UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

RACING WITH THEIR LEGS TIED: PARENTS RETURNING TO POSTSECONDARY

EDUCATION

MÉMOIRE

PRÉSENTÉE

COMME EXIGENCE PARTIELLE

DE LA MAÎTRISE EN SOCIOLOGIE

PAR

LUCIA MASON

AVRIL 2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my directors Pierre Doray and Paul Bélanger for their insight, patience and generosity. Needless to say, I greatly appreciate the valuable advice they provided me, as well as their "perseverance" in following me through for the three years it took me to complete this thesis. I would also like to acknowledge the help and encouragement I received from numerous colleagues at the CIRST, namely Lucie Comeau, Bayero Diallo, Anissa Adouane, Geneviève Szcepanik., Claude-Julie Bourque, Élise Fiedin Comoe, Marie-Andrée Desgagnés, Marie Aboumrad, Amélie Groleau and Claire Fortier.

I also wish to express my gratitude to my boyfriend, Jeff, without whose love, support and humour I could not have completed this thesis.

And, last but not least, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my daughters, Amina and Hannah, who simultaneously taught me about the challenges of being a parent returning to school and provided me the inspiration necessary to see this project through to its end.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

.

LIST OF TABLES

RÉSUMÉ

"Racing with their Legs Tied: Parents Returning to Postsecondary Education" explores the factors that lead to the perseverance or departure of parents returning to postsecondary education in Québec. This thesis mirrors a resurgence of interest on adult learning that has taken place both nationally and internationally. That said, the biographical approach employed in this thesis provides a comprehensive look at the factors that can combine to affect parents' experiences at Cégep. Moreover, there is a lack of detailed analysis in Québec on the experiences of the specific population this thesis– adults with dependent children.

The ten parents that were the focus of this thesis constitute part of a larger sample of 234 Cégep students who participated in the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collegial" project. This study, led by Pierre Doray, is qualitative and longitudinal in nature. The interviews collected during this project were semi-structured. For the purposes of this thesis, the analysis of the interviews of the parents respected the principles of the *grounded theory* approach.

In following the tenets of this approach, no specific hypothesis was adhered to in undertaking the analysis. Once each individual case was analysed a typology was developed. This typology, defined along the lines of *school careers*, served to highlight how a combination of factors could lead to a specific outcome. The range of factors that were found to affect the parents' Cégep experiences were then organised along the lines of temporality.

The factors that determined the *school careers* and, in turn, the parents' outcomes, were related more to their immediate experiences in Cégep, rather than to their past. Indeed, given that the effects of the parents' social background and their previous educational experiences were inconsistent, it becomes clear that it was their *individual agency* that largely decided

their outcomes. This *individual agency* translated into an ability (or lack thereof) to meet the academic demands of their programs (or not), as well as to negotiate the family-school balance. Importantly, while the challenges of the family-school balance were a reality that permeated all of the parents' experiences at Cégep, they were only the direct cause of departure in two cases. Finally, although their future aspirations explained the reasons behind their Cégep projects and helped to fuel their motivation, they did not prove decisive in influencing the parents' outcomes.

Possible key words for this thesis include: adult education; agency; trajectories; educational careers, life-course approach.

RÉSUMÉ

"Racing with their Legs Tied: Parents Returning to Postsecondary Education" explore les différents facteurs qui poussent les parents québécois retournant aux études post-secondaires à persévérer ou à abandonner. Cette thèse reflète l'intérêt renouvelé pour l'apprentissage des adultes qui s'est développé au niveau national, mais aussi international. Ceci étant dit, nous avons utilisé dans ce mémoire une approche biographique qui propose un regard compréhensif sur les différents facteurs pouvant affecter l'expérience des parents retournant au cégep. Notons cependant qu'il est difficile de trouver au Québec des analyses détaillées sur les expériences de la population étudiée dans cet mémoire : les adultes avec enfants à charge.

Les dix parents étudiés ici proviennent d'un échantillon plus important de 234 cégépiens ayant participé au projet : « Les parcours scolaires en science et en technologie au collégial ». Cette étude, menée par Pierre Doray, est qualitative et longitudinale par son approche. Les entrevues réalisées durant ce projet étaient semi-structurées. Pour les besoins de notre mémoire, l'analyse des entrevues avec les parents a respecté l'approche de la « théorisation ancrée».

En accord avec les principes de la « théorisation ancrée», aucune hypothèse spécifique n'a été utilisée lors de l'analyse des données. Après l'analyse de chaque cas individuel, nous avons développé une typologie, basée sur le concept de *carrière scolaire*. Cette typologie sert à souligner la manière dont un ensemble de facteurs se combinent pour déterminer les résultats scolaires spécifiques. Nous avons en suite organisé l'éventail des facteurs influençant les expériences scolaires des parents par temporalité.

Les facteurs qui ont déterminé les *carrières scolaires* des Cégépiens, incluant leurs résultats, sont liés davantage à leurs expériences en cours au Cégep plutôt qu'à celles de leur passé. En effet, c'est leur agentivité individuelle qui explique principalement leurs résultats, laquelle s'est traduite par leur capacité à satisfaire à la fois les exigences des programmes du Cégep et la conciliation famille-école. Leur origine sociale et leurs expériences scolaires antérieures n'étaient pas déterminantes. Notons que les défis de l'équilibre famille-école étaient une réalité présente dans toutes leurs expériences, mais ils ne constituent la cause directe du départ du programme que dans deux cas seulement. Enfin, même si les aspirations futures des parents déterminent leurs motivations et leurs projets scolaires actuels, elles n'influencent pas directement leurs résultats scolaires.

Suggestion de mots-clés pour ce mémoire: éducation des adultes, agentivité, carrières éducatives, approche parcours de vie.

INTRODUCTION

The Context and theory of Parents Returning to College The past two decades have seen a rejuvenation of interest in adult learning. Adults merit particular attention for a number of reasons. As the concept of *lifelong learning* takes hold[1], it has become clear that adults represent a significant portion of the population undertaking this type of learning. Paradoxically, though, adults often have the most limited access to education. While many attend educational institutions designed with the needs of adults in mind, many others attend postsecondary institutions intended for a younger population, such as colleges and universities. Importantly, the social and economic circumstances under which they study, as well as their needs and motivations, often differ greatly compared to their younger counterparts. It is imperative to understand the particular experiences of these adult students if their continued participation in lifelong learning is to be encouraged.

Adults, in fact, represent a variety of situations and cannot be assumed to have the same resources or needs. The focus of this Master's thesis is upon adults with dependent children who return to college, known as Cégep[2], in Québec. More specifically, I seek to understand what determines their perseverance in, or departure from, their Cégep programs. Although these men and women certainly share a number of concerns with the larger adult student population in Cégeps, they also experience issues that are particular to them. Moreover, even between themselves, their experiences and, in turn, their academic outcomes, differ quite widely.

---

[1] Please see the next section.

[2] Please see section 3 for a discussion of the Cégep system.

This thesis is based on a number of interviews conducted under the guise of the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project, a qualitative and longitudinal study that explores the experiences of science and technology students in Québec's Cégep system[3]. Led by Pierre Doray[4] this study began in 2000 and is ongoing. Its general goal is to understand the factors that lead to perseverance, departure or change of program from college or Cégep (Doray *et al.*, 2003*b*, p. 9). While most of the students who participated in this study are "traditional" students, a small number of them are "adults", and an even smaller number of those adults have dependent children. This latter group of students, and specifically those enrolled in technical programs, are the focus of this thesis.

The research objectives of this thesis are, broadly put, to explore what leads to the perseverance or departure of adult students with dependent children. More specifically, I wish to understand how their past and present experiences, both within and outside of school, as well as their future professional aspirations, led to their completion of, or their departure from, the Computer Science and Laboratory Technology programs in Cégep. In so doing, I explore a diversity of factors, ranging from the objective to the subjective. I look at how structural factors, such as the socioeconomic context, social background, and gender; the dynamic between the adult's life in school and outside of school; the dynamic between the institution and the individual; past educational experiences; individual agency; future professional aspirations; and, finally, subjective interpretation, all combined to contribute to perseverance or departure. I do so by creating a typology of school careers based on the experiences, inside and outside of school, of these adults. As this thesis is based upon interviews conducted with the participants, the emphasis is upon their subjective representation of their experiences.

It bears noting that my own subjective experiences may affect this research, given that I have undertaken writing this thesis while being mother to my two young daughters. As a result of

---

[3] For a description of this system, please see "The Cégep System and the Québec Context", section 3 of this chapter.

[4] Please see Doray, Deschênes, Fortier, Gibeay, Foisy and Gemme (2003) for a detailed discussion of the project.

my own personal experience, then, I have some pre-conceived notions regarding what it means to be a parent in postsecondary studies. Indeed, I have, at times, recognized my own situation in the narratives of the parents in this project. That said, based on my knowledge of the interviews, I see that there is a great diversity of experience and there is an array of factors and issues that contribute to the parents' experiences in their technical studies that I have not lived. It should be noted, furthermore, that I chose this topic before I was expecting my first child.

CHAPTER I

THE CONTEXT AND THEORY OF PARENTS RETURNING TO COLLEGE

Introduction

The purpose of this first chapter of "Racing with their Legs Tied: Parents Returning to Postsecondary Education", is threefold. First, I contextualize the phenomenon of adults and, more specifically, parents, returning to postsecondary education. I then describe Québec's Cégep (*Collèges d'enseignement general et professionnel*) system. Finally, I attempt to establish the theoretical context upon which I will base my analysis of the parents' experiences. While importance is paid to their experiences at school, I also place emphasis on their lives outside of school, as well as on the role that their past experiences and future aspirations might play. As such, the following theoretical discussion is varied in the elements that it includes and broad in its scope.

1.1   The Social and Political Context of Adult Learning

Since 1990, the growth of the knowledge economy has been heralded in many Western countries. As the technologies, production systems and organizational structures that make up this new economy are rapidly changing, so too must its labour force (Tuijman, 1996, p 31). An integral part of these transformations, as seen by policy makers, is the learning society: a society in which its members continually participate in learning in order to improve their job/life skills throughout the life course. In the words of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), "les politiques d'apprentissage à vie sont une condition importante d'un développement économique et sociale durable parallèlement

aux politiques macroéconomiques, aux politiques du marché du travail..." (OECD, 1996, p. 16). Likewise, in her pivotal work *Adults as Learners* (1981), Cross declared that "[l]ifelong learning is not a privilege or a right; it is simply a necessity for anyone, young or old, who must live with the escalating pace of change – in the family, on the job, in the community, and in the worldwide society" (p. ix).

It is no surprise, then, that adult learning has been garnering a great amount of attention in recent years, from both policy makers and academics. At the International Conference on Education in September 1990, it was found that "nearly all governments are pursuing policies to expand provision and facilitate participation, in particular in vocational programs" (Tuijman 1996, p. 27). And, as a corollary, since the 1980s, many Western countries have experienced increased participation in various forms of adult education, whether this be basic adult education, on-the-job training, continuing education or higher education (Tuijman, 1996, p. 27).

Not only is participation in learning activities seen as a way to develop new skills to keep up with a changing economy, but it is also viewed as a door through which more marginalised individuals can gain access both into mainstream society and the mainstream economy[5]. Unfortunately, however, adults as a whole are recognized as being at a disadvantage in terms of participation in formal learning. In fact, while there are many diverging opinions about various aspects of participation in adult education, the consensus is that the older the individual, the smaller the likelihood that s/he participates in formal learning (Courtney, 1992, p.6) (Cross, 1981, p. 56-57). It is important to recognize, however, that the "relationship between age and performance is...a complex one" (Woodley, 1984, p. 49). Those with the highest levels of education participate the most and those with the least amount of education participate the least (OCDE, 2003, p. 8 and Tett, 1996, p.151-154). According to Courtney (1992), since "the late 1920s...[researchers] have been uncovering basically the same findings again and again....Organized adult education in the United States

---

[5] The OECD urges governments to be proactive in developing adult education resources so that individuals with less education can engage in personal development, as well as acquire skills to participate in the market economy (OECD, 2003, p. 10).

is essentially the social domain of white, middle-class men and women who are relatively well-educated and young" (p.4). In other words, it is not simply adults who are at risk of more limited participation in education, but, rather, it is socially and economically disadvantaged adults (Doray *et al.*, 2004).

There are, in fact, myriad socially-, culturally- and economically-derived circumstances that complicate adult participation in education. And, while there is much variation in circumstance among parents with dependent children, they generally find it challenging to pursue an education. Finding themselves in a balancing act between care-giving responsibilities and the need to provide economically for the family, it can be difficult for parents to prioritize their studies. This does not mean, however, that these adults do not manage to return to school. Rather, it means that their perseverance is often characterized by fragility. There are additional issues that can influence a parent's experience at school. Some of these factors are common to all adults, while others, such as the gender division of labour, have a particular effect upon parents.

The implications of the uneven participation in further education of parents and, more generally, of adults, are troubling. If learning and training opportunities allow adults easier access to the job market, as well as increased involvement at the social level, then lack of participation equates less access to jobs and limited social involvement. Moreover, it is often those with fewer financial and social resources who have more difficulty finding the time, money or energy to embark upon a learning project and, consequentially, who may not have easy access to better paying jobs. The more the educational system neglects the particular needs of such adults, the more excluded they will be from not only learning opportunities, but also from economic opportunities.

1.2   The Cégep System and Technical Studies

The parents who are the focus of this thesis learned to navigate the Cégep system. Each parent undertook this challenge differently. In order to understand how and why the parents embarked on their specific educational trajectories, both proceeding and during their Cégep

program, it is necessary to understand Québec's Cégep system. More specifically, it is important to grasp the specifics of technical degrees in the Cégep system.

Québec's *Collèges d'enseignement general et professionnel* or Cégeps form part of the province's postsecondary system. While not compulsory, most Cégeps are publicly-funded. These college-level institutions offer either two-year pre-university degrees or three-year technical degrees[6]. There are, in fact, more than one hundred technical programs, a handful of which can be followed by shortened Bachelor's degrees at university (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials). Completion of both the two-year and the three-year programs are rewarded with a DEC (*Diplôme d'études collégiales*). Adult students also have the option of undertaking a one-year AEC (*Attestation d'Études Collégiales*) instead of the DEC. This postsecondary diploma is more limited in scope. It trains students in selected professional fields, without giving them the in-depth or comprehensive knowledge of a field that a technical DEC provides. Moreover, it does not require completion of "general courses".

The "general courses" that a DEC requires include French, English, Philosophy and Physical Education. Those who have already completed a previous Cégep degree, or who have gone on to university, have usually fulfilled the "general course" requirements. Likewise, those students who do one or two semesters in "Reception and Transition" are given the opportunity to complete a number of these "general courses". The "Reception and Transition" program is designed to ease the transition from secondary school to Cégep. It gives students the opportunity to embark on Cégep studies without beginning their program, thus giving them an early taste of the nature of postsecondary studies.

Due to the scientific nature of the Laboratory Technology and Computer Science programs, both programs require a number of pre-requisites. The Laboratory Technology program, in fact, requires more pre-requisites, including maths, physics, physical science and chemistry courses. Cégep students can complete these pre-requisite courses in high school or in adult

---

[6] Many students take longer than the designated two or three years.

education. Students who have undertaken a previous science or technical degree have often completed these pre-requisite courses.

Before entering Cégep, most students must complete a DES or *Diplôme d'études secondaires*[7]. Although this diploma is the minimal level of education required of all Québec students, a significant portion may leave before completion of this degree. The DES can take on a number of other forms, such as the DEP (*Diplôme d'Études Professionnelles*). The DEP allows high school students to obtain a limited level of professional training in selected fields before high school completion.

In 1999, slightly more than ten percent of those enrolled in a Cégep technical program departed with no intention of returning (Gouvernement du Québec, 2005a and 2004). The average age of those who left their program was 22 and the majority were men (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, p. 29). Among the principal reasons cited for their departure were difficulty understanding the course material and course failures, the fact that the program did not correspond to their expectations, and financial difficulties (Op. Cit.). In a more specific example, while there was a 67% increase in enrolment in technical college-level computer science programs between 1991 and 1996, there was only a 35% increase in computer science graduates (Conseil de la science et de la technologie, 1998, p. 26).

If the calls to develop a labour force that can respond to the demands of an ever-changing knowledge-based economy (in which science and technology reign supreme) are to be taken seriously, then so too must the fate of those who undertake learning projects in these domains. In the words of the Conseil de la science et de la technologie (1998), « aucun facteur n'est plus crucial dans une économie de l'innovation que la disponibilité d'une main-d'œuvre scientifique et technique abondante et de haut niveau » (in the « Avant-Propos »). The Conseil de la science et de la technologie (1998) explains that, despite adequate interest and enrolment in technical programs among young students, there is an alarmingly low rate

---

[7] There are exceptions to this rule, although such cases are becoming less common (Ministère de l'Éducation, Loisir et Sport, 1999).

of degree completion. It goes on to accuse the educational system: "[l]a vraie question, c'est plutôt celle de la capacité du système d'éducation à transformer ces 'nouvelles recrues' en diplômés. Les taux de succès actuels ne sont pas acceptables » (p.26).

Cégeps are largely designed for students who come directly from high school[8] on a full-time basis, despite the fact that adults made up approximately one quarter of the Cégep student population in 2003 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2005a). Likewise, in 2001, "one quarter of the registered students in technical college programs were twenty-two years or older" (Doray, *et al.*, 2005*b*, p. 2). Moreover, a little over one half of the graduates from technical college-level programs were twenty-two years or older and almost twenty percent were twenty-five years or older (Ibid., p. 4). In other words, adults comprise not only a significant proportion of students enrolled in technical programs, but they also comprise a significant proportion of the graduates from these programs.

Unfortunately, however, a significant portion of adults drop out of their Cégep programs. This, in turn, means that adults thus lose their chances of attaining a higher education degree, returning to the job-market with higher qualifications, or embarking on a career change. Likewise, society looses a more specialised member of the labour force. If the education system is to take full-advantage of those interested in the technical sector, it needs to take the adult student population more seriously by facilitating its participation in these programs.

1.3   Theoretical Framework

In order to understand what influences parents' participation in learning, it is important to look beyond the literature that focuses exclusively on their experiences. Instead, we must consider a wide array of factors, some that affect 'non-traditional' and 'traditional' students alike, others that affect adults more exclusively, and others still that are reflective of the experiences of women and men with children (Choy, 2002).

---

[8] There have been a number of studies, published before 1990 that highlight how efforts to open Cégeps up to adults have eroded due to financial constraints and institutional standardization initiatives. (See, for example, Bélanger *et al.*, 1987)

1.3.1   Courtney and Cross: Introducing adult participation in learning

Courtney's (1992) categorization provides a good introduction to many of the more specific theories that address adult participation in learning. He distinguishes between motivational theories and theories that are more action-oriented (p. 99). Motivational theories focus on the reasons behind an adult's decision to embark upon formal learning. Courtney argues that such theories are not capable of explaining why an adult will or will not participate in learning because "[m]erely seeking out people's reasons for enrolling in courses…may yield only a listing of goals, without at the same time yielding up an adequate view of opportunities for or barriers to PAE [Participation in Adult Education]" Courtney, 1995, p. 85). In emphasizing the importance of developing action-oriented theory, Courtney argues for seeing how society influences a person's participation or nonparticipation. According to Courtney,

> for every aspect of this process which appears invisible or unconnected with others, we can find another aspect where others are involved, either in creating an opportunity for the learning to take place, or enforcing standards according to which achievement is judged or simply because they are all doing something which individuals come to feel that they should be doing though they may articulate other reasons which appear to give preeminence to the self. (Courtney, 1992 p. 99)

He then goes on to identify three approaches that address this social element of learning. In the first approach, researchers seek to understand the effect of educational institutions on participation in learning. The next approach tackles how learning fits (or does not) into the rest of the individual's life. This emphasis rings particularly true for parents returning to school as their responsibilities outside school directly affect their studies. Finally, "there is the idea that all learning somehow involves the socialization or integration of the individual within the larger social whole" (p. 99).

In citing motivation theories, Courtney mentions Cross (1981). In *Adults as Learners* (1981), Cross develops a general framework for understanding adult participation or nonparticipation in formal learning based on the decision-making process. She does this through an analysis of a wide array of research of varying methodological approaches. In regards to nonparticipation, she identifies three types of obstacles that adults may face. Firstly, she explains that *situational barriers*, such as "Lack of time due to a job or home responsibilities"

(p. 98), lack of money, lack of childcare, and transportation difficulties can interfere with an adult's attempts to engage in learning. *Institutional barriers*, which she defines as "all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities - inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study" (Op. Cit.), can also play a decisive role in deterring participation. Finally, "dispositional barriers", such as "attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (Op. Cit.), can pose as an obstacle to participation. She points out, for example, that: "Adults with poor educational backgrounds frequently lack interest in learning or confidence in their ability to learn" (Op. Cit.).

A wide array of possible factors can fit within the three categories identified by Cross. As such, her framework can serve as a guideline with which to understand the often diverse factors that inhibit adult participation in learning. However, she does not consider how these different factors might interact at the individual level to affect participation or nonparticipation. Darkenwald and Valentine (1985), who have developed their own model of participation, offer another criticism. They argue that her "intuitive conceptualization" (p. 187) does not actually address the "real" issues faced by adults. Firstly, they found that many of the possible factors suggested by Cross were not actually significant deterrents and, secondly, that not all of the factors that they identified fit into her three categories (Darkenwald and Valentine, 1985, p. 187). Darkenwald and Valentine identified six factors as being important determinants in lack of participation. These factors are: 'lack of confidence', 'lack of course relevance', 'time constraints', 'low personal priority' (which refers to a "lack of motivation or interest with respect to engaging in adult education" [p. 184]), 'cost' and, last but not least, 'personal problems'. Importantly, four of the five items "comprising this factor reflect situational difficulties related to child care, family problems, and personal health problems or handicaps" (p. 184-185). Darkenwald and Valentine then established the link between these six factors and socio-demographic variables, such as age and gender. Not surprisingly, they found that 'cost' and 'personal problems' (more specifically, child care issues) affected women more than men. 'Lack of confidence' was a significant factor for those higher in age and those of lower socio-economic status (p. 185).

1.3.2   Gender

One of the most salient factors determining how parents experience their return to school, and, indeed, if they return to school at all, is gender. Work and care-giving responsibilities affect men and women differently and this, in turn, means that they participate in learning differently. McGivney (2003) reports that gender is a significant variable when assessing reasons for withdrawal from formal learning:

> Studies in all sectors have found significant differences between the sexes in their reported reasons for withdrawing from courses. As is to be expected, family commitments are cited by significantly more women than men, while men tend to stress course-, finance- and employment-related issues..." (p. 103).

Indeed, in a 2004 report by the Government of Québec Education Ministry, it was found that men above 21 cited employment offers as the principal reason for abandoning their studies, while women of the same age largely pointed to "family problems" (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, p. 11). Heenan (2002) explains that: "[u]sually, if a woman returns to education it is up to her to negotiate the competing demands of family responsibilities and education" (p.43). Merrill, based on her study of largely working-class women in a British university, describes this balancing act well: "The mature women on part-time courses organized their lives around housework, looking after children, working in paid employment and studying in order to fulfill their ambitions. Life was a continual adjustment to competing pressures upon their time" (Merrill, 1999, p. 202). While women returners are a diverse group and are, by no means, dominated by those with dependent children, women constitute the great majority of adult parents returning to school (Whaley, 2000, p. 14). Therefore, in considering how parents experience their return to school, we must reflect upon the gender division of labour within the family and how this affects women's participation.

Unfortunately, while there is ample evidence that the bulk of care-giving and domestic responsibilities fall on women students, there is not much research on the learning experiences of men with family responsibilities. Merrill points out that:

> In the absence of widespread research on male mature students two assumptions are made: male adult students are supported in their studies by female partners and marital conflict is minimal. My small sample of male mature students indicated that such a statement may be problematical, although there were gender differences in the way the problems were experienced" (Merrill, 1999, p. 164).

Merrill goes on to say that, "Although some men did feel that they lacked support, and that strains were placed on marital relationships, they did not have the burden of looking after children and serving the domestic needs of family members in addition to studying. Male students...[with one exception] were able to remain on campus to study in the library" (p.166). Although the degree to which care-giving responsibilities limit women's access to learning may vary, it is clear, then, that care-giving and other domestic responsibilities reside with women more than men when adults decide to return to school[9].

