). Because the experiences of Ventilene's participants are so diverse, I do not believe all their participants would fit into the text book definition of young-carer. It may speak to the spirit of inclusiveness of Ventilene that they use the term to capture a wide variety of experiences.

The director of Ventilene was a young-carer herself. Growing up in a home with alcoholism and violence, she publicly advocated for the unique needs of this often invisible population since the age of 16. Speaking of her experience, the director says "I always felt that young-carers need something kind of different because I felt very lonely, despite I had many friends. And also I think many of us feel a bit different and feel we don't have all the social codes or whatever, so in kind of normal activities it can be difficult." This experience became a source of inspiration for the design and practice of Ventilene.

As an adult working for Stavanger's child welfare services, Ventilene's director was invited by Oslo's child welfare services to run a summer camp for young-carers outside of Oslo from 2004-2008. In 2009, a donor in Stavanger wanted to sponsor the continuation of the program in the Stavanger area. Ventilene left Oslo at that time and was reborn as a project of the Church City Mission in Stavanger, independent of state services. In 2015 Ventilene was fully incorporated under the Church City Mission, this allowed the director to work with Ventilene full time through the program's rapid expansion.

According to the director Ventilene has grown from a budget of 80,000 to 8 million Norwegian Kroners (8,300 to 830,500 euros) in the past few years. In addition to summer camps, now they also offer weekend camps and camps over school vacations. Up until last summer they were staying in a large cabin in a town across the bay from Stavanger. This was a tight space with up to 20 people staying there. They have since moved to a hotel closer to Stavanger, but still among nature. Eventually, the Church City Mission wants to expand the program to more hotels in more parts of the country. Her goal for now is to grow the teams they have, in the space they have, to accommodate 20 participants and 5-10 adults leaders on each team. Currently Ventilene can accommodate about 12 participants and 5 leaders per team on each of their 3 teams, so this goal could include nearly double the amount of participants. She also wants them to feel like the hotel is really theirs, to have more of a sense of communal ownership over the program.

Entering into Ventilene in this time of expansion, I was met with many attitudes about the expansion. From the leaders who view it as positive but overwhelming, to some participants who are thrilled that the program will be able to help more young people, and other participants who liked the program better before. I did not have any questions in my interview guide about the program expansion, and yet everyone commented on it. I choose not to focus on this transition in my study, but it seems to be on everyone's minds. This could provide some context to some of what I observed and was told about.

Youth often find their way to Ventilene following referral by social services, most commonly through child welfare services, their professional foster care placement (known in Norwegian as *bufetat*), or mental health services. Some of the young people live in foster care, some live with their families, and some live in institutional care, such as refugee resettlement centers. Some children voluntarily join Ventilene, for others its part of their service plan. For children who are in professional foster care placements, their foster-carers are entitled to annual time-off, including two consecutive weeks of leave (Helland and Smith, 2003). According to the director, Ventilene is the only program locally that can offer a recreational placement for two weeks. For children with a professional foster-care placement, attending Ventilene in the summertime is something of an obligation. The social services pay Ventilene for any young people who join the program through their referral. The expenses for other participants are paid through additional grants or donations. Nobody pays out-of-pocket for attending Ventilene, so the camps are in effect free of charge for the young people and their families.

From my conversation with the director and my review of the existing literature about Ventilene on the Church City Mission website (Kirkens, 2015; Kirkens, 2017), I have assembled a list of six of Ventilene's main goals. This list may not be exhaustive, but it will be the goals investigated in this study. They are as follows, to:

*Provide a caring environment*

*Provide opportunities to socialize and build relationships*

*Foster self-esteem through activity mastery*

*Give participants the feeling of being seen with dignity*

*Empower participants to recognize their resources and use them*

The goals of Ventilene echo several of the goals stated in Norway's policies on child rights and participation. Norway recognizes youth organizations have a special capacity to interrupt patterns of social exclusion, arguing youth organizations are, "not only a potential basis for local community and democracy, but also a substitute for it, when family and other local ties are absent" (Wolf et al, 2004 p.16). Ventilene endeavors to provide youth with a supportive, family-like community. Through experiences of relationship building, activity mastery, and stress relief Ventilene aims to empower young people with internal and external resources valuable in their transition to adulthood, and beyond. Investigating to what extent Ventilene is meeting these goals, and what the Ventilene experience is like for participants, can inform how Ventilene fits into Norwegian policy priorities.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

In this review, I examine some of the literature related to youth development, empowerment, and trauma. Firstly, an overview of positive youth development and adolescent needs is presented. The unique needs of young people facing different social barriers are considered. Considerations on the complex process of transition to adulthood round out the review of adolescent development.

Because Ventilene shares several common practices and goals with recreational therapy and empowerment programs, literature on these topics is also considered. The importance of recreation, leisure, and the esteem and relationships they can develop are discussed. To look at empowerment among marginalized young adults in Norway, it is necessary to consider what power and empowerment mean. Using Tew (2006) matrix of power relations framework, I summarize some recommendations for applying empowerment to practice with young people.

In the second half of this review, the topics of trauma, trauma-informed care, and resilience are covered in some depth. Most of the participants in Ventilene, as well as some of the adult leaders, have experienced childhood trauma. Creating a safe space for trauma recovery is at the core of Ventilene's practice. Trauma and the effects of trauma are defined. A study (Defrain et al, 2008) offering perspectives from survivors of childhood trauma helps to establish the potential long-term effects of trauma. This leads into the review of trauma-informed care (TIC), a strengths-based framework that fosters awareness and safety for trauma victims as they rebuild control in their lives (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). Lastly, resilience is discussed with an emphasis on the emancipatory and strengths-based perspectives introduced in empowerment and TIC practices. Resilience, like strengths perspective, is a theme that runs throughout this study.

Throughout the literature review I draw connections between Ventilene's stated goals and the practices recommended in relevant literature. Connections between the literature and the findings will be developed further in the findings and discussion chapters.

### 2.2 Youth Development and Needs

Adolescence, for many young people, can be a time of new opportunities and challenges. Characterized by growing maturity and exploration, and decreased reliance on caregivers, adolescence is often a time of change and questioning (Allen, 2008). Relationships with caregivers shift in adolescence, but they retain much of the same importance as in childhood. For children who live with their biological families, the attachment patterns they developed in infancy are likely to continue into adolescence (Bowlby, 1988). Children with different caregivers than their biological family, may continue the same attachment patterns as before, or change as they adjust to relationships with new caregivers (Ellingson et al, 2011).

Attachment, in the developmental sense, refers to the bonds between children and caregivers that facilitate a child's growth and exploration. When bonds are close, consistent, and safe, the attachment is considered secure and the caregiver environment is considered a "secure-base" for child development (Howe, 2005). For young people who have a "secure-base" with healthy attachment to their caregivers, they often feel confident to leave the home and explore. When stressful situations occur, young people with a secure-base can return to the comfort of their home and the advice of primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1988). When young people do not have this secure-base, when home is not a safe place and caregivers are not trusted to help

relieve stressful situation, it is more difficult for young people to gain the confidence and resources needed “to explore, manage, and master new situations and challenges” (Ellingson et al, 2011 p. 213). For young people without this secure-base at home, support programs may be able to provide them with confidence and relationships that encourage their exploration and positive youth development.

### 2.2.1 Positive Youth Development

Historically, intervention programs for adolescence have tended to be problem-focused and preventative. They emphasize risks and often hold individuals, or specific communities, responsible for preventing wider social problems (Bowers et al, 2014). Larson (2000; cited in Eccles and Gootman, 2002) was the first to suggest a shift towards a more strengths-based approach with his conceptualization of positive youth development (PYD). PYD was then developed into a framework for youth program practice by Eccles and Gootman (2002). Instead of focusing on risk prevention, positive youth development programs promote 5 attributes theorized to be at the core of positive youth development: confidence, competence, character, connection, and caring (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Also known as the 5 Cs, these attributes are understood to be influenced by both individual and environmental factors. Ideally, PYD programs involve elements of both personal growth and contributions to the community in order to promote positive development at both internal and external levels (Bowers et al, 2014).

Similarly, Ventilene’s participants often have complex risks in their lives, yet the focus remains on the strengths of each young person and promoting their positive development. By believing in each young person, and welcoming volunteers from all backgrounds, Ventilene also illustrates the inclusiveness preferred in PYD programs. PYD researchers claim, “evidence-based actions can be taken to enhance the chances for thriving among all young people” and “every person has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the positive development of youth” (Bowers et al, 2014 p. 865). Ventilene, and PYD programs more broadly, may offer an accessible opportunity for participants and leaders to learn and develop together.

A criticism of this style of program is that it does not go for the root of the problem. Instead, risk reduction is seen more as a byproduct rather than the focus of PYD programs. Is an indirect approach to risk reduction enough for young people with difficulties in the home? Adolescence can come with additional developmental challenges and needs for young people experiencing multiple risk factors, social, emotional or behavioral difficulties, social exclusion, or alternative care placements.

### 2.2.2 Specific needs of youth population under study

*Youth experiencing multiple risk factors* – Even within the strengths-perspective, I must acknowledge the extensive literature on the increased likelihood of negative outcomes for youth with multiple psychosocial risk factors. Multiple studies have illustrated how young people with psychosocial risk factors are more likely to engage in behaviors that are harmful for development. They are at increased risk for drug use, violence, delinquency, and early sexual activity (Morton and Montgomery 2013; Howe 2005). Because of these risks, adolescence can be a crucial developmental window to reach young people experiencing multiple risk factors and strengthen their protective factors. Developing “adolescents’ attitudes, skills, and relationships may be able to have far-reaching impacts on young people’s ability to overcome adversity and make successful transitions to adulthood” (Morton and Montgomery, 2013 p.22). Youth with multiple risk factors can also be youth with multiple protective factors. Strengthening these protective factors should be a main priority for PYD programs working with this population.



*Youth with social, emotional, behavioral difficulties (SEBD)* - SEBD includes a broad spectrum of difficulties such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, attention deficit disorders, and clinical level behavioral challenges such as conduct disorder (Flynn, 2013). This is a population whose members are often labelled “troubled” in their youth, and who only feel seen when they are doing something “wrong” or getting in trouble (Masten, 2011). Flynn (2013) engaged students from this population in a youth voice study in which the young people were empowered to dialogue with teachers about their perceptions of how the school environment could be improved for them. Young people articulated how frustration or distress about being different sometimes manifested into increased behavioral difficulties. They also told teachers they would like to be seen on a more personal level with recognition for their achievements, not only their difficulties. By the end of the study, participants reported significantly improved confidence and sense of comfort in school, even if their relationships only improved with one or two teachers (Flynn, 2013). The voices of these young people lend support to prior research findings that when their contributions and insights are respected, young people develop a sense of ownership over their experiences. This ownership can improve confidence and behavioral self-regulation (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; cited in Flynn, 2013), and should be a priority for PYD programs working with this population.

*Youth with social exclusion* – Flynn’s (2013) interventions had less of an affect on young people who felt silenced in additional areas of their life. This speaks to the cyclical nature of social exclusion; social exclusion can lead to feeling different, and feeling different can lead to isolation and further social exclusion (Jarczyńska and Walczak, 2017). Jarczyńska and Walczak (2017) refer to the empowerment of socially excluded people as a “continuous and difficult process” in which the creation and maintenance of a safe platform for dialogue is essential (p. 196). Young people who have been excluded and silenced in multiple areas of their lives, for example labeled a trouble maker at school and neglected at home, may need interventions that are based on developing trusting relationships and a safe space to share their feelings. Since Ventilene aims to provide a safe platform for its participants, this organization might be able to help young people interrupt patterns of social exclusion.

*Youth in Foster Care* – Youth in foster care are often considered a vulnerable or at risk group. In addition to the concerns about foster children healing from past or ongoing trauma, there are also concerns about their attachment. Research from Norway indicates that children in foster care often have healthy attachments to their foster family, and sometimes to both their foster family and their biological family (Ellingson et al, 2011). In the former group, youth often have been at one foster placement for an extended period and come to regard their carers as their main family. In the latter group, connections with the biological family have been maintained even while the youth becomes more comfortable in their foster home. This outcome can be facilitated by cooperation among the family groups and sensitivity to the interests and needs of the child. This attachment pattern seems to be the most common among young people in foster care in Norway, with 42% of young people surveyed expressing some attachment to both their biological and foster families (Ellingson et al, 2011). Although navigating a sense of belonging to multiple families comes with its own challenges, it is generally better developmentally than feeling no sense of belonging in the home (Gilligan, 1997; Ellingson et al, 2011). Young people in these categories benefit from living in a home where they have a secure-base, and some parental figure they feel they can rely on.

Some Norwegian young people in Ellingson et al (2011) study did not manifest any attachment to their foster family. About 13% of the youth interviewed identified their birth family, “as their sole family; and the family to which they would return” (pp. 314). Typically these adolescents had intense feelings of loyalty to their birth parents, most often to the birth mother. Many of them were identified as young-carers with experiences of role-reversal parental behavior (Ellingson et al, 2011). Without a secure base in their foster homes, these young-carers may need additional supports, like Ventilene, to help them achieve the security and confidence needed to explore and cope with the challenges of adolescence.

### 2.2.3 Transition to adulthood

In many nations, young people today are growing up in a very different world than their parents did. Growing up in a rapidly changing and globalizing world, young people today have to navigate more risks and uncertainty than previous generations. Nobody is certain how the world will look in the coming decades, or what sorts of education or skills young people will need to fit in or succeed (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Globalization offers opportunities as well, such as increased awareness of other cultures and ease of building relationships across great distances. There is some evidence that young people today have greater feelings of interconnectedness with the broader world and less fear of outsiders (Asay and Defrain, 2012). Young people these days may have more opportunities than their parents did, but there are challenges about growing up in a newly globalized world.

A wider variety of routes into adulthood means that young people face both more risks and more opportunities. Longer periods of transition to adulthood can have negative consequences for their wellbeing and financial stability (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Additionally, the inflated importance of credentials, such as having a college degree, give an increased focus on individual responsibility for success. Young people often feel pressure to succeed from many sides; “individual accountability and achievement are values which are constantly reinforced by the school and the media, yet in reality individuals often remain powerless” (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007 p. 9). Increased individualization has led to more attributing social issues as individual problems.

For young people who feel they have little control in their lives, this pressure to take individual accountability for their transition to adulthood can be overwhelming. Prolonged transitions to adulthood can have negative impacts on the well-being and empowerment of youth. This is especially true for young people transitioning out of foster care, who have higher rates of “psychological homelessness,” mortality, and mental health problems in early adulthood (Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014 p. 73). In order to minimize risks and promote empowerment, “it is imperative that social services find ways to provide alternative sources of support to young care leavers” who need a “gradual and flexible transition process based on their needs and their level of maturity” (Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014 p. 84). Transitioning to adulthood can be a difficult task for any adolescent, but for young people with complex social barriers extra support may significantly improve the transition process.

## 2.3 Recreational Therapy

Ventilene does not perform therapy or follow any specific therapeutic theories. Ventilene does have several shared characteristics and goals with recreational therapy, namely: interventions through planned activities, development of helping relationships, a supportive environment, and improving the adaptation and well-being of participants (Shank and Coyle, 2002). Ventilene’s process however, is less formulaic. Recreational therapy involves assessing the strengths and health needs of clients, planning appropriate interventions, implementing these plans through deliberate activities, and then evaluating if the interventions met the needs of the client (Austin, Crawford, McCormick, and Van Puymbroeck, 2015). Ventilene’s flexible and group-based activities are less formal and systematic.

Recreational activities can have a variety of therapeutic benefits. Most people have personally experienced the positive effects recreation can bring. Whether its feelings of personal satisfaction at finishing a puzzle, or feeling enlightened while looking out over mountaintops at the end of a hike, recreation can help us feel restored and refreshed. Activities also have social benefits. They can provide opportunities to learn from role models, socialize with peers, and learn how to manage reactions to a variety of potentially stressful situations (Austin et al, 2015). These challenges can help to change behavior and build habits that promote well-being. Recreational activities can also help with goal setting, as participants set and achieve goals in activities it can open dialogue about setting and attaining goals over-all (Shank and

Coyle, 2002). In recreational therapy, these outcomes are intentionally promoted through tools such as deliberate selection of activities, goal setting, relationship building practices, and debriefing dialogues after tasks.

Recreational therapy can also use leisure time to improve well-being. Researchers in this field, and indeed philosophers dating all the way back to Aristotle, emphasize the importance of leisure being self-determined and intrinsically motivated (Austin et al, 2015). Intrinsic motivation has been linked to the *actualization tendency* or the tendency of human beings to seek out activities that promote their own growth and fulfillment.

Intrinsic motivation itself rests on the organism's innate need for competence and self-determination. These needs in turn motivate persons to seek and to conquer optimal challenges that stretch their abilities but are within their capacities. When persons are able to achieve success, they experience feelings of competence and autonomy, along with accompanying emotions of enjoyment and excitement. (Deci and Ryan, 1985; cited by Austin et al, 2015, p. 6)

Because leisure can give people opportunities to succeed in tasks that they choose and value, leisure activities can promote personal growth and feelings of actualization.

In Ventilene, both recreation and leisure are present. The structured, intentional group activities, such as rock-climbing, white-water-rafting, or team-building games, are recreational activities that can be restorative to well-being and promote relationship building. Leisure activities can be less formal and more personalized, such as watching movies, walking along the beach, or playing card games. While leisure activities seem less intentional, they can be encouraged in intentional ways to give participants "perceived control, the opportunity to meet intrinsically motivated needs, and a means to actualize potentials and achieve high-level wellness" (Austin et al, 2015). Later our interview participants will revisit these topics of perceived control, mastery of activities, and self-actualization as they describe the contributions of the program toward their personal growth.

## 2.4 Power & Empowerment in Social Work Practice

Power and empowerment are closely linked and relational. As Pease (2002) articulates, "The way in which we conceptualize power will influence the way in which we develop strategies of social change. Different understandings of power will shape the way in which we construct models of empowerment" (p. 139). Despite the capacity of these concepts to shape models for practice and social change, social work literature does not have a clear consensus on what "power" or "empowerment" mean.

Historically, social work was primarily concerned with using protective power to meet what professionals perceived to be the needs of vulnerable populations (Bransford, 2011). Power was conceptualized primarily as a commodity some people had, and some people did not (Tew, 2006). Social work's role was more focused on treating the symptoms of powerlessness, such as hunger, poverty, or lack of safe housing, than with negotiating how to correct power imbalances. Barbara Solomon's 1976 book *Black Empowerment* lit the spark for the empowerment movement to spread throughout social work (Bransford, 2011). Despite the popularity of empowerment, researchers and practitioners continue to define and practice empowerment with great variety.

The lack of consensus on what empowerment means may lead to oversimplification of the conception of power. Many empowerment programs or campaigns have advocated for social change through the redistribution of power from the elites to the so-called oppressed. These programs regard power as a commodity which can simply be passed on like a baton in a relay race (Pease, 2002). In reality power is much more complicated than that.

Foucault (1982; cited in Pease 2002) was the first prominent voice to reject the binary of the *powerful* versus *powerless*. In his view, all individuals have some power they can operate

through their resistance or allegiance to the powers exerted on them. His concept of power recognizes that everyone has some capacity to develop empowerment, but has been criticized for failing to recognize the intersectional power relationships that make resistance easier and safer for some people than others (Pease, 2002).

More recently, the development of structural, and poststructural theories have helped to conceptualize power more complexly. Structural perspectives define power as “an antagonistic social relation of oppression, in which dominant groups are able to derive systematic benefits from their subordination of others” (Tew, 2006, p. 36). In this perspective power is not a *possession* but rather a *relationship* in which people directly or indirectly partake through their areas of privilege or oppression (Tew, 2006). Post-structuralists expanded the structuralist definition to recognize that not all power is “antagonistic;” power can be multidirectional and potentially productive. They do not consider the power of social workers to necessarily be productive, however. Post-structuralists tend to argue against social workers enforcing state approved standards of control over marginalized communities (Tew, 2006).

Responding to these critiques of social work’s professional power, feminist psychology developed the principle of *power together*. Feminist psychology agrees with the structuralist concept of power being relational, but positions service users in a more empowering stance. It specifically recognizes the individual and collective resources and strategies for coping with inequality that people facing oppression possess (Bransford, 2011). Tew argues that power together may not necessarily be a positive use of power, however, as it could be people who already have some power working together to exclude others, which he terms collusive power.

Developed from structural and feminist conceptions of power, Tew (2006) created a framework to map out the complexity of power relationships for a guide to more empowering practice. Tew defines power as “a social relation that may open up or close off opportunities for individuals or social groups” (Tew, 2006 p.165). This definition positions power as a social relationship that can be either limiting or productive. For the purposes of this study, the concept of empowerment will be drawn from Tew’s structural and feminist conception of power.

Tew’s conception of empowerment is multi-dimensional and emphasizes that practices need to be personal, flexible, and not strictly adherent to any “easily defined end-state.” Within Tew’s framework there are four main types of power relationships: protective, oppressive, cooperative, and collusive (Tew, 2006). According to Tew, empowerment, “at different times, may involve resisting oppressive or collusive modes of power, and exploring new possibilities for constructing or harnessing productive modes of power together with, and on behalf of, others” (2006 p. 49). Here there is echoed Foucault’s notes of resistance, but framed within the practicality and flexibility of structural and feminist theory. It also intentionally positions participants as active agents able to participate and define their own empowerment.

Table 1 Matrix of Power Relations (Tew, 2006 p. 41)

	Power over	Power together
Productive modes of power	<b>Protective power</b> Deploying power in order to safeguard vulnerable people and their possibilities for advancement	<b>Co-operative power</b> Collective action, sharing, mutual support and challenge – through valuing commonality <i>and</i> difference
Limiting modes of power	<b>Oppressive power</b> Exploiting differences to enhance own position and resources at the expense of others	<b>Collusive power</b> Banding together to exclude or suppress ‘otherness’ whether internal or external

Tew (2006) offers suggestions for how professionals can appropriately channel their power while maintaining empowering practices. The matrix, reproduced right, helps to visualize the doors that may exist between areas of power in a variety of relationships (Tew, 2006). In empowering practices, productive modes of power

are the goal. Knowledge of all four types is important to understand the complex interplay of power dynamics.

