

# EMANCIPATORY PATHWAYS FOR ADULTS RETURNING TO TECHNICAL TRAINING: THE CASE OF CONTINUING COLLEGE EDUCATION IN QUÉBEC

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the trajectories of adults returning to full-time study in technical and vocational education and training. The results presented are drawn from a critical ethnography conducted in a General and vocational colleges (referred to as *cégep*, their French acronym) in Montréal, Québec. The aim of the study was to describe and analyze the educational practices used to support the training and social integration of students enrolled in technical programs in *cégep* adult continuing education services. This study is based on a document analysis, the researcher's experience, classroom observations and biographical interviews with teachers, active students and graduates. The theoretical framework is built upon andragogy, defined as a humanist and existentialist philosophy of adult education that provides the basis for a critical theory of adult education, aimed at emancipation and self-realization through lifelong learning. The research shows that the transformative learning trajectories of adults returning to school, while highly varied, demonstrate a certain convergence in terms of the elements that drive their return to training. Firstly, before making this choice, they live in a state of low recognition and socio-economic precariousness. Then, dissatisfaction, opportunity and the support of an outsider propels their return to education. This choice is based on the absence of a negative relationship with school, a drive for learning and intellectual stimulation, and a latent desire to return. Finally, favorable socio-economic conditions facilitate the act. The research shows that by giving adults a sense of competence, self-esteem, and a place in society, the success of the academic pathway enables social reintegration.

The Canadian French-speaking province of Québec offers technical and vocational education and training (TVET) at two distinct levels. The secondary level training focuses on the acquisition of skills specific to trades such as hairdresser or welder. The college level training for professions requiring a higher level of task and responsibility, such as nursing, computer technician or police officer. General and vocational colleges (referred to as *cégep*, their French acronym) provide those programs. *Cégeps* also offer two years of pre-university training, all within the same institution.

Within the *cégeps* network, a Continuing Education (CE) service aimed specifically for adults delivers two types of technical diploma: Diploma of College Studies (DCS) and the Attestation of College Studies (ACS). In 2022-2023, there were 30,516 adults attending CE services, including 26,060 in technical education. These students represent around 25% of the total of technical education student in Québec (103,444 students) (Banque de données des statistiques officielles, 2024). Despite their number, adults have been a marginalized category in the education systems and in research, and still are (Donaldson et al., 2004; Kasworm, 1990; Langrehr et al., 2015; Martel, 2023a; Scanlon, 2008). Moreover, several studies have shown that the precarious status of adults returning to training is a fundamental element in understanding their pathway (Barkoglou & Gravani, 2022; Bélanger & Valdivielso, 1997).

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For adults making this choice, returning to school marks an important moment in their lives. Beyond aiming to obtain skills and a recognized degree, it takes the form of a process of self-transformation and social reintegration (Mezirow, 2000; Martel, 2023b). Returning to training is part of the process of acquiring greater capability (Sen, 1997) and the social recognition needed to “*apparaître en public sans avoir honte* [appear in public without feeling ashamed]” (Honneth, 2006, p. 175).

The paper is divided in four parts. In the first part, I present the analytical framework of the study. Then, the research methodology is briefly exposed. After, the results obtained are presented and discussed. This specific part begins with the presentation of the overall characteristics of adults returning to school. Then, it establishes the different types of pathways that lead to this return, and the effects of this return on these students. The last part of the paper is a conclusive discussion with a plea to see CE and the education system as social justice institution that have a transformative and emancipatory role for adult through lifelong learning.