There are many complex reasons for this imbalance in the domestic division of labour. Heenan (2002) associates care-giving responsibilities not only with gender, but with class background. She explains that, in working-class Northern Ireland, "[w]ithin working-class society, kin relations are still extremely strong and women are still regarded as the main carers within families" (Heenan, 2002, p. 53). Moreover, she argues that women in Northern Ireland occupy a subordinate position in the family structure and are conditioned to put the needs of their family members before their own. She describes such women as :

> willing to give up or postpone their own education opportunities in order to help their families. The women displayed characteristics that have been described indicative of feminine duty, they always put themselves last, and they were available when needed, never selfish and always willing to help....there are class differences associated with caring" (Heenan, 2002, p. 48).

In her exploration of working class women's relationships with schooling in North Carolina and Philadelphia, Luttrell (1997) depicts a similar dynamic. In "narrating their life decisions, the women stressed their social selves. They left school to attend the needs of others and now they returned to school to do the same – to be a good role model for their children" (p.111).

---

[9] While there is a lot of evidence to support this tendency, there is not much information on how men with children and other care giving responsibilities manage the balance between their studies and these responsibilities.

Marks and Houston (2002) link the gender division of labour to similar cultural values, although their study is focused on middle class women. The authors looked at the educational and professional expectations of academically successful girls in a selective British high school. In questioning why young women's success at school does not always correspond to their professional achievements, they discovered that many girls' future career plans were, in fact, affected by their plans to have children. In other words, many girls anticipated motherhood and, of those girls, many did not desire a full-time career, nor the postsecondary studies that usually accompany such a career. They were, in effect, prioritizing their role as mother over professional aspirations, despite the opportunities available to them. Likewise, Smithson (1999) found that, while men and women largely believe that gender equality exists in the workplace and in family life, they usually assume that they will take on a traditional division of labour, in other words, that men will be the 'breadwinners' and women the care-givers:

> The dominant view in this study was that men and women in the late 1990s were individuals making personal choices on a level playing field, so there was regular attribution of the unequal gender trajectories to 'gender neutral' causes. The most common of these causes were financial considerations, which, although not an acceptable reason for choosing a career path for most, was an acceptable reason for determining a highly gendered division of domestic labour and childcare (Smithson, 1999, p. 53).

The notable difference between the women in Heenan (2002) and Luttrell's (1997) studies and those in Marks and Houston's (2002) and Smithson's (1999) studies is class background and their associated values. The lower socio-economic status of the women in the former studies translated, by and large, to a more exaggerated and explicit domestic gender division of labour, while the more middle-class women in the latter studies seem to feel that such a division of labour in the household is more a matter of individual choice. That said, it seems that the women in Smithson's (1999) study seemed to explicitly assume more equality than many of the women in Marks and Houston's (2002) study. The most notable point that arises in comparing these studies, however, is that women across socio-economic lines expect and experience similar roles within the household. Although one group of women may enjoy more 'flexibility' than the other, it seems that women are universally affected by gender roles. If women largely continue to bear the weight of care-giving responsibilities then any

attempt to return to school will inevitably a complicated affair, as described by Heenan (2002), and Merrill (1999).

The arguments of Marks and Houston (2002) make corroborate to a great degree Hakim's (1996) thesis that women have less success in their professional lives by choice. Hakim classifies women with children into three categories: "home-centered", "work-centered" or "adaptive", meaning that they "are determined to combine employment and family work, so become secondary earners" (Hakim in Houston and Marks, 2003, p.198). The implication of Hakim's argument is that, rather than being limited by "external" limitations, such as lack of childcare, social pressure or unsupportive spouses, women have a "real" choice and would prefer to forgo their careers for their children. Moreover, in assuming that a lack of willingness to work full-time necessarily equates a "secondary career", she offers no critique of the job market, nor the postsecondary education system that do not accommodate care-giving mothers[10].

In direct response to Hakim's postulation, Crompton and Harris (1998) argue that "women's employment behaviour is a reflection of the way in which women actively construct their work-life biographies in terms of their historically available opportunities and constraints" (p. 119). In other words, women make choices and negotiate opportunities within the "confines" of the social, political and economic structures of the day. In this respect, Crompton and Harris have a similar perspective as Gallacher *et al.* (2002) and Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000a and b). Although the former authors are discussing women in the labour force, while the latter are focusing on men and women returning to school, both sets of authors see structural factors, as well as individual agency, as important in determining individual trajectories. In their view, women are heavily affected by such factors as gender roles and socio-economic background but, nonetheless, at the individual level, they can shape their life trajectories in ways not typical of the larger group.

---

[10] For a discussion of the income and educational disparities between men and women due to childcare responsibilities on the part of women, please see the Equal Opportunities Commission (2001, United Kingdom). Moreover, Glover (2000) offers a good analysis of the under-representation of women in higher positions in the sciences.

Merrill (1999) not only considers how women position themselves in the family, but also the role that their partners play in contributing to the gender division of labour within the household. She argues that, in some cases, women's difficulties in juggling their domestic roles with their studies is due to a lack of support from their partners:

> about half of the female participants stated that they did not receive support towards their studies from their husbands/partners. A small minority maintained that their husband/partner was obstructive, occasionally hostile, and openly discouraged them from studying. (Merrill, 1999, p. 160).

In fact, one woman's decision to return to school resulted in divorce. Along a similar vein, Merrill mentions a study on women in the labour market in which it was found that, key to their partners' moral support, was that there be no shift in the domestic division of labour:

> Much more common was the attitude of many husbands that they had no objections to their wife getting a job as long as it did not affect them in any way – in other words, as long as they did not have to cook, clean, pick up the children, or stay at home if the children were ill. (Bird and West, 1987 in Merrill, 1999, p. 122)

Merrill links the presence or lack of support with the power relations within the family:

> the level of support was related to the relationships of power and domination within the family. On the whole the women who perceived themselves to have a good and fairly equal relationship with partners received higher levels of support. (Merrill, 1999, p. 159-160)

Merrill does not claim, however, that all partners are unsupportive. Many women in her study did have supportive partners and this support was often instrumental.

For some, the question of partner support is not as relevant. Single parents, who, by and large, are women, find themselves in a particularly difficult situation. The juggling act experienced by most parents engaged in a learning activity is further exaggerated by being the sole care-giver and, at times, the sole income earner. More employment-related and family-related responsibilities equate less time, rendering it very challenging for such parents to undertake a learning activity. Moreover, as Hayes (2000) points out:

> ...families supported by lone mothers are the poorest of all. Many women students have to deal with the effects of poverty – poor housing, inadequate public transport and lack of good quality, affordable childcare. This is emotionally draining and impacts on women's ability to succeed in their studies (Hayes, 2000, p. 11).

Again, the sad reality is that it is precisely those who could benefit most from furthering their education and job opportunities that are confronted with the most serious barriers to participation.

One of the implications of Merrill (1999) and Heenan's (2002) findings is that as women assume the dual roles of student and care-giver, returning to school often becomes an added challenge in daily life, rather than a catalyst for change in the domestic division of labour. In other words, their domestic responsibilities remain the same, despite the added pressure on their schedules. However, in studying women's employment patterns, Crompton and Harris (1998) emphasize that women and men are not "structural dopes" and that commitments and responsibilities can change over their lifecycles (p. 128). After all, many parents and, indeed, mothers and single-mothers, do manage to successfully complete their degrees or diplomas. Individuals negotiate and manipulate the opportunities presented to them in an attempt to find themselves in situations that better suit their needs. The authors point out that many working mothers had "renegotiated the domestic division of labour as their careers developed" (p.128) and that some had even changed partners "for something more career-friendly" (Op. Cit). However, while many women may succeed in altering the domestic division of labour based on their career needs, many may not be so successful. A woman's willingness to transform their living situation may be countered by a partner's unwillingness to change the status quo, as pointed out by Merrill (1999). Moreover, some women may not wish to change the domestic division of labour.

1.3.3   Balancing Life Outside and Inside School

As the previous section indicates, the struggle to balance life outside school with studies colours the student experience. Many authors have remarked on the difference between

adults and more "traditional" students largely because adults face more demanding conditions in their lives outside school[11]. Indeed, adult students tend to withdraw for non-academic reasons (McGivney, 2003, p. 96-102). According to Tinto, "As [adults] are more likely than the typical beginning college student to be married, live off campus, and/or be employed while attending college, they are also more likely to encounter greater problems in finding time to spend on campus" (Tinto, 1987, p. 68). Most prevalent of the responsibilities that compete for adults' studying time are work and care-giving responsibilities.

If we are to understand how adults fit learning into their often busy schedules, as well as how they experience learning, we need to do so from the perspective of their lives. In other words, regarding the learning experience as isolated from everyday life would jeopardize a complete understanding of the factors that influence learning. As Courtney points out, "anyone who has ever tried to persuade adults to undertake a sustained learning episode in their lives knows full well the competition between different roles, responsibilities, pleasures and proclivities" (Courtney, 1995, p. 120). In citing time-budget research, he suggests that we view learning as "a choice among competing activities" (Ibid., p. 119).

Time-budget studies frequently distinguish between work or mandatory activities and non-work related activities or voluntary activities, the assumption being that work-related activities are usually given priority. Tellingly, it has frequently been noted that between school, work and family, the first to go is usually the learning activity. Interestingly, however, individuals with less free time do not necessarily engage in fewer "voluntary activities", such as learning (if learning is, indeed, considered a "voluntary activity" by all adults). In fact, it has been shown that "it was often those most active...who were inclined to participate in adult education, while the less active were more likely to engage in 'passive' behaviours like watching television" (London *et al.* in Ibid., p. 120). In regards to parents

---

[11] Importantly, however, 'traditional' students actually have more responsibilities outside school than is sometimes acknowledged. In an article based on a longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education, Choy (2002) found that students who dedicate themselves full-time to their studies are the exception, not the rule. In fact, in the United States, 77 percent of postsecondary students work while studying and 26 percent work full-time (Choy, 2002, p. 10). This statistic includes both "traditional" and "non-traditional" students alike.

returning to school, the question, then, is how they view their learning project vis à vis their lives outside school and how they fit learning into their lives.

1.3.4   The Interplay between the Institution and the Individual

Both institutional and individual factors have long been recognized to affect students' participation or nonparticipation. While there is a large amount of research that focuses on how institutional characteristics can contribute or impede students' academic success, this trend in research is sometimes seen as painting a one-way picture. As a result, others have argued that the relationship between the individual and the institution is much more reciprocal and dynamic. The learners' motivation and commitment, their self-confidence, their attitude towards the other students, the staff and the institution itself, all play a part in this individual interpretation.

Most of the research on the influence of the relationship between institutions and the individual is centered on the experiences of more 'traditional' students. However, there is often a parallel between what younger and older students experience. That said, adults do face a number of challenges within educational institutions that affect them particularly. Institutional deficiencies can range from inconvenient class schedules for adult students to misguided academic advising. Moreover, lack of daycare facilities is often cited as posing as a very real limitation to parents' participation, particularly women.

In emphasizing the importance of the role played by each individual, Coulon (1997) makes the point that the same institutional characteristics do not necessarily lead to the same outcome. Instead, it is the dynamic between the institution and each individual that will affect the student experience. More specifically, Coulon argues that the student's ability to develop his/her skill set or, in the author's words, "the student profile" ("le métier d'étudiant"), will determine his/her success at school. Successfully developing this skill set involves understanding and manipulating the rules and codes that dictate the functioning of the school, whether with the professors, with the course material, with the other students or

the administration. This "student profile" means for a fair amount of subjective interpretation on the part of the student, as well as the successful translation of this interpretation into strategies and actions.

In his concepts of social and academic integration, Tinto (1987) also underscores the interdependent relationship between individual and institution. Tinto (1987) argues that it is the intellectual and social integration of the student into the institution that play a critical role in determining whether the student stays in school or drops out. Basically, all other things being equal, "the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure. Conversely, the greater one's integration, the greater the likelihood of persistence" (Tinto, 1987, p. 116). In Tinto's view, intellectual integration has both structural and normative elements. "Structural integration involves the meeting of explicit standards of the college or university, whereas normative integration pertains more to an individual's identification with the...academic system" (Braxton and Sullivan, 1997, p. 111). Social integration signifies the degree to which an individual identifies with and feels part of the student life of the school. Interestingly, however, and particularly relevant to adults, Tinto stipulates that:

> For many persons, especially those living at home or off campus, membership in external communities may play a pivotal role in persistence...For persons whose initial goal and/or institutional commitments are weak, the impact of those communities may make the difference between persistence and departure. When the value orientations of external communities are such as to support the goals of college education, they may aid persistence... (Tinto, 1987, p. 61)

Regarding the determinants of adult perseverance, Tinto therefore makes room for factors outside school, such as family life or employment.

Ashar and Skenes (1993) tested Tinto's model of student attrition on adults in a university-level commerce program and found that, while social integration did affect dropout rates amongst the adults, intellectual integration seemed to have very little effect. Classes "that were professionally more homogeneous and thus socially more integrated...lost fewer students than less socially integrated and larger classes" (Ashar and Skenes, 1993, p. 96).

Importantly, the authors could not discern whether it was the students who created the atmosphere conducive to social integration or whether it was the institution that actively encouraged this atmosphere.

Coulon (1997) and Tinto's (1987) analyses borrow from symbolic interactionalism in that they concentrate on the dynamic between the individual and the institution. According to Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000b), the

> premises of symbolic interactionalism are that individuals act according to the meanings which they attribute to their experiences; that meanings are generated through processes of social interaction; and that they are continually reinterpreted and modified as the result of further social interaction. (p. 7).

Indeed, both authors view the students' individual interpretation of the institutional structure, and his/her reaction to and interaction with this structure, as crucial in understanding his/her success or failure at school. In many ways, this approach to the student experience contradicts that which is proposed by reproduction theorists such as Bourdieu (for example, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). "Whereas symbolic interactionalsists see dispositions as grounded in subjective experience, Bourdieu emphasizes their relationship with position..." (Op. Cit.).

Béret (1986) and Sembel and Felouziz (1997) explore how students develop their school and/or professional projects. These authors are like Tinto (1987) and Coulon (1997) in that they privilege how subjectivity combines with objective factors in determining students' academic outcome. They contend that it is the articulation between the socialisation of the individual, the development of his/her project and objective factors that determine the individual's actions (Béret, 1986, p. 22). Sembel and Felouziz describe the (school or professional) project as consisting of three main aspects. These are 1) the rules of the educational institution; 2) the functioning of the job market and its perception by students; and 3) the changing perspective of the individual students (p. 46). They argue that these projects will, in turn, influence the students' academic strategies and, ultimately, their academic performance. According to Sembel and Felouziz, the student project "[n]on seulement nous montre que l'université de masse reste un lieu de socialisation...mais aussi

que les individus jouent un rôle actif dans ce processus de socialisation » (p. 59). Similarly, in Béret's view, " [l]e projet est le lieu de médiation d'un ensemble de variables socio-économiques et culturelles, qui se sont actualisées dans des situations propres à l'individu" (Béret, 1986, p. 21).

In seeking to understand what influences academic success and failure, some authors have leaned more heavily on subjectively determined factors. Dubet and Martuccelli (1996) view school as a force of socialization[12] and subjectivisation. While they recognize that school produces attitudes and dispositions, they argue that school is no longer the institution it is intended to be. Instead, they see it as a "market" in which "les divers acteurs sont en concurrence, investissent dans le travail, mettent en oeuvre des strategies pour s'approprier des qualifications scolaires plus ou moins rares" (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996, p. 12). Consequently, Dubet and Martuccelli speak of the "school experience" rather than of school as an institution in which each individual has a clear role and is "formed" in the same way. The "school experience" is "la manière dont les acteurs...combinent les diverses logiques de l'action qui structurent le monde scolaire" (Ibid., 62). In defining it as such, the authors are emphasizing the subjective experience lived by each individual. Moreover, they see the individual as an "actor" in his/her educational experience, rather than as a subject of the educational system. In order to understand the school experience, then, we must grasp how individual students "'fabriquent' des relations, des strategies, des significations à travers lesquelles ils se constituent eux-mêmes" (p.14).

Dubet (1994) proposes that, in order to understand the social actor, we must broaden our conception of what comprises the individual beyond subjectivity. He suggests, instead, that each actor has a number of *logiques* or processes:

> L'acteur ne s'engage pas dans un "type pur" de l'action, mais il est tenu de gérer plusieurs logiques. Les types purs de l'action ne se hiérarchisent pas et ne se succèdent pas, ils sont co-présents dans l'expérience des individus. Chacun d'entre nous combine sans cesse plusieurs logiques de l'action, aucun d'entre nous n'est réductible à ses intérêts et à ses rôles, ni même à sa subjectivité individuelle perçue comme le moi de la socialisation. (Dubet, 1994, p. 111).

---

[12] In so doing, they are not denying the role of social *reproduction*.

The individual, then, is made up of a multiplicity of perspectives and processes that have been determined by both internal and external forces. Dubet goes on to explain that, in his view, there are three principal processes: *integration*, *strategic action* and *subjectivization* (p. 113). The concept of *integration* implies the development of individual identity through the "interiorization" of norms and rules of his/her social group and, subsequently, the development of a sense of "us". As such institutions, such as school, act as a source of socialisation. *Strategic action* on the part of the individual occurs once the individual's identity has formed and in any context in which there is competition for economic, political or cultural resources. In such a situation the social actor will behave in a rational and practical manner in order to maximize his/her benefit. *Subjectivization* refers to the process in which, once the individual's identity has been formed and s/he is a member of a social group, s/he develops a sense of difference and distance from the larger social world in which s/he finds him/herself. While Dubet emphasizes the socialisation of the individual and the "interiorization" of these norms and rules, he also makes room for individual agency. Indeed, he believes, somewhat paradoxically, that the individual can decide his/her life experiences based on the "logiques de l'action qui ne lui appartiennent pas et qui lui sont données par les diverses dimensions du système" (Ibid., 136). "La sociologie de l'expérience", then, is the study of how the individual constructs and gives coherence to his/her experiences. This is a process that is, in fact, also influenced by outside social forces.

Pirot et de Ketele (2000) argue that student motivation and commitment play a key role in determining student insertion into his/her program. In other words, these two factors are key ingredients leading towards perseverance. They define commitment as the student's independent decision to undertake studies and his/her active participation in learning activities (Ibid., p. 368-371). Moreover, they see this commitment as possessing four principal points:

> [l]a mobilisation affective (désir et aspirations), la mobilisation conative (quantité d'énergie psychique et physique déployée), la mobilisation cognitive (en référence au travail intellectuel) et la mobilisation métacognitive (stratégie par laquelle l'étudiant prend conscience de ses démarches d'apprentissage et adopte un regard réflexif sur ses apprentissages). (Doray *et al.*, 2003*a*, p. 63)

Importantly, they emphasize that it is the *qualitative* aspects of commitment, rather than the *quantitative* aspects, that play a greater role. By *qualitative commitment*, they refer to such factors as the degree of student comprehension of the course material, a "holistic" approach to studying and time management, whereas by "quantitative" aspects, they mean a more "serialist" approach, such as the number of hours invested by day or per weekend. They further specify that "[l]'engagement dans ses aspects quantitatifs serait une condition nécessaire, mais non suffisante. Ainsi, à niveau quantitatif d'engagement suffisant, c'est la qualité de l'engagement qui ferait la différence" (p. 386). Interestingly, while Pirot and de Ketele find a clear link between previous school experience in high school and current academic results, they did not find that socioeconomic background was a significant factor in the programs they included in their study. Furthermore, they pointed out that each program requires different types of strategies and behaviour.

1.3.5 Structure, Agency and Reproduction Theory

A number of the above-mentioned authors refer to the role socialization plays in determining individual educational trajectories. In fact, this idea is central to reproduction theory, one of the most influential theoretical trends in the sociology of education. Of the most prominent of such theorists is Pierre Bourdieu. Like other reproduction theorists[13], his concern is to understand how schools contribute to reinforcing society's socio-economic structures. More nuanced than most other reproduction theorists, his concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus* have been widely used in research on education.

Bourdieu defines *cultural capital* as the "general cultural background, knowledge, disposition and skills that are passed on from one generation to the next" (MacLeod, 1995, p. 13). According to Bourdieu, children acquire different *cultural capital* specific to their socio-economic background. The cultural capital typical of higher social classes is better rewarded

---

[13] See for example, Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. 1976, *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.

at school and this, in turn, translates into more academic success. Basically, "schools serve as the trading post where socially valued cultural capital is parlayed into superior academic performance" (Ibid., p. 14). Bourdieu equates academic success with economic success, arguing that those who do well in school will then go on to have better jobs and enter (or stay) into higher social strata. However, he points out that social reproduction is not always that straightforward and that the structure of the distribution of cultural capital is not the same as the structure of economic capital.

Habitus is comprised of "the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one's social world" (Ibid., p. 15). Habitus may be subjective, but it is not individual. Moreover, "The habitus engenders attitudes and conduct that enable objective social structures to succeed in reproducing themselves" (Op. Cit.). According to Bourdieu, *habitus* means that an individual will develop dispositions that will lead to certain types of behaviour and actions. These behaviours and actions will, in turn, produce or reinforce the objective structures that brought on the individual's dispositions. *Habitus* is thus the "mediating link between individuals and their social world" (Op. Cit.). As such, Bourdieu offers an explanation of the interplay between individual agency and social structure.

Bourdieu's theories are relevant for both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students alike. What inhibits or encourages a young person's access to better educational opportunities may very likely do so at a later stage in life. While Bourdieu certainly has been contested[14], he has also been extensively used in research on education. For example, authors such as Thompson, Henderson and Holland (2003) and Jackson (2003), who are critical of the current discourse on the learning society, draw heavily on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Thompson *et al.* argue that while middle-class youths might reveal a wider range of choices in their lives, British working-class youth are affected by the expectations and bonds within their communities: "potentially positive bonds of community, without the bridging capital into the broader social context, can result in individuals and groups being trapped in excluded communities" (p. 44). Similarly, Jackson (2003) stipulates that, although "class is complex,

---

[14] See, for example, Alheit (1994) and Heinz (1999).

multiple and fractured, our social class has a huge impact on our lifelong learning experiences. Both working-class women and men will, throughout their lives, have had lower access to education, especially higher education" (p. 372).

Boudon (1973) draws on reproduction theory in his analysis of educational attainment and social mobility. Using statistical data, he demonstrates how the higher an individual's social class, the higher his/her educational attainment. Therefore, like Bourdieu, he recognises that "[l]ower-class youngsters are likely to be culturally disadvantaged, thus to be low achievers at school" (p. 85). However, he also argues that the further an individual progresses within the educational system, "differences in school achievement as a function of social background are scarcely observable in a given cohort" (p. 85). In other words, while there is a parallel between social class and educational attainment, once a lower-class individual is in higher education, there is no difference in performance.

Lahire (1994, 1998), like Bourdieu, looks to the individual's family culture in order to understand success or failure at school. However, Lahire (1994, 1998) diverges from Bourdieu's class-based analysis and, instead, argues that it is the family's valorisation of education, and not its social position, that will determine a child's performance at school. In other words, it is the family culture and not the family position that largely affects the young student's relationship with school. Lahire thus points out that:

> On peut constater que des familles faiblement dotées en capital scolaire ou n'en possédant pas du tout (cas de parents analphabètes) peuvent cependant très bien, par le dialogue ou par la réorganisation des rôles domestiques, faire une *place symbolique* (dans les échanges familiaux) ou une *place effective* à l'« écolier » ou à l'« enfant lettré » au sein de la configuration familiale. (1998, p. 106)

As a result :

> des familles beaucoup mieux dotés que d'autres, notamment en capital scolaire, ont des enfants en grandes difficultés scolaires alors que des familles, dont toutes les caractéristiques objectives permettraient de penser que la scolarité des enfants pourrait être difficile, ont des enfants en bonne, voire très bonne situation scolaire. (1994, p. 75).

Lahire centres his analysis of the family's educational background on the concept of *school capital*. Reminiscent of Bourdieu's *cultural capital*, it is the knowledge acquired from the school experience in order to be able to function successfully in the school system.

Procter (2001) points out that many British sociologists have looked towards structural theory, such as Bourdieu's reproduction theory, in reaction to their continental European colleagues who tend to view the lifecourse as more individualized. He complains that, as a result, "structural determination and human agency [have] become polarized into mutually exclusive alternatives, a characteristic which contrasts with developments in general social theory in which agency and structure are features of *all* human action" (Procter, 2001, p. 490). In response, Procter points to Giddens' (1979) interpretation of structure and action (or agency, p.55). According to Giddens, "the notions of action and structure *presuppose one another*" (p.53). Moreover, "'[a]ction' or agency…thus does not refer to a series of discrete acts combined together, but to *continuous flow of conduct*". In other words, "agency and structure are one – that is, any given act is simultaneously the purposeful action of an individual, an expression of structure and a reconstitution of structure" (Procter, 2001, p. 490).