Some argue that a professional approach to empowerment is paradoxical. Placing professional assumptions, goals, and practice on empowerment can reinforce the very patterns of power over service users that it aims to interrupt (Pease, 2002). On the other hand, as a profession there is inherent value in the knowledge base of social work which could benefit the empowerment of individuals and communities (Saleebey, 2009). This paradox could be part of the reason why empowerment programs are often accused of not being very empowering.

Empowerment practices are commonly defined *for* participants *by* professionals, giving professionals expert status to promote their own agendas (Tew, 2006). Foucault (1982; cited in Pease, 2002) argues that all forms of discourse have the potential to be dangerous and disempowering when they are accepted without critique, or used to justify even the subtlest acts of domination. This can lead to further oppression for marginalized communities and the systemic denial of indigenous knowledges (Pease, 2002). Perhaps, in order to truly work in an empowering way, one must always be skeptical of empowering practice and open to hearing other discourse and knowledges. Social workers can use their knowledge of theory and empowering practices reflectively to help service users find their voice and set goals, but empowerment must ultimately be based in the knowledge, strengths, and desires of the individual or community.

Social workers can resist their own power by forming dialogical relationships with the people they work with. Working together, both parties can suggest ideas, share knowledge, and tell their stories. Social workers can then help reframe stories into more affirming narratives that emphasize strengths and capacities (Saleebey, 2009). Giving people experiencing oppression an expressive platform to engage with oppressive experiences can also promote empowerment in practice (Freire, 1970). The more social workers can encourage or reinforce the existing resources and strengths of the individual and their community, the more they succeed in reducing power-imbalances.

In true cooperative power relationships, all parties should feel comfortable voicing support or challenging the views of the other parties in the relationship (Tew, 2006). There should also be respect for all parties' different areas of knowledge. Service users' lived-in expertise should be welcomed and become the basis off which professionals can use their training to suggest appropriate frameworks and resolutions. Practitioners admit their own faults and apologize for mistakes, some research indicate do so can be one of the most significant "healing events" in a professional-client relationship (Bransford, 2011 p. 39).

These suggestions for developing professional co-operative power relationships apply to working with young people, as well. Traditionally, power over has been the main type of power dynamic between adults and children. Most of the decisions in a child's life are governed by adults who have more power, not only in their relationships with children, but also in the broader society as well (Wolf et al, 2004). Proponents of youth empowerment are eager to interrupt this pattern. As Ulvik (2015) reminds professionals, a persistent power imbalance exists whenever working with young people. Even when practitioners embrace child participation, they can inadvertently reinforce power imbalances in their relationships with children. The way adults talk to young people, the way they position themselves, and the way they articulate expectations or norms, may all promote the superiority of adult ideas, language, or behavior and make the young people feel less-than in their relationships with professionals. Ulvik (2015) stresses that allowing young-people to take the lead in conversations, and participate in decisions can reduce this power imbalance.

Sometimes it is necessary to place protective power over young people. Even when making protective power decisions, having a cooperative relationship can make the experience less damaging. As Tew explains, "The deployment of protective power[...] can be most effective

when it emerges from a co-operative alliance between the worker, the service user and key members of their family or social networks” (Tew, 2006 p. 47). The more upfront service providers are about the process and challenges involved in the case from the beginning, the more young people can prepare for the possibility of protective power over them.

Tew acknowledges that some clients might not be ready to move towards empowerment right away. Proposing that everyone has some resources and strengths that can lead to greater empowerment may not be an idea that all service users agree with and embrace. Those who feel disenfranchised may not want to co-operate and make decisions with social workers at all (Tew, 2006). Bransford (2011) agrees with Tew here, adding that people who feel completely powerless may be best served by a professional who can exert some protective power over them until they feel more confident to make decisions on their own. Bransford (2011) uses examples from her own practice to illustrate that sometimes protective power is what service users *need*. Denying them this need does not better serve them, or their journey towards empowerment.

Tew’s definitions of power, and empowerment, and his matrix of power relationships provide a lens for looking at empowerment practices in this study. Power is multidimensional, and empowerment practices need to be complex, ongoing, and malleable to meet the needs of different people, in different moments, with different aspects of power (Tew, 2006). Ventilene also believes in flexible practices, perhaps their specialized care helps young people determine what they need to feel better, and, eventually, more empowered.

## 2.5 Trauma

There is a wide variety of events that can be traumatic, and a broad spectrum of consequences they can produce (Pine, Costello and Masten, 2005). Child trauma can have a wide range of effects depending on how long children are in a distressed state, or to what extent their personal well-being and social supports are affected. In some cases, mood or anxiety disorders can develop from trauma (Pine et al, 2005). On-going traumatic experiences, such as domestic violence, abuse, bullying, or neglect, have greater potential to cause long-term harm. “The most extreme traumas involve high degrees of threat, targeted directly at the child over long periods of time, that produce a loss of social supports,” (Pine et al, 2005 p. 1782). Neuroscience research indicates stress hormones from prolonged or extreme trauma can actually rewire the brain, particularly the developing brains of children and adolescents (Howe, 2005).

To establish in more detail the effects of prolonged trauma, I will highlight a study that focuses on the voices and experiences of trauma survivors. In Defrain, Jones, Skogrand and Defrain’s study *Surviving and Transcending a Traumatic Childhood* (2008), the authors used extensive narrative surveys to collect the life histories of 90 individuals who self-identified as 1.) having a traumatic childhood and 2.) transcending, or successfully moving past, that traumatic period. Reading the participants’ accounts of their childhoods, it is striking how little help they received in their youth. For me, this study served as a powerful reminder of why programs like Ventilene are needed. It is vital to develop programs that can help young people who have experienced trauma find the healing and empowerment they need to interrupt the effects of trauma.

The participants in Defrain et al (2008) endured a wide variety of trauma. For most participants, the trauma included recurring events in the home over a long period of time. 30% of the participants could not pinpoint exactly when their childhood trauma began or ended. For some it felt like the trauma was always there, from birth. Some expressed uncertainty, even in their adult lives, that the trauma was really over. The participants who did indicate when the traumatic period began and concluded endured on average 19 years of trauma, beginning in early childhood and ending in early adulthood (Defrain et al, 2008).

During the time of the trauma, the participants used a variety of mechanisms to try to cope. Some of the techniques were not very healthy or sustainable strategies, such as denial, amnesia, violence, disassociation, or self-medicating (Defrain et al, 2008). Driven into survival mode and powerless to improve their circumstances alone, many young people used any strategy that seemed to help. On the one hand, this illustrates the creativity and resilience of children to continue to try to find strategies to cope with their circumstances. On the other hand, it should never be an expectation for children to manage to cope with trauma alone.

Sadly it appears many of the participants Defrain et al (2008) did have to cope alone. 56% of their participants reported having no one who would listen to them during their period of trauma. Of the participants who did have a supportive relationship, 20% said they had a confidante in their family, 9% said teachers, 5% said friends, and 3% filled in an “other” option. Only 2% said professional counselors (Defrain et al, 2008). From their perspectives as adults, the participants believe it would have been easier to endure and move past their trauma with at least one relationship providing them with support, and comfort.

These testimonies lead the authors to claim, “we have come to believe the type of trauma the individual experienced was not the most critical issue. Rather, the alienation and fear of being alone or isolated from those who could give support was more devastating to the individuals” (Defrain et al, 2008 p. 133). Feeling alone, unseen, and unheard, not knowing who to reach out to for help, was more consistently devastating than any one type of trauma (Defrain et al, 2008). Helping young people develop supportive relationship(s) can equip them with the care and resources they need to overcome their past trauma (Defrain et al, 2008). Ventilene’s goals seem to be in direct dialogue with these findings, as they aim to provide young people with a safe space where they feel seen, heard, and empowered to forge new relationships and recognize resources that can help them.

Escaping from the source(s) of trauma is a necessary step in the process of transcending trauma (Defrain et al, 2008). This may mean getting away from the source of the trauma physically by leaving a home or relationship. That is often easier said than done. Defrain et al emphasize this should never be an expectation placed on young people alone. Social supports, both formal and informal, are responsible for assuring the safety of children (Defrain et al, 2008). Many young people chose to escape into books, nature, school work, or community activities. The mastering of activities was a common form of escape for the participants, expressing that it helped them find a sense of belonging, improved self-esteem, and sometimes helped them build relationships that improved their circumstances. As adults these activities developed into hobbies and interests that continued their self-expressive healing (Defrain et al, 2008). These findings speak to the potential long-term benefits of activity mastery, another of Ventilene’s goals.

Overall, Defrain et al (2008) captures a dynamic kaleidoscope of what trauma and recovery can look like. Participants expressed finding comfort in escape, spiritual resources, counseling, and personal achievements. These practices helped them find greater acceptance of the trauma they had endured. Despite these practices, however, trauma is still something the respondents live with on a day to day basis. Some participants expressed fear of continuing unhealthy coping techniques, or cycles of abuse with their own families. Others said their experiences of trauma motivate them to intentionally build better relationships and circumstances in their own lives, and the lives of their families (Defrain et. al 2008). Trauma and recovery are complex and affect people in different ways. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this problem. It is hopeful, however, that Ventilene’s goals aim to fill the gaps in care expressed in this study.

## 2.6 Trauma Informed Care

Ventilene’s practices are partially informed through a broader movement towards Trauma Informed Care (TIC) in Trauma Informed Services (TIS). The 4 key principles of TIC are 1.

awareness of the complexity and prevalence of trauma, 2. physical, psychological, and emotional safety for all involved in the care process, 3. opportunities for survivors of trauma to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment in their lives, and 4. strengths-based practices (Hopper, Bassuk, and Olivet, 2010). TIC uses these 4 key principles to build flexible practices that aim to be both preventative and rehabilitative. TIC uses knowledge of trauma and the emphasis on safety to prevent or minimize re-traumatizing practices or environmental triggers. Opportunities for rebuilding control, empowerment, and the use of strengths perspective are essential to the rehabilitative work (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). These principles can be applied in a wide variety of settings and across medical and social science sectors through 3 essential processes, to restore power, to create a safe context, and build self-worth. Examples of the characteristics of each are presented in the below table.

Table 2 Principles of Trauma-Informed Care (Yachtmenoff, Sundborg and Davis, 2017)

Table 2. *Principles of Trauma-Informed Care: Agencies demonstrate Trauma-Informed Care Through Practices, Policies, and Procedures*

<b>Restore Power Through:</b>	<b>Create Safe Context Through:</b>	<b>Build Self-Worth Through:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Strengths perspective</li> <li>• Skill building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical safety</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Choice</li> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Predictability</li> <li>• Clear and consistent boundaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Compassion</li> <li>• Mutuality</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Acceptance and nonjudgment</li> </ul>

Incorporating Trauma Informed Care into practice can start with more personalized and strengths based practices. According to Ventilene’s director, they use TIC with participants regularly to guide their response to participants, “when they act in different way, we always try to ask ourselves why do you feel you need to act in this way? What is behind this?” When program providers take the time to get to know participants on an individual level, they are able to facilitate conversations about trauma and recovery in a more natural and compassionate manner (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). For some programs, applying TIC means redressing diagnosis and problem focused practices. Ventilene’s child-focused, strengths-based practices make TIC easier to apply.

Another way Trauma Informed Care is applied in practice is through the use of peer supports. Having relationships with other people who identify as recovering from trauma can be mutually beneficial. Often in TIC, participants meet with peers who are further along in their recovery process who become role models, offering empathy, hope, and personalized care (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). Some studies have also found peer support to have a positive effect on participant empowerment and voice (Bluebird, 2008). Many participants and leaders at Ventilene have experienced trauma. Their knowledges and relationships could help facilitate TIC in practice.

## 2.7 Resilience

Many young people who experience trauma are still able to develop typically due to a complex matrix of characteristics collectively referred to as *resilience* (Masten, 2001). When resilience first began to be studied, it was believed to be something only young people with remarkable strengths were capable of. As the research expanded and incorporated more of the voices of trauma survivors, it became evident that resilience is a common phenomenon. Resilience resides in the optimal operation of basic human systems, such as cognition, communication, attachment, and socialization. “If those systems are protected and in good working order, development is robust even in the face of severe adversity” (Masten, 2001 p. 227). More recently the importance of the functioning of larger social systems around individuals has also been researched. Economics, freedom, and community resources can all



have an impact on resilience as well. External circumstances such as a consistent daily routine, or access to affordable support services can also enable resilience (Masten, 2014).

As the study of resilience has advanced, the focus has shifted from identifying risk factors to promoting protective factors (Masten, 2011). This shift has occurred in large part due to the criticism of resilience research for being biased and problem focused. Risk is more often the focus in psychology, the media, and culture than resilience, as exemplified by the common terminology children or families *at risk* (Saleebey, 2009). Field workers and researchers agreed that labelling certain youth *at risk* was reinforcing stereotypes and starting the conversation off on the wrong note. At the policy level, defining individuals or communities by risks can become a human rights issue giving legal legitimacy to the disempowerment and dehumanization of a marginalized group (Young et al, 2014).

Programs that promote protective factors can meet clients where they are with less judgement and more focus on strengths (Masten, 2011). This preventative work helps to foster healthy development and face risks with consideration for a “broader array of strategies for change” (Masten, 2011 p. 501). With this paradigm shift comes more attention to fostering strengths in individuals and communities. Some authors on resilience stress that many factors of resilience are common capacities held by many children. Masten (2001) is among the more optimistic researchers on resilience, asserting "Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities" (p. 235).

Seemingly in direct opposition, Defrain et al (2008) argue that there is nothing “magical” about resilience. In their research, resilience is tempered by access, power, and relationships. Their participants expressed being in survival mode as children, trapped and powerless in their circumstances, just trying to make it through each day. In Defrain et al’s view, “to describe them as having some seemingly magical capacity to save themselves would be highly inaccurate” (2008 p. 144).

Of course, it should be noted that Masten speaks about children with “normative resources” in the general sense, whereas Defrain refers to specific reflections of adults who experienced often severe childhood trauma. In a sense, the two research conclusions are posed at opposite ends of a spectrum. Masten’s view highlights an ideal set of circumstances which can boost the potential resilience of a typically developing young-person, whereas Defrain et al (2008) highlights that for young people in extreme situations of neglect or trauma, resilience alone is not enough to dramatically change or improve their circumstances. Defrain and colleagues caution professionals not to forget how robbed of power children often are:

Children, labelled resilient or not, have no genuine power in a tragically dysfunctional family; as adults we cannot afford to forget this fact or be lulled into a false sense of security that somehow, some way, the traumatized child can manage alone without the community’s intervention. (2008 p. 144)

Focus on resilience, therefore, must exist in a broader context that takes into account the strengths not only of the young person, but also the community, family, and social resources that can appropriately be employed to improve the young person’s circumstances.

Ventilene’s focus remains on fostering individual resilience. They do not take active measures to reduce current difficulties in participants lives, primarily leaving that up to the authority of social services. Instead they work on the individual level to build up qualities of resilience through supportive relationships, self-esteem, activity mastery, and development of hope.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe and justify the methodology used in this study. I begin with by presenting the theoretical considerations for this study. Here, the strengths perspective is elaborated in greater detail and the main theoretical framework for this study is introduced. Next, an overview of ethnographic research helps to frame the specific parameters for this study. The data collection processes of participant observation and semi-structured interviews are described. The sample, data management and analysis processes are also illustrated. Lastly, ethical considerations and limitations of the methodology are discussed.

### 3.2 Theoretical considerations

The strengths perspective, as established in the literature review, runs throughout this research. Together constructivism and interpretivism form the main theoretical framework for this study. In an interpretative orientation, social researchers often “change their view of the theory or literature as a result of the analysis of collected data, and so they require greater flexibility” (Bryman, 2012 p. 111). With this framework in mind, my theoretical considerations were initially broad and become more specific as themes emerged in the data. Some secondary theories connected with the findings are summarized briefly. Overall the theoretical framework of this study positions participants as social actors and experts in their own lives.

#### 3.2.1 The Strengths Perspective

The strengths perspective is wary of the traditional problems-focused practices that view individuals as predictable, controllable sources of the problem. Instead the strengths perspective recognizes people as complex agents of change, situated in complex circumstances, with their own self-determination (Healy, 2014; Saleebey, 2009). The strengths perspective is present in this study as a theoretical orientation of both Ventilene’s practices and my research.

The strengths perspective first became popular in mainstream sociological research in the 1980s; however, the perspective has longer roots in many indigenous knowledges of social work. The Maori community in New Zealand have the theory of *Te Mahi Whakamana* which seeks to “build on inherent strengths, facilitate emancipatory strategies, enhance positive self-worth, demystify and deconstruct oppression, promote wellness, service and love for others” (Young et al, 2014 p. 905). Many parallels can be drawn between *Te Mahi Whakamana* and the strengths perspective.

The strengths perspective uses eclectic practices drawing upon several additional theories. Systems theory is used to situate the narratives and strengths of clients within the context of communal or societal strengths and barriers (Asay and Defrain, 2012). Social constructivism is evident in the emphasis on equal participation of the client and professional, as well as recognition that people have the agency to dismantle harmful power dynamics within their own lives (Young et al, 2014). Focusing on solutions and strengths is a perspective shared by resilience and empowerment theories as well.

The strengths perspectives does not deny the existence of problems in people’s lives, but instead focus on the person more than the problem. In a strengths perspective, the core point is that difficulties can be improved by channeling and building strengths within the individual, family, or community (Saleebey, 2009). Similarly, Ventilene offers opportunities for the young

people to talk about challenging circumstances, but their focus remains on seeing and uplifting their individual strengths. Believing in the resilience of young people, and helping them access the hope and resources to believe in themselves, can motivate empowered changes (Young et al, 2014). This perspective serves as the connecting thread throughout this study, bringing both theory and practice together to reflect on the strengths found within Ventilene.

### 3.2.2 Main Theoretical Framework: Constructivism & Interpretivism

Social constructivism is an understanding of social reality that “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Bryman, 2012 p. 33). The main question in social ontology is whether social phenomena have an objective reality of their own, or if social phenomena are constructed through the interactions of social actors. Objectivism says social phenomena like norms, gender, race, are entities that exist independently of social actors. Social constructivists say that norms, and identities like gender and race, are socially produced and constantly revised through social interactions (Bryman, 2012). In research this has the implication of recognizing all participants, as well as the researcher, as having their own unique perspectives and agency to make change. In the context of this study, constructivist ideology positions participants as social actors who contribute to the construction of the social realities of the group, contributing to its dynamics, experiences, and outcomes.

Researchers need to be mindful of the ways in which their own construction of reality may influence participants and findings. As a researcher, I have many social identities that could affect my findings, for example: being an outsider to Ventilene and to Norway, young, white, having higher education, and not having any major biopsychosocial health difficulties. These elements of my social identity could affect what I see when I observe Ventilene, what I hear when I listen to interviews, and which findings I think are worthy of further discussion. As a researcher mindful of social constructivism, acknowledging the biases of my unique social position can help me to inspect the rationale behind my actions and analysis, and work to reduce instances of bias (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

To me, in my socially constructed perspective that this world has a lot of unnecessary suffering, social constructivism seems like an ontology of change and hope. It says, in a sense, suffering is not inevitable. “Instead of seeing culture as an external reality that acts on and constrains people, it can be taken to be an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction” (Bryman, 2012 p. 35). Viewing social problems as socially constructed, one can examine how these realities were constructed and identify areas where change is possible. On the macro level, social constructivism can be to make populations aware of the larger social impact of their individual actions. On the micro level, social constructivism can help people find more agency, hope, and make steps towards changes in their own lives (Healy, 2014). In this study the focus of social constructivism is on the micro level, offering reflections on the agency of individuals and the small community of Ventilene to create change in the lives of participants.

Constructivism is commonly used with an interpretive epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with knowledge, particularly what types of knowledge are acceptable to academic discourse. The reigning epistemology for many decades has been positivism, the heavily structured and scientific method commonly used in the natural sciences (Bryman, 2012). Interpretivists are critical of using the same methods used to measure natural phenomenon on social phenomenon, because people can behave fundamentally differently than the natural world behaves. Interpretivism positions participants as “authors of their social world rather than passive objects” and seeks to connect the actions of individuals to larger social contexts (Bryman, 2012 p. 49).

Interpretivists often approach research at the source of a social phenomenon, deriving research questions during data collection. Rather than setting up a simulated reality for participants to

engage in, interpretivism values naturalism: studying participants in their natural environment with as limited interruptions as possible (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In this study I aim to achieve naturalism by conducting participant observation with as little interruption as possible to the routines and dynamics within the group. The ultimate goal of qualitative studies based on interpretivism and constructivism is to understand the point of views of the participants. “Face-to-face participation” between researcher and participant is a preferred method for achieving this goal (Bryman, 2012). The methods of this study are face-to-face, both through participant observation and the interviews which directly seek out the points of view of participants.

### 3.2.3 Grounded Theory

Primarily concerned with developing theory out of findings, this inductive approach does not begin with a predetermined theoretical framework. The theory emerges through the analysis of findings and the collection of data, a process that often overlaps and requires extensive time in the field (Bryman, 2012). Findings are arranged into categories and the grounded theorist continues to return to the field until all categories are “saturated” with details (Bryman, 2012).

In this study, I adopted a very open-ended approach to this research, meaning I came into it with broad research questions, a semi-structured interview guide, and an open mind. Most of the literature was reviewed after organizing the findings and takes direction from the themes found in the data. I also used “categories” to present my findings. Grounded theory was not a practical framework with my limited time in the field, but my study does incorporate some grounded theory methods.