### **Analytic Framework**

My analysis is based on two frameworks. Firstly, I build a critical theory of adult education founded on andragogy, seen as an existentialist and humanist philosophy of adult education (Hartree, 1983; Knowles, 1975; 1978; 1980). This theoretical proposition places the person at the center of his or her concerns, and makes learning a fundamental element in the individual's being and emancipation. Based on the foundations of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), the theoretical framework aims for emancipation and self-realization through lifelong learning. I follow the impetus given by Fleming (2014, 2016, 2018) and Huttunen and Heikkinen (2004), who have proposed a refoundation of the transformative learning theory on the work of Honneth (2000, 2004, 2006, 2014). For them, Mezirow's theory cannot grasp the complexity of today's social struggles without following the same path as the Frankfurt School. This proposal is based on the conceptual richness of the Hegelian concept of recognition, and on the existence of symbolic conditions of alienation or marginalization in today's societies. Honneth takes up the Hegelian concept of recognition, firstly as a source of legitimacy for their ability to act in social space (Honneth, 2004) and secondly, by extension, as an essential condition of social freedom (Honneth, 2014). Without recognition of the other as a “generalized other,” to quote Mead (1934), it is not possible to found a society based on the ethical or good life. In this context, recognition is seen as a vital need for personal development (C. Taylor, 1992).

To capture the phenomenon of variability in educational pathways without passing moral judgment, I used a second framework consisting of four axes (Picard et al., 2011). The first axis focuses on the transaction between the individual and the educational institution. It brings to light the stakes involved in individual pathways within formal education systems. The second deals with the articulation of subjective and objective experience, which can show that changes in student attitudes are the result of new sources of influence and learning. The third axis seeks to analyze transactions between in-school

and out-of-school experience. It calls for attention to social context, but also to life transitions, such as immigration, and adult futures. The fourth axis is the extension to longer temporalities. Through biographical approaches, they invite us to account for educational pathways through a broader temporal horizon, grasping the entanglement of the logics of action mobilized and the sociohistorical determinants of the individual, considering also the bifurcations linked to disappointed expectations, and the historical transformations of institutions. These axes lead us to an open and humanistic reading of subjective experiences, based on individual experience, taking into account a long temporality.

## **Methodology**

The research objective was to describe and analyze the educational practices used to support the training and social integration of students enrolled in technical AEC or DEC programs in cégep continuing education departments. The approach is based on Carspecken's critical ethnography (1996). The fieldwork was carried out in a CE department of a cégep in the greater Montreal area, which welcomes around 1,000 adult students annually. The investigation involved four modes of information gathering. First, a document analysis that includes official documents produced by various institutional sources, such as internal cégep policies, ministerial directives, laws and regulations, collective agreements, minutes of various meetings and documents related to the program of study (syllabus, course outlines, framework plans). Second, I observed the educational practices of the teachers (n=7) in class (32 class sessions, i.e. 96 hours of classroom observation spread over three weeks). Third, I conducted interviews with observed teachers to deepen the understanding of their practices and obtain their views on adult education. Moreover, I conducted extended biographical interviews with graduates (n=12) and students (n=14) to find out about their backgrounds and contextualize their educational experiences (n=26). All participants (teachers, graduates and students) were from the same program. The verbatims of the interviews were analyzed to extract themes relevant to the research objectives. Fourth, the research was also informed by the teacher-researcher's experience as an instructor in a cégep CE department.

## **Students With Rich and Varied Backgrounds**

### **Non-Traditional Students**

Statistics and various studies carried out over the last few decades show that these non-traditional students are of more variable age, often older, have greater and more diversified experience, have multiple responsibilities and have acquired heterogeneous educational capital. These findings by Hughes (1983) are echoed by other researchers such as Bélanger (2015), Donaldson et al. (2004) and Merriam et al. (2007). For example, between 2015 and 2020, at a cégep CE program in the greater Montreal area, 68.4% of registrants had French as their mother tongue, 64.4% were born outside Québec and only 13.9% were under 25 and 27% were over 40<sup>2</sup>. The average age of the total number of students enrolled in a CE technical program in Québec was around 32, and 24% were

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Data from participating cégep CE institutional database (3361 students)

over 40. By comparison, only 7.5% of technical training students in regular education were over 30 (MEQ, 2015). In contrast to adults in CE, the majority of first-time cégep students have a relatively homogeneous educational background. On average, they are 17 years old, the majority are born in Canada (87.4%), have French as their main language of use (88.7%) and almost all come from secondary school (93.4%) (Guay et al., 2020; Gaudreault et al., 2018).