Since Giddens, many sociologists have, in fact, woven together the concepts structure and agency. The common contention is that, although social structures can influence the individual lifecourse, there is too much variation between individuals from the same socio-economic background for structural explanations alone to suffice. Researchers, such as Gallacher, Crossan, Field and Merrill (2002) have used Bourdieu's version of reproduction theory, but argue that it does not alone account for participation patterns in adult learning. Gallacher *et al.* agree that socio-economic status and previous educational experience are significant factors, but they also point out that many adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds manage to obtain higher education degrees, while many adults from more middle class backgrounds do not. They turn to the individuals' lives outside school, as well as the effect of the relationship between the educational institution and the student for additional explanations. In Doray *et al.* (2005*b*), we likewise consider a combination of factors, articulated through the framework of temporalities. By analysing student trajectories

through their past and present experiences, as well as their future aspirations, we are able to take into account an array of factors. These factors include socio-economic background, previous educational experiences, the dynamic between the individual and the institution, the balance between the individual's life outside school and in school, and, finally, future educational and professional goals. Along the same lines, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) feel that both symbolic interactionalism and Bourdieu's version of reproduction theory can shed light on the learning careers of the participants in their study. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) point out that, "[t]his potentially problematic mixing…[of theories] begins to reveal something of the complexity of our data" (p. 8).

In his exploration of individual work patterns through the lifecourse, Heinz (1999) claims that "…we explain the outcomes of occupational training and labour market passages as transition results that depend not only on social origin and the educational system, but also on the individual's biography and decision making" (p.226). Procter (2001) demonstrates very clearly how both structure and agency determine young women's fate in his study of how some women further their educations, while others become young mothers. Reay, Ball and David (2002) make a similar point about the interplay of structure and agency in their analysis of the experiences of twenty-three further education students: "[w]hilst making structures visible, the transcripts vividly demonstrate that access is also about lives and agency in which chance and surprise happenings also have their part to play" (p.17). By allowing for these seemingly contradictory interpretations of the lifecourse, these authors can account for both the patterns that determine individual lives, as well as the variation within social groups.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) present a particularly sophisticated blending of structure and agency. While they include Bourdieu's interpretation of social reproduction in their own model, they also seek to "incorporate a theory of learning that can provide a mechanism for the change of habitus" (p. 32). They begin with the concept of *schemata*, which they define as "the conceptual structures…which serve as tools for understanding…experiences" (Ibid., 34). *Schemata*, then, contribute to the formation of dispositions, which is a central concept in

Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. Hodkinson and Sparkes explain how *schemata* can then change:

> As new experiences are gained schemata are modified and as they change so does what is recognized in the surrounding world. In this dialectical way, the life history of the individual shapes and is shaped by his/her practice. In choosing any action an individual uses his/her schematic repertoire. No-one can step outside their habitus, so decision making can never be context-free. (Op. Cit.)

Furthermore, "[w]hat is learned is a result of an interaction between schemata, activity and situation...which results in a further development of habitus" (Op. Cit.).

Regarding career decision making, the central focus of this theory, individuals make decisions based on the *horizons for action* available to them. "Habitus and the opportunity structures of the labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and appropriate affect decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective" (Op. Cit.). It is, in fact, *schemata* that ultimately determine the individual's *habitus* and, consequently, how the *horizons for action* are perceived, which, in turn, affect how the individual makes his/her decisions. Hodkinson and Sparkes insist that decision making is "pragmatically rational" (Ibid., 37), based on the individuals' "own differing horizons and with their own differing objectives" (Op. Cit.).

The authors then place this decision making model within the context of the concept of *career trajectories*. Central to their use of this concept is the notion of *turning-points*. A *turning-point*, in Hodkinson and Sparke's interpretation, is when a person "goes through a significant transformation of identity" (Ibid., 39). *Careership* is "an uneven pattern of routine experience interspersed with such turning-points" (Op. Cit.). They identify three types of *turning-points*: 1) *structural turning-points* in which institutional structures, such as school, determine the change; 2) *self-initiated turning-points* whereby "the person concerned is instrumental in precipitating a transformation" (Op. Cit.); and 3) *forced turning-points*, when an external event or the actions of others dictate a change in the individual's life. They conclude that, as a decision is made within the context of a *turning-point*, the individual's *habitus* is inevitably changed, to a greater or lesser extent.

1.3.6   Subjectivity and the School Experience

A handful of authors emanating from Great Britain look to how individuals' social origins combine with current experiences to affect their perspectives and attitudes towards learning. They deem the subjective experience key in understanding what leads to student perseverance or departure. As such, they can account simultaneously for both individual variation and the influence of rigid structural and institutional factors.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000*a* and *b*) develop the concept of *dispositions to learning*. These *dispositions to learning* not only influence participation, but in the long run, they influence an individual's learning behaviour which, in turn, determines their academic success or failure. In the authors' minds, learning dispositions are "founded on the meanings that learners attribute to knowledge and learning, and on their definitions of what knowledge is and of what learning entails" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000*a*, p. 7). These subjective meanings develop over time and are influenced by a variety of "other material and cultural phenomena" (Ibid.). In other words, an individual's attitude towards learning will change as s/he is exposed to different experiences, both within and outside of school. The authors see these learning dispositions as crucial in understanding participation in learning as they link subjective meaning with action. Interestingly, while symbolic interactionalists view learning dispositions as a product of social interaction and subjective interpretation, Bourdieu argues that they are rooted in social position (Ibid.). Bloomer and Hodkinson seek to bring both traditions together in their analysis.

Gallacher *et al.* (2002) and Crossan *et al.* (2003) have based their concept of *learning identities* on Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000*a* and *b*) interpretation of *dispositions to learning*. However, where *dispositions to learning* are centred on the individual's attitude towards learning, learning identities are based on the idea that changes in the individual's life and, consequentially, in the individual's social identity, lead to the development of learning identities. In the words of the authors, "[t]hese status passages [significant and socially recognized changes in a person's life] are also often associated with changing self-perceptions and definitions leading to changes in social identity in which the role of a learner

becomes open to them" (Gallacher *et al.*, 2002, p. 502). And once the individual becomes involved in a learning activity, his/her confidence in regards to learning may be bolstered. When the individual becomes a more confident learner, s/he may become involved in more learning activities. The authors caution, however, that "[i]f these processes are to be interpreted in this way..., we should accept that they may involve considerable discontinuity and disruption, rather than following a neat direct line from apprenticeship to full membership of the community of practice" (Ibid., p. 506). In such cases, the learning identities are seen as fragile, and they may "begin, falter, start, then start again as people weave learning into their lives" (Op.Cit). Gallacher *et al.* attribute personal, institutional and structural factors to these less regular learning identities. Regardless of whether the *learning identities* are fragile or continuous, the concept of *learning identities* is obviously rooted in the subjective experience of the individual. And, as mentioned above, structural and institutional factors are then seen to affect the course of the learners' projects and, in turn, their *learning identities*.

1.3.7   The Lifecourse Approach and Learning Careers

That there are myriad ways in which to analyse the adult experience in learning is not surprising, given the huge array of possible elements that can contribute to each individual's participation. The challenge then is to integrate these many possible factors into a comprehensive model.

The lifecourse approach offers us not only the possibility of understanding learning from the perspective of the individual's life, but also of taking many different factors into consideration. This approach stems from the biographical method and, as such, is an account of a person's life. The emphasis is not on the internal world of the individual, but is instead on the dynamic between the individual and society. According to Scott (1998), "biography is the study of an individual in society or, in other words, it comprises an understanding of the relations between agency and structure with reference to that individual" (Scott in Erben, 1998, p. 33). In their work on working careers, Moen and Han (2001) argue that the

lifecourse approach allows us to understand how the macro- and micro- intersect at the individual level. The lifecourse approach, then, offers a way of weaving together both subjective and objective interpretations, structural factors and agency. Moreover, in following the individual's life, the lifecourse approach will naturally span throughout time. As such, elements from a person's past can be considered alongside factors that are influencing his/her participation in the present (Doray, 2005*a*, p. 77). Elder and O'Rand (1995), however, point out that "…the major question is whether the life span model can incorporate the range of social processes that organize the lifecourses of individuals and the collective lifecourse patterns of cohorts" (p. 456).

Based upon the lifecourse approach, the concept of the *learning career* has been developed in order to address the complexities of participation in learning at the individual level. Crossan *et al.* (2003), as well as Gallacher *et al.* (2002), suggest that a *learning career* is a sequence of learning or educational events in an individual's life that influence the development and transformation of an individual's identity. A *learning career* thus occurs over a long period of time and therefore includes different periods of learning which may, or may not, have been fragmented or unfinished.

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) insist that further education students usually withdraw in response to a series of considerations in their lives and not one single reason. As such, they view *learning careers* as a way of bringing these complex reasons together in a comprehensive individualized perspective. Indeed, they share with Crossan *et al.* (2003) and Gallacher *et al.* (2002) the notion that a *learning career* does not exclude those events that occur outside of the educational context. Instead, such events are considered alongside learning events, as they inevitably affect what occurs within the learning context. Moreover, in Bloomer and Hodkinson's view, a *learning career* involves a complex interplay between the subjective and objective. They highlight the perspectives of symbolic interactionalists, as well as reproduction theorists such as Bourdieu, in stressing that "action and learning exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with context or situation" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p. 590). In their words, a *learning career*

> is a career of events, activities and meanings, and the making and remaking of meanings through those activities and events, and it is a career of relationships and the constant making

and remaking of relationships, including relationships between position and disposition. (Op.Cit.)

As such, they combine their subjective concept of *learning dispositions* with more objective factors, such as the "habitus of the individual and…the material and cultural contexts within which habitus has developed" (Ibid., p. 591). .

1.3.8   Concluding with "School Careers"

In the context of research conducted on the adult sub-sample of the "Les Parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collegial" project, Pierre Doray, Paul Bélanger and I developed the concept of *school career* (Doray, *et al.*, 2005*a*, p. 5-7). Although this concept is largely based on that of *learning careers* as defined by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000*a* and 2000*b*), Crossan *et al.* (2003) and Gallacher *et al.* (2002), its scope is more limited. "We define a school career as the sequence of events experienced by an individual for the duration of the formal learning activity s/he is undertaking" (Ibid., p. 5). Importantly, this does not only refer to what transpires in the individual's life within the school setting, but also to that which occurs in his/her life outside school. As we have seen, this is particularly relevant in the case of adults who have many responsibilities outside school that not only influence the adult's daily experience at school, but may also be the motivating force behind their return to school or their departure.

There are four key theoretical dimensions to our definition of *school career* (Ibid., p. 6-7). Much of the literature mentioned in Doray, *et al.* (2005*a*) has been discussed in the Theoretical Framework section of this thesis. The first of the four elements is the notion of time. "In other words, the factors that influence a school career stem from different moments of an individual's biography, be they in the past, present or future" (Ibid., p. 6). In demonstrating how cultural disposition can affect performance at school, for example, reproduction theorists such as Bourdieu look to past experiences to explain current behaviour. Anticipation of the future is an important feature of literature that focuses on school/professional projects. The next key dimension of our concept of *school careers* is the

dynamic between the individual and the institution. The educational institution can affect the individual's learning experiences through a range of factors, such as pedagogical and evaluation systems. However, it is important to recognise that "the same institutional characteristics do not necessarily lead to the same experiences at the individual level" (Ibid.). Taking from the literature on the sociology of experience and on the student profile ("le metier d'étudiant" in Coulon, 1992), we argue that the individual experience is determined by the dynamic between the school and the individual. In the third dimension we borrow from interactionalism by looking at how objective factors combine with subjective factors to affect the individual's experience at school. Lastly, critical to our conception of the *school career* is how the individual's life outside of school influences his/her experiences at school. After all, "[w]hat happens in a student's life outside of the school can either facilitate his/her return to school or act as a constraint that hinders it" (Doray, *et al.*, p. 7).

In the following chapters, most notably in Chapter Four, I will develop a typology using *school careers*. By analysing the parents' experiences along the lines of these *school careers*, we are not only able to consider the broad array of factors described above, but we can discern the patterns that define their experiences. Indeed, as will be seen further in this thesis, that which occurs at school and outside of school, structural factors such as the socioeconomic context, social background and gender, the dynamic between the institution and the individual, and, finally, individual agency, all combine to determine the parents' educational trajectories and, more broadly, their *school careers*.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

2.1   IntroductionThe aim of this chapter is to discuss all elements that concern the methodology of this thesis. This is undertaken in three sections, namely the methodological approach involved in the "Parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collegial" project as a whole, the analysis of the adult cohort and, finally, the analysis of the parent cohort. The first section includes a discussion of the sample selection, the representativeness of the sample, the interview grid and the interviewers. The second section focuses on the definition of "adult", as well as on how the analysis of the interviews was undertaken. The final section includes a discussion of the definition of "parent" and of the analysis of the parent cohort. It also includes a consideration of the limitations to the research.

2.2   The "Parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" Project

This thesis is based on a number of interviews conducted under the rubric of the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project. This qualitative and longitudinal project, led by Pierre Doray and funded by Fonds FCAR[15], was started in 2000. Its qualitative nature has allowed the researchers to explore a wide range of topics related to the students' experiences in Cégep, through the subjective perspective of each individual (Doray *et al.*, 2003*b*, p. 9). The project is longitudinal. It follows Cégep students throughout

---

[15] The Fonds FCAR later became the Fonds de recherche québécois sur la nature et les technologies

their program until they graduate, change programs or depart from their programs. This has meant that the interviewees cannot re-construct their discourse with the advantage of hindsight or for the purposes of giving their experiences more coherence. Instead, they recount what has happened to them from the vantage point of only the very recent past until the present. The longitudinal nature of the project has also meant that it captures a wide variety of experiences and outcomes, lived throughout the course of each student's program.

2.2.1   The Sample Selection

Of the 234 students who participated in this study, 126 were enrolled in technical programs and 108 were in university-track science programs. In other words, these students were either in one of three technical programs; Laboratory Technology, Electronic Engineering or Computer Science, or they were enrolled in the Sciences. While the participants came from six Cégeps, two of which were private colleges and two of which came from outside the Greater Montréal region, those in the technical programs attended only four of the institutions in this study (Ibid., p. 10). Students attending these institutions, enrolled in one of the four programs cited above, and beginning their program in September 2000, were contacted by means of a letter sent to all new entrants. The 234 students in the study responded to the letter positively. Participation in the project was, therefore, voluntary.

2.2.2   Representativeness

The "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project cannot claim any sort of representativeness in the statistical sense. That said, its sample number is large for a qualitative study and, as such, it can claim to represent a diversity of experiences. The aim of a large-scale sample such as this one is to present:

> le *panorama le plus complet possible* des problèmes ou situations, une *vision d'ensemble* ou encore un *portrait global* d'une question de recherche. D'où l'idée de diversifier les cas de manière à inclure la plus grande variété possible, indépendamment de leur fréquence statistique. (Pires, 1997, p. 155)

The present thesis involves intra-group diversity in that it is an exploration of the experiences of a specific group of students within the Cégep system (Ibid.). In other words, I am not interested in representing the trajectories of all Cégep students, but instead want to explore what happens specifically to parents in technical programs.

2.2.3   The Interview Campaign

Although these students began their programs at the same time, they did not necessarily all finish at the same time or in the prescribed amount of time. Moreover, they did not necessarily finish their programs – some "dropped-out" and others changed to another discipline. All the participants in this study were interviewed at least once, at the beginning of their first semester. After this initial interview, they were interviewed at the end of their second semester and twice a year for as long as they continued their program. In between these interviews, the researchers maintained telephone contact with the participants in which they were given brief updates on the students' situation. Whenever possible, the students were interviewed at the end of their schooling, either upon completion of their program or at the time of departure from the program. Of course, such regular and consistent contact with the students was not always possible and, for example, some were only interviewed once and then never heard from again. Fortunately, however, most others participated in the study very willingly until they completed the program or departed prematurely.

The longitudinal nature of this research project had a number of advantages. Most obviously, it followed the students while their programs were in progress and, as such, meant that the accounts of the students' experiences were relatively up-to-date. This allowed for a level of detail which the students' may not have otherwise been able to provide. Related to this is the fact that, if the interviewer did not adequately pursue an important topic in one interview, s/he could address the matter in the following interview. Moreover, it meant that both the contradictions and consistencies in the students' discourses were apparent. Such nuances in

their discourses were important as they revealed important information regarding how the students' attempted to make sense of their experiences, as their programs went along.

2.2.4   The Interview Grid[16]

The interviews were semi-structured. In other words, while the interviewers followed an interview grid which highlighted general themes, there were few rigidly defined questions. As such, the interviewers were at liberty to follow the flow of the interviewee's discourse and add any questions that were pertinent to the participant's experiences (in keeping with the topic of the research). While the interview grid of the first interview, at the beginning of the students' program, was quite detailed, those of the following interviews were less detailed. This meant that the interviewers could "customize" each interview according to the experiences and situations of the individual participants.

During the first interview, five main themes were discussed: 1) the participant's first experiences and impressions of the courses, teachers, fellow students and the institution as a whole; 2) the reasons behind the participant's program choice; 3) the participant's previous school and work experience, particularly how the participant experienced the transition to high school or another postsecondary program, if applicable; 4) the participant's life outside school, such as paid work, hobbies and general life situation; and, finally, 5) the participant's future projects. The following interviews focused on the participants' current experience at school, their lives outside school and their future projects, as well as on any relevant information, particular to that individual. When it was possible to conduct a last interview with the participant just before the completion of his/her program, there was a heavy focus on their future projects and expectations (Gemme, 2003, p. 30-31).

---

[16] Please see Appendix 1 for the interview grids.

2.2.5   The Interviewers

Given the large number of participants and the longitudinal nature of this project, several research assistants were involved in the interviewing process. To the extent possible, each participant was assigned the same interviewer. Unfortunately, however, the long nature of the study meant that some research assistants came and went, and there could not always be a consistent follow-up. Although the interviewers had a background in sociology or the social sciences, they were additionally trained in semi-structured interview techniques.

2.3   The Adults in the "Parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collegial" Project

With the hopes of understanding how adults experience the particularities of returning to college in the Québec context, Pierre Doray, Paul Bélanger and I identified the adults from the original sample of 234 students. Of these 234 students, there were 30 adults enrolled in the three technical programs identified, as well as a small number of adults enrolled in the Sciences. We decided to focus only on the 30 adult students in technical programs, as there were too few adults from the original sample in the Sciences to legitimately be able to claim any sort of representation of the adult experience in that program. That said, we found that the 30 adults in the technical programs provided us with rich material with which we could explore the adult experience. Indeed, they represented a diversity of perspectives, experiences and situations.

2.3.1   Defining "Adult"

There is contention regarding the definition of adult within the context of education, as is evidenced by the use of terms such as "non-traditional student", "mature student" or "returner". Cross (1981) points to the multiple ways in which adult students have been referred, including "over 21", "over 22", "registered in continuing education programs" and "registered in external degree programs" (Cross, 1981, p. 67). For the purposes of the research on the adult experience in Cégep technical programs, and, by extension, the present

thesis, we do not define "adult" according to age or program criterion. Instead, we view an "adult student" as an individual who ended his/her initial schooling in order to enter the job market, start a family or undertake an equivalent project for one year or more[17]. An adult, then, is an individual who has undertaken an alternate "project" to formal schooling and who did not necessarily have the intention of returning to school. Enrollment in one of the full-time technical college programs identified is thus considered a return to school. Once we had defined our concept of "adult", we then found thirty students who fit this category and we were able to delve into the analysis of their interviews.

2.3.2   The Analysis and Results

The analysis of the adults' experiences was not conducted until most of the adults had completed, changed or departed from their programs. We adhered to the *grounded theory* approach, which consists of "(1) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from the text, and (2) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories" (Bernard, 2000, p. 443). In Bernard's words, "[g]rounded theory is an *iterative* process by which you, the analyst, become more and more *grounded* in the data" (Bernard, 2000, p. 444). As such, our analysis was characterized by reading the transcripts of the adults' interviews individually and then coming together as a group to discuss our observations and impressions of that individual's experiences. The result was that we brought together our distinct perspectives on each individual's case and, through discussion, came to a consensus regarding the patterns and themes that defined their experiences. We were then able to compare the adults' stories and identify themes that could be applied either to the group as a whole or to a number of adults together. At the end of this process, which lasted several months, we were able to identify a typology that characterized the different experiences of the thirty adults in technical programs.

---

[17] By "equivalent project", we do not mean travelling or even volunteer work for a period of one year or more. Such projects are considered a "parenthesis" in that the student has every intention of returning to school.

42

In the end, we identified six types of school careers[18]. Two types of these school careers depict students who have successfully persevered in their programs and four describe students who have not. The first of the perseverant school careers, (1) "A Comfortable Perseverance", involves students who experienced relative ease in their studies. The second type of school career, (2) "Perseverance despite Difficulty", describes students who experienced a number of challenges, but were successful in completing their programs. More specifically, the adults in "A Comfortable Perseverance" described relatively easy adaptations to Cégep, a confirmation of both their program choices and professional projects, and advantageous conditions outside of school. Meanwhile, the adults in the "Perseverance despite Difficulty" experienced academic difficulties, a lack of motivation, a lack of social integration and a difficult balance between their lives in school and outside of school.

The four school careers in which the students did not complete their programs are (3) "Difficulties and Discontinued Projects", (4) "Anticipated Departures", (5) "Difficulties that Lead to Other Projects" and (6) "Difficulties Balancing Studies, Work and Family". The differences between these four typologies are based on their future projects, as well as difficulties they either experienced at school and in balancing their studies with other parts of their lives. Whereas the men in the "Anticipated Departures" school category never intended on completing their programs, the adults in "Difficulties and Discontinued Projects" were forced to drop out despite their best efforts. The challenges of those in the "Difficulties and Discontinued Projects" category included lack of comprehension in their courses, heavy workloads, poor adaptations to Cégep from adult education, lack of motivation, and stress-related health problems (Doray *et al.*, *2005b*, p. 10-19). The adults who made up the "Difficulties that Lead to Other Projects" school category experienced similar problems but, instead of departing from Cégep, they undertook other studies. Indeed, their lack of success in their first programs simply allowed them to confirm alternate interests. The two women who formed the "Difficulties Balancing Studies, Work and Family" category had relative success in their programs, but were forced to drop out due to unforeseen family obligations.

---

[18] See our definition of school career above, in Section 1.3.7, "The Lifecourse Approach and Learning Careers".

2.4   Parents returning to college in technical studies

Of the thirty adults in technical programs, there are ten with dependent children[19]. In other words, there are ten adults who have children for whom they are still responsible and for whom they must provide. Three of these parents are single mothers, while seven have partners who, in varying degrees, share responsibility for their children. Nine in our sample of parents are women; there is one father with a young child. The father was included in the sample because this thesis does not focus specifically on women returning to postsecondary education, but instead focuses more broadly on parents.

2.4.1   Defining "Parent"

I am limiting my definition of "parent" to those with dependent children as the aim of this thesis is to understand how parental responsibilities, on top of the other myriad considerations that may affect an adult's life, influence the adult experience of returning to school. To include parents with both dependent and independent children would be to confuse very different types of experience as the same. As it is, there is a great degree of difference between each parent's experience.

2.4.2   The Analysis

As will be seen in the following chapters, the analysis of the experiences of the ten parents in the adult sample has been carried out in very much the same way as the analysis described above. In other words, I followed the dictates of the *grounded theory* approach. That said, it

---

[19] There is, in fact, one more parent, "Bertrand", in our sample. However, as Bertrand rarely mentions his son and given that his son already attends Cégep, it is not clear whether he lives with Bertrand or not. In other words, it is not clear whether Bertrand is the care-giver to a dependent child or if his son is already an adult. Moreover, there are only two interviews with Bertrand, thus rendering his already limited commentary on his situation as a parent even more difficult to interpret. I have therefore decided to exclude him from the sample of parents.

must be noted that, based on my prior work on the analysis of the adult cohort, I already possessed a certain familiarity with each individual case.