## 3.3 Ethnography

Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that interprets meaning from in-depth investigations of a specific social group or phenomenon. While there are many types of research that can be used to investigate groups of people, their actions, and environment, ethnography is specific in the emphasis on understanding the social setting from the perspective of participants. Ethnography is usually framed in a social constructivist understanding that people are social actors who influence their environment (Bryman, 2012). It is often inductive, in the sense that researchers typically enter the field with an exploratory quest rather than clearly defined research questions and hypotheses (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Following in this tradition, I seek to obtain meaningful interpretations of Ventilene that are based on the perspectives of group members.

Although ethnography comes in many shapes and sizes, there are general characteristics that are common in most types of ethnography. Generally an ethnographer stays within a social setting for an extended period of time, regularly observing behavior and engaging in conversation with members of that setting (Bryman, 2012). It is also typical for ethnographers to gain access to information that is not clear from observation alone via interviews with participants or the gathering of documents about the group. Through these general methods, ethnographers develop understandings of the group within their context which in turn is used to write a detailed account of the setting (Bryman, 2012). This study seems to hit all of these main characteristics, although the time constraints of this study limited my “extended period of time” in the field to only a month.

Ethnography utilizes some of the same processes of meaning-making most people use in their everyday lives. Most people utilize observations and conversations to make sense of their environments, the actions of others, and even ourselves. It could be said that as social beings, we are constantly engaging in participant observation. What separates ethnography from these everyday observation practices is its intentionality. Ethnography deliberately seeks out data, records data, then analyzes and reflects on data, to generate answers to research questions

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). It is uncommon in everyday life to take on life's questions with such a systematic research design. As a researcher, ethnography appeals to me because it channels basic observation and conversation skills, areas that are strengths for many people.

Ethnography usually requires researchers to try to fit-in to the setting being studied, as much as is ethically or reasonably possible. In some contexts this may require the researcher to undergo serious alterations to their typical dress, attitudes, or behavior. This is sometimes referred to as a "personal front" (Goffman, 1959) or "impression management" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Impression management is important because, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) emphasize, "whatever attitude participants take towards [the research], they will often be more concerned with what kind of person the researcher is than the research itself" (pp. 66). Elements of my identity and their associated privilege may have made it easier to fit into Ventilene. Being a young woman, of the same race as most of Ventilene's members, may have made it easier to "gain access to settings and information with relative ease" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007 p. 74).

I did not have to alter my appearance, attitudes, or behavior in any extreme way to gain the trust of participants in Ventilene. Generally, I dressed intentionally casually, noting that both participants and staff often wear athletic wear in anticipation of the day's recreational activities. When on a team with more young women wearing makeup, I made sure to do so as well. My professional behavior during research was more hands-off than I typically am in practice, to respect the naturalism of the group. I also tried to mirror the generally relaxed and warm attitudes of the other adults in Ventilene.

One major way I did not succeed in fitting into Ventilene was my basic level of Norwegian. Negotiating trust and building relationships with participants was generally dependent on them having some understanding of English. Participating in activities also helped me build relationships in spite of the language barrier. No language proficiency was required to keep up with the fastest participants while skiing, or offer a shoulder to cry on at the end of a movie. To some extent, I think the language barrier helped me take on the desirable ethnographic role of an "acceptable incompetent," (Lofland, 1971; cited by Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). I was permitted to ask lots of questions, make mistakes, and investigate norms as an outsider learning more about the language and culture of Ventilene. Perhaps if I could speak Norwegian, the participants may have been more suspicious of my frequent confusion and curiosity. Sympathetic of the language barrier, some participants and leaders were eager to include me and teach me a little Norwegian, and a lot about Ventilene.

### 3.4 Participant observation

For some theorists, participant observation and ethnography are considered synonymous. Ethnography almost always involves participant observation, and participant observation often falls under the umbrella of ethnography (Bryman, 2012). Participant observation is a form of data collection in which the researcher joins a preexisting group or setting and participates in the daily routines, rituals, rules and norms of the group. It is also typical in participant observation to take note of power dynamics, decision making processes, or any unusual or problematic events (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Participant observation allowed me to gain a more extensive understanding of Ventilene's inner workings than I could from interviews alone.

Because participant observation is a very common tool of ethnography, this method fits well into the design of this study. In my overt dual roles as volunteer and researcher, I participated in Ventilene's daily activities while also making observations. My role was primarily as a participant observer, as I typically engaged in the same activities and routines of the group. At times, however, it was more appropriate for me to be a non-participant observer, meaning I continued to observe but withdrew from active participation. This often happened at meal times or on long car rides, when too much was being said in Norwegian at once for me to

keep up. It felt more productive to sit back and watch the body language, relationships, and power dynamics in these conversations, than to try to figure out what was said specifically. I also chose to be a non-participant observer when it came to correcting the behavior of any participants. To uphold the naturalism of my research, and minimize the use of professional power over the participants, I let other adults take the lead on redirecting any incidences of problematic behaviors. Adapting the level of participation to what felt right in each scenario helped assure my observations retained the fluidity of ethnographic research.

Some proponents of empowering research argue that participant observation is invasive, potentially exploiting the time and trust of participants. Participant observation can use more of the participants time than other methods, like a survey or interview. During that time, researchers are building relationships with participants that usually are terminated at the end of the research (Bryman, 2012). These relationships can be especially exploitative for children, who are more likely to speak freely with researchers and feel abandoned by their absence (Ulvik, 2015). I acknowledge these ethical concerns could have bearing on my present study. On the other hand, fitting into the existing structure of Ventilene as another young adult ready to enjoy some recreational activities felt like the best way to get to know the young people on their own terms and turf. Participant observation also allowed the participants to get to know me, opening doors for cooperative power together research practices in this study.

### 3.5 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews in ethnography are often semi-structured and exploratory. It is often the goal in ethnographic interviews to facilitate a conversation which gives participants more control over the direction of the interview (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Interview can be used both to gather data about specific practices or activities in a group, and to reveal the perspectives of the social actors shaping these practices and activities (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The interviews in this study contribute towards the overall understanding of Ventilene as a group, as well as highlight the voices of individual young people.

In this study, a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was utilized. This guide helped to keep the conversation on track, but did not limit the participants or myself from pursuing any other related topics that came up. Semi-structured or unstructured interviews are preferred tools in feminist and other emancipatory research, because of the greater freedom given to participants. They can also allow researchers greater flexibility to respond to and address participants' needs (Bryman, 2012). My guide (Appendix A) includes a preliminary explanation of the study, a brief section for basic background questions, followed by four subsections of questions related to: experiences in Ventilene, the atmosphere of Ventilene, participants' relationships, and transition to adulthood. The guide was developed working closely with my project supervisor and approved by the Norwegian Research Ethics Committee (NSD) prior to starting my interviews.

For this study, I conducted 5 interviews with 6 young people, and one interview with Ventilene's director. The 3 interviews with 4 current participants took place in-person during one weekend camp at Ventilene. The 2 interviews with former participants were conducted over video calling. The interview with the director was conducted face-to-face after the data collection period, as a supplemental expert-interview to answer some questions which emerged during my analysis. The interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to 75 minutes, depending on the length of answers and how much time was needed for translation.

For my in-person interviews, two were individual interviews and one was a group interview. My initial plan was to have all the interviews be individual. I anticipated that group interviews could provide participants with peer support and translation assistance, and so had group interviews in mind as a "back-up" option. When Finn volunteered to be interviewed but was not comfortable speaking English, I suggested he could ask someone to help him with

translation. He asked both Anja and Gabriel to be present. Anja was both a participant and translator during this interview. Initially, Gabriel did not volunteer to be interviewed. He chose to sit in on Finn and Anja's interview as a spectator and helped Anja translate. After observing their interview and gaining a better sense of the scope of my questions, Gabriel volunteered to be interviewed too. Gabriel was interviewed individually, and Britt was interviewed with the presence of a translator.

Interview participants are often more relaxed being interviewed in a setting they are more familiar with (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). I attempted to set the participants at ease by allowing them to make some decisions related to the interviews. All face-to-face interviews were conducted in a conference-room in Ventilene's hotel where participants sometimes watch movies or plays video games. The room is near the main recreational room where the other program participants were playing games at the time. Cheering can be heard occasionally on the recordings, but overall there were few distractions in this space. The participants chose their seats, controlled the temperature of the room, and they had access to water and tea. Two of the participants chose to lock the door. With these invitations to make small decisions, I attempted to set the tone that the participants were in charge of this space. For the interviews over video calling, the participants had even more control over the parameters of the interview. They decided exactly when and where the interview would happen and had full control over their settings.

### 3.6 Sample

The sample for this study consists of young people participating in Ventilene, as well as adults associated with the program, such as volunteers, leaders, and former participants. In my participant observation I observed about 20 participants between the ages of 12 and 23, and 10 adult leaders or volunteers. I conducted face-to-face interviews with 4 of the participants over 18 years old. Additionally, I conducted interviews over video calls with 2 former participants and volunteers.

Access to this population was assured by gatekeepers, chiefly Ventilene's director. As a volunteer back in May 2017, I spoke with Ventilene's director and assistant director about potentially doing my thesis on Ventilene. As the research design developed throughout the second year of the masters, I was in regular contact with the director and assistant director who continued support the study.

During my time as a volunteer back in May 2017, I participated in two over-night long-weekend trips and built rapport with many participants and leaders. Most of the young people I met during this time were not present during my data collection however, so this previous rapport did not aid in recruitment as much as I anticipated. The recruitment process for participant observation was open to everyone involved in the program, because this study focuses on Ventilene as a whole community. The interviews, however, were limited only to adult current or former participants. I used convenience sampling, giving each of the young people over 18 years old present during my data collection weekends the opportunity to be interviewed. The director put me in contact with the two former participants I interviewed over video calling. Their selection was convenience sampled as well, on the criteria that the director was still in contact with them and knew them to be fluent in English. Having access to both current participants and former participants gave a more longitudinal range of experiences in Ventilene and in transition to adulthood.

### 3.7 Managing the data

For my participant observation, I kept a detailed field notebook on my computer in a password encrypted software. No names were used in the field notebook, referring to the participants through coded initials. At the end of each day, I wrote my field notes before going to bed,

calling upon brief memos to myself I had written on my phone during the day. In total I collected approximately 30 pages of field notes.

The interviews were recorded on my phone, then transferred to my computer and password protected. Once in the password protected notebook, I deleted the original recordings from my phone. I wrote the transcripts to all interviews in the same password protected virtual notebook. The actual names of participants are not present anywhere in the written transcripts. I assigned all interview participants pseudonyms from a list of popular baby names in Norway from the 1990s, the decade when most of the interview participants were born.

When this research is finalized, per the policy of NSD, all remaining documentation that could identify participants will be destroyed. In my case this means all memos and initials in my field notes, the audio recordings of all interviews, and signed consent forms.

### 3.8 Data analysis

All of my data was processed in the research software NVIVO. Inputting my field notes and interview transcripts, I coded the observations and interviews together into categories—or as NVIVO calls them, nodes—within the data (Appendix B). Grouping these nodes together I created 9 themes. As I began writing the analysis, I saw connections between a few themes and chose to combine them into five main themes for analysis in the findings chapter, and a sixth theme for recommendations for Ventilene included in the discussion chapter.

I also used NVIVO to help in the analysis of relevant literature. Reading books and articles in the NVIVO software, I coded pieces of text that seemed relevant to this study. I used an eclectic approach to finding literature, using readings from my MFAMILY course work, and searching in bibliographies and databases to find literature on related topics. I primarily focused on texts in English written after 2000, although I include some older texts by key theorists (cf. Goffman, 1959) to define terms and give greater background. To my knowledge, no prior literature on Ventilene has been published in English so I was dependent on Google translated Norwegian sources (cf. Kirkens, 2015; Kirkens, 2017). I reviewed the passages based on these translated texts with the assistant director to make sure nothing was lost in translation. I was unable to find up-to-date scholarly research on the experience of refugee minors in Norway, so on this brief topic I have cited online Norwegian news sources (cf. Local, 2018).

Some of the literature was reviewed before data collection to help inform my observations. For example I reviewed literature on adolescent development, recreational therapy, and empowerment program practices prior to data collection. My previous experience as a volunteer in Ventilene gave me some basis to judge which topics may be relevant. As is typical in interpretive research, however, much of the literature was reviewed during and after the data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). As themes related to trauma, trauma informed care, and resilience emerged from the findings, I reviewed these topics as well. Incorporating all of the literature and findings into the NVIVO software helped me to stay organized and recognize visually which themes were most prominent in the research.

During my analysis, new questions and categories arose. Due to the time constraints, I was not able to follow grounded theory's framework of returning to the field for another extended period of inquiry (Bryman, 2012). I did however return to the field to interview the director at this time. Interviewing the director gave me greater background knowledge on Ventilene, and also helped confirm that I was representing the goals and outcomes of the program accurately. This interview also gave me some insights into how her social construction of Ventilene compares with the perspectives of the participants. This expert-interview helped to inform my analysis, but I primarily derived meaning from participant responses, my own observations, and the literature.



### 3.9 Ethical considerations

Before conducting this study, I sought approval from the Norwegian Research Ethics Committee (NSD). The application to NSD required explanation of the project, indication of the steps taken to keep information and identities secure, and assessment of who will be participating and how their informed consent will be ensured. In Norway there is an additional ethical approval process for work with vulnerable populations or sensitive topics which can take up to 3 months. Out of concern for the time constraints of this study, I designed the research to avoid interviewing minors and asking sensitive questions. Doing so limited the ethical concerns that require additional approvals from other institutions. The NSD granted approval and determined their approval was sufficient to carry out this study (Appendix C).

Framed within the ethical guidelines of the NSD, this study takes care to avoid the four most common areas of ethical issues: lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, deception, and harm to participants (Bryman, 2012). Informed consent was achieved in this study through a written consent form available in both Norwegian and English (Appendix D). I developed the Norwegian consent form by translating the English version in Google Translate, and then two Norwegian speakers separately reviewed and edited the document. Both versions of the consent form were read and approved by NSD. For the minors I observed, the ethical form was emailed home, signed, and sent back by their guardians. I also obtained consent from volunteers and leaders in the program for their contributions to my observations. All participants had time to read the form in Norwegian and address questions or concerns to me or Ventilene's leaders.

Taking care to ensure all participation was voluntary and anonymized also decreases the likelihood this study may have invaded the privacy of participants. Even when a participant's identity is made anonymous, indirect identification can occur, because of details that make participants recognizable to people who know them. Indirect identification is a likely ethical concern, since Ventilene is a small program within a small city. Making the program name anonymous would reduce the risk of indirect identification further. I discussed the idea of renaming the program with Ventilene's leaders, and they decided they wanted to keep the program's real name. They are hoping to use this research in the future and thus want to have it overtly connected to Ventilene. To respect their wishes, Ventilene was not renamed. I discussed this decision with my project supervisor and the coordinator for MFAMILY at the University of Stavanger. They both advised it was appropriate to keep Ventilene's name if I took special care to remove any specific details about participants. To help minimize the chances of invasion of privacy through indirect identification, I have attempted to remove any details or background information (such as age, nationality) that could be linked to a specific participant.

In terms of deception, my role as researcher was overt during the data collection. The rapport built with participants was with the understanding that I was a masters student in social work studying the program. Due to a miscommunication between myself and the leader of the first team I joined, the young people did not find out about my research until more than halfway through the weekend. This was an unintentional deception, since the young people had begun to get to know me and share their perspectives prior to this clarification. The participants' surprise and jokes about finding a "CIA agent" in their midst seemed to indicate they felt spied on. Despite this faux pas, the participants in this group signed the informed consent forms and, if anything, seemed more eager to include me. To try to counterbalance this misstep, I joined this group for half of another weekend at the end of my data collection for additional overt participant observation.

Harm to participants is a less predictable ethical concern that includes a wide spectrum of circumstances (Bryman, 2012). My methods aim to be non-invasive by respecting the naturalism of the group and asking questions from a strengths perspective. Of course it is still possible my presence in the group, my questions, or the results of my research could cause

unintended harm to participants. Perhaps some participants found it stressful having a researcher in the group and it detracted from their experience in Ventilene, or maybe a young adult felt triggered of past trauma by a line of seemingly innocuous questioning. Such risks of emotional or psychological harm to participants are hard to anticipate. Ethical guidelines advise researchers should, “try to minimize disturbance both to subjects themselves and to the subjects’ relationships with their environment.” Anticipating and minimizing consequences for participants includes considering, “carefully the possibility that the research experience may be a disturbing one” (Bryman, 2012 p. 136). In consideration that this research could disturb some program participants, prior to my data collection I discussed an action plan with Ventilene’s assistant director on how to go forward with the research in a way they felt would be least harmful to participants. As far as I know, no participants expressed any distress from the research.

My own role as ethnographer comes with ethical considerations as well. Each of my roles as researcher, social worker, and native English speaker come with their own social constructions of power. I do feel I was able to minimize my own power over participants however, both through my actions as a volunteer and researcher, and through personal characteristics, like being close to the age of the interview participants. I kept Tew’s power framework in mind as I tried to work in cooperation with participants and engage them as active partners in decisions and relationships (Tew, 2006). The four participants I interviewed in person were all younger than me, but they had the chance to get to know and trust me during the weekend camps. The two older participants I interviewed over Skype did not have the chance to get to know me personally, however I expressed respect for their extensive knowledge of Ventilene and they seemed eager to share with me. For all the participants I was truly impressed by their depth of knowledge and self-expression. I was eager to hear their perspectives and share their voices in this text. It was not difficult for me to position them as the experts and myself as the learner, they clearly know much more about Ventilene and the participant experience than I do.

### 3.10 Limitations of methodology

Time is an overarching limitation of this study. With only one semester to prepare this dissertation, including one month of data collection, this study is lacking the depth of most ethnographic studies. I have made an effort to get to know each of Ventilene’s three teams and this does provide some depth and source of comparison. Longitudinal comparisons were not achievable in such a short time frame, however. One way I sought to overcome this limitation was by interviewing young people who have both in-depth and long-term knowledge of Ventilene. Their overall perspectives of the program help to balance out my limited perspective.

I introduced another limitation to this study, however, by only interviewing participants who have been in Ventilene for a long-time. Because all of my interview participants were at least 18 years old, the voices of minors in the program are underrepresented in my study. Although it is common for participants to stay in Ventilene into their early 20s, the majority of the young people in the program are minors. Out of the 20 participants I observed, only 4 were adults. Furthermore, all adult participants are voluntarily in Ventilene, and have usually chosen to extend this measure in their service-plan with social services. Some of the minors, however, are obligated to attend Ventilene as part of their foster family’s required time-off. It is possible the older participants, with their years of relationship building in the program, shared with me a more positive view of Ventilene than the norm. Without the capacity to interview minors in this study, their voices have not been heard, thus the Ventilene experience described is biased towards the older participants’ perspectives. I attempt to counterbalance this by including experiences from minors in my participant observations, particularly when the experience deviates from the norms expressed by the older participants.

Another limitation of this study, as I have mentioned before, is the language barrier. There is no doubt that I missed many details during my observations because of my limited understanding of Norwegian. The interviews also have limitations in terms of language barriers, because the participants who chose to speak in English were not expressing themselves in the language they are most comfortable in. If they had been interviewed in Norwegian, they may have been able to express their experiences on a deeper level. Interview participants who did speak Norwegian in the interviews, did not have professional interpreters and so these responses may be less reliable. There are several limitations to this methodology, but overall it still illustrates an innovative program and the voices of select participants.

# Chapter 4

## Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present a summary of the data collected from participant observation and interviews. The observations are presented first to establish the ethnographic context of Ventilene in which the interview participants are positioned. Five themes derived from the data collection are analyzed at the end of this chapter.

### 4.2 Participant observation

During the course of my data collection period, I joined each of Ventilene’s three teams for a weekend of activities. Each weekend I was with a different group of 5-10 young people and 4-6 adult leaders. I logged over 30 pages of field notes from the nearly 150 hours of observation I spent with the group. My field notes aimed to provide a thick description of each day’s activities, noteworthy conversations, and observations on each groups’ relational and power dynamics. In the following tables I will present a summary of my participant observations. Following the guidelines for ethnography data collection suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), I will outline the observed routines (4.2.1), rituals (4.2.2), rules and norms (4.2.3), unusual or problematic events (4.2.4), and decisions (4.2.5). Themes and connections to literature are also briefly presented to the right of each summary. A more detailed account of my participant observations is presented in Appendix E. Examination of these areas provides a brief ethnography of Ventilene and lays the framework for the inductive thematic analysis.