Several authors have shown that this experience must be considered when understanding adult learning (Jarvis, 2004; Merriam et al., 2007). While experience is the foundation of our ability to learn, it can also be a brake that limits our openness to new learning (J. E. Taylor, 2021). This resistance to learning potentially arises when there is a conflict between previous experience and the experience gained in training. This conflict may be related to previous and new learning, or it may lie in too great a difference between educational or other cultures. In so doing, persons involved in CE need to consider the variety of life paths and experiences of adults, to respond appropriately to their educational needs. The next section will present the initial education and adult life pathway of those learners returning to training in CE services.

### **Initial Educational and Adult Life Pathway**

When they returned to school, many of them already had a post-secondary diploma, had been employed on a stable basis, and had not experienced any major problems in their initial educational path. This is the case for almost half of the participants. However, this is not the case for everyone. In the study, I set out to classify the pathways leading to a return to full-time study for the participants, considering their initial educational pathway and their adult life pathway. The initial educational pathway ends with the discontinuation of studies, with or without a diploma. The adult life-course includes the post-study period up to the return to college CE. It may include multiple returns to school, with or without a diploma.

### ***Initial School Pathway***

An analysis of the participants' experiences reveals three types of initial educational paths: the simple path; the path that ends abruptly; and the rocky path. Whether marked by ease, success or failure, the initial school path was described as situated in a pivotal and difficult period of life. The age of first choices in the pursuit of post-secondary education, or simply the high school period that accompanies adolescence, were often cited as moments of instability, upheaval and great change. Emancipation from parents, the need to leave an inadequate or violent environment, the accumulation of new responsibilities, particularly financial, and the search of oneself were just a few of the themes raised by participants to explain the early end of studies.

While adolescence and early twenties can be difficult, for many this period unfolds quite simply. Some have relatively linear initial educational path, with no major obstacles or pitfalls. This pathway is characterized by a rather positive relationship with learning and an implicit acceptance of the school environment. This is the case for half of the

participants (graduate and student) in the study who have obtained a qualifying diploma which could lead to a job (n=13). They describe adequate support at home, good integration with the learning environment and ease to learn.

For others, it is a path full of obstacles that makes success more difficult and leads to an abrupt end (n=7). While the beginnings of their journey are like that of the previous category, it is marked by the abandonment of their studies for a variety of reasons. Lack of interest in their initial training, the weight of life's preoccupations (financial pressure, break-up, etc.), a low sense of academic competence and a lack of confidence in the future are often cited as reasons for leaving school early.

Finally, there is the rocky road, marked by great difficulty and a lack of support for successful study. This path is not conducive to obtaining the desired diploma, or even to completing a basic secondary diploma. Complex family situations, violence, immigration, racism and traumatic events mark this pathway (n=6). These are difficult life situations that have left their mark on them. Despite their good will and the absence of major learning difficulties, it is mainly external contingencies that lead them to deviate from the classic trajectory of continuity studies. So, it is not their capability that is at issue here, but rather the social conditions under which these individuals realize their potential - they're in an incapacitating environment.

### ***Adult Life Pathway***

The second phase, the adult life pathway, includes life experiences from the time of first leaving school, with or without a diploma, and sometimes includes periods of returning to school with varying degrees of success. These people have a different relationship with school and a different initial educational trajectory. They have also accumulated diverse work and life experiences. Before returning to school, some had experienced a linear career path, with few changes, in a single field (n=9). The quasi-linear experience is described as directly in continuity, after the end of studies, in a specific field without great variability. Of the nine people, eight had a straightforward initial school career, one had an abrupt end, and none had a rocky path. A return to school, when it comes after a period of several years' work, completes this phase.