In more detail, my analysis consisted of three stages. The first involved a re-reading of the interview transcripts in order to devise a typology based on *school careers*[20]. This typology was based largely on the parents' status in their program (perseverant/departure/change of programs) and the reasons behind their status. This initial stage of the analysis additionally allowed me to take note of the major biographical incidents that characterized their lives, an effort that allowed me to better structure the second stage of analysis. This second phase consisted of a more detailed reading of their interviews, in which I undertook to better understand the general patterns that characterized their experiences in and outside of school, as well as more nuanced elements of their lives which more not as apparent upon first glance. In working on this second stage, I devised categories which could be applied to the lives of the ten parents, such as "Family-school balance", "Work-school balance", "Relationship with professors", "Understanding of school system", "Discourse on value of education", "Future professional plans", "Future academic plans", and so on. I used these categories to organize my notes on the events that characterized the respondents' lives and the subjective meanings that they attributed to them. It should also be noted that, in some cases, certain events, situations or attitudes defied the general categories I had devised, thus requiring me to create categories for a specific individual. In the final stage of the analysis, I compared the descriptions of each individual's life by category within each *school career*. This allowed me not only to verify that each individual "fit" into the *school category* to which s/he was assigned, but I was also able to analyze the more nuanced tendencies that characterized the lives of the parents within each *school career*. As such, I came to a more detailed understanding of each *school career*.

It must be said that the present thesis, like the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project as a whole, is almost entirely based upon the discourse of

---

[20] It should be noted that this concept had already been designed during my work with Pierre Doray and Paul Bélanger.

the participants in the study. I therefore analyzed their representation of their experiences and not their experiences as such. This means that I analyzed how they subjectively saw and presented their experiences and not an objective rendition of what they actually lived. As such, in attempting to understand what led to their perseverance/departure/program change, I largely based my analysis on what they saw as the most important contributing factors.

2.4.3   The Number of Interviews

There are not a uniform number of interviews done with the parents in this cohort. Due to their different trajectories in their programs and their varying availabilities throughout the interview campaign, the same number of interviews could not be conducted with each parent. This meant that the level of detail and understanding reached in some cases could not be repeated in other cases. On average, though, there were three in-person interviews and one telephone interview conducted with each parent.

Table 2.1 Number of In-person and Telephone Interviews per Participant

PSEUDONAME	NUMBER OF IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS	NUMBER OF TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS
BARNAVE	4	0
GABRIELLE	2	0
GISÈLE	4	1
IDA	2	1
IRMA	2	0
ISABELLE	3	3
ISAURE	4	0
JUSTINE	2	1
MADELEINE	3	1
MARIELLE	2	1
TOTAL	28	8

2.4.4   Limitations to the research

There are a number of limitations that bear mentioning, some of which are related to the nature of the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project and others that have more to do with my personal experience.

The "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project was designed with a number of objectives in mind, namely to understand students' program choice; compare the experiences of women and men; analyse the effect of socio-economic background on the students' school- and profession-related choices; and, finally, understand what leads to the students' perseverance or departure (Gemme, 2003, p. 24). In none of these general objectives is the question of adults, let alone parents, mentioned. This, in turn, meant that some of the particular issues that might affect adults and, more precisely, parents, were not considered when the interview grid was designed. As such, the collection of information on the particularities of the adult and parental experience depended on the discourse of the interviewee and the discrepancy of the interviewer. Indeed, while some interviewers grasped the importance of the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences outside school, others did not. Likewise, while some interviewees wanted to include their accounts of their lives outside school, others did not speak so openly about these elements of their lives. As a result, some interviews are richer than others.

Another issue related to the data collection is the information on the participants' socio-economic background. This information was collected by means of a questionnaire filled out by each participant during his/her first interview. There were two questions directly related to their socioeconomic background: their parents' level of education and their parents' current employment. This means, therefore, that we have very little information on their social background and, moreover, that it is difficult to extrapolate any conclusions based on this information. Unfortunately, this is exacerbated by the fact that some of the participants did not have or did not wish to provide this basic information on their parents.

The focus of my thesis is upon the return to school of parents with dependent children. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, only one of the ten parents featured in this thesis is a man. While this is a common feature of research on parents returning to school[21], it meant that it was very difficult to accurately compare the experiences of men and women with dependent children. In other words, it was difficult to explore by means of comparison how the gender division of labour may or may not have affected the participants.

I chose this topic based on my already detailed knowledge of the interviews with the adults. Of the several themes that attracted my attention, one was the situation of the adults with children. Their situation and the issues they faced often seemed quite different compared with the other adults and yet, somehow, there was a great diversity in their experiences and their final outcomes. While being familiar with the interviews before I begun the analysis of the parents' experiences proved to be an advantage, it was also a disadvantage. It meant that I had some preconceived ideas about the factors that affected their particular trajectories and even about how to organize the typology of these adults. While I retained some of my ideas about the factors that have influenced their experiences, based upon my analysis of the adults with Pierre Doray and Paul Bélanger, I re-read the interviews in order to identify any additional elements that may have affected the parents particularly. Likewise, I re-read the interviews with the aim of developing an entirely new typology, specific to the adults with dependent children.

---

[21] See, for example, Merrill (2002).

CHAPTER III

THE INDIVIDUAL CASES

3.1   Introduction

In the following two chapters, I describe and analyse the parent cohort. Chapter Three begins with a general overview of the cohort and then follows with a case-by-case analysis of each adult. The Overview comprises of a discussion of the vital statistics of the ten individuals who make up the parent cohort. The case-by-case analyses of the individuals allow for a more detailed understanding of each parent's situation and their experiences before presentation of the school careers in Chapter Four.

The vital statistics in the Overview specifically include a description of the parents' program choice and academic standing, gender, age, family situation and size, social background (based on their mother and fathers' educational attainment), and previous educational and professional experience.   In the analysis of the individual cases, I look at such factors as the parents' social background, past school experiences, their lives outside school, the moral and practical help they received, the development of strategies, as well as their academic ability, motivation, level of determination and interest. Through my analysis of the interviews with the parents, based on the grounded theory approach, these are the factors that seemed the most pertinent.

3.2   Overview of Parent Cohort

The parents in this cohort share more in common than their family responsibilities. As will be evidenced in the Overview, the similarities they share extend to some basic attributes such as family background and past educational experience.   That said, the differences that distinguish them are significant, as well.   Indeed, these differences lead to very different outcomes regarding their technical studies.

3.2.1   Program and Current Academic Standing

Although there are three technical programs included in the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project, only two are represented in the sub-sample of parents.   At the beginning of this study, there were four parents enrolled in a Computer Science program and six enrolled in Laboratory Technology.

One of the parents in Computer Science has since graduated, while three of the parents in the Laboratory Technology program have graduated or have almost successfully completed their schooling.   Six have not.   Two parents, representing both programs, changed programs, while five parents have left their programs and not returned.

Table 3.1 Program and Status

PSEUDO NAME	PROGRAM	STATUS
Barnave	Computer Science	Graduated/ Program almost completed
Gisèle	Laboratory Technology	Graduated/ Program almost completed
Isabelle	Laboratory Technology	Graduated/ Program almost completed
Madeleine	Laboratory Technology	Graduated/ Program almost completed
Isaure	Computer Science	Program Change
Gabrielle	Laboratory Technology	Departure
Ida	Computer Science	Departure
Irma	Laboratory Technology	Program Change
Justine	Computer Science	Departure
Marielle	Laboratory Technology	Departure

This ratio of graduated/perseverant students compared to students who have departed is, in fact, reflects that of the adult cohort in the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project. Whereas only four out of ten parents graduated or were about to graduate, thirteen out of thirty adults, including the parents, graduated. In other words, almost half of the adults graduated, while 2/5 of parents graduated. When compared with the overall graduation rate of non-adult students in the technical programs, the similarities are consistent. There were 43 out of 96 non-adult students who successfully graduated or were close to graduating in June 2004. This equates to only 40.5% of the students who participated in the study, a ratio that closely resembles that of the parents. That there be very little difference between the older and younger students in the study is somewhat surprising, if only because, in a study published by Québec's *Ministère de l'Éducation* (2004), it was found that the greatest proportion of departures came from the 18- 21 year old cohort[22]. In other words, students who were 22 years old and above tended to persevere in their programs much more. It bears noting that what is most surprising about the statistics collected by the *Ministère de l'Éducation*, as well as the numbers from the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project, is the large number of students who drop out of the technical programs offered in Québec's Cégeps.

3.2.2   Gender and Age

Although the adult sample as a whole is relatively evenly divided between thirteen men and sixteen women, this equal representation of men and women is not shared by the sub-sample of parents. Out of ten adults with dependent children, there is only one man.

There is quite a wide age range between the adults with dependent children. The youngest parent was only eighteen years old at the time of the first interview on September 2000, while the oldest was forty-two. This age range, in fact, quite closely reflects the age range of the 126 participants from the three technical programs as a whole, with the youngest students

---

[22] The similarities between the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project and the government study mean, in no way, that the former research can be considered statistically relevant.

being seventeen and the oldest student being forty-seven. The average age of the adults with dependent children is thirty (and the median age is 28.5), compared with the average age of the adults as a whole at 27.5.

3.2.3   Family Situation and Size

Three of the parents in the sub-sample were single-mothers, while the rest lived with their partners. Interestingly, as we will see in the following pages, the division of labour in these family units was quite varied.   While some parents bore most of the care-giving responsibilities, others enjoyed a more equal division of labour at home.   Not surprisingly, while balancing family with studies (and sometimes with paid employment) is always a challenge, it was even more so for the single mothers.

The three single mothers had one child each.   Interestingly enough, there were three women in the sub-sample who have four children, while there was one more that has three children. There were two more women who had just one child with their partners, as well as one man who had one child at the beginning of the program and had a second at the end of the program. While the single mothers tended to be older than the average age of the parents as a whole, the parents who lived with a partner were slightly younger than the average age of the parents.   That said, there is quite a wide range between the latter type of parents, the youngest being eighteen while the oldest is thirty-nine.

It is interesting to note the age of the women with three or more children.   While two of the women with four children are at the older end of the age range (one is thirty-nine and the other is thirty-eight), the other two are relatively young (at twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age).   Two of the women who were in their twenties when they began their current Cégep studies, and one who started the program in her late thirties, had their first child under twenty.   The implication of this is that they may not have had much time to develop a career or pursue postsecondary studies.   In fact, while this is true of two of them, the third woman

managed to pursue university studies, have one of the most professionally elevated careers of all of the parents, and have three more children.

Table 3.2 Marital Status, Age, Number of Child/ren, and Approximate Age of Child/ren

PSEUDONAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	NUMBER OF CHILD/REN	AGE OF CHILD/REN
Barnave	28	partner	1 (and 2nd child born just after completion of the program)	toddler
Gabrielle	23	partner	1	toddler
Gisele	27	partner	3	5-9 years
Ida	38	partner	4	10-18 years
Irma	29	single mother	1	8 years
Isabelle	18	partner	1	1 year
Isaure	39	partner	4	4-12 years
Justine	37	single mother	1	1 year
Madeleine	42	single mother	1	7 years
Marielle	28	partner	4	Under 1 year – elementary school age

3.2.4   Previous Educational and Professional Experience

The parents' educational background was characterized by limited postsecondary studies until the current program. In fact, three of the women in this sub-sample had to complete secondary studies at an adult education institution before enrolling in their current program, while two more parents completed at least one semester of "Reception and Transition" courses before entering the technical program of their choice. Of the remaining four students, two had some Cégep-level studies but had not obtained their diplomas; another had completed her technical diploma at Cégep; one had entered university as an independent student and had done some B.A.-level courses; and another still had completed a B.A. in Art History. In other words, before beginning the technical program, although five had previous Cégep experience, only three had received their DEC (*Diplôme d'études collegiales*). Two more parents acquired Cégep experience just before their current studies in "Reception and

Transition". Importantly, only two had some postsecondary experience in the sciences (and, in the case of one of these parents, her experience amounted to one biology course).

It is worth noting the educational attainment of the parents' mother and father, if only to catch a glimpse of the *social milieux* in which they were raised. Most surprising is the lack of high school completion. In other words, half of the parents (and probably two more) in the cohort were of the first generation in their families to complete high school and all but one were the first in their families to undertake postsecondary studies. Of the ten parents in the sub-sample, at least five have neither mother nor father who had completed high school. Furthermore, a sixth woman had a father who had not completed high school and did not know about the educational attainment of her mother, while the only man in the cohort did not know the schooling of his mother or father. One more parent had a father who had not completed high school, but her mother had a DES (*Diplôme d'études secondaires*). One other parent in the sub-sample had both a mother and a father who had graduated from high school, and one parent had a mother who, later in life, completed a Cégep degree (DEC), although her father had not completed high school. This means that the highest level of education attained by the parents' mothers and fathers was a DEC and this was not until that parent was already an adult herself. This low educational attainment is doubly surprising if we look at the age of the parents' mothers and fathers. At least half were young enough to be Cégep students by the time the Cégep system was established in Québec in the late 1960s. In other words, high school completion was becoming more commonplace and Cégep-level studies were being made much more accessible.

Interestingly, there is not always a consistent parallel between the educational attainment of the parents and that of their mothers and fathers. While the parents who had to complete high school in an adult education institution had neither mother nor father who had gone much past primary school, three more of the parents with mothers and fathers with this low educational level had already attended Cégep. In fact, one of these parents had completed her Cégep program, while another had begun university-level studies[23]. Moreover, the woman

---

[23] However, the third woman, Justine, had not even completed the first semester of her Cégep experience.

with the highest level of education in this sub-sample, a B.A. degree, had only a mother who had completed high school. However, that said, it should be remembered that the parents in this sub-sample do, on average, have low previous educational attainment as does the generation before them.

Table 3.3 The Parents' Previous Educational Attainment and Social Background

NAME	PARENTS' EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE (BEFORE CURRENT PROGRAM)	STATUS IN PROGRAM	SOCIAL BACKGROUND: THEIR MOTHER AND FATHER'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT
Barnave	"Reception and Transition" * is an African immigrant. Sounds like he has at least high school, if not college equivalency from country of origin	Graduated/ Program almost completed	Mother: ? Father: ?
Gabrielle	Cégep, not completed (a science-oriented technical degree)	Departure	Mother : primary school completed Father : primary school completed
Gisèle	Adult Education to complete high school	Graduated/ Program almost completed	Mother: primary school completed and high school almost completed (went up to grade 11) Father: primary school completed * but mother has since completed a DEC and father is described as well-read.
Ida	Cégep, completed (a non-science technical degree)	Departure	Mother : primary school completed Father : primary school completed
Irma	Adult Education to complete high school	Program Change	Mother: ? Father: primary school completed
Isabelle	"Reception and Transition" * before 1 year off to have baby, completed high school	Graduated/ Program almost completed	Mother: high school completed (DES) Father: high school completed (DES)

NAME	PARENTS' EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE (BEFORE CURRENT PROGRAM)	STATUS IN PROGRAM	SOCIAL BACKGROUND: THEIR MOTHER AND FATHER'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT
Isaure	Adult Education to complete high school Two semesters in a Social Sciences program at Cégep.	Program Change	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed
Justine	DEP in Administration (and an uncompleted DEC) (She had attended an adult education institution in order to finish high school.)	Departure	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed
Madeleine	BA completed (in Art History)	Graduated/ Program almost completed	Mother : high school completed (DES) Father : primary school completed
Marielle	BA-level studies, not completed (in Social Sciences)	Departure	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed

Reflecting the low educational attainment of the parents in this cohort is their professional experience. Of the four women who had attended an adult education institution to complete high school, one was a self-identified house-wife, one worked as a cashier in a depanneur, another as a baby-sitter and the last one did not provide her professional status. Interestingly, the one parent who had a university degree had a relatively low-skilled job as a waitress and the woman who had begun Cégep studies in the Sciences worked as a receptionist (although she had previously worked in a veterinary clinic). The only man in the sub-sample had a relatively low-skilled but stable job as an office clerk for Revenue Canada. Only two parents seemed to have jobs that spoke of higher educational attainment. One woman, who had a DEC in Administration, worked as an administrative assistant, and the other woman, who had attended university as an independent student, had worked as a farm-manager and in the insurance business before becoming a full-time housewife (she had four children and wanted a fifth).

Most of the parents in this sub-sample did not work during their studies. That said, three of the four who did have employment, undertook quite substantial hours. Not surprisingly, two of the single mothers needed to work during their studies in order to supplement their family income. One worked about fifteen hours per week, while the other had a much more full-time working schedule, at somewhere between fifteen to thirty hours a week. During the course of her program, however, she reduced her hours significantly to seven hours a week. Two other women worked between fifteen to thirty hours a week through course of their studies.

3.3   The Individual Cases

In looking at the individual cases separately, we will be able to grasp the logic that runs behind each individual's experiences, decisions and actions. The individual cases will be presented in alphabetical order, irrespective of the school career categories under which they will fall in the next chapter.

3.3.1   Barnave (Computer Science – Perseverance)

> **According to Barnave:**
> « moi j'ai décidé d'être là-dedans, donc euh, donc c'est un choix que   j'ai fait. Il faudra que j'aille jusqu'au bout.   Ça va être l'informatique ou rien. » (Barnave, Interview #1, lines 992-995)
>
> « on a pas bien le choix hein. On le fait pour nous et aussi pour elle, donc euh... Si ... elle, si elle veut un jour avoir un meilleur avenir que ce que nous avons en ce moment, c'est de faire un sacrifice maintenant et de vivre un peu mieux plus tard que de faire l'inverse.» (Interview #2, lines 1399-1404)

At the time of the first interview, or the commencement of his program, Barnave was 28. He is the only immigrant in the cohort of parents. Born and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo (ex-Zaire), Barnave immigrated to Québec as a young adult in 1996. By the time he decided to immigrate, he had already completed one year of postsecondary education in the Humanities in his native country and had worked for a few years as a merchant. His immigration was sponsored by his Québecoise wife and seems to have proceeded without too many complications.

Barnave and his wife had a small child when he decided to go back to school. Importantly, his wife went back to school to do a technical degree at the same time. This meant that they were living on a tight budget for a number of years, relying on student loans and bursaries, as well as any income Barnave pulled in during the summer months. Before beginning the Computer Science program, Barnave had worked as an office clerk for Revenue Canada. While he did not complain about his job, he did point out that he could not have continued as an office clerk for much longer. Instead, he needed a job that offered better conditions, namely a better salary. Moreover, he aspired for a more stimulating career. In Barnave's mind, one must have educational qualifications in order to work in an interesting field in Québec. He was therefore quite willing to take the gamble and leave his job in order to pursue postsecondary education. It was simply a matter of choosing a program and deciding whether to apply at the university-level or for a Technical degree at Cégep.

Barnave came up with the idea of going into computers when he saw how relevant they were at his workplace. Moreover, his brother-in-law had a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and talked to him a lot about the field. He had also taken a few courses at the local community centre in order to keep up-to-date on the programs that were being used at his workplace. As a result, Barnave was relatively knowledgeable about computers before beginning his program, although not about programming. He did not, however, appear to have done very much research on the Cégep programs available to him. While he explained that he looked into the difference between Computer Science at university as opposed to at Cégep, he did not speak of having informed himself about the specifics on the Cégep programs.

From the beginning, Barnave was quite resolute in his determination to succeed in the Computer Science program. Although all of the parents talk of being "determined" in their first interview, Barnave's determination never waned throughout the program, regardless of the difficulties he faced. In fact, his determination seemed to be a matter of personal pride: he had chosen this program, therefore he was going to see it through to its (bitter) end. Of course, his desire for a more fulfilling career and the financial pressures his young family was facing were a strong source of motivation. Indeed, he knew that if he did not succeed in this

program, he might never be able to undertake another program again, at least not in the near future.

One of Barnave's first challenges came in the form of "Reception and Transition". He was obligated to do one year of general and pre-requisite courses before being admitted into the Computer Science program. He found the general courses pointless and repeatedly stated that had he not been so motivated, he would have dropped out before ever beginning the actual program itself. Once in the Computer Science program, his school experience was inconsistent. He found some courses extremely difficult and barely managed to pass, while others were quite easy. His level of comfort in each course seemed largely to depend on teaching style. It also took Barnave some time to adapt to Cégep studies, even in his first year of "Reception and Transition". First of all, he found the return to school difficult, as he had not studied at the postsecondary level for several years. He specifically had trouble managing his time. He also found it strange to be among so many "young students". Barnave further had difficulties adjusting to the Quebec Cégep system compared to the system in which he had been schooled in the Congo.

Another serious challenge came when he realised that he was not very gifted in programming and decided that he had chosen the wrong program. He was much more interested in (computer) networking and felt that he should have undertaken his studies in a Cégep that offered such a program. Unfortunately, by the time he came to this realisation, he was in his second year of the program. As he did not want to lose any credits for courses he had already completed, he decided that he did not want to transfer to a different Cégep. Instead, despite his reduced interest, he would continue in the same program. Basically, his economic needs and time constraints prevailed over any considerations regarding interest.

It should not be surprising that Barnave's family responsibilities acted simultaneously as an important source of motivation, as well as an important obstacle to his studies. Throughout the program, he had a lot of responsibility for his daughter, frequently taking her to and from daycare. He tried to study as much as possible at school because of the inevitable interruptions at home. When he did study at home, he did so around his family's schedule.

In the face his many obstacles, Barnave proved both resourceful and determined. Indeed, when confronted with difficult course material, he simply put more hours into his studies and adjusted his academic strategies. In fact, Barnave estimated that he did between six to seven hours of homework a day. In terms of his academic strategies, he relied on the teachers and other students for additional academic support, he frequently re-read his class notes, and he often asked teachers to provide notes or texts when they were not provided. Moreover, when he anticipated difficulty in a course, he bought himself books on the subject and read them before the course even began. In his opinion, it was critically important to always keep up with the course material and, if possible, be ahead of the game. The result was not only that he finished his program in four years (one year of "Reception and Transition" and three years of core-courses), but that he did not fail a single course. Barnave graduated in May, 2004, just in time for the arrival of his second child.

It seems that the recipe for Barnave's success was his resolute determination. Behind this determination lay his desire for professional and economic mobility, as well as a belief that education is the key to such mobility. This mindset allowed him to overcome serious obstacles, namely time constraints due to family responsibilities, poor program choice, problems adapting to the Cégep system and difficulties in his courses. Indeed, when confronted with such challenges he simply doubled his efforts and applied himself even more to his studies. Indeed, challenges that would have unmotivated and possibly derailed many students did not deter Barnave.

3.3.2   Gabrielle (Laboratory Technology – Departure)

According to Gabrielle:

« mais là euh, j'étais vraiment sur le bord. Mais euh, ça, c'est juste à la fin de la session, là j'ai eu comme un espèce de, c'est là que ça commencé les suivis d'orthophonique. Mon petit garçon, donc j'étais vraiment fatiguée puis j'avais pu le temps, j'avais pu assez de temps pour étudier et tout... » (Interview #2, lines 1594-1598)

« étant donné bon le manque de temps, manque de sommeil, manque, c't'ait manque de tout là, manque d'énergie un peu dans mes...dans mes cours, j't'ais comme, j'tais moins concentrée là. C't'un manque de concentration plutôt qui faisait euh, tout chambouler le reste. » (Interview #2, lines 1609-1615)

At 23 years old, Gabrielle had already had an array of jobs, experience in another Technical Cégep degree, and a young son. She had always been oriented towards the sciences, having almost completed a DEC in Animal Health and having been in an enriched science program in high school. At the time of her enrolment in the Laboratory Technology program, she had two low-skilled part-time jobs, totalling approximately twenty hours a week, as well as a large portion of the care-giving responsibilities for her son.

Gabrielle's program choice was not uninformed. She had done extensive research on the Technical programs offered at Cégep, had attended a career workshop, had talked to an academic advisor about her potential choices and, finally, had found out about the employment opportunities associated with the Laboratory Technology program. Before even considering this program, she knew she had an affinity for biology and was particularly interested in health and medicine. She also knew she wanted a career that would allow her research opportunities. While her interest in the field was an important factor leading to her program choice, so was her desire for a stable job with "good working conditions". By "good working conditions", she meant a nice working atmosphere, as well as sustainable hours that would allow her to raise a family. Interestingly, potential salary was not an important consideration.

By her accounts she was a good, but not a particularly gifted student. She had been in the enriched science program in high school largely as a result of hard work. In her previous Cégep program, she had received average marks. That said, at the time of the first interview, she was confident that she would do well and felt that she knew how to study. In other words, whether based on her academic prowess or on her good work ethic, she felt that she had the potential to do well in the program.

Gabrielle had a number of factors working both for and against her. Most obviously against her favour was the fact that she was the principal care-giver for her small child and that she worked approximately twenty hours a week. However, she did have the advantage of already having had postsecondary experience in the sciences and, moreover, she had completed all of her general and pre-requisite courses in her previous program. As a result, during her first

semester, she only had three courses. Moreover, her keen interest in biology acted as a motivational force.