Summary	Themes & Connections
<b>4.2.1 Routines</b>	
<p>Ventilene has 3 teams of participants and leaders who have camps on alternate weekends during the school year. There are some variations between the 3 teams, but their general routines are similar.</p> <p><i>Weekend camp routine:</i> Leaders pick up participants on Friday afternoon and move into the hotel. Sometimes the participants choose their rooms in the hotel, sometimes assigned by leaders. Fridays activities are less-structured with leisure time around the hotel, such as movies and games. Bedtime is 11:00pm every night. Saturday is usually a long day of structured activities away from the hotel. The mood in the group is usually most enthusiastic on Saturdays. Sundays can be a more low-energy day, because participants are tired from the camp or unhappy about leaving. After cleaning their rooms, participants can do less structured activities around the hotel, like football or games. Sometimes there is an activity in the city on Sundays too, such as bowling or the cinema. The participants go home Sunday afternoon.</p> <p><i>Meal routine:</i> Food is served about every 4 waking hours in Ventilene. The normal routine is breakfast at 10:00am, lunch around 2:00pm, dinner around 6:00pm, and a light meal before bed at 10:00pm. On some teams participants help make meals, on others only the leaders make meals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Flexibility with pickup and room selection to personalize needs</li> <li>➔ Balance of leisure and recreation activities</li> <li>➔ Consistent meals are a TIC practice for participants with anxiety about not being fed</li> <li>➔ Youth participation</li> </ul>

## 4.2.2 Rituals

<p><i>Activities:</i> Providing encouraging activities for young people is the central ritual of Ventilene. In the activities there is generally an attitude of acceptance and teamwork. I have witnessed activities raise the mood of participants, help them connect with peers and volunteers, and welcome new members into the group. I have been impressed to see activities that could easily be individual and competitive, such as skiing or Ninja Warrior courses, turn into team building activities with the goal of helping everyone succeed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Peer Support</li> <li>➔ Relationship building</li> <li>➔ The strengths perspective</li> </ul>
<p><i>Barometer:</i> The barometer is an expressive ritual practiced after most meals. The <i>barometer</i> ritual has variables specific to each team, but in general the barometer is a 10 point scale drawn vertically from 0-10. Sitting around the table, the participants take it in turns to rank and talk about their feelings about the day. On some teams this ritual is lead by participants, on others the leaders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Safe space for dialogue</li> <li>➔ Respect for participant voice</li> <li>➔ Youth participation, leadership</li> </ul>
<p><i>Nightly leadership meetings:</i> Every night after the young people have gone to bed, the adults gather and talk. Everyone takes it in turn to summarize the day. It can be a safe space to discuss concerns, get advice, and make decisions and plans for the next day. The nightly meetings feel like a time and space exclusively for the adults.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Safe space for adults to dialogue</li> <li>➔ Power over decision making</li> </ul>

## 4.2.3 Rules and Norms

<p><i>Rules:</i> The rules in Ventilene are designed to foster a safe and accepting community, without putting a lot of restrictions on participants. The rules are fairly basic expectations for adolescents, such as no smoking, no drinking, no sex, no going someplace without the knowledge and permission of a team leader. There are also expectations to be respectful of each other, such as no phone use during meal times, and no talking over others. They start off with basic rules and add more if it becomes necessary to do so.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Do not want Ventilene to be too restrictive</li> <li>➔ Building trust and consistency</li> <li>➔ Flexibility with rules to meet needs of each team</li> </ul>
<p><i>Acceptance:</i> I observed many examples of accepting behavior in Ventilene, leading me to believe it is a core norm of the program. Some examples I witnessed are celebrating diversity, recognition of the strengths in others, cheering on and supporting each other in activities, and reacting to others behavioral challenges with kindness and understanding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ TIC safety and acceptance of all</li> <li>➔ The strengths perspective</li> </ul>
<p><i>Diet norms:</i> Overall my impression of Ventilene’s diet is that it is inadequate to provide adolescents with the nutrients needed for long, busy days of physical activity. Breakfast, lunch, and pre-bed snack are often the same buffet of breads, processed meats, spreads and cheeses, and sometimes fruit. If lunch and dinner are eaten away from the hotel, it is often at fast food restaurants. Dinner at the hotel is usually heartier, with a warm meal like meat and vegetables. Water, juice, tea, and sometimes coffee are included with these meals, and soda is often purchased during activities. Ventilene role models healthy relationships and decision making in other important developmental areas, but is not assisting young people in this basic way of learning to take care of their body’s dietary needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Dietary guidelines suggest adolescents avoid processed meats, fats, and added sugar and sodium</li> <li>➔ Sugary beverages may increase symptoms of anxiety, headache, and insomnia (Massey-Stokes and Quezada, 2017).</li> </ul>
<p><i>Physical affection:</i> Giving and receiving physical affection also seems to be a norm in Ventilene. I asked the director about this norm and she said: “They should be able to feel what it is like to be cared for. They really</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Connections with attachment theory</li> </ul>

<p>need it. They want to sit on the lap even if they are 18. They want to be taken care of in a very different way than you meet outside with others in that age. And we try to use fun situations to do it because then it's not so dangerous and not so shameful." The director also told me about the policies they have in place to protect members from abuse.</p>	<p>and TIC's influence on Ventilene's practice  → Harm reduction measures in place</p>
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#### 4.2.4 Unusual or problematic events

<p><i>Disempowering experiences for young people:</i> I have some concerns about a few instances I witnessed that do not seem to respect the dignity of participants. The most extreme disempowering incident I observed was a volunteer repeatedly interrupting and physically moving one participant away from other young people (not in Ventilene) who she was trying to socialize with during some less-structured time out of the hotel. It seemed like this singled the participant out in front of her peers. The most common disempowering experience I observed was leaders talking <i>about</i> rather than <i>to</i> young people.</p>	<p>→ Contradicting the goal of helping participants socialize  → Protective power over young people not respecting their full agency or dignity</p>
<p><i>The absence of refugee young people:</i> When I first volunteered with Ventilene back in May of 2017, Ventilene had several participants from refugee backgrounds and anticipated more joining the group as resettlement progressed. When I returned for my research, however, in February 2018, I observed no refugee young people in the program. According to Ventilene's leaders this absence has been caused by Norway shutting down the refugee centers. Young people often receive a response from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) approving them to stay in Norway as minors, but directing them to leave when they turn 18. This has personally affected several participants of Ventilene. Some have fled to other nations in Europe and are living on the streets. One leader I spoke to about this was visibly upset and said of Norway, "we give them a glimpse of this incredible life and then we tell them they can't have it." Remaining young refugees are living in uncertain times and attend Ventilene inconsistently. In agreement with the remaining local refugee centers, Ventilene still reserves six of its spaces for refugee young people. The director hopes that things have stabilized now and some of the remaining young people will be able to join the Ventilene community.</p>	<p>→ According to the UDI, between 2015 and the end of 2018 the number of refugee centers will have fallen from 150 to 27 nationally. (Local, 2018).  → These reforms have sparked controversy within Norway, and attracted criticism from Amnesty International (Oesterud, 2017).</p>

#### 4.2.5 Decisions

<p><i>Adults in charge of most decisions:</i> The daily decisions of what to do and when to do it, what to eat and when to eat it, where to go and who will go together, are usually decisions that are made <i>for</i> rather than <i>with</i> the young people. Activities are generally selected by the leaders, using their knowledge of the general preferences and energy level of the group. The larger decisions and rules of the group are also determined by the leaders.</p>	<p>→ Protective power over young people used more than co-operative power together</p>
<p><i>Opportunities for participants to be included in decision making:</i> Sometimes young people vote on which restaurant to go to, suggest and vote on which movies to watch, propose activities for the next day, or take charge of leading their own self-directed activities at the hotel. One of the participants is on Ventilene's advisory board and joins meetings with stakeholders. The director expressed wanting to develop this leadership opportunity further to include more participants. Participants also receive an annual survey to give written feedback about Ventilene anonymously.</p>	<p>→ Participants can decide on leisure time and less-structured activities  → Youth participation within adult defined systems</p>

## 4.3 Interviews

The interviews are an essential piece of this study, providing the young adult participants with a platform to express their voices on the influence of Ventilene within their lives. The interviews were designed to be as empowering as possible for the participants through strengths focused questions. Towards this end, some concessions were made to include the participants who were less comfortable in English. In the following texts, Anja answers jointly for herself and Finn on several of the questions. I followed up with Finn to make sure he agreed with Anja's statements, where his answers are absent, it can be assumed he agreed with Anja. Simon does not answer two questions due to limited time for his interview. Listening to participants needs and making some accommodations in the interview helped to assure participant inclusion and comfort.

For the remainder of this section I present participants' responses to interview questions using a categorization system often utilized in grounded theory. In the following tables, the *main category* is a paraphrasing of the question asked in the interview, the *illustrated text* are the responses, which are then divided into more thematic *sub-categories*. The sub-categories were then color coded into 5 themes for thematic analysis. Some responses were coded separately as participants' feedback for Ventilene, encapsulating their recommendations for the program and attitudes towards its expansion. The 5 main themes are analyzed at the end of this chapter, and the recommendations theme is drawn out in the discussion chapter.

### 4.3.1. Main category: Description of Ventilene

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Recreational space for youth in foster care	It's a foster care meeting place.
Nostalgia for previous program location	Before we moved here we were in a little cabin. It was little because there was so many people in it. But that was the beauty of it. But it was very chaotic!
Strengths of current location	But here...we can sit down and chill and not do anything. I think it's a very good change.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Accepting, homelike environment	It can't be described with words. Most of the youth, including me, [were] really insecure, lot of distress and difficult times in my life. So coming there, getting to know the system, the leaders, the other youth, it becomes like a family, you know, and it's allowed to be different. It's ok to have problems, to have a background not much other people have, and you're accepted as a part of something. You are part of something where you are not different, so that's the most unique thing about Ventilene and how they operate and try to include everybody.
Remembers Ventilene's beginnings	I was there from the beginning when they had a camp nearby the border to Sweden. It was totally different and they had less support. A lot of anonymous people were making this thing go round, until it got bigger and bigger, and become more and more popular, with more and more youth.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
A safe, homelike environment	It's a safe space where you can feel at home. A place you can relax and be yourself.
Satisfaction with growth of program	In the 5 years I've been here we've gone from being in this little cabin far in the woods to a hotel by the beach so I really think it's gonna keep on growing. The more people that join the better it is.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Recreational space for young people with difficulties at home	It's a place for mastering and activities, and it's a place where you can meet others that have some hard times growing up.
Opportunity to be a part of something	The whole thing it made me feel a part of something. And kids need something to be a part of, it's so important.
Combining sense of community with mastering activities	So if you combine being a part of something with activities and mastering, yeah you've got Ventilene.
Mixed feelings about the expansion	I don't know if [the expansion is] good or...It's good when we're speaking of the development of Ventilene. It's a lot of space at that hotel. It's really much different.
Consistent focus on activities and relationship building	But the program hasn't changed much really because it's always about the activities and just get to know each other, so it's pretty much the same.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Recreational space	It's a place where the youth have fun. It's a place for the youth so they have something to do in the weekends.
Opportunity to participate in activities	They are summer camps. I get to be a part of the activities, I get to go and do the activities, I sit and talk and I listen.
Safe space to be heard	It's a place, and it's a platform where you can listen and talk about everything for the youth. I was very shy when I came to Ventilene. Ventilene changed me.
Harm reduction measure	For the kids who are home while their parents are out in the weekends... Instead of doing other stuff, getting in trouble, they can be here and be with other people like in the weekends and the summer camps and the [school vacations].

#### 4.3.2. Main category: Perceived strengths of the program

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Family-like community	The strength is that we are like a family.
Satisfied with program overall	Weaknesses we actually don't know, we like everything.



Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Cons of expansion to hotel	There's always room for improvement, I would say. Wherever you are. From my opinion I think it was better when it was smaller. I feel that the connection between us, both leaders and youth, was kind of closer before. In the cabin. Because in the big hotel everyone can be on the other side of the building and don't see each other for half the day. So it's plus and minuses of course, and it will be like that whatever you are or whatever you're doing.
Strengths perspective; accepting community	They're focus is on activities, and to see the strength in every youth and build them up from where they are. They don't try to make them somebody else like some other systems, institutions and stuff try to do.
Satisfied with leaders	And having [the director] as the leader has definitely a strength because she is like the foundation of it all. Without her it wouldn't be the same no matter where it was.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Satisfied with program overall	I don't really know if there's any weaknesses.
Family-like community	Yeah just strengths. So when we are here we are parts of a big family.
Healing environment	Like a lot of the people I have met here has problems making friends, having problems with their family, yeah problems in general. And a lot of those problems just go away when they're here. So that's, just amazing.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Loving, family-like community	Children like me often have some problems with their relatives and you feel like you're not getting enough love from the adults. It's like you don't feel the glass is full with love. And when you're at Ventilene and has the really good relationship to [the leaders]. They were always looking after me, it was like they wanted to be my parents.
Difficulties in the transition to adulthood	That phase, of going from participating to being the adult there, the leader, that's a hard part. Because you don't really know how to be. It feel like you're losing all of that. You don't feel like you're getting the love anymore. I don't know if it can be better, but it was kind of hard for me. Just the love, it feels like it's gone. When you're used to get a lot of attention there at Ventilene and then it just suddenly stops. I guess that's the hardest part of the transition.
Inexperienced volunteers	Others too come to Ventilene as volunteer, adults who don't know much about being the child of an alcoholic. It's like something is crashing in this.

Satisfied with program overall	If I had to think really hard to tell you something that can be a lot better at Ventilene, it's not so much. It's small things here and there, but it's not huge, it's not like there's problems with it.
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Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Satisfied with leadership	It's very positive that [the leaders are] able to actually keep this up, to have it.
Satisfied with program overall	Everything is positive, I can't find anything negative.
Opportunity to participate in activities	And I like all the activities, you know, going places I probably wouldn't go if I weren't here.

#### 4.3.3 Main category: Feelings when with Ventilene

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Happy group environment	Happy. Because everyone is smiling so it's like contagious.

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Happy group environment; Family-like community	Every time I come to this place I get happy and it feels like home.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Accepting group community; safe place for growth	My experience as a participant has been amazing. A lot of growth, joy, and the feeling of acceptance and freedom to do whatever, and speak as the person I am, and connect with other people who more or less had the same experiences as me, or at least learn from their experiences. I feel that has made me a better person. A more secure, stable person.
Relief and escape from problems at home through activities	It's a big difference from the real world. It's always been a bubble, you know, like you can detach from all that noise. We do activities and stuff, the activities make you use your body, and for me in such a way that I am more focused in the situation that I am than on all the problems I had back home at that time, for example. Home for me from when I was 13 to at least 17 was not a good place... Ventilene was so much to me. It was like the escape from all of that noise, all of that...bad stuff. It helped me through the most difficult child years.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Family-like community	We feel like a family, feel connected and everybody knows each other really well.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Happy group environment	In the group it's really good. Within all of the participants it's really good.
Safe space	We're always looking out for each other.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Happy group environment	I feel happy. Because I get to meet new and old people.
Relationship building	I care about people fast. So I like meeting new people.

#### 4.3.4. Main category: Attitude towards Ventilene's rules

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Satisfied with basic rules	It's not so many so it's ok.
Behavior management within Ventilene	I haven't got directly in trouble here, but it's just like "it's ok" we talk and then [the leader] asks about what I have done and why I have done it, and it's ok.

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Satisfied with basic rules	There's not many, some basic ones.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Rules can foster inclusion	I think they are pretty good rules and conditions around the system. Because it's about including everybody.
Satisfied with basic rules; Participants' need for structure and boundaries	It's about not doing anything stupid you could regret, you know? They are youth, they want to experiment sexuality, all of that stuff, so if we didn't have any rules for certain things, bedtimes for example, when the meals are served, everything would be chaotic and it wouldn't work.
Learning opportunities	Sometimes the leaders, have been a little bit too late to like make the situation ok...We have the talk at dinner and it's like shit [the director] is mad and when she is mad it's like <i>respect</i> . We messed up and we have to learn from it.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Power dynamics	It's like we're on the same level. It's no problem.
Satisfied with basic rules	Like it's just basic rules and the rules are there to keep everyone safe.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Rules can foster inclusion	It's good to have the rules because when you come into

	something new then it kind of gets equal, so it's easier to have the rules so that nobody gets treated differently.
Learning opportunities	The rules you learn when you do it and somebody yells at you, then you learn for the next time. They don't do it anymore.

#### 4.3.5 Main category: Perceptions of youth participation in group decisions

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Voice in activities	Yeah, like you heard when we are going to go to the cinema... they get to choose [between 2 movies]

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Support for individual voices	I can comment and I feel like I get heard. So that's not a problem.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Voice in activities	When there's room for that, they try to let the youth and children choose the activities, you know, if it's possible.
Voice in group discussions	We can decide some of the week so we're not put in a box where we have to do everything that they tell us.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Support for individual voices	Everyone's getting heard and can say whatever they want.
Limited voice in group activities	If there's like one special activity that's planned we can't just say that we want to do something else because it makes conflicts with our plan.
Voice in daily routine	We get to choose a lot if it's possible. Like outside of the activities, when we are at the hotel we get to choose a lot, what we want to do.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Voice in activities	Yeah. Sometimes, in the activities and stuff.
Voice in group discussions	I feel like when I'm in the meeting or the [barometer] my voice is getting heard because people are saying yes or responding.
Participation in leadership	I'm a youth leader too, a mini leader.

#### 4.3.6. Main category: Perception of relationships in the group overall

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
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Relationships in transition; nostalgia for former participants	We feel like before it was better. Because then we were more like...the old people. Like we used to be. Now it's very much new, so...We are comfortable with all the people that are here, but we miss when like the old people were here also.
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Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Safe space for conversations	I think it's easier to talk about things when I'm here.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Strong relationships among youth	Like I said earlier, the relationship between the youths have always been magical.
Occasional conflicts	But of course there always stands up some conflict or disappointment, so then again it's up to the leaders to spot the situation before it expands in a negative way.
Increasing diversity and acceptance	So we learn as long we live, right? Especially when it comes to relationships between human beings, there's no facet. It's different from the mix of people, from the mix of age, etc. Where I'm from. The last years there have been more [immigrant youth] there too, from different religion and background. With an overall look I think that it couldn't get much better because it is all allowed.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Similar background facilitates connections	It's easier to connect to people you are relating to.
Family-like community	Everybody here is, as I said, a big family. That's how most of us feel.
Relationships in transition; new members less connected	Like for new people that haven't been here that much. So all the new people aren't that connected because most of them haven't either opened up or haven't talked that much to us. So beyond that we are a big family.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Strong relationships among youth	At Ventilene it's a big, big, big chance for getting new friends. I met my best friends through Ventilene.
Emotional support; safe place to talk and open-up	We were a lot different but I had all of these emotions. I could see his emotions and he could see my emotions. So there we were getting to know each other and we talked about our issues at the time. Which was really great. I really remember when we were going to leave Ventilene that summer, we were crying so hard in each other's arms. So that's some of the magic Ventilene makes.
Similar background facilitates connections	It was like a shortcut to a friendship, when you're talking to someone, it's like you're opening your [chest] and just digging right into their heart.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
More space in hotel reduces conflict	At the other place it was a small cabin so it was more drama and stuff, because people were so close. But at the hotel it's like a bigger area so people are not like on each other all the time. If you want to be by yourself you can just find a spot to sit.
Supportive community atmosphere	But I have a good relationship with everybody who's here...I am really understanding of other people. Like even though they might have a bad background, or are negative, or have a bad attitude and stuff, I still want to know them and talk to them and help them and yeah understand more. I trust them.

#### 4.3.7 Main category: Comparison of relationships in Ventilene to relationships outside the program

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Similar background facilitates connections	It's the background that they all have. It's like if I have experienced something that like maybe someone else is having the same.
Safe space for conversations	So it's easier to talk to people or...connect in a different way than you do with a classmate or people you see everywhere. It's like here you can talk about everything. And nothing, if you want to.
Low-threshold for acceptance	You still get noticed and accepted for who you are and not the clothing or like everything else. So it's easier to be here than in the classroom because you have to be accepted there. Here you can be accepted anyway, so it's easier.

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Feels seen and listened to	I feel like I get seen here. I get heard.
Low-threshold for acceptance	It's more accepting.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Leadership with similar backgrounds	Because [the director], almost all the other adults, including the participants, have more experience with how it is if you don't come from an environment that is good all the time.
Safe place to learn and make mistakes	For example one of the last times I was participating as a leader, one of the youth was really upset about something and broke the glass to one of the doors. If you had done such an action in the real [world], you would have big, huge consequences. But when you are there—it's not OK,

	maybe you or your family or someone has to pay for it, and of course you have to talk to one of the adults so you will understand that kind of behavior is not allowed, not even here. But there is more room to do the mistakes.
Safe space to open up and intentional opportunities for difficult conversations; importance of volunteers	You have more room for having the time to actually speak with you, to take you aside, to listen to your side of the story and maybe what is upsetting you, etc. If you are in a school or in a place where there is a lot more structure, you have to make that class, or you have to make that bus. It's always a system dragging you away from or distracting you from your own feelings. People don't have time, the teachers don't have time... So they can't meet you for your needs as much as they can at a place like Ventilene.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Social exclusion; safe space to make friends	Like for me I've had few relationships with other people, and that's mostly because I have a problem with trusting people because of a lot of bullying. From when I was very young I was alone for many years. So when I came here I got friends, I didn't feel alone.
Interruption of social exclusion	I can tell you a little bit about why I'm so close with [the director]. Well from when I was growing up I, as I said, I was really alone. And then I got a chance to join Ventilene and I said yes without knowing what it was. I was saying no the four last days before it started, but I ended up going anyways.
Safe space to open up and intentional opportunities for difficult conversations; physical affection	I was really sad when I was here the first time. Because my plan was to take my own life when I got home. The last day of Ventilene we all sat around and talked. Everyone who wanted to talk just stood up and talked. So yeah, I took the choice and told everyone why I was sad all week, and when I was talking... I just collapsed and started crying and that's the first time [the director] just grabbed me and held me.
Feeling cared for and loved	And that's the first time I felt loved. That's the first time someone has cared for me.
Suicide prevention	So yeah if it wouldn't be for her, I wouldn't be alive.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Missing the support felt as a participant	It's been some hard times for me [recently]. So that's why I'm taking a little distance from Ventilene, and distance from everything.
Enjoys role model role	There's some parts in the transition there that I think is really hard. It's not like I can't do it, because I loved working there, and I really feel like a role model when I'm working there. When I'm there we're just doing lots of crazy stuff, having fun with each other, and looking out for each other. I really love working with the youth.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Relaxing environment	When I come here I can relax and just read a book, or knit, or watch a movie with the others. While I'm at work it's stress, and I have to maintain a lot of tasks at work.
Accepting environment	I feel like I can be myself when I'm here.

#### 4.3.8 Main category: Reflections on personal development during Ventilene

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Development of coping, anger management skills	Before I just left whenever things were difficult. I like just run away and said like "fuck everything." But now I just think and get mad and then it's over.