For many, it is a heterogeneous journey of work and professional experience that marks part of their adult lives. Their work history is marked by numerous changes in the field of work or the accumulation of unskilled jobs (n=12). For five of them, their initial school career fell into the simple category, six were categorized as abrupt endings, and only one was in the rocky category. This heterogeneous pathway is sometimes short but can also stretch over several years.

Finally, the adult life course of some is marked by a succession of resumptions and exits from training with or without a diploma, often combined with various unsatisfactory work experiences (n=5). All the cases in this category had a rocky initial school career. They fall into this category because they all left their initial studies at various times to enter the job market, before returning to training on at least two occasions. What is more,

their work experience through these returns is short-lived and often heterogeneous. It is a complex journey, marked by several setbacks and difficult moments in the lives of these people. As with the rocky path from which they came, the participants' backgrounds are marked by low social status, low self-esteem, discrimination and difficult psychosocial situations.

### **What Leads to a Return to School**

Irrespective of initial schooling and adult life path, the decision to return to school seems to take place in similar contexts for all our participants (n=26). According to the data, this decision is taken at a time when the person is in a state of low social recognition, i.e. feels unappreciated by others, not recognized for their true worth (materially or symbolically) or is no longer able to give meaning to their daily life. This may be compounded by a low sense of competence, a depressive episode or a perceived stagnation in the career. These people are experiencing a negative episode in their lives, whether from a life experience, social or psychological point of view. The situation is also frequently linked to a form of socio-economic precariousness. They can no longer project themselves into the future, either socially or economically, in continuation of their career or in their current domain.

This return is propelled by dissatisfaction and an opportunity that presents itself. This decision is often triggered or supported by an outsider. All but one participant said that someone related to them had told them about a program or a possible source of funding. I also note that these people had already expressed a desire to go back to school. It was therefore a possibility they were already considering, and those around them were aware of it. Moreover, these people had a positive perception of school. Even though some of the participants had not succeeded in obtaining a first qualifying diploma, they expressed no resentment towards school as an institution. From the outset, they saw school as a possible solution, a preferred route to change their situation.

Finally, a return to school is encouraged by favorable socio-economic conditions, such as the availability of financial support such as loans and grants, subsidies or from family. It is then that this latent project becomes feasible, an experience within reach that can lead to a way out of an inadequate situation.

### **The Transformative Role of CE and TVET**

While education is generally perceived as a path to emancipation, empowerment and escape from precarious social situations, the role of TVET establishments seems to suffer in comparison with universities (Legusov et al., 2021; Verdier and Doray, 2021). Various international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) consider TVET to be an essential element in the prosperity of states and the emancipation of individuals. For UNESCO (1999), TVET

is one of the most powerful instruments for enabling all members of the

community to face new challenges and to find their roles as productive members

of society. It is an effective tool for achieving social cohesion, integration and self esteem (p. 10)

The aim of these programs of study is not only to train skilled, qualified workers who will enter the job market by meeting the specific needs of the production system, but is also to give these individuals a valued place in their communities. For Raby et al. (2022), the contribution of TVET establishments is also aimed at objectives other than qualification or requalification. This training sector enables educational establishments to achieve sustainable development objectives, such as integrating people who are poor, marginalized and have few skills suitable for the labor market. This includes skills that are outdated or poorly recognized in an ever-changing labor market. For these authors, TVET establishments achieve these objectives: thanks to their local roots, their ability to maintain close relations with the job market, their flexibility in terms of training curricula and their policies favoring access for a large number of people.

The relevance of developing the TVET is twofold. Firstly, to improve employability and contribute to economic growth, and secondly, to respond to more general social issues such as poverty and the reduction of inequalities. It should no longer be seen as the end of the initial educational pathway, or linked to a specific stage in the biographical journey (Picard et al., 2011). As part of a lifelong learning perspective, I believe that cégeps should be seen not only in terms of initial training for young people continuing their studies, but also in terms of CE for people requiring further training and initial training for adults undertaking a career change. So, without denying the importance of TVET for young people, we must also support its contributions in relation to the training and educational needs of adults.