By the first few weeks of her program, however, Gabrielle was experiencing difficulties in her courses and, more generally, difficulty adapting to the Cégep. Two years away from Cégep meant that she had forgotten a lot of the pre-requisite knowledge required in her biology and chemistry courses. It also meant that she had trouble getting used to the teaching methods and the rhythm of the courses. Moreover, she did not feel comfortable with the other students and kept largely to herself. Her teachers served as her principal source of academic support and, therefore, when several of them proved unsympathetic to her situation, she felt isolated and frustrated. By the middle of the first semester, she found that she had reached a critical point. She was lost in her courses and began to feel the symptoms of stress such as exhaustion and depression. Fortunately, she managed to pass her courses with marks consistently in the 60s. Importantly, she did not attribute her difficulties to the subject-matter of the courses or to her lack of ability as a student. Instead, she pointed to her lack of time and concentration, as well as to her slow adaptation to the Cégep.

Gabrielle's principal handicap was that she did not have enough time for her studies. By the end of the first semester, her son began to require regular orthophonic treatment. In fact, she explained that her lower marks corresponded with the beginning of her son's medical treatment. Combined with the twenty hours of paid work she did a week, this new responsibility meant that she had far from enough time for her studies. Moreover, she began to worry about him, which took away from her ability to concentrate.

Gabrielle's son's needs appear to have tipped the balance between her studies and her family responsibilities. She therefore left her program after the first semester. Although it is likely that she would have experienced a number of difficulties at school, regardless of her family responsibilities, it is difficult to know how serious these difficulties would have been. Gabrielle seemed like an interested and relatively capable student – indeed, she must have been, given that she passed all of her courses despite her difficult situation. That said, when she demonstrated difficulties in her courses, she did not develop adequate strategies to deal

with them. Moreover, based on her past educational experiences, her ability to do well seemed to depend largely on her ability to work hard. Therefore, if she did not have the necessary time to put into her studies, then, the chances that she would encounter critical difficulties would increase. Interestingly, after departing from the program, Gabrielle planned on returning to the same program in a year's time.

3.3.3   Gisèle (Laboratory Technology – Perseverance)

> **According to Gisèle :**
>
> « Moi en tout cas moi c'est la peur que j'avais face à ce cours là c'est de pas réussir parce que j'savais c'était difficile. Alors euh, de voir que j'arrive à comprendre pis tout ça et à suivre les autres et vu que j'ai pas le même âge pis tout ça, j'ai pas fait le même secondaire qu'eux... De voir que je suis capable, ça fait comme... C'est plaisant bien sûr. [Rires] » (Interview #2, lines 1626-1633)

At 27 years old at the time of the first interview, Gisèle had three children and had never worked on the job market. She had dropped out of high school in order to start a family. It was not until a few years before her enrolment in Laboratory Technology, when her youngest child was a toddler, that she decided that she would like a career. At that point, she completed her high school requirements at an adult education institution and went straight on to begin her program.

At first glance, given her lack of postsecondary experience and the fact that she had three children, Gisèle would not appear to be an ideal candidate for successful completion of the Laboratory Technology program. However, by the first interview, it became clear that she was a particularly adept student. In fact, her previous experiences in high school and adult education also hint at her aptitude. Apparently, in both institutions, she did not have to work hard to receive high marks. Moreover, her experience in adult education had confirmed her interest in both chemistry and biology, as well as her ability in mathematics. Gisèle therefore began the Laboratory Technology with confidence, albeit a cautious confidence.

Gisèle cited her determination and her careful program choice as the keys to her success. Indeed, she seemed to have invested a lot of thought and research into her program choice.

Once she realised that she would like to go into the sciences, and more specifically into a health-related field, she carefully looked over the descriptions of all the Technical degrees offered at Cégep, as well as the courses offered in each program. She based her choice on what she thought would be the best combination of her interests in chemistry and biology. Gisèle was one of the few students among the parents who were largely motivated by interest. As such, she was not very concerned with salary, although she did want to be able to contribute to her household income so that her family could take vacations.

There is actually more to Gisèle's success than she claimed. First of all, she enjoyed favourable economic conditions. Gisèle did not have to work during her studies, as she could rely on her husband to provide economically for the family. Moreover, her children were of school age, which meant that they were not as dependent as pre-school aged children. That said, it should be noted that she seemed to bear the brunt of the child-care and domestic responsibilities, which meant that her late afternoons and evenings were usually too busy to study. Although her husband seemed willing to help her with her domestic responsibilities, especially in particularly stressful times, she nevertheless had to do an immense amount of juggling to manage her home life and studies. She often only managed to resume her studies at ten p.m., with a foreboding six a.m. wake up the next morning. She took short cuts with her children by not reading them bedtime stories or not giving them a bath. She expressed a feeling of guilt in this regard. However, she never complained about this difficult balance and instead simply saw it as necessary in order to achieve her final goal.

In addition to the balance she achieved at home, Gisèle quickly developed effective strategies in her program. First of all, from the outset, she planned to do the program in four years, rather than three. This would allow her to take only five courses per semester. Moreover, she chose her courses based on how much homework she anticipated and, in so doing, balanced her schedule between courses with heavier and lighter workloads. As of the first semester, she quickly began to resort to the other students for help. Despite the fact that she was in her late twenties, Gisèle did not feel uncomfortable with the other students and thus was able to establish good working relations with them. In fact, in her third year, she talked of feeling close to the other students and of a feeling of solidarity between them. By the

second semester, she began asking the teachers for help and visited them during their office hours. She also sought advice from academic advisors and attended study skill workshops. By the second year, Gisèle had a number of very specific strategies, such as keeping her class notes from previous courses in order to look them over from time to time. In general, Gisèle seemed quite self-analytic, aware of some of her shortcomings and willing to adjust her study practices accordingly.

Gisèle also acquired summer employment in her field after her second year. Her summer job at the wastewater treatment plant on the South Shore served to reinforce her program choice as she found that there was a direct correlation between the job and the material covered in the course. Indeed, she greatly appreciated the opportunity to have had some "real" experience on the job market.

Gisèle's experience in the first semester proved to be slightly rocky and caused some nervousness, although she never actually felt like she would have to depart from the program. Basically, her marks were the lowest she had ever received and this shook her confidence. Her principal difficulty was her adaptation to the pedagogical style in Cégep from that of adult education. Like many other parents in this cohort, she found the adaptation problematic because, in adult education, she had been used to studying at her own rhythm and doing the exams when she was ready. In Cégep, she had to quickly adjust to the rhythm of the teacher and she complained about the need to keep on top of the course material without adequate time to absorb it. What is more, she found it difficult to passively listen to the course lectures for three hours at a time. On top of this difficult adaptation, Gisèle found that she had been badly advised before the commencement of her program, as she was not told to take the maths pre-requisite. As a result, she found that she was expected to be familiar with material she had never learnt before. By the second semester, however, it was clear that she was feeling more confident and certain of her perseverance in the program. That said, she did experience difficulties in some courses. There were occasions when she did not have enough time to spend on her homework and this caused her to fret. At times she felt that she might not pass. In fact, she never failed a course and often received marks above 80%.

Gisèle's success was due to a number of factors. Her consistent interest in her program and her success in her courses, which at times bordered on ease, attest to her good program choice. This, in turn, meant that she was motivated, as exemplified by her search for a job in the field while still a student, as well as her late nights after her family had gone to bed. But Gisèle also proved to be an efficient student, willing to analyse her shortcomings and re-adjust her strategies. She was aware that the program would prove challenging and did not hesitate to use all the resources available to her, whether they be the pedagogical services offered by the Cégep, the teachers or her fellow students. In short, her ability at school and her interest in the field, combined with her supportive home environment, meant that she could overcome the various challenges that being a student and a mother of three presented her.

3.3.4   Ida (Computer Science - Departure)

> **According to Ida :**
>
> « J'apprends les choses par moi-même, mon dieu, c'est vrai, j'avais l'air à avoir le don là-dedans, apprendre ça facilement moi-même. Fais que c'est pour ça j'ai dit : « Ben, si j'ai le don, pour moi j'dois avoir le don de programmation.(rire). » (Interview #1, lines 847-853)
>
> « Même si j'avais lu ce qui était marqué, c'était pas exactement ça. J'avais bien lu qu'il y avait de la programmation, mais j'pouvais pas savoir à quel point ça allait être... Moi, ça me disait rien la programmation. » (Interview #2, 2565-2569)
>
> « Pis en plus les professeurs, on aurait dit qu'ils comprenaient pas qu'il fallait qu'ils nous expliquent quasiment comme à la lettre. Eux autres, ils voulaient aller plus vite pis la majorité comprenait. Fait que à ce moment-là nous autres on sentait comme, c'est comme si on était pas à notre place là. » (Ida, Interview #2, lines 1858-1863)
>
> « Je ne retournerai jamais aux études comme au cégep. la, ça va des cours, des cours du soir t'sé, mais j'retournerai pas à un cégep. » (Ida, interview #2)

Ida, at 38, was undertaking her second DEC. She had already obtained a DEC in Administration in 1996 and was working as a secretary one day a week during the Computer Science program. Her DEC in Administration was actually completed in two stages. She had begun the degree in 1980, but had dropped out in order to have children. She had then returned to school from 1993-1996 to finish the program. Ida now had four children, aged

between ten and eighteen. She only saw the three oldest children on weekends as they stayed with their father during weekdays. The youngest child, whom she had with her second and current husband, lived with her permanently.

Ida was enthusiastic about computers. She saw their potential and predicted they would be of growing importance in everyday life, not to mention in the workplace. She was actually using computers more and more at work and saw herself as the resident "computer expert". She had also bought herself a computer so that she could explore various programs on her own time. In gaining this concrete experience, she not only built up her self-confidence but she felt that she was "overcoming a barrier". She explained that, for someone her age, computers were usually a daunting barrier and that she had, instead, had embraced them. This concrete experience also ultimately led to her decision to undertake the Computer Science degree at Cégep. She had concluded that her ability in installing computer programs equated a talent in computer programming. Based on her interest and ability in computers, Ida devised a career plan. In her first interview, she spoke at length about the possibilities of being a computer programmer with a background in administration. It is important to recognise that, now that her children were older, Ida was seeking to realise herself professionally. She wanted to improve her employment situation as she currently saw herself as undervalued and underpaid.

Despite her interest and her well-articulated professional project, it did not appear that Ida knew much about computer programming, nor about the Computer Science program. Her references to the field were quite vague and she did not speak of having done any research on the Computer Science program at Cégep. Furthermore, there was a contradiction when she spoke of her program choice. While, in the first interview, she spoke of having chosen Computer Science over Administration so that she could focus on programming rather than just secretarial work, in her second interview she explained that the program had not corresponded to her interests precisely because it focussed on programming. She claimed that she had not thought that the program would have been so oriented towards programming and had, instead, hoped that it would allow her to become a more skilled secretary. What essentially manifests itself from this contradictory discourse is the fact that she actually had a

vague notion of her chosen field and that she had not done sufficient research on her program choice.

Ida had a number of factors working both for and against her. First of all, her children and her husband were very supportive of her educational project. Moreover, as her children were not very young, they did not need the same degree of care as pre-school aged children. Moreover, she only saw three of her children on weekends, which meant that her weekdays were not as complicated as they might have been. That said, it should be noted that Ida worked one day a week as a secretary. It therefore cannot be assumed that juggling her family responsibilities, schoolwork and job was easy. In regards to her schooling, Ida also had the advantage of having had previous experience at Cégep, which made her adaptation easier than for some and gave her a certain amount of confidence. Having already completed a DEC also meant that she had done her general courses. However, while she did not have to do her philosophy and physical education classes, an academic advisor had nevertheless recommended that she re-do her French and English courses. To her disadvantage was also the fact that the academic advisor had decided that she did not need to re-do her pre-requisite maths course, which she had taken at the end of high school in 1978. As it turned out, the course she had completed more than twenty years prior did not prepare her for the obligatory maths course in her first semester.

Ida had devised a few strategies during the course of her first and only semester in the program. She made sure that she did one or two hours of homework every evening, which she deemed adequate. She also made a point of visiting her teachers during their office hours when she needed extra tutoring and, when she did not manage to see them, she sought the help of a friend who knew about computer programming. Ida only took four courses during the first semester, which obviously eased her course load. Nevertheless, her difficulties began no sooner had the program begun. Most importantly, she found her maths course a challenge. As her pre-requisite course did not prepare her for her Cégep-level maths course, she was immediately lost. Combined with the fact that she found the rhythm of the course too fast, she never managed to catch up. In fact, her criticism of the academic advisor who had allowed her to take this course without re-taking the pre-requisite is one of her principal

complaints regarding her experience. Ida also had trouble in her core courses. Although she had initially felt confident about these courses, in the second interview she spoke of trouble following and applying the course material. Moreover, she complained that the teachers were not sympathetic to the students who experienced difficulties and, instead, focussed on the "good" students. She went on to explain that the program was basically designed for those students who had come straight out of high school and had prior knowledge of the field. According to Ida, these younger students had been studying Computer Science throughout high school and thus had a distinct advantage over the older students who were starting from scratch.

Importantly, Ida pointed out that it was not her family responsibilities that caused her departure. Nevertheless, managing her study schedule with her family responsibilities did seem to require some juggling. She would either have to take advantage of gaps in her schedule when she did not have classes to do her homework or she had to wait until her youngest child was in bed. While she said that it was easier to undertake studies at this point in her life because her children were older, she nevertheless found it difficult to find "peace and quiet" at home.

Ultimately, Ida passed her French course but failed her maths course, as well as her two programming courses. She departed from the program before doing her final exams, following the guidance of an academic advisor. She was very disappointed with her inability to persevere in the program and vowed never to return to Cégep. In her opinion, the Cégep system was not designed with the needs of adults in mind and it was thus too difficult to persevere under such conditions.

In actual fact, her lack of success in the program was more complicated and began even before she stepped into the classroom. Both Ida's professional and program choices were ill informed. Indeed, she knew very little about the field she so enthusiastically embraced. Similarly, she had chosen her program based on a number of assumptions, rather than on researched information. Moreover, she found herself without the pre-requisite familiarity with computer programming that is possessed by most students upon beginning the program.

What is more, there was a certain fragility in her ability as a student. When confronted with difficulties in her maths course, she chose to focus so much on that course that it was to the detriment of her other courses. In fact, she was rendered quite nervous and frustrated by those difficulties and demonstrated an inability to analyse and adjust to her situation. As a result, she was never able to get back on track and was forced to depart from the program.

3.3.5 Irma (Laboratory Technology – Program Change)

> **According to Irma :**
>
> « moi aussi, c'est un peu l'inconnu. J'sais pas qu'est-ce qui va me passionner plus que d'autre chose, mais je m'aperçois que la biologie, j'haïs pas ça. (rire) » (Interview #1, lines 815-818)
>
> « c'est ça qui est décourageant des fois un peu parce que… T'sé comme moi, à mon école d'adultes, j'étais bonne dans toutes les matières, même en maths j'avais comme genre pas loin de 90% de moyenne, sauf les deux derniers examens, fallait vraiment que j'me presse pour les faire. Pis j'arrive ici, j'comprends pas qu'est-ce qu'y m'explique, « Mon doux, de quoi qu'y parle? Où c'est qu'y est rendu? C'est quoi ça? » » (Interview #1, lines 470-479)

Irma was 29 years old when she began the Laboratory Technology program. Just prior to the program, she had completed five years of high school at an adult education institution in fourteen months. She was the single mother of an eight year-old boy at the time of the first interview. Her son went to boarding school during the week and saw his father every other weekend. In other words, she saw him only two weekends a month.

Irma's difficulties and eventual departure from Laboratory Technology revolved almost entirely around her lack of skills at school and not around any family-work-studies balance. As she rarely saw her son, she did not have to juggle her school work with family obligations to the extent that most of the parents in this cohort did. Moreover, she did not have to work during her Cégep studies. However, despite creating optimal conditions outside of school, she did not manage to overcome the difficulties she encountered at Cégep. The principal factor working against her was that she had never developed adequate study skills. This may be attributed to the fact that she had no postsecondary experience and to the fact that she had done most of her high school courses at an adult education institution. In other words, the

only school experience she knew was the individualised approach that characterises adult education – vastly different from the quick-paced nature of courses in Cégep.

Irma's lack of school-related skills was evident before the program even began. Her program choice was badly researched. She had enjoyed her chemistry courses in adult education and, after a friend told her about Laboratory Technology, she chose the program on a whim. Although she spoke of having read about "chemistry" (we assume she meant that Laboratory Technology program), she did not talk to an academic advisor prior to the beginning of the program, nor did she look into the courses offered or the nature of employment in the field. In fact, like many of the parents in the cohort, she basically wanted to study in a field that would lead to good career opportunities. Quite simply, she dreamed of a "good" career with a decent salary so that she would be able to buy a house and live comfortably.

Irma blamed her difficulties and eventual departure on a number of factors. She initially found fault with her adaptation from adult education to Cégep. She specifically said that she was not used to the lecture format of the classes and that she was used to studying at her own pace. She also found it difficult to get used to the heavy workload and the long hours of classes and homework. Interestingly, according to Irma, younger students had an advantage over adults like her as they had been trained since high school to study under such conditions and thus were accustomed to the Cégep system. In retrospect, after she had dropped out of the program, she said that she should have chosen an easier program, without such a heavy workload. She also thought that the fact that she had gone straight from adult education to Cégep must have contributed to her difficulties, as she was mentally exhausted. She eventually came to the conclusion that she had to drop out of the program because of her difficulties in maths. From the beginning, she literally did not know what the teacher was talking about and, the further the course progressed, the more lost she became. But she did not solely attribute these difficulties to her own lack of comprehension. She decided that her bad rapport with her teacher must have contributed to her poor marks because, after all, she had been good at maths in adult education. In any case, in reaction to these difficulties, she focussed all her attention on her maths course, to the detriment of her other courses. The result was that she began to receive poor grades in all of her courses.

Despite her extensive reasoning, Irma never managed to fully explain why she was failing her courses. While she probably was correct in diagnosing her difficult adaptation to Cégep as a significant part of her problem, there were many other factors that she failed to recognise. First of all, she never reassessed her strategies. It must be said that her strategies were quite limited or, at least, she did not speak in any detail of strategies. Other than the creation of good conditions outside of school, it seems that the only helpful strategy that she employed was to diminish her course load from seven to five courses. In regards to seeking academic help, she argued that she did not have the time to see her teachers outside class time. Moreover, she did not seek help from her classmates other than her lab partner and it is not clear whether she sought out help from the Cégep tutoring service[24]. Moreover, she employed the same study methods she had used in adult education and could not understand why they did not produce the same results in Cégep. In another example, although she was aware that she prioritised maths to the detriment of her other courses, she never questioned this decision. Similarly, she never seemed to consider that her poor grasp of the course material might have led to her difficulties. Indeed, at a more general level, she seemed ill-prepared for the course material that was covered in the Laboratory Technology program. She simply attributed her difficulties to teaching methods or to her adaptation to the Cégep system. In fact, she seemed to think that her lack of comprehension was normal and that she simply had to persevere. In sum, Irma seemed to have a lack of academic experience that resulted in a lack of appropriate skills.

Irma dropped out of the Laboratory Technology program just before the end of the first semester. This decision came quite suddenly, after she failed yet another maths exam and while she was doing poorly in her other courses. She was extremely frustrated and discouraged by her experience and vowed to never return to a Cégep again. Instead, she planned on returning to an adult education institution where she could do an AEC in

[24] Although, during the second interview, she said that she did not know about the tutoring service until it was too late, during the first interview she said that she knew about the service. In fact, at one point during this interview, she spoke of having used it.

Computer Science. Unfortunately, she did not appear to have reflected on this next program choice any more than her previous choice.

3.3.6   Isabelle (Laboratory Technology – Perseverance)

According to Isabelle:

« j'vais me dire : "C'est pour trois ans, c'est pour avoir un bon métier plus tard, faut que tu coupes là". J'ai pas le choix de couper là. Y'a des semaines, y'a une semaine que j'te mens pas, je l'ai vu deux fois dans la semaine. J'avais full d'examens cette semaine-là, j'avais deux examens plus des rapports à remettre, fait que je l'ai vu juste deux fois. !a m'a fait mal au cœur, mais en même temps ben regarde, j'ai eu des super de bonne notes, fait que j'étais plus de bonne, j'étais super de bonne humeur au moins quand elle me voyait. » (Interview #2, lines 2151-2162)

« Tsé, je peux partir de chez-nous, que ça ait mal été avec [Marc] puis tsé la petite le matin, ce n'est pas toujours évident un enfant, il y a des fois tu arrives à l'école puis tu as l'impression, tsé j'ai l'impression qu'il faut que je fasse le vide parce que j'ai l'impression que je ne passerai pas à travers la journée dans le sens ou mon humeur va trop transmettre aux autres ce que je vis dans le fond. Des fois, ça devient dur. Mais le fait d'avoir un laboratoire, on dirait, ça passe vite là. Je ne vois pas le temps passer. » (Interview #3, lines 3687-3697)

Isabelle is the youngest of the students in the parent cohort. At 18 years old, she had a toddler and had already completed one year of Reception and Transition at a Cégep oriented towards adults. At the time of the first interview, she was beginning the Laboratory Technology program.

To a large extent, Isabelle's background and past experiences explain her determination and motivations. By her accounts, she grew up poor, with absent parents. This meant that when she had a baby of her own, she was adamant that her child would not be raised under the same conditions. In other words, despite her young age, she wanted a stable and well-paying job in order to be able to provide for her child. Moreover, she was aiming for a career she would find interesting, with the possibility of a higher level of training. Although Isabelle lived with her boyfriend, who owned a house, she did not consider this security enough. Instead, she wanted to be able to provide for herself and her child with or without her partner. In fact, as she progressed through the program and her relationship with her boyfriend worsened, she began to equate technical studies with emotional and financial freedom.

Isabelle had always been interested in the sciences. Although she had never been a model student in high school, she had always had facility in the sciences. In fact, her hobbies included reading about biology and watching science programs on television. She would have ideally studied medicine but, with a small child, she decided that such a plan was unrealistic. She therefore decided early on that a technical degree related to chemistry was her best option and she researched her program choices quite thoroughly. She was happy when she found the Laboratory Technology program as it corresponded with many of her interests. Moreover, it promised job opportunities with good pay and provided the option of a reduced course load in certain related university programs. Isabelle was quite seriously considering going on to university, perhaps even on to the Master's level.

Isabelle's partner supported her financially throughout her studies and, as such, she never had to work during her program. Moreover, he helped with their young daughter to a great extent; often bringing the child to and from daycare and preparing meals. Nevertheless, Isabelle was overwhelmed with the balance between the Laboratory Technology program and her responsibilities as a mother. As the program progressed, she saw her young daughter less and less, and obviously felt quite conflicted. These regrets were coupled by the fact that the babysitting that her mother provided in Isabelle's first year in the program ceased, thus making the balancing act even more precarious. Furthermore, despite the help that her partner provided, he was also a source of great stress. Throughout the interviews, she talked at length about her difficult relationship with him and about how this negatively affected her studies. Indeed, she largely attributed her difficulties in her first semester to a particularly rocky period in their relationship. The uncertainties in their relationship proved additionally stressful as to lose her boyfriend would equate being forced to quit the program. In other words, she did not see how she could continue in the program without his support. As such, she frequently spoke of enduring the relationship until she had completed the program – not ideal circumstances under which to study.

Like many of the parents in this cohort, Isabelle's initial experience in the program proved quite precarious and there was nothing to indicate that she was a candidate for program

completion. In fact, her first year in "Reception and Transition" did not yield great promise either. While she did quite well in her general courses, she did less well in her science courses. Her marks ranged between 60% and 80%. In her first semester of the actual Laboratory Technology program, she found the courses much more difficult than she had anticipated, particularly maths. She was doing almost 30 hours of homework a week and, in addition to dropping out of her maths course, Isabelle only earned marks between 60% and 70%. In fact, her results were so poor that she considered departing from the program. She reasoned that if her marks were marginal than she would not be a good technician once in the workplace.

Isabelle also experienced a difficult adaptation to Cégep. Although her year in "Reception and Transition" had proven advantageous in that it reduced her course load during the Laboratory Technology program, it had also had its disadvantages. During her "transition year", Isabelle had grown accustomed to the learning and teaching styles of adult education. In consequence, she found the rhythm of the courses at Cégep difficult to follow and the course material difficult. Moreover, she complained that the atmosphere of the Cégep was impersonal and that it was difficult to get to know her fellow students. Interestingly, she identified much more readily with the adult students rather than the students of her own age.