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Development of coping, behavior management skills	Basically when I joined I was this little brat (laughs). To people and everything. Before I'd just leave. When things got hard I'd just give up. Now I stand in it. I stand in it and fight.
Personal growth	Yes I have changed. When I came here, the more help I got, I grew.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Personal growth	I was changed in a lot of ways, I would say. The thing is that my growth through that program, without Ventilene I wouldn't be where I am today.
Early struggles characterized in systems theory	I wasn't on a good road when I came to Ventilene. Like I didn't fit in socially, it was struggle at school, it was struggle at home. First of all the center, I would call the home the center, you know? And when the center is chaotic it effects everything around. Like school, my focus and the way I behaved socially and I [hung out with] people who were bad for me. So, if I weren't picked up by [Ventilene] and the system, it would go sideways.
Development of hope; development of positive thinking	I don't think I had a lot of hope (laughs), in that moment of time before I got to Ventilene. So they gave me kind of hope back and that still was good. It's very special to like go back mentally and think of how the world looked for me then, because the world looks totally different now.
Personal growth	Of course we all have our ups and downs, but I would say that I really moved, or developed in a good way from being part of the program in Ventilene. And having this leader role and all of that is a part of who I am today.
Leadership opportunities	I always been different and even when I was there I was different because I saw things in a different way, had different conversations. I became this leader type really



	quick...My growth just expanded. It made me feel like I had a purpose and it felt good to help other people and I could actually tap them on the shoulders and actually know what I talk about. (laughs) Because there's a lot of adults that don't know shit (laughs), and the youths and children are reading right through that.
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Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Personal growth	Yeah I've grown a lot from before I started coming here.
Development of anger management skills	Before I came to Ventilene I struggled with a lot of anger issues. I could black out in anger and break everything around me. But now I don't get angry anymore. I haven't been angry in years. I think that comes from when I just gave up. I just let everything go. So sometimes I am just really emotionless and don't have any emotions or just feel kind of empty, but I am mostly happy now.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Personal growth	I didn't have much confidence before Ventilene.
Importance of mastering	We're getting the chance to do activities where we can master and that's where it all starts. The mastering. You know? So with the mastering, the good mood, the real good mood came out and started to change me. To something better, something more real because I was always walking around with a fake smile.
Recommendation for more focus on developing tools for long-term healing from trauma	It's weird because when it all was traumatic, it wasn't so hard. It's like I was in survival mode or something, and now it feels like it all comes to me as hard as it actually is, and yeah I don't know how to handle it. Maybe it should be a little more focus on these parts in Ventilene. We've been talking a lot about [the trauma], but I don't feel like we've been talking about how to get over it and how to live with it. It's like you're forgetting all of that stuff when you're at Ventilene, but when the normal days come back you don't really know what to do.
Recommendation for more follow-up with participants leaving Ventilene	Maybe this should be some follow-up after you've been at Ventilene or something? I don't know, a contact? Because I know there's a lot out there who don't get help for the past, guys like me... This is definitely the hardest part, this transition and I maybe wish there would be a follow up or something to just keep in touch with us until we're ready to do things with our lives.

Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Personal growth	I see a different person. I'm braver when I come to Ventilene. I feel like I have grown over the years I have been here.
Development of supportive relationships	It helps me by listening to the other kids talk about what

within the group	they are going through, and I can hear from them that they are maybe experiencing similar feelings and situations that I also had in my past.
Development of positive thinking	I am thinking more positive now. Before I had a really negative thinking pattern.
Development of anger management skills	I took an aggression course, for managing [temper]. So if it's kind of an [argument] I would rather go than stay. I think that's better.

#### 4.3.9 Main category: Hopes and plans for the future

Respondent: Anja

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Reconnection with family	I hope when I get a little bit older I'm going to live in [the town where I grew up].
Continued support from foster family	But now at the beginning, I'm going to live in my foster care because they help me very much to "fly on my own wings." They always say that to me. They understand when I'm mad, they understand when I'm sad, and they see it on me. I don't know why (laughs) but they just feel it. I've been with them about 2 years.
Agency in decision making about care arrangements	When I moved the first time, I was gonna be going to Ventilene but the child services they said, "No you are going to be moving" and I just like "no... I'm going to go [to Ventilene]." I convinced them all on my own. [Ventilene leaders] just like laughed at me because I am so stubborn. I'm really, really stubborn when it comes to Ventilene.
Ongoing support through difficult times	When I'm gonna move, I'm still gonna go here. It's like they have been with me when I have moved and everything.

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Development of hope	I am a lot more positive about my future now.
Ongoing support through difficult times	Being here for a few years that has helped a lot. It's been more easy to move on, move forward.
Career goals	I want to take a job in [the North of Norway] where my grandfather used to work.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Feeling of success and growth	Well the last I think 4 or 5 years I have this amazing boost upwards, and like always being expanding, always getting knowledge.
Educational attainment; goal to help others from similar background	I finished my studies...Tried and failed 2 or 3 times in school because I was in another state of mind than I am now. Then I finally figured out that, ok I want to help people, I want to work with youth, let go of all the fears

	and stuff and just go for it. Made it with the top grades. So that gave me a huge boost of confidence.
Career fatigue from helping others all the time	I'm really grateful for [the job I have now], but now... I'd like to do more. First of all, I still want to work with people somehow but I also have drained myself. From always giving and sometimes you give more than you get so you become like really tired and drained. So I don't really know where I'll go from here. We all have our things and we learn as long as we live, so I'm taking it day by day, week by week and who knows?
Intrinsic motivation towards actualization; continued desire to master activities	But I've always been really hard on myself, so when I first accomplish one thing I want to go further and further. I always like to be an active guy, always doing some activities in my spare time. I want to try and go as far as I can go, but I have to to adjust my standards a little so I don't drain myself... I think it's healthy to have goals and desires but you also have to enjoy the ride.
Ventilene helped him got to where he is today	But Ventilene definitely helped me. Came into my life at the exact right moment, I believe, and I think that things happen for a reason, so Ventilene is a good reason for where I am right now.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Development of hope	Before I came here I didn't think I had any future.
Goal to help others from similar background	So now for my future I just wanna help other people with the same problems that I have, or similar problems. I'm not really sure how right now, because I'm still figuring it out.

Respondent: Simon

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Career and leadership goals	In the future, maybe I would like to be some kind of a leader. Doing my own company or something like that, because from everything, I feel like it's good to have some responsibility.
Activities in Ventilene gave him a sense of control	I think that's an important part... that feeling of control. Because you know, the whole childhood you don't have this feeling of control, you couldn't control a thing.
Finding control in his adult life	So now I really do like to have control. That's making decisions by myself. But sometimes it's really hard, too.
Goal to help others from similar background	My most important thing of my work is to have some work that is doing a lot of good things to the environment or to the people in it. It would be a huge bonus if the people were like me...with youths that have some issues with their grown-ups. That's the most important thing to me, to help people and to be a part of something good. That's so huge, I really want to do that.
Achieving goals and mastering feeling	I really hope things is gonna go well. I'm always doing my everything to reach my goals that I'm setting. I'm always

	looking after this mastering feeling, you know.
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Respondent: Britt

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Goal to help others from similar background	In the future I want to really be a foster parent and maybe later have my own family. Because I have seen how important that is for a child who can't be with their own family, and the importance of having someone there for them.
Career goals	I'm trying to find a job [in agriculture]. It's hard to find work because not so many people want that kind of help.

#### 4.3.10 Main category: Opportunity for final questions or comments

Respondent: Finn

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Inclusive and accepting community	It's a place for everyone and you can come as you, you can be who you are, and just be yourself here. So it's for everyone and everything is ok.

Respondent: Leo

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Admiration for leaders	I really admire the way they built themselves up. All the respect to [the director and assistant director] who started the whole thing. They and Ventilene will always be in my heart.
Positive attitude towards expansion	They just grow more and more known, so I can't wait to see where they end up or how they expand but I know that it's going to be even greater than it is today. All the best wishes to them.

Respondent: Gabriel

Subcategories	Illustrative Text
Safe space to talk and get help	Ventilene is just a great place if you need help. Yeah if you need someone to talk to.
Goal to help others from similar background; Continued participation in Ventilene	I'm never gonna leave, I think, because I've seen how much it helps people. I feel like I'm done getting all the help that I needed so I feel like I can finally be the one that can join in and help others.
Actualization	That feels amazing. It feels like I'm more complete.

## 4.4 Analysis of themes

Integrating my ethnographic observations with the perspectives of insiders, several common themes emerge. Five common themes are analyzed below. Several participants also gave feedback about the program expansion and areas for improvement. These perspectives are represented in a sixth theme, *recommendations for Ventilene* which is included in “Chapter 6: Discussion” for greater continuity.

#### 4.4.1 *Safe space to be seen, heard and accepted*

Every interview participant expressed the acceptance they felt in Ventilene. Some expressed being able to talk and act truly as they are without judgement. Others felt unburdened by not having to talk or act at all. Some said the activities helped them find new things about themselves, some said the relationships allowed them to feel heard and loved in new and powerful ways. Overall, they present a picture of a program where participants feel safe to be seen, heard and accepted.

In their descriptions of Ventilene, the participants emphasize that there is a sense of community that brings everyone in Ventilene together. Finn describes it as “a place for everyone and you can come as you, you can be who you are, and just be yourself here. So it’s for everyone and everything is ok.” When asked how he feels in Ventilene, Finn answers, “Every time I come to this place I get happy and it feels like home.” This home like feeling is echoed by several others. The community is described by most of the interview participants as like a family, and participants express feeling joy, love, growth, and freedom within this nurturing environment.

Some of the participants emphasize that there is something special about the environment of Ventilene that they do not feel other places. Anja shares that she feels like there are less social barriers to acceptance in Ventilene than in school where she experiences more pressure to conform:

It’s like here you can talk about everything. And nothing, if you want to. And you still get noticed and be accepted for who you are and not the clothing or like everything else. So it’s easier to be here than in the classroom because you have to be accepted there. Here you can be accepted any way, so it’s easier. - Anja

Anja mentions two ways that Ventilene’s practices make her feel safe. Firstly that she can speak (or not speak) and feel listened to, and secondly that she does not have to moderate her behavior or look a certain way to fit in. I will discuss both these aspects in turn.

Firstly, the opportunities for youth voice contribute to the accepting environment of Ventilene. In my observations I describe the twice (or sometimes thrice) daily ritual of the barometer. The barometer is a low-stakes opportunity for young people to talk about their day, and an invitation to share anything more personal with the group if they feel they need to. In Gabriel and Leo’s description of experiences at the longer camps, they allude to additional group discussion activities. Britt describes these opportunities as giving young people a “platform” to share and learn with each other. In Gabriel’s case, this platform allowed him to open up about his suicidal intentions, prompting a timely response from leadership that he believes saved his life.

The strengths perspective, and trauma informed care both stress the importance of giving participants opportunities to share their narratives on their own terms. Having members of the group validate the narrative and point out the strengths represented within it can be an empowering experience (Tew, 2006; Saleebey, 2009; Yachtmenhoff et al, 2017). The interview participants believe they are heard in Ventilene. Practices that provide opportunities to share their perspectives may contribute to this.

The second point Anja’s statement illustrates is that Ventilene has a lower threshold for acceptance than in broader society. Leo agrees with Anja that there are less social pressures within Ventilene, describing it as a “bubble” with “a big difference from the real world.” Without those external social pressures, Leo thinks Ventilene is more relaxing, easier to be yourself and “detach from all that noise.” Based off these descriptions, Ventilene appears to be what dramaturgy theory describes as a backstage space. Backstage contexts are social settings where people are freer to act without social constraint. Behavior in backstage spaces reflects people at more ease, feeling more comfortable to be themselves and less what society demands (Goffman, 1959). Dramaturgy agrees with social constructivism that people shape and reinforce the norms of each space they participate in. Ventilene has been shaped into a

context with a low-threshold for social acceptance, where inclusion and kindness are the norm. A secure setting where young people can have a sense of belonging is also a key resilience factor (Gilligan, 1997; Masten, 2011). By providing young people with this setting where they can unburden themselves of social expectations and truly be themselves, Ventilene may be helping to promote their resilience.

Another facet of Ventilene being an accepting place with low social expectations is that it is a safe space to make mistakes. The director and interview participants both describe Ventilene's rules as basic. The young people are given less restrictions than in many other settings in their lives, and in return they generally respect the few rules put upon them. Some even expressed enthusiasm in favor of the rules. Leo thinks they are fundamental in making sure the program is a healthy and safe place for participants. Britt says, "It's good to have the rules because when you come into something new then it kind of gets equal, so it's easier to have the rules so that nobody gets treated differently." These perspectives indicate the rules might help contribute to the sense of physical and emotional safety in the group, one of the key principles of Trauma Informed Care (Hopper et al, 2010).

Although rules are usually respected, Ventilene remains a safe space to make mistakes. Anja says the consequences are, "ok, we talk and then [the leader] asks about what I have done and why I have done it, and it's ok." During his time as a volunteer, Leo witnessed a participant smash a glass door in frustration. Here, Leo describes the balance of consequences and forgiveness for that participant:

If you had done such an action in the real [world], you would have big, huge consequences. But when you are there—it's not OK, maybe you or your family or someone has to pay for it, and of course you have to talk to one of the adults so you will understand that kind of behavior is not allowed, not even here. But there is more room to do the mistakes. - Leo

Ventilene's commitment to forgiving participants for misbehavior connects back to attachment theory's influence on their practice. They want the young people to feel both cared for and challenged to explore and learn (Bowlby, 1988). One way they foster this is by showing the young people they can trust Ventilene to remain a secure-base for them even when they have made a mistake.

#### 4.4.2 *Importance of relationships*

The physical affection and kindness observed, and the love and family-like feelings expressed, all emphasize the importance of relationship building in Ventilene. It is important for all people to have a safe space where they can build supportive relationships. For young people who have experienced trauma, developing supportive relationships is crucial for their recovery (Defrain et al, 2008); the interview findings suggest, it can actually be a matter of life and death. Gabriel is explicit in his statement that if it were not for the care he received in Ventilene he would not be alive today. Gabriel specifically says it was his loving relationship with the director that saved his life, but the director feels the caring relationships are a piece of the overall environment of Ventilene which fosters harm reduction and suicide prevention.

I have children that before they came here they wanted to end their lives, and now they don't. I think that's not because of me or us, I think it's because we are together. It's because of the physical affection, it's because of the cuddling, it's because of the strict rules—there are few, but they are strict—it's because of the caring, and it's because of the motivation to do something with their lives. - Ventilene's director

It seems relationships are one of several protective factors promoted in Ventilene, but among the young people interviewed, relationships seem to have the most importance.

I was surprised by how much love I found in Ventilene. Knowing it was a support program, I was expecting to witness friendship and caring and acceptance, but the actual *love* participants and leaders have for one another is palpable. When Anja said the program makes her feel "Happy. Because everyone is smiling so it's like contagious," I knew exactly what she meant because Ventilene has that effect on me too. When Gabriel says that being in Ventilene is the

first time he felt loved, I was struck by what a transformative moment that must have been for him, already a young man, to find a place and a relationship where he felt whole for the first time. For Gabriel (and the director implies several other young people she has worked with) that feeling of love may have saved his life. For Anja and many others, the love is uplifting, healing, and keeps her “stubbornly” coming back for more every few weekends.

The characteristics of the loving relationships in Ventilene seem to be manifest of trauma informed care’s 4 key principles. The relationships are fostered in mutual understanding of trauma, they recognize the strengths in every participant, and they stress emotional safety for all. Within this safe space, participants can gain some control and hope in their life and relationships (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). The general understanding of the experience of trauma can build relationships where participants feel they can be open and honest without judgment (Bluebird, 2008). That certainly seems to be true in Ventilene. The way participants describe the acceptance in Ventilene, it sounds as though everybody is recognized and applauded for having strengths.

Emotional safety can also be fostered through physical affection. Physical affection is not always an aspect of TIC, but meeting individual needs for safety and connection may call for physical affection (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). The director believes attachment theory partially explains why some of the young people have such a longing for a physical connection. According to the director, without that secure-base or a lot of adults they can rely, young people in Ventilene are often very mature in some ways, and in other ways like much younger children, reaching out physically for reassurance that they are cared for. Attachment theory and resilience overlap in agreement on the importance of having a secure-base, that comforts young people and also pushes them to explore and take risks (Masten, 2011; Gilligan, 1997). This description sounds similar to how the director describes the use of physical connection in the relationships in the group: “We do both, we take care of them, we hold them, we cuddle with them, and then we also do activities that can be a bit scary, and challenging for them.” Finding security in the caring relationships of Ventilene may allow young people to explore more confidently, an important developmental goal in adolescence and transition to adulthood (Allen, 2008).

The shared experience of trauma among many of the young people and adults at Ventilene may also foster relationships with special bonds for participants. When asked how their relationships in Ventilene compared to other areas of her life, Anja answered, “It’s the background that they all have. It’s like if I have experienced something that like maybe someone else is having the same. So it’s easier to talk to people or...connect in a different way than you do with a classmate or people you see everywhere.” As Gabriel succinctly put it, “it’s easier to connect with people you are relating to.” While this could be said of anyone, feeling different from peers can make it more difficult to find relatable people to connect with. Ventilene as a specific gathering place for young people with difficulties in the home helps participants form bonds that do not rely on any pretense that everything is fine at home.

Having a shared background can also facilitate healing. Britt explains, “It helps me by listening to the other kids talk about what they are going through, and I can hear from them that they are maybe experiencing similar feelings and situations that I also had in my past.” Britt’s answer indicates there is something especially helpful, and perhaps healing, about being able to hear and relate to the stories of others with similar histories. This relates to the peer-support emphasized in trauma informed care. Role models who are further along in recovery can give hope, help people find their voice and feel safe to tell their stories (Bluebird, 2008). Britt can at once benefit from hearing the stories of others, and feel pride that in telling her own story she may help the younger participants.

These perspectives help to showcase the value of having a mix of volunteers and professionals in the program. Britt and Gabriel express wanting to return to the program and volunteer in the future, rewarding opportunities they may not be able to have in a program that requires all leaders to have certain educational or career requirements. Leo and Simon were volunteers in

the program and made subsequent career choices shaped by their leadership experiences in Ventilene. Having volunteers can also help give young people more diverse view points and role models to learn from. As the director said, “it’s good to have different age, gender, etc. in the group and they can see we are different. And it’s many role models too. If they have only females who are young carers who work in social services, that’s the only view they get.” The presence of volunteers in the program seems to mutually benefit both the young people and the volunteers.

Including volunteers may not only be beneficial for relationship building, but also for maintaining the intuitive practices of the program. The director values the inputs of non-professionals and intentionally includes them in teams, saying “I think they have different ways of seeing the world and different ways to look at the way we should do things and I think maybe if we have too much school background, we analyze too much.” Stoecklin (2013) agrees that too much focus on professionalism can hinder participation and relationship building with young people. Stoecklin (2013) describes this as a “dilemma of competence” in which professionals “are trapped in a double-bind relationship because they are asked to establish their authority and at the same time to listen to children, while the latter is still interpreted in many spheres as proof of professional incompetence” (p. 451). Non-professionals are more free to listen to and encourage the participation of young people without concerns about following specific regulations (Stoecklin, 2013). In Ventilene, the professionals’ knowledge of theory, practice, and adolescent behavior is also valued, and both professionals and non-professionals seek enduring relationships with the participants.

The participants describe their relationships in Ventilene in supportive and healing terms. Leo and Simon even go so far as to say these relationships are “magical.” Leo and Simon also say that they feel less connection and support now that they are older. For Simon losing this connection sounds traumatic, what he describes as being the most difficult part of his transition to adulthood. Simon recommends that Ventilene focus more on helping young people develop long-term coping skills. This could better prepare young people to continue to cope with and overcome their trauma independently of the comfort zone that Ventilene provides. Recovering from childhood trauma is not a linear process. Many trauma survivors manage ongoing, complicated feelings about their childhoods well into adulthood (Defrain et al, 2008). The more Ventilene can do to help participants find sustainable, long-term ways to cope with trauma, the more Ventilene will succeed in fostering resilience among its participants (Masten, 2011).

The feedback of former Ventilene members indicate they are still benefitting from the hope and mastery they cultivated in Ventilene, but they feel the absence of supportive relationships. Perhaps this is the drawback of having a family-like community in an impermanent setting like a recreational program. When the young people grow-up and leave the program, they leave that family behind too.

#### *4.4.3 Importance of activities*

The interview participants overall expressed satisfaction with Ventilene’s activities. As Leo summarized, “Their focus is on activities, and to see the strength in every youth and build them up from where they are. They don’t try to make them somebody else like some other systems, institutions and stuff try to do with you.” Here again, we see evidence the strengths perspective and acceptance. In this low-risk setting, there are opportunities to learn from role models and socialize with peers that help to foster stronger relationships. They also have opportunities to practice managing stressful situations in a safe-setting, whether that is trying something new, or not getting angry when they lose a game (Austin et al, 2015). This experiential learning can help equip young people with greater social skills and relationships they know they can trust.

Mastering activities has additional benefits for greater self-confidence and actualization. Consider on this topic, a comment from Simon: “With the mastering, the real good mood



came out and started to change me. To something better.” Simon seems to be expressing what Deci and Ryan (1985; cited by Austin et al, 2015, p. 6) describe as intrinsic motivation for actualization: “When persons are able to achieve success, they experience feelings of competence and autonomy, along with... enjoyment and excitement.” This tendency towards actualization developed through recreation and leisure could be part of the reason why personal growth and self-confidence are common experiences among the interview participants.

Activities can open the door for deeper connection and communication. While taking a break from skating at an ice-rink, I was talking and laughing with a young person about a movie we both like when the conversation evolved into him disclosing some of his experiences of bullying at school. I do not think this conversation would have occurred without the backdrop of the activity. Due to the language barrier between some of the participants and myself, the activities helped me observe and get to know them in ways we could not manage via verbal conversation. Activities can also offer some escapism and make it more ok not to talk. There is no pressure to express the complicated circumstances at home while go-karting or playing a riddle game.