### **Transformative Training for Adults**

As mentioned above, adults returning to school are usually in a state of low recognition. The decision to go back to school is a way out of this situation. Going back to school is perceived as an important moment, even a totally unexpected turning point that has completely transformed their lives. This can be seen in two different ways among graduates. Firstly, in the enthusiasm they all demonstrated as they talked to us about their experience in CE and what they were able to achieve as a result. Then, in some cases, by explicitly alluding to the direct effect it had on them.

*Mais ça a changé ma vie [...] Ça a vraiment changé ma vie.* [ But it changed my life [...] It really changed my life] (MD)

*Ça a comme changé ma vie.* [It changed my life] (PG)

*C'était sûrement le meilleur choix que j'ai fait de toute ma vie.* [ It was probably the best choice I ever made in my life] (FT)

*Ça change tout. Et..., là, c'était, je me sentais vivant.* [It changes everything. And..., there it was, I felt alive.] (PY)

*Ça a vraiment été un moment hyper important pour moi.* [It has been a really important moment for me.] (MG)

None of the participating graduates have a bad outcome. Graduates emphasize that their lives have been affected in three ways. They have gained access to a new job or a new career that would have been impossible before their training. They perceive that the transition to CE has acted as an accelerator or a creator of opportunity, opening up a new field of employment. While the employment aspect is important in the testimonies of graduates, other aspects are also mentioned explicitly or appear in their general discourse.

Their attitudes and perceptions of themselves and their own abilities are changing. Some have become personally aware of their own ability to learn. Many saw it as a passage to “a form of adulthood,” a pivotal moment where there was a before and an after. Others, after less successful educational experiences, gained in confidence.

Graduation itself also leads to this change. In some cases, it acts as a catalyst for a transformation in the person's attitude towards themselves. This is also the case for others who see that the changes have affected several spheres of their personal and professional lives, such as propelling them out of their initial social class.

The post-training testimonials of the participating graduates show the positive effect this trajectory has had on both the professional and personal aspects of their lives. While they all mentioned the efforts required to succeed, the fact remains that, for them, the result has been important in terms of their new being.

## **Conclusion**

Adults tend to return to training after complex and variable initial education and adult life pathway. As my theoretical framework suggests, recognition of the complexity of these journeys is essential to respond adequately to their educational needs. Supported by the research data, I consider that beyond the simple requalification of individuals, college CE supports people in their process of transformation and social reintegration which is in phase with my theoretical framework build on andragogy seen as an existentialist philosophy of adult education based on a critical theory of adult education that aims for emancipation and self-realization through lifelong learning (Bélanger, 2015; Fleming, 2016; Hartree, 1984; Honneth, 2000; Knowles, 1978, 1980; Mezirow, 2000). Most of all, it seems to me that college CE represents a social justice institution that aims, in particular, to reduce inequalities. I proposed that the return-to-study pathway be consistent with the concerns of Honneth's critical theory, which makes the struggle for recognition a fundamental element in understanding the issues facing adult students.

It is in this respect I propose that a critical theory of adult education that aims at emancipation and self-realization through lifelong learning is able to help us propose a fruitful analytical approach to understand adult education. In this sense, I believe that schools and the educational system as a whole cannot be conceived outside of society and their study must be grounded in a theory of social justice. They must be seen in their social role and with their social stakes.

As such, as a social institution, the educational system in which cégeps are embedded is the bearer of standards and values that must ensure the conditions of possibility for social justice. Moreover, the results of the research enrich the understanding of the conditions that lead to undertaking a training course, the school experience and the impact on adults' post-training life courses.

They must be offered the right conditions to support them in their learning process. I therefore invite scholars to reflect on the role of institutions as cégeps in adult education, in particular on the various recommendations and international work such as the Marrakech Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2022) and on the possibility of renewing national's adult education policy from a perspective of social justice and equity (Honneth, 2014). In Québec's education policies, adult education recognition was a hard-fought victory, but it still requires keeping advocating for its importance as a social institution (Mercier & Thériault, 2023).

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