Fortunately, Isabelle gave herself another chance and went on to do quite well. In fact, she proved quite resourceful. Upon realising that her study strategies were not working, she sought out the advice of her professors. She took their suggestions to heart and radically changed her approach to studying. For example, she stopped focussing on note taking and instead simply started to listen in class more. She became selective about what homework she should do and, again, focussed on comprehension more than the amount of homework she completed. She also began to ask the teachers more questions and sought out the help of her fellow students more. In fact, by the middle of her program, she was spending her Friday nights eating dinner and studying with a group of students. At times, these students, and her studies in general, provided respite from her difficult situation at home. In fact, the friends she made at school may have been quite instrumental to her perseverance. She spoke of often wanting to give up but instead being pushed on by these fellow students.

This successful adaptation to the Laboratory Technology program did not mean that it was an easy experience. First of all, she continued to experience difficulties in her relationship and the more that she had to study, the more frustrated her partner became. It was at this point that she really began to speak of him as a financial provider and as a means to completing her program. Moreover, as the program progressed, the workload increased. This meant that she sometimes only saw her daughter two or three times a week; a sacrifice that was particularly hard to make given that she felt she had been abandoned by her own parents. Although her marks improved to a large degree, reaching between 70% and 90% after the first semester, she nevertheless failed some courses. And, at times she was so exhausted that she did not know if she could complete the last few weeks of the her semesters.

As evidenced above, for a number of reasons – not all of them academic, her perseverance seemed quite fragile. Her academic results were inconsistent; she managed to do well in some courses but failed others. At times she wanted to drop out of the program, but at other times she was absolutely determined to pull through. Moreover, the threat of her disintegrating domestic situation loomed over her studies. Nevertheless, at the time of the last interview, Isabelle had completed all of her core courses and had only one more semester of general courses. Isabelle's academic success lay largely in her careful program choice and her ability to adjust her study strategies. Indeed, this willingness led to significantly improved marks. Importantly, rather than taking between three to four years as she had originally hoped, it was going to take her at least 4 ½ years.

3.3.7   Isaure (Computer science – Change of Program)

According to Isaure :

« c'est un but que je veux obtenir, c'est de revenir au marché du travail. Je voulais pas travailler au salaire minimum. Fait que t'sais, je voulais avoir une technique. Je voulais avoir un travail, comme un genre de titre là, pour pouvoir travailler, genre pas travailler... Je me vois pas travailler dans les usines rendu à mon âge. (Interview #4, lines 3817-3823)

« Ben je sais un peu c'était quoi la comptabilité parce que mon chum est C.A.. Fait que je pouvais

> voir... C'est comme quand j'étais rentrée en informatique j'avais un neveu qui m'a montré c'était quoi les programmes d'informatique. Fait que t'sais je savais dans quoi je m'en allais. T'sais c'était comme pas, c'était pas l'inconnu là. (Interview #4, lines 3658-3664)
>
> « Tout étudiant qui donne des heures comme j'en donne dans mes études, j'verrais pas pourquoi j'passerais pas. » (Interview #2, lines 1468-1470)
>
> « il faut quasiment connaître la matière avant de la faire. C'est qu'est-ce qui est plate ici. Parce que, comme je t'ai déjà dit aussi, que les professeurs sont là pour t'ouvrir le chemin, mais certains professeurs qui te l'ouvrent pas. C'est ça. Ils font pas leur job en fin de compte. » (Isaure, Interview #3, lines 2192-2197)

Isaure was 39 years old at the time of the first interview and had four children who ranged in age between four and twelve. Before the current program, she had been a housewife and had intermittently occupied low-skilled jobs, such as babysitter and saleswoman. Immediately preceding her registration in the Computer Sciences program, Isaure had completed high school in three years at an adult education institution, as well as two semesters of general courses at Cégep.

Isaure felt a certain pressure to find a career as quickly as possible due to her advancing age. She valued education highly and viewed it as a vehicle to career advancement. Quite logically, then, she turned to the Cégep system in order to develop her career path. This perspective flies in the face of her upbringing and her past behaviour. Her parents did not value education and, largely due to their influence, she did not finish high school. She later came to resent their view of education and, during her interviews, pointed out that they were still unsupportive or, at best, indifferent regarding her decision to return to school. This negative influence, however, was counterbalanced by the support she received from other family members.

Her program choices were largely based on the experiences of some of those family members. Her initial choice of Computer Science was a product of the advice of her nephews, who had both studied Computer Science at university. They introduced her to various computer programs and informed her about the job opportunities in the field. When she eventually changed programs and undertook studies in Accounting, her program choice was even more uninformed. She based her second program choice on the experiences of her

husband who worked in the field. She did not know if accounting would interest her and, instead, based her choice on the fact that she had facility in maths. In fact, she considered her future in the Accounting program to be a simple matter of "destiny". Time would tell whether she would be able to persevere in the program or not. At no point in her two program choices did she consult an academic advisor. As such, without knowing what she was getting into in either of her programs, she was potentially setting herself up for disaster.

It should come as no surprise that, despite her two semesters of general courses, Isaure was ill-prepared for studies in the Computer Science program. Her lack of research into her program choice, combined with the fact that she had completed most of her pre-requisite courses in adult education, meant that she did not know what to expect from the program. Indeed, despite her two semesters of Social Science courses at Cégep, she expected the teaching methods to be akin to those in adult education. She often expressed resentment that the teachers were unwilling to answer her questions in sufficient detail and that many of the students seemed to have started off with more knowledge. Moreover, she was surprised by the workload in Computer Science and annoyed that the program was designed for students with more of a background in computers. That said, she did have a number of factors working in her favour. For instance, she had a computer at home and she could use her nephews as a resource. Similarly, once in the Accounting program, her husband proved to be helpful. Moreover, until the Computer Science program, she seemed to have been relatively able academically.

While Isaure's family situation is not the key to understanding her school experience, it certainly did play a role. Although her children's age put her at an advantage compared to some of the parents with smaller children, she also bore more responsibility than many of the parents. Her husband often worked overtime and, although supportive of her studies, it does not seem that he was very helpful in regards to household and childcare responsibilities. The result was that she had quite a tight schedule, coming home after classes to take care of her family and only resuming homework once they were all in bed, at around nine p.m.. Throughout both programs, she had many nights in which she would stay up to 1 am, only to attend classes at 8 am the next day.

Although most parents found the first semester overwhelming, they often resolved this to some degree by the next semester and became more efficient students. Isaure never seemed to reach this point and showed few signs of adapting to remedy her difficulties. And, moreover, the strategies she used since the beginning of her Computer Science program were those that followed her throughout her Cégep experience. That said, it does bear noting that Isaure tried hard to improve her marks and was not willing to give up easily. Indeed, her experience in Cégep can be characterised by hard work and late nights. She not only spent very long hours on homework every day, but she also made a point of doing her assignments right away while the material was fresh in her head. At times, she bought additional books in order to catch up on the course material and she frequently read over her notes after her classes. Moreover, she had completed a number of general courses before beginning the program in order to lessen her course load.

Unfortunately, however, these strategies were not enough and Isaure simply could not improve her situation. In fact, dissecting the strategies Isaure employed is crucial to understanding her school experience. Her hard work revealed a weakness: she could not understand nor accept that hard work does not necessarily equate academic success. In her mind, if one works hard and has good teachers, then one does well. This logic reveals a second flaw in her strategies: she relied heavily on the teachers and remained quite isolated from the other students. For example, in the case of a course failure in philosophy, as she did not have the contact information for any of her fellow students, she could not reach them when she missed a preparatory class for the up-coming exam. Instead, she tried to get in touch with the teacher. When he did not respond to her, this meant that she was ill prepared for the exam and failed. She consequently blamed the teacher for her failure, a tendency which was quite typical of her experience at Cégep. Isaure tended to blame her teachers for her failures and attributed her success in courses to a combination of a good teacher and hard work. Interestingly, she was even more isolated from the other students in her second program than in the Computer Science program. This tendency also raises the issue that she did not seem very capable of self-reflection. In regards to the Computer Science program, at no point did she consider that she may not have an aptitude for computer programming, nor

that she may be employing inadequate strategies. In fact, although she steadfastly insisted that she found programming interesting, even by the second interview, she could not describe what programming was.

Isaure left the Computer Science program for Accounting after she had completed the third semester. Her decision to change programs was one of her more successful strategies. At the time of the last interview, she had passed all of her courses to date and could discuss the course content in much more detail than in Computer Science. In the Computer Science program, Isaure had done quite well in her general courses but had struggled through her core computer courses. She had failed three courses, although it should be noted that her failures were never catastrophic. Indeed, in one course, she only failed by 1.5%. It is quite ironic that she suffered the most difficulties in precisely the courses that interested her the most.

Isaure's academic success was tenuous throughout the program. She did not choose her program carefully and therefore was ill-prepared when she began. Although she worked hard, she never demonstrated an ability to adjust her study strategies. Indeed, she insisted on approaching her courses in the same manner, despite the fact that she consistently had trouble in her core courses. Moreover, she appeared adamant that her difficulties in her core courses lay in the inadequacy of her teachers, not in her own shortcomings. Nor did it seem to occur to her that she was not particularly gifted in computer programming, a distinct possibility given her comparative ease in her accounting program. In addition to her difficulties in the Computer Science program, Isaure had to grapple with a difficult school-family balance, a factor that surely aggravated her troubles in the program.

3.3.8 Justine (Computer Science – Departure)

According to Justine :

« Non, mais j'entendais beaucoup parler de l'informatique. Pis j'entendais toujours parler que c'était le domaine de l'avenir. Pis là, je me suis dit r'garde, si c'est ça le domaine de l'avenir, ça change tout le temps. Pis moi, j'aime ça apprendre toujours quelque chose de nouveau. Faque là, je me dis c'est l'fun ça. Pourquoi pas ? (Interview #1, lines 415-421)

« je savais pas trop comment on ouvre l'ordinateur au début. » (Interview #1, lines 123-124)

« Ben, avec un bébé de 11 mois, aller à l'école, une journée de travail à travers, là, ça fait 6 jours. Chus 6 jours sur la trotte... ça me donne le dimanche pour faire mon ménage, ben dans la semaine, j'essaie de faire du ménage, je fais de la bouffe, je m'occupe du bébé. Faut que je fasse de la bouffe au petit à travers de ça... Faque un moment donné, faut que j'arrête à que'que part. Ça pas de bon sens... »(Interview #1, lines 259-267)

Justine, at 37, was one of the oldest in the parent cohort. She was a single mother and, before beginning the program, had worked as a cashier full-time in a depanneur for seven years. She had dropped out of high school in grade ten, but had then made up her secondary studies at an adult education institution. In 1990, she completed a DEP in Accounting Administration and had gone on to do a DEC in Administration. She did not complete these latter studies. Since that point, she had worked in various low-skilled, service-oriented jobs and had never managed to work in the field for which she was trained (albeit with a high school-level diploma). She had her baby when she was 36 and, unfortunately, suffered from post-partum depression for a few months afterwards.

Having a child acted as a trigger for Justine. She realised that working for $8/hour as a cashier was not sustainable. She wanted to work in a field that offered better working conditions, better pay and more stability. Moreover, she wanted to have a better job so that she could be a good example for her child[25]. Her decision to embark on her new studies was

---

[25] It seems as if Justine leads a marginal existence and has trouble accessing resources. As such, her lack of success in finding a better paying job, as well as her inability to research her program, or even to find a daycare for her son, may be a product of this.

therefore largely a question of social and economic mobility. Moreover, on a very practical level, she realised that, as a single mother, she had the right to certain loans and bursaries for studying to which she had not previously been privileged. It is not entirely clear why she chose the Computer Science program. She had heard "a lot of people", namely her clients, talking about computer science as the "wave of the future". Although she did not have a computer at home and had probably not used computers since her previous Cégep studies, she thought she would like programming because she had enjoyed working with computers ten years ago. She also pointed out that she had facility working with the computerized cash registers at work. It does not appear that Justine spoke with an academic advisor or any Cégep staff before choosing her program.

More than any other parent in the cohort, Justine did not appear to have anything working in her favour. Indeed, her life seems to be governed by challenges and a lack of resources. She explained that she was one of nine children and that, since she was a young adult, had had to provide for herself financially as her parents could not. Perhaps as a result of this financial instability, even her earlier studies were coloured by her need to prioritise work over studies. Indeed, she dropped out of her DEC program because she had worked during her program and her marks had suffered as a result. Justine's previous school experiences were quite limited and, as such, help to explain her lack of skills or strategies related to studying. Moreover, she had to do all of her general courses in the current program.

Justine's lack of resources also manifested itself in her experiences as a single mother. She appears to have had been alone and to have had no support network in looking after her young child. In fact, she did not even have subsidized daycare for her son, which meant that she had to pay for a private babysitter. To add further complication to an already difficult situation, in her second interview, she attributed her bad program choice to her post-partum depression. By Justine's accounts, she had rushed into her decision to study Computer Science in response to her troubled emotional state. In retrospect, she claimed that she should have chosen Accounting, given her propensity for maths.

Not surprisingly, Justine experienced numerous difficulties within the first few weeks of the program. Even though a difficult first semester characterizes all of the parents' Cégep experiences, her troubles were more exaggerated. When she began the program, she did not know where the on-off switch of the computer was. She not only found the pace of the classes too fast, but there was very little of the course material that she understood. As a manifestation of this, she could not speak in detail of the material being covered in her courses. Consequently, when the courses progressed at a rapid rate, she found herself quite lost. She asked the teachers questions but, in the case of one teacher at least, he quickly grew impatient and refused to answer her questions. Justine saw her grasp of the material as the teachers' responsibility and blamed her lack of success in the program on them. She did not think that it was appropriate for the teachers to tell her, in response to her questions, that they had covered the material in the last class. She even accused her teachers of being sexist as, in her mind, they prioritised the men over the women. It also seemed that Justine did not understand, or did not pay attention to, the evaluation system in her courses. As a result, she was surprised when she failed her physical education course.

Throughout her duration in the program, Justine worked one day a week at the depanneur. She found the family-work-school balance extremely difficult to manage, especially given that she was a single mother. The result was that she did not have much time to dedicate to her studies outside of school time – although she did not always seem willing to acknowledge this. Justine often spoke of being worried about her financial situation. As the sole financial provider for her small family, she obviously could not take her economic situation lightly. She found that the loans and bursaries that she received from the government, combined with her meagre income as a part-time cashier, were insufficient to meet her family's needs. Moreover, she found it stressful to be in a situation of debt. While for some parents indebting themselves for their studies was a risk worth taking, Justine could not accept this. Both in her current program and in her previous studies, her immediate financial needs always seemed to outweigh the advantages of pursuing an education.

Justine failed all four of her courses and did not return to her program for the second semester. She did not take these failures lightly. She expressed frustration at the Cégep

system, at the teachers and at the fact that she was $2000 in debt with nothing to show for it. She concluded that she was "not made for school" and that she was a much better worker than student. She returned to her job as a cashier full-time and felt a certain amount of relief as she was finally making money rather than loosing it. As such, she had actually come full circle, ending up in precisely the situation she had tried to get out of through her studies in Computer Science. Interestingly, despite her lack of success in postsecondary education, she still looked to education as a vehicle to social and economic mobility. She planned to take English courses to increase her potential on the job market.

There was little in Justine's experience in the Computer Science program that gave any indication of possible success. She had possessed a very vague notion of computer programming before considering the program and had seemingly registered for it on a whim. Not surprisingly, her lack of familiarity with computers, let alone computer programming, manifested itself immediately. But Justine had serious difficulties in all of her courses, including Physical Education. She lacked both strategies as a student, as well as a general comprehension of the evaluation system in her courses. As a result, she was incapable of understanding why she was not succeeding in her courses and of adjusting her approach to her studies accordingly. In addition to her challenges in school was the fact that she was a single mother with few resources. This rendered her already unfavourable situation even more difficult as it meant that she had little time to dedicate to her studies and was under constant financial stress. In sum, Justine's situation at home, her poor program choice and her inability to devise successful strategies meant that perseverance in the Computer Science program was a long shot.

3.3.9 Madeleine (Laboratory Technology – Perseverance)

According to Madeleine :

« Il y a des fins de semaine que je me rappelle que je pleurais, j'avais un examen de maths au début de la semaine puis, je pleurais parce que je ne comprenais pas ces problèmes-là puis, j'aimais pas ça. Je passe mon dimanche à étudier, je passe mon samedi à travailler puis ma fille, je la laisse toute seule. Elle fait du dessin ou elle écoute la télé quand je ne m'occupe même pas d'elle donc, je me sentais coupable aussi tsé, en tant que mère. » (Interview #3, lines 2976-2984)

At 42, Madeleine was the oldest in the parent cohort. She was the single-mother of an elementary school-age daughter and had been working as a waitress for a number of years. She had quite an extensive educational background, most recently having finished all of her high school maths and sciences in adult education over a four-year period. Before that she completed a B.A. in Art History and a DEC in Social Sciences. Between her DEC and her B.A., she began a DEC in Administration, and she had done one year of geography, as well as one semester of psychology at university. In other words, she had had a number of academic interests and had invested a considerable amount of time in education. Until the current program, her program choices were always based on interest and were never job-oriented.

The most prevalent reason for her program choice was economic. The fact that she had a daughter made her much more responsible as she was suddenly confronted with the need to provide for her small family. She came to the conclusion that waitering would not be a viable career in the coming years and began to search for a career alternative. Madeleine quickly settled on the idea of doing a technical degree without having decided on the field. She absolutely wanted to study in an area that had a good job placement rate. Based on her positive experience in one biology course in university, she decided that the degree should be related to biology and, moreover, aimed to find something with the possibility of research. She further sought to find a degree that would lead to a stable career, with sustainable hours and a decent salary. Before choosing the Laboratory Technology program, Madeleine talked to an academic advisor and did a number of "tests" to evaluate her aptitudes and preferences. Once Laboratory Technology was decided on, she embarked on the four-year project of completing all the necessary pre-requisite courses in adult education. Studying in the Laboratory Technology program had thus been a long-term project for Madeleine, one that she would not abandon easily.

It should be noted, however, that it could not have been easy for Madeleine to embark on such a project. It meant for a huge sacrifice both financially and in terms of time. Moreover, it implied a break with her old life as a waitress, in which she had been managing quite well. Indeed, it was quite risky, given that she had to give up a stable job for the unknown. As she

85

had limited knowledge of both the course content in the program and the types of jobs offered after completion, she was not guaranteed to like her field of choice. Her decision to embark upon studies in Laboratory Technology seemed, then, to be fuelled much more by a need for economic and social mobility than by interest in the program itself. Her age probably made her drive to succeed all the more urgent.

Madeleine did not initially seem to have much working in her favour, aside from her obvious determination, her previous experience in higher education and the fact that she had already completed her general courses. She not only had sole custody of her child, but she had to work during her studies. Until she completed all of her high school maths and sciences, she had very little background in the sciences. Moreover, what experience she did gain in adult education, it cannot have prepared her adequately for studying sciences in Cégep. Her marks in adult education were good but not outstanding. In addition, her interest in biology and chemistry seemed vague.

Madeleine's start in the program was characterised by nervousness and difficulty. She had trouble adapting to Cégep from adult education, despite her previous experiences in postsecondary education. Moreover, she felt that not all of the necessary material had been covered in her adult education courses. She felt isolated in her lack of comprehension and was hesitant to ask questions of the teachers or of the other students. She found the workload extremely heavy and complained that she had no spare time. By the first interview, she already felt that she needed a break and was talking of the temptation to quit.

While the first semester was, to use her words, a matter of "survival", she was also already talking of strategies. Indeed, one of her strengths was that she knew how to analyse her school experience, her needs, her weaknesses and strengths. From this awareness she was able to adapt strategies[26]. First of all, Madeleine was aware that Laboratory Technology was one of the toughest technical degrees in Cégep and was therefore expecting difficulties. She

---

[26] Although she does not explicitly suggest that this could have been the product of her past school experiences, one wonders if such experience did not play an important role in developing these skills.

was not afraid to fail the occasional course in order to pass her others. Indeed, she did this with her maths course in the first semester and, as a result, passed her other three courses and received excellent results when she re-took the maths course. She also knew that it was essential to keep up with the material and not get behind. After the first semester, she began to rely much more on the other students and on her teachers for help, even venturing to ask questions in class. She also began to plan ahead so that she would not be left scrambling before exams. This involved, whenever possible, doing the homework when the subject matter was fresh in her mind and reviewing in advance so that she would not have any surprises come exam time. When she was not able to keep up-to-date in this manner, she was cognisant of how this negatively affected her school performance.

Madeleine also created a number of conditions outside of school that facilitated her school experience. Before she began the program, she and her daughter moved to an apartment near the Cégep so that she would not lose time in travel. This also meant that she was able to study in the tranquility of her home. Despite a considerable amount of financial stress, she reduced her number of work hours, thus allowing herself to dedicate more time to her studies. Finally, by the middle of the program, she had begun a romantic relationship with a maths teacher. While she does not give much detailed information about this relationship and how it affected her studies, it must have proved advantageous.

The conditions she created and the strategies she developed did not mean, however, that she was at ease in her program, nor that she managed the family-work-school balance easily. Indeed, like many of the parents in this cohort, juggling family and school responsibilities was very tight. Already by the first semester, life involved rushing from Cégep to pick her daughter up at school, quickly making dinner, working on her daughter's homework and, once her daughter was in bed, focussing on her own homework. Her daughter was largely babysat on weekends, as Madeleine had to work at the restaurant and do homework when she had the spare time. She lamented that during the course of the Laboratory Technology program, her daughter was largely raised by television. Moreover, her financial situation was a source of constant stress and she felt that it was the only consideration that might cause her to drop out of the program.

It is interesting to observe Madeleine's progression throughout the program. Whereas in the first semester she felt isolated, by the third interview she seemed much more integrated into the program. She was at home not only with the other students, but with the course material as well. She could speak in detail about the content covered in her courses and about what her interests and disinterests were. This meant, in turn, that she had a much clearer idea of the type of work she would want to do at the end of the program. Indeed, in the initial months of the program she had a vague notion of the work of a technician on the job market, whereas by the end of the program she articulated specific professional ambitions. Her marks correspond to this increasing integration into the program. Her marks generally went up from between 60% to 70% in the first semester to between 70% and the 85% in the following semesters, excluding the three courses that she failed. By the last interview, she had a few remaining courses to complete and was anticipating her internship.

Madeleine proved to be much more adept in the Laboratory Technology program than she originally appeared to be. That said, she never excelled in her program. Instead, she managed to maintain acceptable marks and, in so doing, persevered in the program. The secret to her success was her obvious determination, as well as her ability to adapt successful strategies. Behind her determination was a strong desire to change her career in order to provide for her family. This determination manifested itself in the form of a clearly thought-out, long-term plan that involved pre-requisite courses in adult education and the Laboratory Technology program. Once in the program, Madeleine proved capable of weathering a difficult adaptation and astute enough to devise successful strategies. Her ability to adapt such strategies hint at a familiarity with postsecondary education acquired from her previous educational experiences. Moreover, the longer she persevered in the program, the more socially and academically integrated she became. This, in turn, increased her chances of perseverance. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons behind her successful adaptation and integration, her perseverance was always precarious, both academically and in terms of her school-family balance.

3.3.10 Marielle (Laboratory Technology – Departure)

According to Marielle :

« Pour moi le français ou les mathématiques c'est aussi facile. Donc aller en sciences humaines c'est comme la voie…C'est comme en secondaire 4 et 5 j'avais pris géo histoire au lieu de chimie physique, parce que c'était facile et je voulais de la facilité. Et ça a continuer au cégep. Et après bon, j'ai eu mes enfants et tout et tout, et en vieillissant ben je me suis dis que ça me tentait pu le facile. Que ça me tentait d'aller dans ce que j'aimais plutôt que d'aller dans ce qui me demanderait pas. » (Interview #1, lines 303-314)

« Pour ce qui est de chimie générale et bio, j'adore ça. J'ai pas un mot à dire. C'est exactement ce à quoi je m'attendais. C'est peut-être même plus intéressant que ce que je pensais, parce qu'on nous avait averti que la première année on fait comme l'alphabet finalement, et que c'est plus plate. Jusqu'à date j'ai pas vu de platitude. » (Interview #1, lines 121-128)

Marielle was 28 at the time of the first interview and already had four children. The youngest child was twenty months old, while the eldest was in elementary school. Although she did not discuss the matter until the first telephone interview, in October 2001, one of her daughters was handicapped. Despite her family situation, Marielle was also one of the best educated of the parents. She had completed a DEC in the Social Sciences and had then gone on to take a variety of university courses as an independent student. Later on, after her fourth child was born, she did a number of science and maths pre-requisite courses in adult education as she foresaw studying medicine or doing a technical DEC. She had also occupied a number of jobs, such as insurance salesperson and farm-manager prior to the birth of her third child.