The interview participants also talked about how the focus on activities can help them to take a break from thinking about their troubles. Defrain et al (2008) talks about the escape from dealing with trauma that their participants found in activities. For some of their participants, devoting their time to activities in adolescence helped them escape, emotionally and physically, from their home for a while (Defrain et al, 2008). Britt emphasized that this escapism through activities can help the young people stay out of trouble, giving them a rewarding way to occupy their weekends. The two older interview participants both remain involved in organized activities in adulthood. This is similar to how the participants in Defrain et al (2008) continued to use activities as part of their expressive healing as adults. Within the context of Norwegian society where it is common for adults to engage in communal recreational activities, former participants continued involvement in activities that could give them a source of both escape and social connection.

#### *4.4.4 Youth participation and empowerment*

Initially, when designing this study, I anticipated that youth participation and empowerment would be a main theme. During my time volunteering for the program in May 2017, I had noted that the power gap between participants and leaders seemed minimized by the mutual respect and acceptance of one another. With this impression in mind, as well as knowledge of Ventilene’s stated goals to see and empower young-carers, I perceived that empowerment was a focus of Ventilene.

Despite these preconceptions, when I began my observations I observed much less participation and empowerment than I had originally expected. I came to conclude that although there are institutional opportunities for youth participation, Ventilene quite often uses more protective power over young people than cooperative power together. While protective power is not necessarily harmful to the participants, it is not ideal for fostering their empowerment either (Tew, 2006).

Even so, and in contradiction to what I thought was the case, the young people whom I interviewed generally expressed satisfaction with their level of participation and power in the group. Their perception must be taken seriously. Nearly all of the participants relate feeling that they have a voice in group decisions. Their descriptions of the rules and decisions in the group show a general willingness to do as they are told. Possibly the protective power dynamics feel reassuring to the young people in Ventilene, some of whom may not have felt protected or supported by many adults in their lives. Having someone make responsible decisions for them that foster their safety and best interests may help role model how healthy relationships with authority figures should be (Bransford, 2011). This needs to be balanced,

however, with invitations for young people and adults to work together, or else the relationship can remain paternalistic (Flynn, 2013).

Power together relationships seem to be more common experiences among participants who have experienced leadership roles in Ventilene. Simon, Leo, and Britt have experience volunteering in Ventilene and describe it as an empowering experience. Britt talks about the shifting of her identity as she gains confidence in her leadership role. Leo claims the leadership role gave him “a lot in many ways. It made me feel like I had a purpose and it felt good to help other people.” This experience seems to have shaped Leo’s drive to do well in school and work in a position where he can help others, goals that he has accomplished since leaving Ventilene. Although Simon expresses having an emotionally difficult transition from a participant to a leader, he says the leadership opportunities in Ventilene helped him feel more in control of his life, and find satisfaction in leadership and responsibility. These findings seem to connect with Rudduck and McIntyre’s (2007; cited in Flynn, 2013) conclusion that giving young people opportunities to feel ownership over their experiences through leadership can promote their empowerment.

To me, this seems to be the topic where my observations and the participants’s experiences have the least congruity. As an outsider and a social work professional, looking through my own socially constructed lens I see the use of protectionist power over participants hurting empowerment opportunities and practices. To the insiders of Ventilene, with lived-in expert knowledges, Ventilene seems to be an empowering experience.

Along the way, this has helped me to understand that empowerment does not necessarily mean full participation and autonomy. For people who feel they have very little control in their lives, being asked their opinion about pre-selected activities can feel empowering. The very fact that I did not already know that, reveals I was looking at empowerment from a position of privilege myself. Still, I argue that the more we can encourage young people’s participation and empowerment, the more we can help them to find their own strengths and power, and the smoother their transition to adulthood will be (Ulvik, 2015; Flynn, 2013; Saleebey, 2009; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This may be especially necessary for building the resilience in young people transitioning out of care, or with multiple risk factors in the home (Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014; Masten, 2011). Ventilene could be doing more to foster this empowerment.

#### *4.4.5 Resilience & personal growth*

In the interviews, all of the participants said they benefitted in some way from their participation in Ventilene. Most of the participants expressed having more hope in their future now, less anger about the past or on-going difficulties, and more self-confidence. Most of the young people also say Ventilene helped them find better ways to manage difficulties in their lives. Nearly all of the participants say they used to get angry when things went wrong, some expressed this anger physically, and others would run away (fight or flight). The participants who say they used to get very angry now feel they can manage their anger more appropriately.

These expressions of personal growth may indicate Ventilene is achieving the desired outcomes of positive youth development (PYD) programs, helping young people strengthen the five C’s: confidence, competence, character, connection, and caring (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Promoting the 5 C’s, as well as a sense of hope, are outcomes that strengths perspective and TIC also prize (Hopper et al, 2010; Saleebey, 2009).

Even in the responses of Simon—who was perhaps the most critical of Ventilene among the participants in my study—there are expressions of great personal growth and resilience. His descriptions of pride at mastering activities, and the joy and relief of forming lifelong friendships seem like great strengths that add to his internal resilience (Masten, 2011). Simon says he does not believe Ventilene helped him find new ways to manage, however. He recommends they should focus more on coping as a part of everyday life and not just when in Ventilene. Establishing greater resiliency and personal growth seem to be common outcomes

in Ventilene, but Simon's critique indicates that participants may not be equipped with strategies for managing difficulties arising during the transition to adulthood.

Several participants mention being motivated to help others because of their own traumatic experiences. Some are specific in their desire to be a support for young people like themselves, such as Britt's statement that she wants to be a foster parent because of her own experience as a foster child. Gabriel says, "I feel like I'm done getting all the help that I needed so I feel like I can finally be the one that can join in and help others." Simon describes helping others and being "part of something good" as "the most important" criteria for his future career. Helping others from a similar background on their recovery journey is an essential aspect of peer support in Trauma Informed Care (Huckhorn and Libel, 2013). Working with others with similar traumatic experiences can help people make meaning from their past trauma and motivate them to continue healing (Defrain et al 2008). It seems some of the participants are actively reframing their adversity as a strength which has helped them grow and can help others (Saleebey, 2009).

The personal growth and resilience of participants may be amplified by bias in the sampling of this study. Because I only interviewed young people over 18 years old who are still connected to Ventilene, all of my participants have voluntarily remained a part of Ventilene into adulthood. Perhaps these results are not typical among the young people who choose to leave Ventilene. The director had this to say about participants who do not have such positive outcomes from Ventilene:

Of course some of them, they don't make it. They don't go to school, they have a fallback, but I think even them have some good experiences here. I think they learned something and I hope they felt loved, and I think they do, because many of them who are grown up and moved out... still they call, they send me a text, and like things on Facebook, so they have a connection. - Ventilene's Director

Although there are limitations in this study that make it difficult to speculate about the outcomes of Ventilene participants overall, from what I have seen and heard, healthy growth does seem to be a common experience. Even if the experiences of the interview participants are not the norm among all of Ventilene's participants, they still provide many valuable insights. Although many of Ventilene's interventions might seem intuitive and simple, most of the young people whom I interviewed believed that the experiences helped to enhance their personal growth and also their sense of being positively connected to other young people.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented, integrated, and began to analyze the findings of this study. I now discuss how these findings shed light on my essential research question: how do Ventilene's goals compare to the experiences and outcomes for young people in the program? Commentary on Ventilene's goal actualization is followed by recommendations for Ventilene and future research. The findings of this study are also briefly contextualized within broader implications for policy. Lastly I close with concluding remarks on Ventilene's contribution to this field of study.

### 5.2 Implications of findings for Ventilene's goal outcomes

#### 5.2.1 Goal: *Provide a caring environment*

Overall I feel Ventilene succeeds in this goal. From interview participants' descriptions of Ventilene, it is apparent they feel cared for in this accepting and family-like setting. Moreover, many of Ventilene's practices meet the standards of Trauma Informed Care, indicating providing care within an emotionally and physically safe environment for all is a true priority of Ventilene. My only critique related to quality of care is the insufficient diet of Ventilene, and the bad eating habits it may reinforce. Ventilene's environment meets the emotional care needs of participants, but is not nourishing their bodies with the same level of care.

#### 5.2.2 Goal: *Opportunities to socialize and build relationships*

As indicated in the interviews, the relationship development in Ventilene may be its greatest strength. Participants are open about having strong, loving relationships both with peers and with leaders. The norms of acceptance and awareness of what it is like to have a difficult home life provide what one participant describes as "a shortcut to friendship." Physical affection is frequent among most people of the group and some participants speak of feeling loved. The director's wish for participants who have left Ventilene is "I hope that they felt loved."

Certainly the relationships among people who have been in Ventilene for a long time are very strong, but I observed some dynamics indicating that newer members of the program may not have such strong connections. This sentiment was also stated in one interview. Perhaps that will come with time, and if the leaders are intentional in making sure all young people feel connected and included.

Another aspect of this goal is to help young people feel like they have the social codes needed to socialize outside the Ventilene. That would seem to be undermined by the instances I observed of the teenager girl being repeatedly reprimanded for socializing with other teens outside of her Ventilene team. Overall Ventilene definitely does provide opportunities to socialize and there are many strong relationships within the group, but perhaps the leaders could benefit from more training on how to facilitate relationship building both inside and outside the group setting.

#### 5.2.3 Goal: *Foster self-esteem through activity mastery*

All of the interview participants, and most of the participants in my observations, expressed overall satisfaction with the activities. Those who had been in the program longer offered

hindsight reflections on how the activities had helped them to gain confidence through mastery. Feelings of confidence and accomplishment increased their intrinsic motivation towards actualization, encouraging them to push themselves to grow and accomplish more (Austin et al, 2015). Activities also offered a form of escapism which some of the participants continue to find outside of Ventilene's context. The only way I think the activities could be better is if young people were more involved in their selection, relating again to the need for more youth participation opportunities.

Many of the interview participants express having greater confidence and hope for their future because of their involvement in Ventilene. Their descriptions of personal growth seem to illustrate having higher self-esteem both from feeling mastery in activities, and feeling cared for in relationships. Activities often have a communal goal in Ventilene, turning regular, individual activities into team building challenges. Attitudes that everyone has strengths and is supported by the group become visible in the fostering of relationships through activities.

#### 5.2.4 Goal: *Give participants the feeling of being seen with dignity*

The expressions of feeling seen, listened to, and safe to be accepted as themselves seem to indicate that interview participants are recognized with dignity. In my observations, it seemed like overall the participants felt safe to be themselves and recognized for their strengths in Ventilene. This accepting setting seems to have helped participants develop greater hope. Some of the participants said they did not think they had a future before they came to Ventilene. Some meant this literally, in that they had suicidal intentions, and others meant they did not have any future goals. Participants varied goals now reveal greater belief in their self and capability to achieve in the future.

The frequent decision making *for* rather than *with* youth, and talking *about* rather than *to* youth are practices that do not seem to fully respect the dignity and agency of each participant. Here again I feel outcomes could be improved by interrupting existing protective power over practices. An interview participant offered the additional critique that some of the volunteers do not know what being a young carer means. With more training on these topic volunteers may be better able to relate to the young people and treat them with dignity.

#### 5.2.5 Goal: *Empower participants to recognize their resources and use them*

The way Ventilene cooperates and communicates with multiple systems in their participant's lives may help young people to recognize the existing resources available to them. None of the interview participants provided explicit examples of Ventilene helping them to recognize and use outside resources. Certainly their answers indicate that strengths perspective helped empower them to recognize internal resources, and building these strengths may have indirectly empowered them to seek out more external resources as well. According to the director, Ventilene does sometimes directly connect participants to outside services, such as mental health care.

Many of the young people at Ventilene already have some connection to social services and Ventilene's updates after every camp can be shared with stakeholders in the system, such as psychologists, social workers, or teachers. Although Ventilene mostly focuses on building relationships within the group rather than connecting young people to other services, they seem to have systems in place that encourage—and perhaps empower—young people to recognize and use other resources available to them as well.

### 5.3 Recommendations for Ventilene

As previously mentioned in the thematic analysis, I was expecting youth empowerment to be a more prominent theme in this research. This has been a learning opportunity for me about power and access to empowerment. Whereas I consider empowerment an essential process

and right of growing up, the interview participants reminded me feeling cared for and secure are more essential.

Similarly, In Defrain et al (2008), the authors conclude that empowerment is a lot to expect of young people who are just trying to survive day by day. The participants in Defrain et al (2008) were often alone, unheard, and not helped in childhood, however, whereas the participants in this study have strong relationships in Ventilene, and indicate feeling listened to. These are incredible strengths that have helped some Ventilene participants move past trauma and find greater hope, self-esteem, and intrinsic motivation towards actualization. Fortified by these relationships, I believe Ventilene's participants are capable of taking more ownership over tasks that already exist within Ventilene's structure. Building cooperative power together practices that actively involve young people in decision making about activities, meal choice and prep, and the discussion rituals like the barometer, could help to promote young people's resilience and a smoother transition to adulthood.

Increasing the empowerment of participants may help to address some of Ventilene's areas for improvement suggested by interview participants. Overall, interview participants were positive about Ventilene and several only expressed strengths of the program. Those who did offer some critiques, however, had recommendations for how the program could be improved. According to Simon, "There's some parts in the transition [to adulthood] that I think is really hard. You don't feel like you're getting the love anymore." Empowering young people with greater confidence and competence can help to ease the uncertainties of their transition to adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Many young people depend on their families for resources and support during their transition to adulthood. For young-carers and young people leaving care, this social network may not be available (Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014). Simon's suggestion of establishing a contact person for former participants to reach out to when they feel they need additional supports could help to ease feelings of isolation during the transition to adulthood. I would add to his recommendation that Ventilene could host reunion opportunities for previous members of the program. Since Ventilene regularly hosts events at their hotel, I think it could be logistically feasible to have reunion type events a couple of times a year as an invitation for alumni to reconnect with Ventilene again.

Related to Simon's recommendation, I think Ventilene's participants could benefit from more guidance on how to develop long-term coping skills. While several of the younger interview participants mention feeling like they have learned to manage when things get difficult, the two older participants admit that was a struggle for them into adulthood. Simon and Leo have both had healing and accomplishments in their adult lives, but express not always knowing how to cope day by day. Simon expresses that in Ventilene, "We've been talking a lot about [the trauma], but I don't feel like we've been talking about how to get over it and how to live with it."

The answers of interview participants may indicate that Ventilene is doing great work engaging their participants during their difficult childhood years. Managing recurring trauma symptoms or additional difficulties in their transition to adulthood receives less attention, however. Leo and Simon continue to find relief in activities, so in that regard the mastery they experienced in Ventilene continues to be a way of coping for them. Typical adult life consists of many roles and responsibilities that require coping skills beyond recreation, however. Expanding the coping tools in the toolkits of young people could help give them additional strategies for managing difficulties in adult life.

Another way Ventilene can better prepare young people for adulthood is teaching them how to take care of their body's nutrition needs. A healthier diet could add to the inclusiveness of the environment, being necessary for some young people and helpful to them all. This was made evident to me one morning when a leader decided to add a large bowl of porridge to the morning spread and several young people enthusiastically lined up to get some. It was almost comical to see teenagers thrilled about porridge, which I interpreted as a sign they were

craving nutritious food. In addition to encouraging healthy eating and meeting everyone's dietary preferences, more options may allow participants to feel like they have more control over their diet. This would seem to be in line with trauma informed care, rebuilding a sense of control and meeting individual care needs (Huckshorn and Lebel, 2013). A low quality diet is the norm of Ventilene right now, but from my limited observations I believe some participants are open to a shift to a more enriching diet where junk food is a treat and not the norm.

My last recommendation is for more leadership training for volunteers. Ventilene's volunteers are a great asset to the program, providing the young people with opportunities to build relationships with relatable and supportive role-models of diverse backgrounds. If Ventilene wants to have more empowering practices, however, the volunteers and leaders should seek more training on how to facilitate power together practices and relationships. More training may also be able to reduce the problematic incidences I observed. The more leaders feel comfortable facilitating decisions with the input, knowledge, and consent of participants, the less likely they are to inadvertently place limiting power over the young people (Tew, 2006).

## 5.4 Implication for Policy

In the 196 countries that have ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, children have the legal right to leisure and recreation time. Through policy, states are supposed to facilitate and encourage recreational opportunities for youth, per agreement with article 31 (Committee, 2013). In Norway, approximately 85% of minors take part in organized activities (Norwegian, 2017). Norway recognizes youth organizations have a special capacity to interrupt patterns of social exclusion, arguing youth organizations are, "not only a potential basis for local community and democracy, but also a substitute for it, when family and other local ties are absent" (Wolf et al, 2004 p.16). Establishing recreational activities that promote positive youth development appears to be a policy priority in Norway, and an increasing priority globally. With the infrastructure for recreational activities becoming increasingly accessible to the global population of young people, these program could have a profound effect on youth development (Committee, 2013). Moreover, a better understanding of the ways in which recreational programs can engage young people and promote social supports could have global benefits for youth out-reach work.

Traditionally, the foundation of recreational programs are common interests among the participants, such as a mutual enjoyment of football or knitting. This research examines the additional benefits of building recreational groups around common background. As the interview participants of this study describe, grouping people with similar experiences together helps to build relationships because "it's easier to connect to people who you are relating to." When these common experiences are atypical or marginalizing, these relationships can offer peer support and relief from feelings of social exclusion (Bluebird, 2008; Saleebey, 2009; Jarczyńska and Walczak, 2017). Some resilience movements have grouped "at risk" young people together in recreational programs before, but without a more strengths-based perspective programs may fail to see the young people with dignity (Masten 2011; Young et al, 2014). Instead of labelling the youth "at risk" and prescribing future challenges to them, Ventilene focuses on the strengths of the young people here and now.

Structuring other recreation-based programs in this support-group style could help meet the needs of other under-served populations. Despite efforts to make activities free or accessible to all in Norway, young people who are in conditions of poverty, physical or mental health difficulties, interrupted education, or are migrants are more likely to face social exclusion (Huang, 2013). If Norway is not succeeding at supporting the needs of these populations through mainstream youth organizations, perhaps more specialized programs like Ventilene can help bridge this gap. Bringing together young people with a shared social barrier may better enable them to participate in programs designed specifically for their needs.

Ventilene's interventions are often simple and intuitive. The simplicity of this program makes it more replicable and adaptable to meet the needs of diverse groups of young people in diverse settings. As implementation of the UNCRC's article 31 continues in a variety of contexts, attention should be paid to encouraging the participation of marginalized youth populations in recreation (Committee, 2013). Continued research and improvement of programs that can promote the positive development of a diverse population of young people have now surely become a global policy need.

## 5.5 Recommendations for further research

My first recommendation for future research is in response to one of the greatest limitations of this study. Due to ethical concerns and the time constraints pertaining to this dissertation, I chose to only interview participants over 18 years old. Hearing the perspectives of minors could help Ventilene better meet the needs and address any concerns of their younger participants, particularly those who are not in Ventilene voluntarily. I believe the younger participants in Ventilene have varied and valuable views and voices that should be included if further research on Ventilene is conducted.

In my study, I was unable to engage the voices of young refugees who were in the Ventilene Program. I regret this, and I sincerely hope that other researchers will follow-up in this important area. I feel this is a missed opportunity, caused in part by Norway's larger scale missed opportunity to help ease the plight of refugees. The resources, space, and services to help many refugees are there; yet Norway is closing most of its refugee centers and deporting young people as soon as they turn 18 (cf. Oesterud, 2017). I believe such practices deserve further investigation and scrutiny. Research which listens to the perspectives of refugee youth in Norway could help raise awareness and advocate for their continuing human rights and developmental needs.

A trend that emerged in my research that needs further attention is the prevalence of teen suicide. One out of six interview participants in this study indicated past suicidal thoughts or actions. They also indicated that their experience as participants in Ventilene helped manage these feelings. Their relationships and feelings of accomplishment in this recreation-based program may have prevented their suicide. Research should consider if suicide prevention is a common unintended outcome among other recreational programs. If recreational programs are deterring youth suicide in broader contexts than just Ventilene, then the workers at these programs should be equipped with more knowledge of how to address and care for young people who may be contemplating suicide. In the European Council's youth policy review of Norway, social exclusion and suicide were considered to be increased risks for marginalized youth who may feel invisible among the relative affluence of their peers (Wolf et al, 2004). Further research into the prevalence of teen suicidal intentions in Norway, and the potential for recreation-based programs to deter these intentions, is an important arena for further research.

## 5.6 Conclusion

Overall the evidence from participants' testimonies and my own participant observations indicate that Ventilene is having a positive impact on youth development. It could also be a safe place for power together opportunities, helping young people gain greater empowerment and tools for smoother transition to adulthood. To achieve this end, Ventilene needs to interrupt some of their protective power over practices and have more opportunities for youth participation in decision making.

Of every surprise I found during my research, the most serendipitous was uncovering how much love there is in Ventilene. The caring is not unidirectional in Ventilene, it is not merely the adults caring for the young people. It is also young people caring for each other, young people caring for adults, and adults caring for each other. There is a web of loving and



supportive relationships in this community and it is hard not to get caught up in it. The goals of helping the young people feel seen and cared for seem to have been expanded in practice to everyone feeling seen and cared for. I feel so fortunate to have been welcomed into this caring community. Their strong relationships and personalized care provide an accepting environment for healing.

It was also encouraging that Ventilene seems to be participating in a movement recognizing the need to develop more support-centered recreational programs in Norway. Certainly Ventilene has a lot to contribute towards greater understanding of the care needs of young-carer populations. Despite expressing nostalgia for when the group was smaller, the interview participants are generally enthusiastic that Ventilene's rapid expansion since 2015 will enable them to help more young people. Growing without losing sight of the intimacy that makes their relationships so strong may be a challenge for Ventilene in the years to come. Now, while the program is still small, is the right time for them to examine their practices, address challenges, and intentionally move closer to their goals. As Leo said twice during his interview, "We learn as long as we live, right?" Ventilene is still learning and growing and I believe they have the capacity and drive to meet and exceed their goals.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Semi Structured Interview Guide

### Preliminaries:

- Thank you for meeting with me today.
- Purpose: I have really enjoyed getting to know you a little bit through the activities this weekend. I would like to get to know you and your experiences in the program a little better by asking you some questions.
- Rules: This interview is completely voluntary so you are really the boss here. You can choose what to answer and what not to answer. You are welcome to end the interview at anytime and I will respect that. I just want to hear your perspectives, so there are no wrong answers. This should take less than an hour.
- Recording: Is it ok for me to record our conversation?
- Questions: Do you have any questions for me before we get started?
- How are you feeling? Do you need anything before we get started? Water?