Understanding Marielle's family situation is critical in deciphering her trajectory in the Laboratory Technology program. Put simply, Marielle was family-oriented. Mother of four children, she hoped to have one or two more. Indeed, when she spoke of her future in five years, she saw herself on maternity leave with a baby. Moreover, after completion of the current diploma, she spoke of not wanting to work full-time, nor during the summer. Instead, she preferred to have time to spend with her children. Similarly, at least during the first interview, she explained that she avoided doing schoolwork on the weekends, as she preferred to be with her family.

Her reasons for embarking on studies in the Laboratory Technology were a mixture of both pragmatic and interest-motivated. Marielle was in a relatively comfortable position financially as her family survived easily on her partner's income. However, while there was not a pressing instrumental reason behind her enrolment in the Laboratory Technology program, she and her partner felt that it was preferable that she return to the job market, rather than have another child. Any salary she earned as a result of her technical studies would be a welcome addition to the family income. Independent of financial considerations, Marielle had also been contemplating realising herself professionally and intellectually through a return to school. The Laboratory Technology program was an instant fit with her medical and research-oriented interests, as well as her pragmatic goals.

Marielle's past educational experience is also key in understanding both how she approached her studies. First of all, at the most basic level, it meant that she had to do no general courses. In the first semester, for example, she only had four core courses. This previous experience also meant that she had a great amount of self-confidence as a student, which was evident within the first minutes of her first interview. She immediately described herself as an 80%s average student who had never had to work for her marks. Aware that she would have to change her study habits in her current program, she was nevertheless confident. She claimed to be a quick learner who had facility at school. In fact, she explained that one of the reasons that she had chosen to study in the sciences was that it would be more challenging. True to her descriptions of herself, Marielle seemed at ease in the program, even by the first interview. In fact, she distinguished herself from the other parents in the cohort on this front. She seemed comfortable with the material being covered in her courses, with the exception of maths. She never appeared overwhelmed, nor did she complain about the level of difficulty in the courses or about the heavy workload.

Her confidence and competence, manifested themselves in a number of other ways, most notably her strategies. Her program choice was well-researched, for example, but was not extensive. In other words, once she had decided that she would enrol in a technical DEC, she read about the different programs both on the internet and in brochures. However, because she had previously had a negative experience with an academic advisor, she never used this

resource. She knew that adult education was not representative of postsecondary studies and therefore took her experience in adult education with a grain of salt[27]. She therefore had no false illusions about what a technical degree in Cégep would be like and did not complain when difficulties presented themselves. She also knew her study habits well and adjusted her life in order to accommodate her learning style. For example, she made a point of waking up between 3 and 6 am in order to study because she knew she did not function well at night. Moreover, during the second semester, when she realised her study strategies were not adequate she adjusted them. Whereas in the first semester, she had studied for her exams at the last minute, she began to study for exams days ahead. She also began writing summaries of her notes so that she could re-read them before her exams. She had previously resisted working on weekends, but, by the second semester, began to fit her studies in between her other commitments on weekends. She also began to visit her teachers during their office hours more often. In regards to the other students in the program, Marielle appeared quite disinterested. But her lack of social integration was not caused by any shyness on her part. Instead, she saw herself as a busy mother of four and did not seem to think that there was any clear benefit in spending time with the other students. As it stands, by the second semester, she had made some good friends in the program, although she did not study with them.

Her actual experience in her program can be described as a limited success. Despite her confidence, she passed her first semester courses with marginal marks, ranging from the low 60%s to the low 70%s. While she seemed somewhat disappointed by these results, she was not anxious about them. Ironically, she received her best mark in the course that she was having the most trouble with. In the first interview, she had complained that her maths pre-requisite course had not prepared her, nor the other students, for their current maths course. This criticism was aimed much more at the adult education system than the Cégep system. Unfortunately, it is not clear why she received mediocre marks in her other courses, given that she appeared both interested and comfortable with the course material. While she did not explain her uncharacteristically low marks, she did refer to her experience in the first

---

[27] In fact, she argued that the lack of consistency between adult education and Cégep caused many older students to drop out of their programs.

semester as triggering the adjustment of her strategies in the second semester. In the telephone interview, she described her marks in the second semester as being acceptable.

One of the most notable aspects about her progression through the program was her confident, relaxed manner. As previously noted, she took her difficulties and disappointments in stride, never questioning whether they would interfere with her perseverance in the program. Another important aspect was her unfaltering interest and enthusiasm in the content of the program. Throughout her time in the program, she spoke with excitement about the course material in her chemistry and biology courses. In fact, she was one of the few parents in the cohort who spoke in such detail about her courses, both in terms of their structure and their content. That said, by the second semester, she was uncertain about her professional choice. While she remained interested in the field, she doubted whether she would be content working as a technician. It was at this point that she began to seriously consider pursuing a shortened B.A. program, in one of the disciplines related to the Laboratory Technology program.

It should also be noted that, although Marielle never complained about her competing family and school responsibilities, she had a precarious balance to manage. Indeed, while her partner did share some of the care-giving responsibilities, she appeared to bear the bulk. Given that they had four children, one of whom was handicapped, the effect of these responsibilities on her studies should not be taken lightly. Moreover, again distinguishing herself from many of the other parents, she did not seem very willing to sacrifice time with her children for her studies. Marielle often picked up her youngest children from their babysitters by midday, not able to resume her studies until early the next morning. She spoke of her partner taking all of the children on Saturdays so that she could focus on her schoolwork, but, in actual fact, this seemed to be a rare occurrence. Interestingly, the only indication she gave that her family situation might interfere with her studies was when she said her desire to have a fifth child was so strong that it was making her less motivated in her studies. It also bears noting that she fell seriously ill twice during the program, forcing her to withdraw from one course each semester in order to ease her workload.

Marielle was forced to leave her program after the second semester. Her handicapped daughter was deemed ready to begin an intensive training program, which would require constant assistance. As her partner was the breadwinner of the family, it fell upon her to stay at home. She vowed to return to the program as soon as possible.

Marielle's case is interesting in that, like Gabrielle, she provides a clear example of how schooling is put on the back burner when parents experience too many competing responsibilities. Typically, the two parents who represent this situation in the present study are women. As the primary caregiver in her family, Marielle could no longer find the time to provide for her daughter and pursue her studies at the same time. As such, her departure was not related to her performance at school. That said, Marielle's marks were far from outstanding and she plodded along with mediocre results. However, it should be recognised that Marielle had to grapple with pronounced time constraints imposed by her family responsibilities. Moreover, although willing to sacrifice her sleep for her studies, she appeared unwilling to make too many sacrifices regarding her children. Marielle's success in her first semester courses, albeit borderline, should thus be deemed an achievement. Indeed, she demonstrated both ease and confidence – possibly a spillover from her previous educational experiences, despite a lack of social and academic integration.

3.4   Conclusion

The parents in this cohort represent a variety of experiences, persevering or departing for different reasons. However, whether they continued in their programs or dropped out, their experiences are also defined by a number of shared characteristics. First of all, they all grappled with a difficult balance between their studies and their families. Even Irma, who only saw her son two weekends a month, mentioned that it was challenging to manage the balance. Importantly, however, with the exception of Gabrielle and Marielle, the parents' family situations did not decide their outcomes in their programs. In other words, there were reasons other than the responsibility of children that led to their departures. In fact, some of the parents managed to persevere despite a seemingly impossible balance between family and

school. The parents also shared a difficult adaptation to Cégep during the first semester[28]. While some parents weathered these challenges quite successfully, for others it meant their departure or near-departure. Their difficult adaptations were often caused by false-expectations based on their experiences in adult education institutions. At other times they were caused by the fact that the parents had spent too many years between Cégep and their last postsecondary experience. Finally, all of the parents in this cohort claimed a resolute determination in regards to their perseverance in their programs. Surely enough, though, this determination manifested itself to varying degrees and was never enough in and of itself.

The parents' experiences, of course, differed in many ways. Among the more notable distinguishing factors were their previous educational experiences, the strategies they employed and their family situations. In fact, the variation in their past school experiences, ranging from a B.A.-level university degree to secondary studies in adult education institutions, meant for different experiences in their technical programs. While some parents understood the workings of the Cégep system and were quickly able to adapt successful strategies, others were clearly quite lost and unable to adjust to their studies. The strategies the parents employed were one of the clearest and most important differences distinguishing them. Given that all of the parents had difficult adaptations during their first semester, the ability to adapt strategies proved a critical factor in determining their success in their program. Another crucial difference between the parents lay in their situations at home. Some parents still had babies or toddlers, while others had children who were all of school age. Moreover, some were single parents or mothers whose partners played minimal care-giving roles, while others had partners who played a substantial role in raising their children. It is telling that of the four perseverant parents, they all had either older children or partners who played an important care-giving role. In other words, the parents with very young children with minimally involved or non-existent partners were not able to persevere. Although their situations at home were not the sole factors in determining the parents'

---

[28] It is debatable whether Marielle is an exception to this rule. For, although Marielle did not experience particular worries in regards to her studies, her marks during the first semester were uncharacteristically low. While this is certainly due to her family responsibilities, it may also have been due to the fact that she had not undertaken postsecondary studies in a few years.

perseverance or departure, these situations certainly did influence their outcomes in their programs.

CHAPTER IV

THE SCHOOL CAREERS

4.1   Introduction

In the current chapter, I divide the parents' individual cases into school careers.   By categorizing the parents' experiences into school careers, I seek to highlight some of the general trends that characterize them.   Moreover, I hope to underline the links between specific phenomena and their outcomes in the Cégep program. Importantly, then, it is not the outcome at the end of students' experiences in the program that dictates the identification of each school career.   It is the combination of factors that lead to a certain outcome that are considered in the delineation of the school careers.

I base the school careers on the same factors that were highlighted in the description of the individual cases.   In other words, such considerations as their social background, past school experiences, the conditions outside school – particularly the family-work-school balance, cognitive support, practical help, the development of strategies, academic ability, motivation, and interest, are all deemed to play a critical role in determining whether a student perseveres, drops out or changes his/her program.

4.2   The School Careers

I have identified four distinct school careers based on the experiences of the parents. Only one of these school careers represents parents who have successfully graduated from the program that they initially set out to complete. Not surprisingly, in none of these "successful" cases can their school experience be described as smooth or as transpiring with ease. Instead, the four parents who fall under this category struggled with difficult adaptations to Cégep, trouble with their course material and, of course, a very tenuous balance between family-school responsibilities. Another school career represents two parents who experienced similar, if not more exaggerated difficulties at school and a challenging balance between family and school responsibilities. Instead of trying to fight their way through their program, however, these individuals found that changing programs was a more realistic option. The two final school careers represent those who did not complete their programs and did not go on to do a subsequent program in Cégep (as far as we know). The first of these school careers encompasses the experiences of Gabrielle and Marielle who, although not experiencing dramatic difficulties at school, had to depart from their programs. These women, already confronted by a difficult balance between family and studies, were forced to "drop out" of their programs because one of their children needed immediate and continuous medical attention. The final category of parents represented those students who also faced a difficult balance between family responsibilities and school. More importantly, however, they had too much trouble in school and thus were forced to abandon their programs.

4.2.1   School Career #1: "Struggling to the Finish Line" – Perseverance with Difficulty

R32 : Je ne vis pas là. (Isabelle, Interview #3, line 3088)

Barnave, Gisèle, Isabelle and Madeleine either completed their programs or, at the time of the last interview, were well on their way to doing so. While Barnave undertook the Computer Science program, the three women in this category were enrolled in Laboratory Technology.

These students ranged in age from 18 to 42, at the beginning of the first semester. Madeleine, the oldest in this category, was also the only single parent.

While only Gisèle spoke of the influence of her mother and father upon their educational experiences, it is interesting to note that their mothers and fathers were among best educated of the cohort. That said, we do not know the educational attainment of Barnave's mother and father. Isabelle had parents who had completed high school, while Gisèle's mother had almost completed high school and, later in life, had obtained a DEC (her father had not completed high school but is described as being well-read). Madeleine's mother completed high school but her father did not. It is equally striking that Madeleine, one of the best educated of all of the adults in the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project, had the least well-educated parents in this school category. It should also be recognized that, regardless of the fact that their mothers and fathers were among the best-educated in the cohort, they had a surprisingly low-level of education for their generation.

One of the most notable characteristics shared by these four parents is that none of them initially seemed to be destined for program completion. For various reasons, their beginnings in the program seemed fragile and they did not differentiate themselves from the other parents. Like almost every other parent in the cohort, they talked of being determined. During the first interview, however, it became apparent that they were overwhelmed by the workload in their respective programs and did not feel that their adaptation to Cégep was going smoothly. With the exception of Barnave, all of the parents in this category had attended an adult education institution prior to the program and spoke of the differences between the two types of institution. Gisèle, Isabelle and Madeleine described how difficult it was to get used to the fast pace of teaching in Cégep and, consequently, the speed at which the courses proceeded. Gisèle found it difficult to passively sit and listen to her teachers for three hours at a time. Isabelle and Madeleine mentioned that Cégep is much more impersonal than adult education, where everybody knows each other and the teachers seem to take a personal interest in their students. Barnave, who had been largely educated in the Congo, talked of the difference between teaching methods in his native country and at Cégep. In regards to the workload, by the first few weeks in the program, all of the students in this

category found that it was extremely heavy. They were staying up late at night to complete their homework and found that they could not keep up with their courses. Indeed, they seemed nervous and exhausted. In fact, by their first interview, Isabelle and Madeleine were already speaking of the temptation to drop out of their program.

Their previous school experiences, as a whole, presented an advantage and a disadvantage in the context of their technical studies. On the one hand, none of the parents in this school career had a strong background in the sciences. In fact, only Madeleine had taken a postsecondary science course. However, she had taken a course in biology approximately 10 years prior to the current program. She therefore had to do all of her high school science and maths courses in adult education just prior to the current program. Barnave had done the equivalent of first year Cégep courses in the Humanities in the Congo and had completed his pre-requisites science and maths courses in "Reception and Transition". Both Isabelle and Gisèle demonstrated a certain aptitude for the sciences in high school and a more concrete interest. However, Isabelle pointed out that she had never been a good student in high school and had not taken her courses very seriously, while Gisèle had no postsecondary experience. Gisèle was, in fact, the only one of these four students who had no postsecondary experience prior to the current program. In other words, three of these parents went into their current program with some notion of Cégep studies. It is interesting that Madeleine had such trouble adapting to Cégep given that she had the most postsecondary experience of the group. That said, she had spent four years at an adult education institution prior to the current program, and, as such, may have become accustomed to those methods of teaching and studying.

While the first interviews may not reveal great differences between these four students and the rest of the parent cohort, by the second interviews the differences were striking. In a nutshell, what distinguishes these parents from the others was their ability to develop strategies. They all possessed an ability and willingness to be self-critical in regards to their study practices. As such, through the course of the first semester, they reflected upon what it took to succeed in the program and adjusted their strategies accordingly. In fact, the simple ability to self-reflect and develop strategies was an important advantage in itself.

Not surprisingly, they shared a number of strategies in common. Among their principal realisations was that a lot of work would be required of them. They readily adjusted their schedules and lifestyles in order to accommodate the hard work to come. For none of these students was the adjustment easy, given that they had children. Gisèle, Isabelle and Madeleine spoke of sacrificing time with their children in order to have more time for their studies. In fact, both Isabelle and Madeleine spoke guiltily of having put their relationships with their daughters on hold for the program. In another example, Madeleine moved closer to the Cégep because she anticipated that she would need more time for studying.

These four parents also saw the other students and the teachers as a key resource. While it took Madeleine until the second semester to build up the courage to ask questions of the teachers and associate more with her fellow students, she eventually came to use them to a large degree. For Isabelle, some her fellow students not only became a key academic resource, but they were also instrumental in encouraging her to continue in the program.

Finally, it is significant that, with the exception of Barnave, these parents researched their program quite thoroughly. In the cases of Gisèle and Isabelle, this meant not only that they were orienting themselves towards a field in which they were interested, but also towards a field in which they had previously demonstrated academic ability. Gisèle pointed to her careful program choice as essential to her success.

Some of the strategies particular to each individual parent can be described as meticulous. For example, when Barnave anticipated difficulty in a programming course, he often bought additional textbooks before the course had even begun in order to have a "head start" in the subject matter. This was his way of dealing with the fact that the courses progressed quite rapidly and that a certain level of background knowledge was often assumed. Gisèle dealt with the heavy workload in the program by anticipating which courses required more work and choosing her courses accordingly, combining courses with heavier and lighter workloads together. In a good example of the self-critical approach of these parents, during the first semester, Isabelle re-assessed her strategy of re-writing her notes after each class and instead opted for listening more attentively to the class lectures. This seemingly simple, although

very self-conscious, change led to a radical improvement in her efficiency as a student, not to mention in her marks.

The strategies that these parents employed were not the sole keys to understanding their perseverance. Another key element was their determination. Although many of the other parents in the cohort initially manifested a similar drive to complete their programs, there is one key factor that distinguishes them from the others. The perseverant parents determination was reinforced by their continued success in their programs. In other words, determination was critical in maintaining their motivation, but, without positive results, their determination might have waned. There was, in fact, a lot riding on the successful completion of their program. At least in the cases of Barnave, Isabelle and Madeleine, a technical DEC represented not only professional mobility, but also a better lifestyle for their families. Moreover, Isabelle's determination was fuelled by an additional factor: successful completion of the Laboratory Technology program meant economic independence from her boyfriend, should she need it.

Barnave is a particularly good example of the role determination played in his eventual completion of the program. He often conveyed the idea that he had no choice to continue as he had chosen this program and it was too late to re-trace his steps. It was basically "now or never". As a result, when confronted with the realisation that he had not chosen the right program or when facing the prospect of one year of general and pre-requisite courses in "Reception and Transition", he simply told himself that he did not have the choice but to succeed. And, indeed, despite the odds against him, he continued to work excessively hard in order to guarantee success in the program.

While these parents shared a number of similarities in their school experiences, their interest in their chosen programs and the development of their professional projects varied considerably. Gisèle and Isabelle's interest in the Laboratory Technology was apparent from the beginning of the program. Madeleine's interest in the field, however, was less clear. She largely privileged the possibility of an easy job-placement and stable working conditions in making her program choice. Barnave spoke of his interest in computer networking, although

he never truly elaborated on this interest. Like Madeleine, he certainly seemed driven by the employment possibilities that a DEC promised. Not surprisingly, then, Gisèle and Isabelle's professional aspirations were more articulated and more interest-based than their counterparts. While Gisèle contented herself with the position of technician, and indeed had this goal affirmed by her job experience during the program, Isabelle had loftier ambitions. Despite the fact that she decided to work as a technician for a while after program completion, she did not abandon her goal of pursuing university studies, perhaps up to the Master's level. She was the only one in the parent cohort who manifested such ambitions.

The conditions under which they achieved their success in their programs also varied. First of all, Madeleine was a single mother with sole custody of her child, while the other parents were not. They also bore different levels of responsibility for their children. Whereas Isabelle left a large portion of the child-care responsibilities to her partner, it seemed that Barnave and Gisèle had at least half of the child-care responsibilities. This means that, with the exception of Isabelle perhaps, their time outside of school was largely dictated by the needs of their children. Moreover, both Barnave and Isabelle had children under the age of three, while Gisèle and Madeleine's children were elementary school age or older. Whereas Isabelle's partner appeared to accept a large part of the responsibility for their baby, he was also the only partner who was not entirely supportive of her decision to pursue her studies. Furthermore, their difficult relationship contributed to difficulties in her studies. Madeleine was the only parent of this school category who had to work throughout her studies. (Barnave had worked for a few months for one semester and during the summer months when he did not take courses.) That said, she managed to reduce her hours significantly, from fifteen hours a week to just seven hours. Both Madeleine and Barnave felt a considerable amount of financial stress and relied quite heavily on government loans and bursaries. However, this stress had differing effects on their experiences at school. Whereas it served to motivate Barnave, it was the only thing that threatened to cause Madeleine to depart from the program. Both Gisèle and Isabelle felt relative financial ease as they could rely on their partners to provide for them during their studies. In sum, none of these parents enjoyed easy conditions outside of school. At the very least, their family responsibilities complicated their studies

and, at worst, their situations added considerable stress to their lives which, in turn, made it difficult to study.

It is interesting to compare their progress in the program. Other than the fact that they completed or were on their way to completing their programs, there is no particular consistency in the academic experiences of these four parents. Whereas Barnave and Gisèle never failed a course, the road Isabelle and Madeleine took to program completion was much rougher. That said, they all demonstrated more familiarity and comfort with the subject matter of their courses as the program progressed.

Interestingly enough, it was Gisèle, with no prior postsecondary experience, who demonstrated the most academic ability. In fact, she claimed that, whether in high school or in adult education, she had always had facility in maths and the sciences. In regards to her current studies, despite the fact that she probably dedicated the least amount of time to homework, she had some of the best results of all the adults in the parent cohort. That said, the further she progressed in the Laboratory Technology program, the more she found it challenging. While maths was always interesting and easy for her, she complained of difficulties in such courses as physics and microbiology. She also experienced stress and a certain loss in confidence regarding her aptitudes as a student in the middle of the program. Nevertheless, Gisèle never failed a course and her marks were between 60% and somewhere in the 80%s. By the end of the program, she obviously felt comfortable in the field and was satisfied with her accomplishment.

Barnave also managed to get through his program without failing a single course. It is difficult to discern, however, whether this was as a result of a particular ability or other factors, such as long hours of homework and effective strategies.

Madeleine is an interesting example of a student who gradually found her place in the program. In the later interviews, she spoke in much more detail of the course content, of her interests and disinterests in regards to subject matter and of future job opportunities. Not surprisingly, her marks corresponded to this gradual integration into the program, increasing

from 60% to the low seventies in the first semester, to between the high sixties and the eighties in the following semesters. She did, however, also fail three courses.

Isabelle also experienced a gradual academic integration into the program, which was matched by improving marks. Her marks actually tended to be higher than Madeleine's, going from the sixties to seventies in the first semester to between 70% and 90% in subsequent semesters, barring the occasional failure. As represented by her marks, Isabelle had a varied experience in her courses, struggling through some and finding others relatively easy. Indeed, both Isabelle and Madeleine's continuation in their program always appeared fragile; at many points in the program, they seemed to be tottering between departure and perseverance.

4.2.2   School Career #2: "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" - Departure due to the Balance between Family-Work-Studies

« Je souhaite pas qu'un de mes enfants tombe malade, ou qu'il arrive de quoi de grave pis que ça m'empêche. Je pense pas...J'aime ça beaucoup. !a serait fou de m'en cacher. Je suis ben contente de ce que je vois pis de ce que j'apprend. » (Marielle, Interview #1, lines 783-788)

The two women in this school category seemed as much on their way to program completion as the parents in the preceding category. However, they could not balance their family responsibilities with their studies and were eventually forced to depart from the Laboratory Technology program. Gabrielle and Marielle were at opposite ends of their twenties, at 23 and 28 respectively. Their situations outside of school were quite different. Gabrielle had one child and worked, while Marielle had four children but did not work.

Gabrielle and Marielle shared a number of advantages regarding their Cégep program. Their previous Cégep studies meant that neither woman had to take general courses during their time in the Laboratory Technology program. Moreover, Gabrielle did not have to undertake any science or maths pre-requite courses. As such, Gabrielle only had three courses during

her first semester, while Marielle had four. Their previous school experiences had also endowed these women with a certain amount of confidence in their academic abilities. Based on her time in an enriched program in high school, Gabrielle felt that she was a good student who knew how to work hard. Moreover, she had almost completed another technical DEC in the sciences and was actually the most experienced parent in this regard. While Gabrielle's confidence was quite cautious, Marielle was much more forthcoming about her faith in her abilities. She described herself as a talented student, in both the sciences and social sciences, who did not need to work hard to obtain good results. In describing herself as such, however, she was admitting that her work ethic was poor. Interestingly, while these women are among the best educated in the cohort of the parents, none of their parents had gone much past primary school.

Both women had made their program choice based on interest, as well as on pragmatic considerations. While Gabrielle wanted to do a technical degree related to medicine or health, Marielle knew that she wanted to go into medicine or a related discipline. After narrowing down on her interests, Marielle then decided to do a technical DEC as she felt it would be more practical than studying medicine. They also both wanted to work in a field that would allow them research opportunities. In regards to the more instrumental aspects of their program choice, they were attracted to the high job placement rate of the Laboratory Technology program and hoped to find jobs that would allow them flexible schedules in order to accommodate their family responsibilities. Gabrielle undertook an extensive amount of research in making her program choice. She not only read about the various technical Cégep programs and spoke to an academic advisor, but also she attended a career workshop. Marielle's research was more limited but, by no means, careless. She read quite thoroughly about the different technical programs available and, when she found the Laboratory Technology program, was confident she had found the right program[29]. Indeed, both Marielle and Gabrielle spoke with interest about their courses. Gabrielle showed a great amount of enthusiasm for biology, whether regarding her courses or the discipline in general,

---

[29] That said, Marielle did later wonder whether she would ever want to work as a technician. This did not mean, however, that she felt that she had chosen the wrong program. Instead, she began to think more seriously about pursuing her studies at the B.A. level.

and Marielle spoke with interest about the course content in both her chemistry and biology courses.