### Intro: Background

- How long have you been in Ventilene?
- And you are \_\_\_\_ years old?
- What has been your favorite activity you've done in Ventilene? Why?

### Theme: Experiences in the program

- (4.3.1) How would you explain Ventilene to someone who doesn't know about the program?
- (4.3.2) Many programs have their strengths and weaknesses. With that in mind, what do you think about Ventilene?

### Theme: Program atmosphere

- (4.3.3) How do you feel when you are in this group?
- (4.3.4) What do you think about Ventilene's rules?
- (4.3.5) During group activities or discussions, does your opinion matter?
  - *If yes, in what way?*
  - *If no, how so?*

Theme: Relationships

- (4.3.6) I think as people sometimes we all can find it easier to connect with and trust some people more than others. Could you tell me a little bit about what your relationships in the group are like?
  - *Why do you think that is?*
  - *What makes it easier/more difficult to connect to/ trust those people?*
- (4.3.7) How do your relationships in Ventilene compare to relationships in other areas of your life? Like at home or school, for example.

Theme: Becoming an adult

- (4.3.8) So now you are an adult. Thinking about who you were when you first joined Ventilene and who you are now:
  - Has Ventilene affected the way you think or behave?
  - Has it had any influence on how you manage when things get difficult?
- (4.3.9) Ok we are coming to the end of our interview now, and I'd like for you to think about your future briefly.
  - What hopes or plans do you have for your future?
  - Do you feel these have been shaped in anyway through your experience in Ventilene?

Conclusion: Ok so that was my last question for you,

- Is there anything I haven't asked you think I should have?
- (4.3.10) Is there anything else you would like to ask me or tell me before we end?

Sa fint! Tusen takk for talking with me today.

# Appendix B: NVIVO Thematic Analysis Frequency Charts

Figure 1: Most frequently coded nodes from data collection

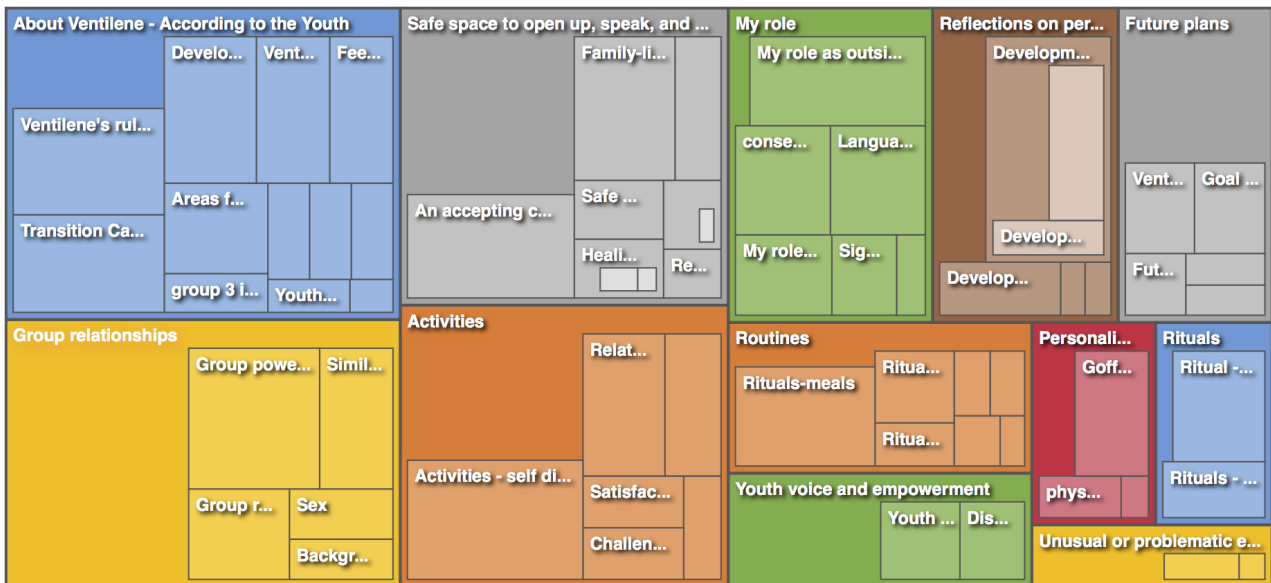


Figure 2: Most frequently coded nodes overall – (includes data collection, literature review, and methodology)

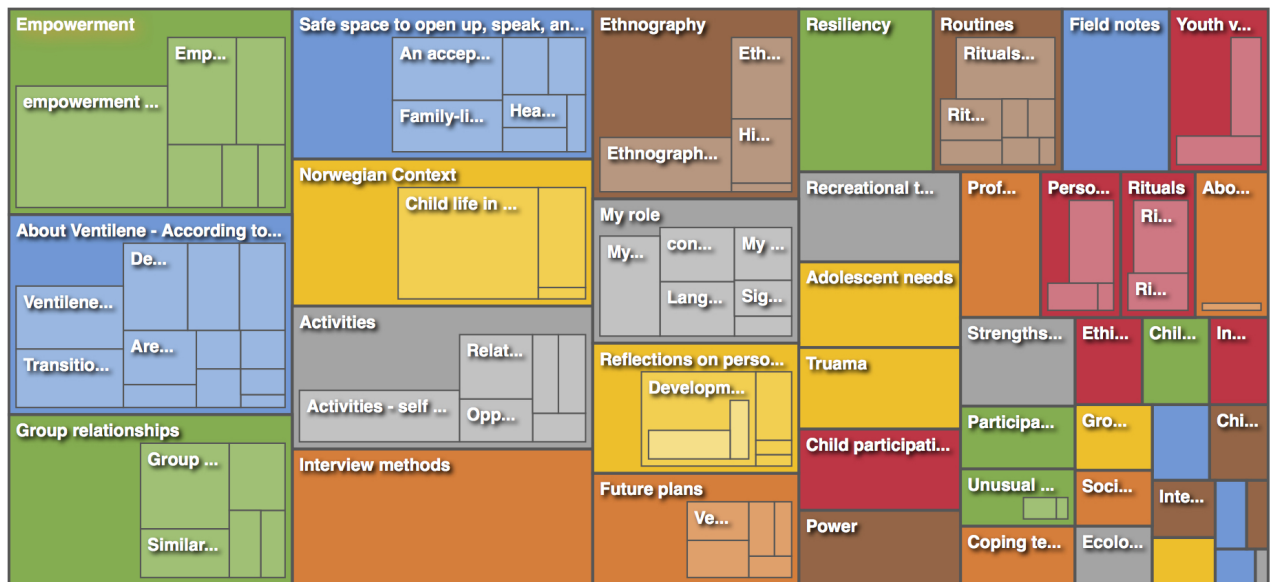
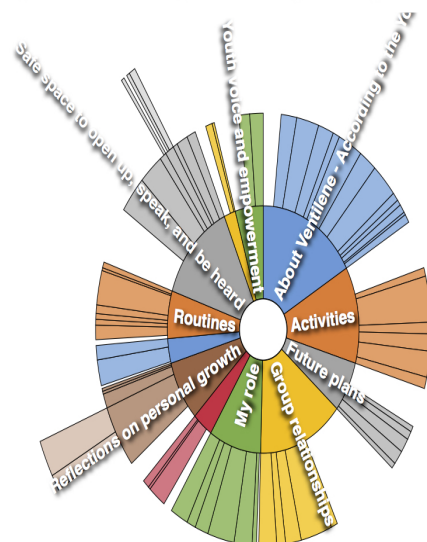


Figure 3: Prominent themes from coded nodes overall - (includes data collection, literature review, and methodology)





# Appendix C: NSD Approval Letter



Paul Stephens  
Kjell Arholms hus  
4036 STAVANGER

Vår dato: 13.02.2018

Vår ref: 58448 / 3 / AGL

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

## Tilråkning fra NSD Personvernombudet for forskning § 7-27

Personvernombudet for forskning viser til meldeskjema mottatt 17.01.2018 for prosjektet:

<i>58448</i>	<i>Experiences of a therapeutic program in a Norwegian city: young people's voices</i>
<i>Behandlingsansvarlig</i>	<i>Universitetet i Stavanger, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
<i>Daglig ansvarlig</i>	<i>Paul Stephens</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>Molly Paone</i>

### Vurdering

Etter gjennomgang av opplysningene i meldeskjemaet og øvrig dokumentasjon finner vi at prosjektet er unntatt konsesjonsplikt og at personopplysningene som blir samlet inn i dette prosjektet er regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. På den neste siden er vår vurdering av prosjektopplegget slik det er meldt til oss. Du kan nå gå i gang med å behandle personopplysninger.

### Vilkår for vår anbefaling

Vår anbefaling forutsetter at du gjennomfører prosjektet i tråd med:

- opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet og øvrig dokumentasjon
- vår prosjektvurdering, se side 2
- eventuell korrespondanse med oss

### Meld fra hvis du gjør vesentlige endringer i prosjektet

Dersom prosjektet endrer seg, kan det være nødvendig å sende inn endringsmelding. På våre nettsider finner du svar på hvilke [endringer](#) du må melde, samt endringskjema.

### Opplysninger om prosjektet blir lagt ut på våre nettsider og i Meldingsarkivet

Vi har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet på nettsidene våre. Alle våre institusjoner har også tilgang til egne prosjekter i [Meldingsarkivet](#).

### Vi tar kontakt om status for behandling av personopplysninger ved prosjektslutt

Ved prosjektslutt 08.06.2018 vil vi ta kontakt for å avklare status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

*Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.*

Se våre nettsider eller ta kontakt dersom du har spørsmål. Vi ønsker lykke til med prosjektet!

Vennlig hilsen

Marianne Høgetveit Myhren

Audun Løvlie

Kontaktperson: Audun Løvlie tlf: 55 58 23 07 / [audun.lovlie@nsd.no](mailto:audun.lovlie@nsd.no)

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Kopi: Molly Paone, [mollypaone1109@gmail.com](mailto:mollypaone1109@gmail.com)

## Personvernombudet for forskning



### Prosjektvurdering - Kommentar

---

Prosjektnr: 58448

The purpose of the project is to investigate young people's perceptions of a therapeutic program to which they have been referred by Child Services.

According to your notification form the sample will receive written and oral information and will give their consent to participate. The information letter we have received is well formulated.

We remind you that children themselves must consent to participate, even if their guardians have given their consent. Children should receive age-appropriate information about the project, and you must ensure that children understand that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time if they wish.

Is it the Data Protection Official assessment that the project will process sensitive personal data about health, as the sample consists of individuals with a relationship to the Child Services.

The Data Protection Official presupposes that you will process all data according to the Universitetet i Stavanger internal guidelines/routines for information security. We presuppose that the use of a personal computer/mobile storage device is in accordance with these guidelines.

The estimated end date of the project is 08.06.2018. According to your notification form/information letter you intend to anonymise the collected data by this date. Making the data anonymous entails processing it in such a way that no individuals can be identified. This is done by:

- deleting all direct personal data (such as names/lists of reference numbers)
- deleting/rewriting indirectly identifiable personal data (i.e. an identifying combination of background variables, such as residence/work place, age and gender)
- deleting digital audio

# Appendix D: Consent forms

English Version

## **Request for participation in research project**

"Experiences of a recreation based support program in a Norwegian city: young people's voices "

### **Background and Purpose**

In this study, I investigate young people's perceptions of a support program to which they have been referred by Child Services. The aim of the program is to foster safe and empowering experiences for young people. In my role as a researcher and a program volunteer, I use participant observation and semi-structured interviews for the purpose of data collection. My aim is to obtain a better understanding of young people's behaviors and experiences in this relatively informal therapeutic setting. Informal interviews will also be carried out with the program director and a few of the staff, with the intention of gaining some insight into program provider goals. This study is conducted through the University of Stavanger in accordance with the Erasmus Mundus Master's in Social Work with Children and Families (MFAMILY) program.

### **What does participation in the project imply?**

The participant observation for this study is designed to be naturalistic, meaning the research will respect the routines and dynamics of the group with minimal interruptions. Consenting to be part of the participant observation means you should behave as you normally do in the program. Participant observation identifies patterns within a group, your individual behavior will not be monitored or studied. Any reference to the words or actions of an individual within the paper will be made anonymous.

Participation in interviews is entirely voluntary and limited only to participants over 18 years old. This age limit exists both out of respect for the privacy of minors, and also to focus on participants who have experience with entering adulthood. The interview questions are flexible and open ended, with the general themes of experiences in the program, perceptions of empowerment, and entering adulthood. The interviews focus on strengths and will not ask sensitive questions about past experiences. All participants, and the parents or guardians of participants under 18 years old, have the right to request to see the interview guide. Data will be recorded via written notes and a voice recorder.

### **What will happen to the information about you?**

All personal data will be treated confidentially. Participants, program staff, and the program itself will all be renamed and anonymized in the data and any subsequent publication. Only the project leader will have access to the data before it is anonymized. All data will be securely stored in password protected software and hard-drives.

The project is scheduled for completion by 1 June, 2018. All data will be anonymized by this time and secured indefinitely on hard-drives accessible only to the project leader.

### **Voluntary participation**

It is voluntary to participate in the project. You may choose at any time to withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be made anonymous. Choosing not to participate, or choosing to withdraw your consent at a later date, will not impact your involvement in the program or relationships there-in.

For questions concerning the project, please contact the project leader, Molly Paone, at [m.paone@stud.uis.no](mailto:m.paone@stud.uis.no) or 001-603-9433794. Professor Paul Stephens is the supervisor for this project and can also be contacted with questions or concerns at [paul.stephens@uis.no](mailto:paul.stephens@uis.no).

The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

## **Consent for participation in the study**

Participant Consent: I have received information about the project and consent to participate in:

- Participant observations
- Individual interview

-----  
(Signed by participant, date)

Parent or Guardian Consent (for participants under 18): I have received information about the project and grant consent for \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in:

- Participant observations

-----  
(Signed by parent or guardian, date)

Norsk versjon

## Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt.

"Opplevelser av et rekreasjonsbasert støtteprogram i en norsk by: Ungdomsstemmer"

### Bakgrunn og formål:

I denne undersøkelsen undersøker jeg ungdommens oppfatninger av og erfaringer fra et støtteprogram som de er henvist til av barnevernet. Målet med støtteprogrammet er å fremme trygge mestringsopplevelser for unge mennesker. I min rolle som forsker og frivillig i prosjektet, bruker jeg deltaker-observasjon og semi-strukturerte intervjuer for å samle inn data. Målet mitt er å få bedre forståelse for ungdommens oppførsel, uttrykksform og opplevelser i denne relativt uformelle terapeutiske situasjonen. Uformelle intervjuer vil også bli gjennomført med prosjektleder og noen få medarbeidere, med sikte på å få litt innsikt i målet med programmet. Denne studien gjennomføres ved Universitetet i Stavanger i samsvar med Erasmus Mundus Master i sosialt arbeid med barn og familier (MFAMILY).

### Hva betyr det å delta i prosjektet?

Deltakerobservasjonen i denne studien er tenkt å være naturlig, noe som betyr at forskningen vil respektere gjeldende rutiner og dynamikk i gruppen med minimal forstyrrelse. Ved å samtykke til å være en del av deltakerobservasjonen betyr at du oppfører deg og gjør helt som normalt i programmet. Deltakerobservasjon vil identifisere mønstre i gruppen som helhet, ikke din individuelle opptreden og væremåte. Eventuell referanse til ord eller handlinger fra en person i gruppen blir anonymisert i rapporten.

Deltakelse i intervjuer er helt frivillig og begrenset kun til deltakere over 18 år. Denne aldersgrensen er satt både for å respektere mindreåriges personvern, men også for å fokusere på deltakere som har erfaring med å bevege seg over i voksen alder. Intervjuspørsmålene er feksible og åpne rundt temaene «erfaringer i programmet», «opplevelse av mestring» og «inntreden i voksen alder». Intervjuene fokuserer på styrker og vil ikke stille sensitive spørsmål om tidligere erfaringer/bakgrunn. Alle deltakerne, og foreldrene eller foresatte av deltakere under 18 år, har rett til å be om å få se intervjuveiledningen. Data registreres via skriftlige notater og en stemmeopptaker.

### Hva skjer med informasjonen om deg?

Alle personopplysninger behandles konfidensielt. Deltakere, programpersonal og selve programmet vil alle bli omdøpt og anonymisert i teksten og eventuelle senere publikasjoner. Bare prosjektlederen vil ha tilgang til dataene før de er anonymisert. Alle data lagres sikkert i passordbeskyttet programvare og harddisker.

Prosjektet er planlagt ferdigstilt innen 1. juni 2018. Alle data vil bli anonymisert innen denne tiden og sikret på ubestemt tid på harddisker som kun er tilgjengelig for prosjektlederen.

### Frivillig deltakelse:

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Du kan når som helst velge å trekke samtykket ditt uten å angi noen grunn. Hvis du bestemmer deg for å trekke deg, forblir alle dine opplysninger anonyme. Å velge å ikke

delta, eller å velge å trekke samtykket ditt på et senere tidspunkt, vil ikke påvirke din deltagelse i programmet eller forholdene der.

For spørsmål om prosjektet, vennligst kontakt prosjektlederen, Molly Paone, på [m.paone@stud.uis.no](mailto:m.paone@stud.uis.no) eller 001-603-9433794. Professor Paul Stephens er veileder for dette prosjektet og kan også kontaktes med spørsmål eller problemstillinger på [paul.stephens@uis.no](mailto:paul.stephens@uis.no).

Studien er varslet til Databeskyttelsesansvarlig for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata.

## Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Deltaker samtykke: Jeg har mottatt informasjon om prosjektet og samtykker til å delta i (sett kryss):

Deltaker observasjoner

Individuelt intervju

-----  
(Dato, signatur, deltaker navn blokkbokstaver)

Foreldre eller foresatte samtykker (for deltagere under 18 år):

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om prosjektet og gir samtykke til at \_\_\_\_\_ kan delta i (sett kryss):

Deltaker observasjoner

-----  
(Dato, signatur, rolle – navn blokkbokstaver)

## Appendix E: Detailed Participant Observation

### 4.2.1 Routines

Each weekend followed the same general routine. The weekend begins with the pick-ups and drop-offs of the youth. This routine is flexible and personalized with the leaders of each group texting the teenagers, and sometimes their parental figures, to determine where and when the teen will join the group. The two most common options are for the parental figures to drop them off at the hotel, or for the youth to meet the leader at the train station. Other accommodations are made as needed on a person by person basis, such as pick-up from the airport or ferry terminal. Regardless of how the teenagers manage to join the group, the mood is generally high with lots of hugs and catch-up chit-chat between and among the teenagers and volunteers. As a new person in the group my reception was mixed; I was usually greeted with at least a warm “hei hei,” sometimes given introduction and hugs, and sometimes ignored all together.

The next step in the routine is the process of moving into rooms in the hotel. The autonomy of the youth to select their own room varies depending on the preferences of the leader in each team. One weekend the youth selected their own rooms. The other two weekends leaders predetermined who would stay with whom and in which room. These decisions were sometimes made in collaboration with the youth before their arrival. If the teens voiced objections to their placement, the leaders worked with them to determine a better arrangement. Once it was settled who was staying in which rooms, the youth took some time to set up their rooms, making their beds, arranging furniture to their preference, and often setting up speakers or gaming systems. Frequently the youth wander between rooms catching-up or playing games with friends and volunteers during this time.

In terms of the meal routine, youth can expect to receive food approximately every 4 (waking) hours while in Ventilene. The director explained to me this structure has been an intentional part of the program since its early days when several of the youth participants had past trauma and anxiety about not being fed. The stability of knowing when to expect food helped the youth feel more comfortable in the group setting and able to focus on activities. This practice reminds me of the U.S. Special Education principle, “necessary for some, helpful for all” in that it is a measure that not all youth explicitly need, but all youth can benefit from being in an environment with consistent meals (Bakken and Obiakor, 2016). In practice this works out to a routine of having food every morning around 10:00am, lunch around 2:00pm, dinner around 6:00pm, and then a pre-bed snack around 10:00pm. Depending on the scheduling of activities during the day and evenings, the timings for lunch and dinner may vary, especially on Saturday which is the busiest day for activities. Often I noted the leaders informing the youth when to expect lunch and dinner while communicating the plan for the day; I never noted any of the youth expressing any anxiety in regards to meals.

The staple food on Friday nights in Norway is Tex-Mex style tacos. I have not fully investigated the origins of this tradition, but suspect it is related to the influx of U.S. Americans to Stavanger following the oil boom. Conforming to this multicultural tradition, Ventilene routinely has tacos for dinner on Friday night. Depending on the willingness and arrival time of the teenagers in each group, this dinner is sometimes prepared by the volunteers, or sometimes by the teenagers with a few adults supervising. One weekend I observed the teenagers working in pairs at stations, cooking the meat, prepping the toppings, and mixing guacamole, all with minimal direction from adults. On another weekend it was difficult to motivate the youth to even help set the table. The youth’s participation in meal-prep throughout the weekend is usually left up to them as individuals. They are encouraged but not expected to provide some assistance. They are expected to wash their hands before each meal and bring their plates, glasses, and cutlery to the dishwasher afterwards.

Friday night dinners was also usually when I was introduced as a researcher and my project summarized for the youth. They were told at this time—in English first and then Norwegian—that their participation in the research was voluntary, anonymous, and non-binding. They were encouraged to think about whether or not they wanted to participate as they got to know me over the weekend and I would ask them on Sunday for their signature if they decided to participate.

After dinner there is time for activities. Coming at the end of a long school week, Friday nights are usually pretty low-key with low-stakes social activities around the hotel. Movies, card games, board games, talking and listening to music are all common during this time. The youth are often permitted to do self-directed activities during this time, such as playing games on their phones or chatting in small groups. Self-directed activities respect the autonomy of the youth, allowing them to make the decisions about activities, decisions they are not always included in during more structured group time. Observing a team with new members, however, I noted a disadvantage of this less structured time as the youth who had been in the program longer cuddled and chatted with volunteers and program staff while the new people grouped together in a separate area. In other teams the adults were more intentional in making sure all youth were included in the activities, such as starting up card games among youth or asking for votes on what games to play or movies to watch as a group.

Bedtime is 11:00pm. I was impressed by how well the youth generally respected this rule. I would characterize bedtime as somewhat quick and cooperative, with lots of hugs and good nights exchanged. The youth go into their rooms and they are left to get ready for bed independently. When the youth share rooms, bedtime can take longer, as more bedtime rituals and preferences are negotiated.

Following bedtime, each night there is a leadership meeting until about midnight. At this meeting there are volunteers, staff, and participants who are over 18 and have been given limited leadership responsibilities. Working in the round they share their opinions and observations about how the day went. They express concerns, discuss strategy and logistics for the next day, and summarize what they liked about the day and what they are looking forward to doing tomorrow. Usually on Friday nights these meetings also include some analysis of the overall mood and dynamics in the group. Volunteers who know the participants well may be asked if they think anyone seems to be in need of individual supports. Usually chocolate or candies are passed around. It is part check-in, part strategy session, part slumber party gossip.

Each weekend usually has 4-6 adults, including 1 paid leader and 3- 5 volunteers. The leaders of the groups have some professional background in social work or childcare, as do some of the volunteers. The personal and career backgrounds of the volunteers are diverse. Some are born and raised Norwegians who are electricians in their day jobs, others are from immigrant backgrounds and work as teachers during the week. Some come from young-carer backgrounds similar to the participants. Some are men, some are women; some are old, some are young.

Usually the mood is most enthusiastic on Saturdays because it is the main day for group activities. Some Saturdays are full of one long activity such as skiing or going to an adventure park, other Saturdays have several shorter activities such as playing football at the hotel, going ice skating at an ice rink, and going to a glow-party at a trampoline park. The youth are generally excited to go somewhere and do something together. Depending on the schedule, sometimes the group has lunch or dinner out on Saturday. Returning to the hotel is often after dinner. Then the young people may take showers and get into pajamas, ending the night with a movie or other mellow activity together before the pre-bed snack.

On Sundays, breakfast is usually served a half hour later to allow some extra time to sleep in. Accustomed to waking up early for school, some young people are usually awake and ready for breakfast long before 10:30am. Generally I was getting ready or catching up on my field



notes during this time. On the two mornings I did observe the youth before breakfast, most of the youth were watching a movie together while one or two helped out in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

On Sundays the participants and volunteers have to clean their rooms prior to going out for any activities. Usually there is a volunteer stationed outside the young people's rooms, ready to advise and inspect the cleaning process. Sometimes Sundays can be a less structured day of cleaning, playing games around the hotel, and cooking a nice warm meal for the last lunch together. Most of the Sundays I have witnessed, however, have been a rush. With breakfast concluding around 11:00am, everyone works quickly to clean their rooms so they can go out to bowling or a movie. After the activity, it is a race to have lunch and get everyone to their rides home on time.

The mood is often a bit low on Sundays. Contributing to this mood are the unwanted cleaning tasks, fatigue from the busy day before, and prominently the weekend coming to an end. It is common for youth to express not wanting to go home during the last hours of the Ventilene weekend, sentiments met with sympathetic words and hugs. The process of sending the youth home, much like the process of picking the youth up, is personalized and flexible. No matter what form of transit the young people leave by, their departure is met with hugs and fond farewells from peers and leaders.

#### 4.2.2 Rituals

*Activities* – Providing encouraging activities for youth is the central ritual of Ventilene. The activities are the regular focus of each day. Although the activities themselves vary, their continuity and the spirit of community around them are invariable. In the activities there is generally an attitude of acceptance and teamwork. I have witnessed activities raise the mood of youths, help them connect with peers and volunteers, and welcome new members into the group. I have been impressed on multiple occasions to see activities that could easily be individual and competitive, such as skiing or Ninja Warrior courses, turn into team building activities with the goal of helping everyone succeed. These observations seem to indicate Ventilene is meeting their goals of providing stress relieving activities for mastery, and fostering self-esteem and relationship building through activities.

*Barometer* – After most meals, Ventilene practices the ritual of measuring how each person feels on an ordinal scale. The *barometer* ritual has variables specific to each team, but in general the barometer is a 10 point scale drawn vertically from 0-10. Sitting around the table, the participants take it in turns to measure how they would rank their feelings about the day. To illustrate how different teams use this practice differently, I will contrast two examples from my field notes:

Example 1: “[A teenage girl] once again quietly took the lead on organizing the barometer. She drew scale from 1-10, and a heart, a thumbs up, and an impossibly high trillions of billions number at the very top. When it came time to rate her own day she put it at 2. Most of the rest of the group placed themselves in the heart.”

Example 2: “The barometer in this group was much more spread out, with most of the group ranking 4-10 on the chart. They did not have a heart or any other special characters, just the scale of 1-10. Rather than asking a youth to write down people's answers, [the leader] led and scribed the whole activity.”

As these examples illustrate, the feelings of the youth are not the only variables in the barometer. The level at which youth are permitted to participate and to alter the original scale vary by group. The order of who speaks is different between the groups as well. One team uses voluntary order by raised hand, one goes around in a circle, calling upon each person in

turn, and the third goes around in a circle calling on the all the young people first and then the adults.

These particulars do provide some insight into the variation in power dynamics between the groups. Some teams use this as an opportunity to give the youth a voice and a creative platform. The other team keeps the professionals in a position of control. Having the youth lead this ritual may be empowering not only to the youth leading, but also to the youth participating as it brings the ritual to a peer to peer level making the value of their participation evident (Healy, 2014; Tew, 2006).

Most barometer sessions are a calm check-in, often including lighthearted comments and stories from the day, but they can provide a safe space for expressing more difficult feelings as well. In my limited time with the group, I observed the barometer used to express reluctance to go home and the sharing of difficulties happening there. I have also witnessed anger and frustration expressed, and the calm reaction from the group when this anger escalated into leaving the room and throwing things. Sometimes participants do not express their feelings in words, but rather in how they measure their day. The participant mentioned in the above example 1 illustrates this point. One might expect her to be feeling great by her outward expression of enthusiasm to lead the ritual, the drawings of hearts and optimistically high numbers. When she ranks her day as a 2, she offers an insight into how low she is actually feeling. Despite the differences in practice, the barometer remains a consistent ritual that by design provides a safe space to be and express oneself.

*Nightly leadership meeting* – Every night after the youth have said goodnight and gone to their respective bedrooms, the adults gather and talk. This practice feels particularly ritualistic to me because it always, irrespective of team, happens at the same time and place, with the same intentions. There is usually a communal sharing element to it as well, such as someone offering to go get water, tea, or the passing around of candy. Everyone takes it in turn to summarize the day and express any meaningful moments they observed with the youth. These can range from concerns about a young person not eating at a meal, to stories of a young person's accomplishments in an activity. It can be a safe space to discuss things that troubled them, get advice, and set a plan in motion to follow-up with the participants involved the next day.

The nightly meetings feel like a time and space exclusively for the adults. Of course, the adults have specific roles and responsibilities and it is important to give them a space to talk and organize. As the rest of the routines and rituals stress inclusiveness for all, however, I think excluding the youth from this feels contradictory to Ventilene's goals. The meetings have a protectionist foundation which can feel patronizing at times with a lot of talking *about* the youth rather than *to* the youth (Ulvik, 2015). This ritual may inadvertently send the message that the young people are less than fully autonomous and incapable of speaking for themselves or helping in decision making. Making some of these decisions during the day *with* the youth might promote their autonomy and sense of ownership (Flynn, 2013).

### 4.2.3 Rules and norms

*Rules* – The rules in Ventilene are intentionally basic. They are designed to foster a safe and accepting community, without putting a lot of pressure on youth to act a certain way. The director says she tries to have minimum rules. For every rule, there must be follow-up and consequences and that can make the environment too restrictive. The rules are fairly basic expectations for adolescents, such as no smoking, no drinking, no sex, no distracting the driver, no leaving the hotel without the knowledge and permission of a team leader. There are also rules designed to promote the structure and cohesion of group activities like consistent bedtimes, mealtimes, and expectations to behave respectfully towards others, such as no phone use during meal times, and no talking over others. They start off with basic rules and add more if it becomes necessary to do so.

Compared to other camp and child care settings I have worked in, Ventilene is not very strict with rules and consequences. The director wants the youth to learn to trust her word and that if she says yes to something, it really means yes, and if she says no to something, it really means no. Consequences are needed to build that trust, but the consequences are not usually severe. There is no preordained “if you do A then B will happen, if you do A again then C will happen” system of rule breaking and consequences. When rules are broken the consequences are weighed on a case by case basis.

That is not to say that rule breaking is a norm in Ventilene. On the contrary, during my time volunteering for Ventilene, I have been surprised and impressed by how respectful the youth generally are to the rules of the program. The leaders say “Time for bed” and the youth go to bed. The leaders say “No phones at the table” and the youth do not check their phones at the table. Their compliance could be born out of youth being used to rules and finding some comfort in the certainty rules can provide (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This is probably part of it, but the youth in Ventilene often have trouble following the rules at school, and yet in the program they do not seem to mind being told what to do. Perhaps this could reflect the importance of relationship building; maybe participants do not mind being told what to do by people they care about, who have taken the time to get to know them. It could also reflect on the success of the accepting environment of Ventilene; perhaps the youth do not mind being told what to do because they feel accepted and respected in this setting. In any case, following the rules is a norm in Ventilene, and so is forgiveness when the rules are broken.

*Acceptance* – The most fundamental norm I observed in Ventilene was acceptance. It is also one of the most commonly expressed feelings in the interviews. In the interview sections, the participants illustrate how ingrained the norm of acceptance ingrained is in the Ventilene community. Here I will only provide some examples of the acceptance I witnessed during my observations, and

When a leader announced to the youth that it was her home country’s independence day and all the youth immediately crowded her for hugs and congratulated her.

When a participant asked his team if they could come to his music performance the next day and cheer him on. They accepted the invitation without question, attended the show for over two hours, began a chant of his name, and gave his group a standing ovation.

When a participant asked me if I like Norway more than the U.S., but before I could answer amended, “of course America has a special meaning for you because it’s home. You don’t really have to pick one.” I thought this was a remarkably empathetic amendment.

*Diet Norms* – At Ventilene a lot of the day is dedicated to eating, but it’s rarely anything nutritious or filling. Breakfast, lunch, and pre-bed snack are often the same buffet of breads, processed meats, spreads and cheeses, and sometimes fruit. If lunch and dinner are eaten away from the hotel, it is often at fast food restaurants. Dinner at the hotel is usually heartier, with a warm meal like meat and vegetables. Water, juice, tea, and sometimes coffee are included with these meals, and soda is often purchased during activities. Besides the four meals each day, there is also frequent snacking on sweets and chips, some provided by Ventilene and some bought by the young people. Not everyone in Ventilene embraces this norm. During my observations, several youth and volunteers complained that they do not usually eat “junk food” and wished they had more control over what and how frequently they eat in Ventilene.

Overall my impression of Ventilene’s diet is that it is inadequate to provide adolescents with the nutrients needed for long, busy days of physical activity. Dietary guidelines suggest adolescents consume a variety of nutrient rich food such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, fish and poultry and avoid processed meats, saturated or trans fats, and added sugar and

sodium (Massey-Stokes and Quezada, 2017). Sugary beverages are not recommended for daily consumption and have been shown to increase symptoms of anxiety, headache, and insomnia among youth (Massey-Stokes and Quezada, 2017). With access to juice at every meal, tea and coffee at some meals, and about one soda per day, Ventilene's youth could be consuming up to 5 sugary beverages each day.

Adolescence may be the most important life-stage for establishing lifelong food preferences and habits, helping youth to make healthy food choices at this age could benefit for their well-being (Fismen et al, 2012). In Norway, nearly half of adolescents do not meet the national dietary guidelines and obesity rates for both children and adults are increasing. Globally, chronic diseases related to diet, such as heart-disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and diabetes, have become the leading cause of death (Massey-Stokes and Quezada, 2017). Ventilene role models healthy relationships and decision making in other important developmental areas, but is not assisting youth in this basic way of learning to take care of their body's dietary needs.

*Physical affection* - According to the director, many of the youth feel they get too little of the physical connection outside of Ventilene. Whether they are neglected by parents, bullied at school, feel socially excluded, or just want a physical reassurance of their safety, many of the youth, and most of the adults as well, reach out for that physical connection in Ventilene.

They should be able to feel what it is like to be cared for. They really need it. They want to sit on the lap even if they are 18. They want to be taken care of in a very different way than you meet outside with others in that age. And we try to use fun situations to do it because then it's not so dangerous and not so shameful. - Ventilene's director

These "fun situations" help to normalize cuddling as just part of the daily routine, its arms around each other on the couch, its hugs every night before bed, its napping on each other on a long van ride. Some of the youth seem to be seeking out physical contact most of the time, whereas others seem to want some affection yet soon become overwhelmed by it. On this topic the director told me "that's one of the reasons it's called 'Ventilene' because we have to ventilate how much love and caring we're giving the children because we have to see how much you can take." This norm of cuddling is flexible to give youth the personal care they need, whether or not that includes a lot of physical affection.

In Ventilene they do have some ground rules on when and where cuddling is appropriate, to try to reduce the possibility of abuse occurring. Generally cuddling is encouraged in communal spaces, not in bedrooms or behind closed doors. When a child and an adult need to be one-on-one, such as for a private conversation, leaders try to at least be in sight of one another. All adults at Ventilene have cleared police background checks and also receive some training on this topic. The director says she encourages the leaders and volunteers to trust their gut and leave and report a situation the moment it starts to feel like it is not a typical child-caregiver moment. With these policies in place to protect members from abuse, Ventilene can provide personalized care to youth who desire physical affection, and respect the boundaries of those who do not, in a safe setting for all.

#### 4.2.4 Unusual or problematic events

*Disempowering experiences for young people* – Despite the general spirit of acceptance, I observed some events that contradict the program goals of treating young people with dignity.

During one weekend I observed a volunteer repeatedly obstructing the socialization of one young woman. This participant had an outgoing personality and when the group was in public spaces she found other teenagers to talk to. In both instances she was interrupted by the same volunteer, taken by the arm, scolded, and led by the volunteer back to her Ventilene team.

Then the teenager would complain to her Ventilene teammates. She even spoke to me in English for the first time to ask if I thought this was unjust treatment too. In truth I did find this unjust, and also unnecessary. It seemed like this singled the participant out in front of her peers, both in Ventilene and in her broader social circle. To clarify what exactly the rules are for when young people run into people they know while the group is out, I spoke to a more experienced volunteer. She said that it is fine for the young people to socialize in public as long as it does not interfere with the group's activity and they know where they are at all times. In both instances the participant was not interrupting her team's activities and remained only a short distance away from them. The other volunteer was troubled to hear about these instances, saying the participant had been stripped of her dignity in that moment.

The most common problem I observed was talking about young people behind their backs. Generally this is done in a protectionist way, with adults giving other adults insight into a young person's background they feel will help better facilitate trauma informed care or behavior management. Sometimes its a positive acknowledgement that the young person has accomplished something that used to be a challenge for them. Other times the conversations about rather than to the participants are to establish a plan for how the adults should respond to specific needs or behaviors of the young person, for example assigning a volunteer to stay with a specific participant during activities, or to keep two quarreling participants apart.

On occasion, the child welfare services makes Ventilene aware of some details in a young participant's case without the participants knowledge or consent. If child welfare services has a specific concern in a young person's case, for example, early sexual activity, they may share this with Ventilene so they can be prepared to prevent or respond to that behavior. The young people know that Ventilene and child welfare services are in communication, but I think it is not always transparent to the young people what specifically child welfare services has communicated to Ventilene. It is worth noting here that Ventilene has limited control over what the child welfare services, as a state apparatus, chooses to share with them, or not share with the young people. Overall Ventilene seems to keep specifics of young people's cases confidential, and share only necessary details with leaders. Still, from a strengths and empowerment perspective, talking about young people rather than to young people, and sharing information from their lives without their knowledge or consent, are actions that may not respect the agency of young people as the authors of their own lives (Saleebey, 2009; Ulvik, 2015).

*Disorganization* – Like many travel or activity programs for young people, Ventilene requires a lot of careful planning. Some leaders are quite meticulous about planning out each day in advance, taking into account several variables such as weather, when the youth may be hungry, and which youth are likely to want to participate. Other leaders' planning is more in the moment, which does not always work out when organizing a group of 5-15 teenagers. Some of this disorganization seems to result from the increased responsibility as the program expands. Now supervising a working hotel with regular guests events in addition to Ventilene, the director and staff have more on their plates than ever before. I think they need some help planning out the weekend beforehand and anticipating issues that may arise. If they continue to try to do it all themselves, I worry they might get burned out.

*The absence of refugee young people* – During the senior year of my bachelors program, I did an internship with a refugee resettlement center in my home state of New Hampshire. I was primarily assigned to working with the adolescent refugee population, some of whom became the participants for my senior research capstone. My experience working with refugee young people and their families inspired my decision to pursue a masters degree in social work. When I first volunteered with Ventilene back in May of 2017, I was excited to have a chance to work with young people from refugee backgrounds again. Ventilene had several participants from refugee backgrounds at that time, and anticipated more joining the group as resettlement progressed. I was alarmed when I returned to Ventilene in February of 2018, only 9 months later, and found no refugee young people in the program.

During my observations, I asked a leader I knew had worked with several of the refugee young people why they now appeared to be absent from Ventilene. She said that Norway has been shutting down the refugee centers and denying permanent residency to many young people. Young people often receive a response from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) approving them to stay in Norway as minors, but directing them to leave when they turn 18 years old. The leader said she knows some young people who decided to leave Norway earlier. In her opinion, “we give them a glimpse of this incredible life and then we tell them they can’t have it.”

The immigration trends from the past few years show a tightening of immigration policy. When the refugee crisis drew global attention in 2015, Norway accepted 30,000 asylum seekers (Local, 2018). This initial generosity was soon met with a resurgence of anti-immigrant ideology, stricter immigration reforms, and more parliamentary seats awarded to right-wing parties in the 2017 election (Anderson, 2017). By 2017, the number of asylum seekers had dropped to 3,500 and the number of refugee centers fell from 150 to 50 nationally. According to (UDI), this number is expected to be further reduced to 27 refugee centers by the end of 2018 (Local, 2018). These reforms have sparked a lot of controversy within Norway, and also attracted criticism from human rights advocacy group Amnesty International (Oesterud, 2017).

Following-up with the director, she corroborated the same reasons for the lower participation of refugee young people. She added that some of the young people I had met last year had fled to another city in Europe and were living on the streets, doing what they need to do to survive. It was heartbreaking news, and I can only imagine how devastating it must be to the young people and leaders who knew them well. The remaining refugee young people are living in uncertain times. In agreement with the remaining local refugee centers, Ventilene still reserves six of its spaces for refugee young people. The director explained the situation thus: “In theory we have the same amount [in Ventilene], it’s just that it’s difficult to get them to come. And it’s not that they don’t like the camp, because they do, it’s just that they have so much going on in their heads.” The director hopes that things have stabilized now and some of the remaining young people will be able to join the Ventilene community. With the UDI predicting continued closings of refugee centers throughout 2018, I am not sure stability has been achieved just yet.

#### 4.2.5 Decisions

In Ventilene, the power for most decisions lays with the adults. The daily decisions of what to do and when to do it, what to eat and when to eat it, where to go and who will go together, are usually decisions that are made for rather than with the young people. Activities are generally selected by the leaders. Using their knowledge of the general preferences and energy level of the group, the leaders try to select activities they think the young people will enjoy. The larger decisions and rules of the group are also determined by the leaders as well. From my perspective, having observed the respect that the leaders evidently have for the young people on their teams, I believe most of the decisions made by adults fall into the category of protective power (Tew, 2006).

In my follow-up interview, I asked the director indirectly about Ventilene’s use of protective power by asking how they try to find a balance between providing young people with the structure they need, while also respecting and supporting their autonomy. She indicated this is a main challenge for them. She said she always tries to have her team on her side when she makes a decision, but sometimes it is necessary to make decisions for the young people. “Often I can get them to understand why we are making the choice for them, and then they agree.” This is an example of protective power, not power-together, because young people were not included in the conversation until after the decision was made (Tew, 2006).

There are some opportunities for participants to be included in the decisions made in Ventilene. Sometimes young people vote on which restaurant to go to for dinner, suggest and vote on which movies to watch, propose activities for the next day, or take charge of leading their own self-directed activities at the hotel. One of the participants is on Ventilene's advisory board and joins in meetings with stakeholders. The director expressed wanting to develop this leadership opportunity further to include more participants' perspectives. She also mentioned young people have an annual opportunity to give written feedback about Ventilene via an anonymous survey. The power dynamics of Ventilene, as well as many other aspects of this ethnography, will be illustrated fuller by the following selections from interviews.

## Appendix F: Anti-Plagiarism Declaration

### Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation titled, *Experiences of a recreation based support program in a Norwegian city: young people's voices* submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Program in Social Work with Families and Children:

- Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College
- Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work
- Contains proper citation and references from my own prior scholarly work
- Has listed all citations in a list of references

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize, and will result in a failing grade (F) in the program.

Date: 1 June, 2018

Signature: 

Name: Molly Paone