Gabrielle and Marielle's differences became apparent as their programs progressed. Gabrielle's experience in the first semester was characterized by difficulty and exhaustion. First of all, she had trouble adapting to the rhythm of Cégep. More specifically, she found that, after two years of not having attended Cégep, she had forgotten much of the pre-requisite knowledge and she found the rhythm of the classes was difficult to follow. She also found the "abstract" and "complicated" nature of her chemistry course challenging. In the end, though, Gabrielle attributed her difficulties principally to the balance between her studies and her life outside school. At the end of the semester, her son began to follow orthophony treatment, which not only ate up time from her already busy schedule, but it also caused her concern. As a result, she not only began to miss classes more frequently, but she had less concentration. To make matters worse, she found two out of three teachers unsympathetic to her situation. Corresponding with this new burden on her schedule, Gabrielle's marks began to get worse at the end of the first semester. She completed her courses, with results uniformly in the 60%s, and decided to leave the program in order to focus on her son's medical needs.

Marielle, atypically for the cohort of parents, did not complain of stress or exhaustion during her time in the Laboratory Technology program. Much more apparent was her interest in the courses and her enthusiasm for learning. She felt that she had a solid grasp on the content covered in all of her courses, with the exception of maths. This comfort is evidenced by her detailed descriptions of her courses. This is not to say, however, that she did not encounter difficulties. She obviously was not able to apply herself as much to her studies as she would have liked and she constantly had to take short cuts with her homework. Importantly, she did not complain about the difficult balance between her studies and her family, and simply found ways to manage. Her one criticism and complaint was regarding her maths course in the first semester. She explained that the pre-requisite maths course in adult education had not adequately prepared her for her current maths course and that, as a result, she was quite lost. Interestingly, she did not describe these difficulties as only her own, but instead spoke

of "we". In other words, she implicated the other students in these difficulties. She also focused more of her blame on the adult education system than on the Cégep maths course or on the Cégep teacher. It is also of relevance that, despite these difficulties in maths, Marielle never sounded overwhelmed, nor did she appear to blame herself for her difficulties. Paradoxically, Marielle's best results in the first semester were in the maths course. While she received a 73% in this course, her marks in her remaining three courses ranged between 60% and 70%. Marielle was forced to drop out of the Laboratory program after completion of her second semester in the program due to the medical needs of her handicapped daughter.

Although they experienced their program quite differently, it is notable that Gabrielle and Marielle were quite similar in regards to the strategies they applied. Particularly in the first semester, neither Gabrielle nor Marielle seemed to use the resources available to them, nor go out of their way to adapt strategies that would help them in their courses. While both women spoke of soliciting the help of their teachers - particularly Gabrielle, they spoke of very few other strategies. For example, for different reasons, they did not confer with other students and tended to keep to themselves. That said, by the second semester, Marielle realized that her study methods were not adequate and she began to change her approach. She specifically recounted that she had begun to organize her notes differently, study for exams more methodically and speak to her teachers more. She also became more socially integrated in her program, although it does not appear that she used her newfound friends as a study-resource. Why neither of these women paid much attention to their academic strategies during the first semester is not clear. Perhaps they simply did not have the time or perhaps their confidence meant that they felt that they did need to devise specific strategies.

Although neither Gabrielle nor Marielle received particularly good marks, it is, nonetheless, an achievement that they managed to pass all of their courses. These two women had a particularly difficult balance between their studies and their lives outside school. While their partners supported their decision to return to school and seemed to help with the children at times, it appeared that Gabrielle and Marielle bore the bulk of the child-care responsibilities. Moreover, Gabrielle had to contribute to the household income. While it is probable that they would have experienced difficulties in their studies, like the other perseverant students in

the cohort, it is also likely that they would have been able to continue in their program. Their departures, therefore, can only be attributed to their balance between their studies and their lives outside of school. Interestingly, neither woman appeared devastated by the cards fate had dealt them in regards to their Cégep studies. They seemed to accept quite readily that they needed to give up their studies and simply promised to resume their programs as soon as they could.

4.2.3 School Career #3: "This Race is too Tough" - Departure due to Difficulty

« J'aimais ça au début, mais quand je voyais que j'avais trop de difficulté là-dedans je me suis mis à moins aimer ça. » (Justine, Interview #2, lines 1198-1200)

The women in this school category left their programs because, on top of their family and work obligations, they could not manage academically. Ida and Justine were close in age, at 38 and 37 respectively and had both signed themselves up for the Computer Science program. These women had markedly different family situations. Ida was a twice-married mother of four children, while Justine was a single mother. Both women worked one day a week.

Ida was the most accomplished academically of the two. She had obtained her DES at a regular high school and, years later, she had completed her DEC in Administration in 1996. Justine, meanwhile, had completed her secondary studies at an adult education institution. Justine also had an uncompleted DEC in Administration. Having already studied at Cégep put both Ida and Justine at ease in regards to their entry into the Computer Science program. That said, Ida's confidence was based on a feeling of academic competence, while Justine simply felt at ease in the Cégep context. Their mothers and fathers only had a primary school education.

Like a number of other parents in this cohort, their troubles manifested themselves even before they set foot in the classroom. In other words, their choice of program was not well

researched. These women had not spoken to an academic advisor regarding their program choice, nor had they read about the program beforehand. Instead, they seemed to have chosen it based on assumptions. That said, Ida's reasons for choosing the program were much clearer than Justine's. She not only had gained experience with computers during her previous DEC, but she used them frequently at work. Moreover, she enjoyed working on her computer at home and loved to learn about new programs. In a nutshell, Ida had an enthusiastic interest in computers. Justine, however, could not claim the same type of familiarity with computers. She said that she had enjoyed using them in her previous DEC, about ten years prior to the current program, and thought that her facility with computerized cash registers would equate a talent with computers. She did not have a computer at home. In regards to what prompted her decision to choose the Computer Science program, it seems that her customers at the depanneur, in telling her that computers were the "wave of the future", had a significant influence.

While these women saw their programs as an opportunity for economic mobility, Ida was also seeking professional mobility. She felt undervalued and underpaid at work and wanted to develop her computer skills in order to find a better job. Although somewhat contradictory, she had elaborated a plan in which she saw her newfound "programming" skills as either a way of allowing her to work as a computer programmer or as a way of beefing up her skills as a secretary. Unfortunately, she did not appear to know what a computer programmer did. Justine's motivations for beginning the Computer Science program were decidedly more desperate. She not only wanted a better job in order to provide for her son, but she had suffered a burnout from her job as a cashier. She felt, quite simply, that she could not continue to work in the depanneur at her age. Moreover, Justine's bout of post-partum depression had prompted her to hurriedly enrol in the Computer Science program. Upon reflection, after she dropped out of the program, she decided that she had chosen the wrong program.

Although these women's experiences were not uniform, there were some common threads between them. Ida emphasised the serious difficulties she was having in her maths course. In retrospect, she decided that she had been badly advised and should have been required to

do the pre-requisite course first. She found the workload at Cégep heavy and explained that she would have to make an effort to keep up with the material. As a whole, Ida was much more specific about her difficulties than was Justine. Justine never specified the problems she was having in her courses and she always appeared quite unconcerned despite her difficulties. That said, among the problems she did describe were her troubles with the teaching methods and with the theoretical nature of her courses. Moreover, she explained that she could not keep up with the fast pace of the courses, nor submit her homework on time. In fact, only Justine felt that she did not have enough time to dedicate to her homework and that, overall, the family-school balance interfered with her performance at school.

Ultimately, although there were differences in their experiences, these women applied quite similar strategies. In fact, they also resembled each other in the relative lack of strategies that they employed. Ida visited her teachers during office hours, while Justine did not hesitate to ask questions in class. Justine also relied on the help of her lab partner. Moreover, they both reduced their hours at work to one day a week. Justine tried to reduce her course load but, unfortunately, was obliged to take five courses in the first semester. Both women made a point of using their teachers as a resource. While it is clear that these women did try to meet the demands of their program, they did not successfully developed strategies to address their particular difficulties.

Ida dropped out of her program before the end of the semester. Justine decided not to return to her program after she had received failing grades in all of her courses. They largely blamed their teachers, as well as the Cégep system for their lack of success. According to Justine, her teachers were unsupportive. Ida, likewise, felt that the teachers did not sufficiently prioritise students with difficulties. In addition, she emphasised the fact that she had been badly advised regarding her maths class.

The blame these women assigned to their Cégeps and their teachers reveals two important elements of their experiences. First of all, they had difficulty adapting to Cégep studies. Justine had expected a pedagogical system much more akin to adult education than to Cégep. When she did not get the individualised attention she had assumed, she felt that her teachers

were not acting responsibly. She felt that teachers should answer all their students' questions and should even be willing to spend one-on-one time with each student until the student feels comfortable with the material. Ida expressed frustration with the fact that, in her mind, the Cégep system did not take the difference between older and younger students into account. She felt that the Computer Science program went too quickly for older students, like her, who were not familiar with computer programming. While her depiction of the Computer Science program as being oriented towards those students with a background in computers was accurate, this criticism also betrays her lack of research and misplaced expectations regarding the program.

The tendency to blame the Cégep system and their teachers also betrays their inability to accurately analyse their own performances. Whether or not they also attributed their departures to their own behaviour, they all seemed to negate the effect their lack of comprehension and their inability to keep up with the course load might have had. Indeed, Justine never appeared to realize that her lack of understanding might cause problems. Along a similar vein, Ida did not appear to recognize the problems that her initial lack of research into her program caused. She had waffled in her expectations of the program. In the end, she said that her program was not what she had wanted.

Ida and Justine's reactions to their departures were very similar. They expressed frustration and disappointment. This is not surprising, given that they had a lot riding on their studies and had been willing to sacrifice in order to achieve their goal. Ultimately, Justine decided that she was not "made for school", while Ida vowed never to return to Cégep. While these women did not see further Cégep studies as part of their future they did, however, anticipate further studies. Ida wanted to take computer courses, while Justine was contemplating correspondence courses in English and Accounting.

4.2.4 School Career #4: "Changing Course" - Program Change in the Face of Difficulty

> « je m'en vais en informatique, j'aimerais aller en informatique. Moi, j'scraperai pas mon informatique là, c'est pas eux autres qui vont me faire baisser les bras. Ils me connaissent pas, j'suis vraiment décidée à m'en aller en informatique pis c'est pas personne qui va me mettre des bâton dans les roues. » (Isaure, Interview #2, lines 1581-1587)

Like the previous school category, there are two women in this category. Irma was enrolled in the Laboratory Technology program, while Isaure was undertaking her studies in the Computer Science program. These women responded to the academic difficulty in their initial programs by changing to another program. While Irma dropped out of her initial program before the end of the first semester, Isaure only did so after struggling for three semesters.

Their situations at home varied considerably. At 39, Isaure was a married mother of four children, ranging in age from four to twelve. As her husband often worked overtime, Isaure was quite heavily burdened with domestic and child-care responsibilities. This meant that she had to squeeze her homework between her class schedule and her children. While this does not appear to be a principal reason for her change in programs, it certainly contributed to the exhaustion of which she complained. At 29, Irma was ten years her junior. The single mother of a school aged boy, she only saw him two weekends a month. Moreover, she did not work during her studies. This meant that she had one of the least complicated school-family balances of the cohort.

While Irma had a limited level of previous schooling, in recent years Isaure had acquired some postsecondary experience. Irma had completed her secondary studies at an adult education institution and had no postsecondary experience prior to the Laboratory Technology program. However, her rapid completion of her secondary diploma in adult education had given her a certain amount of confidence regarding Cégep studies. Similarly, Isaure had dropped out of high school and had subsequently finished her secondary schooling at an adult education institution. However, she had then gone on to do two semesters of Social Sciences at Cégep prior to the Computer Science program. As such, not only had

Isaure acquired some postsecondary experience, but she had also diminished the number of general courses she had to take during her actual program.

Interestingly, Isaure is one of the few parents who spoke of the relevance of her upbringing and of her parents' attitude towards education. Although she since came to value education, her parents had discouraged her from pursuing any schooling from an early age. It bears noting that Isaure's parents did not have more than a primary school education.

Like their counterparts in the previous category, Irma and Isaure had not researched their program choice well. They did not speak of having discussed their program choice with an academic advisor, nor had they read about their programs beforehand. Irma had chosen the Laboratory Technology program because she had enjoyed her chemistry courses in adult education. She demonstrated no detailed knowledge of the program itself, nor of the employment possibilities in the field. That said, she was motivated by her desire to work in a field that would lead to good career opportunities. Quite simply, she dreamed of a "good" career with a decent salary so that she would be able to buy a house and live well.

Isaure had largely based her decision to undertake the Computer Science program on the experiences of some members of her family, namely her nephews. As she was seeking a career that promised a good salary and decent conditions, her nephews' accounts of employment in computer programming appealed to her. She compared their descriptions with the other profession she knew well – her husband's career as an accountant – and judged Computer Science to be a better choice. Moreover, she knew that she would be privileged to the help of her nephews, should she need it. However, it should be noted that, during the first interview, she could not even describe the responsibilities of a computer programmer. When she eventually left the Computer Science program, she simply chose her husband's field. She had a rough notion of Accounting and, importantly, she had no idea whether she was interested in it or not. Time would only tell. Isaure's determination to complete a DEC in order to enter the job market with qualifications explains not only her stubborn perseverance in the Computer Science program for three semesters, but also her decision to immediately undertake another program.

Not surprisingly, and not unlike many of the other parents in this cohort, their troubles began no sooner had the program started. Both women complained of the heavy workload and explained that it was difficult to keep up with the course material. Indeed, even within the first few weeks, Isaure was staying up until four a.m., only to wake up again at eight a.m. She quickly realised that she did not know very much about computers and thus was struggling to keep up with the other students. Irma immediately emphasised the difficulties she was having in her maths course and complained of a general lack of comprehension. Both women tended to blame their teachers for their difficulties. In Isaure's case, the further she continued in the program with unsatisfactory results, the more pointed her criticisms of her teachers became. Moreover, like Ida in the previous category, Isaure felt that adults were at a disadvantage compared to the younger students.

The strategies these women employed were of a limited nature. According to Isaure, academic success requires hard work and a good teacher. As such, she invested an immense amount of time in her homework and was conscientious about keeping up with the subject matter in her courses. She seems to have relied heavily on her teachers and to have remained quite isolated from her student counterparts. The only explicit strategy that Irma seems to have employed was to reduce her course load from seven to five courses. (Isaure also had only five courses.)

There were a number of disconnects between their analysis of the reasons for their departure from their initial programs and their actual experiences. Indeed, unlike the parents who persevered in their programs, they did not appear very self-aware and, as a result, were not adept at analysing their strategies. One of the most notable factors was their seeming lack of ability to grasp the extent of their difficulties. Irma, for example, believed that her lack of comprehension was normal and that she simply had to persevere. In Isaure's case, while it is true that her difficult adaptation to Cégep and the odd incompetent teacher certainly must have contributed to her failures, she also could simply not grasp some of the material in her core courses. She explained that she had difficulties in one specific course and had had to focus on that course to the detriment of her others. In other words, in her mind, she failed her

other courses because she was forced to privilege one course too much. Not only does this explanation reveal poor strategies, but it also negates the fact that Isaure was having trouble with the course material in a number of courses. Likewise, Irma's tendency to find fault in her teachers reveals a lack of ability to analyse her situation and develop strategies.

Whereas Irma dropped out of her program by the first semester, Isaure's eventual departure from the program was less straightforward. In her first semester, Isaure failed her two core courses, but passed her other courses with above-average marks[30]. Moreover, upon repeating one of her programming courses in the third semester, she received a good grade. Unfortunately, however, her difficulties in her core courses continued and she eventually decided to leave the program after the third semester.

Interestingly, these women did not invest any more thought or time into their second program choices. As such, they were potentially committing the same mistake again. Irma envisioned pursuing an AEC in Computer Science, while Isaure entered an Accounting program at the Cégep-level. While we do not have information on Irma's change of program, we do know about Isaure's first semester in Accounting. Fortunately, despite the repetition of this poor strategy, she did much better in this second program.

While both Isaure and Irma changed programs, we only have evidence that Isaure did so successfully. In fact, while she shared much in common with Irma, as well as those in the "This Race is too Tough" school career, she did differentiate herself in a couple of ways. First of all, although inadequate, she was more systematic in her strategies. Moreover, that it was Isaure who found another program within the Cégep system in which she was successful should not be surprising. She highly valued postsecondary education, had two semesters of Cégep experience, and badly wanted a career. And, as evidenced by her inconsistent course successes in her Computer Science program, and her more consistent success in the Accounting program, she was a more able student. We should view her decision to change programs, then, as the deployment of a successful strategy, rather than as a failure.

---

[30] We do not know what her academic results were in her second semester.

4.3   Conclusion

The four school careers described in the previous pages are not solely based upon the parents' final outcomes in their programs. Instead, they are designed to highlight how certain factors combine to lead to specific outcomes. As such, each school career is characterised by specific experiences that are unique or particularly exaggerated among the parents in that category. That said, the parents also shared experiences across school careers, such as the difficult family-work-school balance or difficult adaptations in the first semester.

The parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school career distinguished themselves from the other parents by their ability to devise successful strategies. While all the parents demonstrated a willingness to work hard and sacrifice time, they did not always prove capable of adapting strategies to overcome their difficulties. In fact, some appeared completely unable to change their approach to studying, while others adopted ineffective strategies. Isaure (of the "Changing Courses" school career), for example, reacted to her difficulties in her maths course by lending it all her attention, to the detriment of her other courses. In an opposite example, Madeleine, of the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school career, allowed herself to fail her maths course so that she could still dedicate time to her other courses. She then re-took the maths course and obtained very good results. Indeed, the parents in this school career not only showed an ability to best use the resources available to them, but they were also able to navigate the school system to their advantage. Behind their adeptness at developing successful strategies was the capacity to self-analyse. In other words, they were able to see their own strengths and weaknesses and react accordingly.

The women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" shared many characteristics with those in "Struggling to the Finish Line". They not only had postsecondary experience like three of the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" but they had carefully selected their programs and grasped their course material in the same manner that their more successful counterparts did. Quite simply, then, they had two distinguishing features. First of all, their mothers and fathers had not exceeded primary school and, most importantly, their family responsibilities meant that they had to depart from their programs. They could no longer

continue their studies due to their role as principal caregiver to children in need of intensive medical attention. That two women found themselves in this situation speaks of the effect of a persistent gender division of labour in which women continue to bear the overwhelming brunt of child-rearing responsibilities.

Just as the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" and "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" resembled each other, those in the "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" school careers also had much in common. First of all, these parents tended to do a minimal amount of research into their program choice – if any. Instead, they based their selection on the opinions of their family members and even their clients, or on their workplace experiences. Moreover, three of them had attended an adult education institution prior to their Cégep studies in order to complete high school. This proved problematic not only because it gave them little knowledge of the workings of postsecondary education, but also because they tended to base their approach to studying on their experiences in adult education. With its individualised attention and respect for each student's rhythm, adult education had ill-prepared them for Cégep. Indeed, it is not surprising that they experienced difficult adaptations once in their programs. But it is not these adaptations that made them stand apart. As discussed above, it was their inability to devise successful strategies in response to their difficulties that distinguished them from the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line". Interestingly, when their strategies proved ineffective, these parents tended to fault their teachers and/or the Cégep system, rather than themselves.

CHAPTER V

A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PARENT COHORT

5.1   Introduction

In this penultimate chapter, I bring together the parents' experiences with the theoretical discussion of Chapter One. In so doing, I argue that many different elements of the parents' lives must be considered in order to fully understand what transpired during their studies. These diverse elements can be structured along the lines of temporality[31]. In other words, their past and present experiences, as well as their future aspirations, combined to determine their outcomes in their Cégep programs. That said, I argue that certain factors, specifically those related to their previous and present postsecondary experiences, are of central importance. In regards to their present experiences, it was not just that which occurred at school, but also that which occurred outside of school, that had an important effect. Particularly relevant to this thesis, of course, is the role that the family-school balance played regarding their experiences and outcomes at Cégep.

---

[31] Please see Doray *et al.* (2005*a* and *b*) for a more thorough exploration of the role of temporality in determining adults' educational experiences.

5.2   From Start to Finish: Understanding the Parents' Cégep Experiences in the Context of
       their Lives

The concept of "school career" permits us to view the parents' school experiences in the
context of their lives as a whole.   Indeed, "school career" encapsulates more than the
"sequence of events experienced by an individual for the duration of the formal learning
activity" (Doray *et al.*, 2005*a*, p. 5). It also implies the notions of temporality – past, present
and future, the interplay between the individual and the institution, and subjectivity (Ibid., 7).
In analysing the parents' Cégep experiences through such an approach we can discern what
factors were the most influential in determining their outcomes, regardless of when or where
these occurred.   In other words, as we are exploring their school experiences in the contexts
of their lives as a whole, we can consider that which is related to their past, as well as to their
present, and that which occurs at school, as well as outside of school.   Moreover, we can
begin to understand how these factors interacted.

In order to achieve such an analysis it is important to discern in what respect the parents as a
whole resembled and differed from each other. The parents in this cohort share a number of
important similarities and differences.   The most obvious similarity is their status as the
parents of dependent children.   Whether later or earlier in their lives, these individuals had
decided to have children.   They embarked on this project either with a partner or as single
mothers.   Another significant commonality shared by the parents is their modest social
background. Only one parent had both a mother and father with a high school diploma, while
a number of the parents had neither mother nor father with more than a primary school
education. Regardless of their mother and fathers' low educational attainment, though, some
of the parents went on to acquire postsecondary experience before their current Cégep
studies. Others, however, were required to complete their high school diplomas at an adult
education institution prior to entering their technical programs.   Finally, the parents
demonstrated remarkably different levels of ability in their technical programs and,
consequently, some were able to complete their programs, while others were not.

It is also important to remember that the parents are all adult returners to postsecondary
studies. In others words, at some point in the past they broke with their educational paths and

embarked (by choice or otherwise) on an alternative project. This may have occurred early on in their lives, as in the cases of some of the women who departed from high school in order to have children, or later on, after a certain amount of postsecondary studies. It is interesting to note that many of the parents left school precisely because they found themselves with children, whether planned or accidental. An obvious exception to this is Barnave who, at some point in his life as a young adult, emigrated to Québec and had to begin his life here. Moreover, for some, their technical programs constituted their second attempted return to postsecondary education.

Regardless of the fact that the parents were all returners to postsecondary education and that they shared similar social backgrounds, their experiences are defined by two main types of trajectories prior to their entry into their technical programs. These trajectories comprise those who did not complete high school before deciding to embark on technical studies and those who had already undertaken postsecondary studies[32]. For the former group, the decision to undertake technical studies acted as a rupture with their previous educational trajectory, whereas for the latter group, technical studies fell much more easily into an educational pattern they had already developed. Nevertheless, at some point in their educational trajectories, almost all of these parents had steered away from their mother and fathers' educational background[33]. In other words, whether immediately preceding their entry into their technical program or long before, when they first attended Cégep/university, these parents made a decision to pursue postsecondary studies. In a number of cases, such a decision acted as both a break from the social environment in which they grew up and from their own previous educational paths.

The question remains, then, how it came to be that they had such varying levels of educational attainment prior to their Cégep programs and, most importantly, why their

[32] There is one adult who I cannot fit into these two trajectories. Isabelle's experience is distinct in that she had completed high school, but not embarked on postsecondary studies before her experience in "Reception and Transition". As such, she much more closely resembles those students who go directly from high school to Cégep.

[33] With the exception of Barnave, whose parents had both completed high school, and Gisèle, whose mother had a DEC.

experiences and outcomes in their technical studies differed to such an extent. By exploring their social background, their previous educational experiences and, finally, their experiences while in Cégep, I hope to gain insight into these questions. Moreover, in doing so from the perspective of their life trajectories, I hope to understand how the diverse elements of their lives combined, sometimes randomly, sometimes due to explicit-decision making, to lead to their outcomes at Cégep.

Figure 5.1 The parents' educational trajectories and outcomes in the technical programs
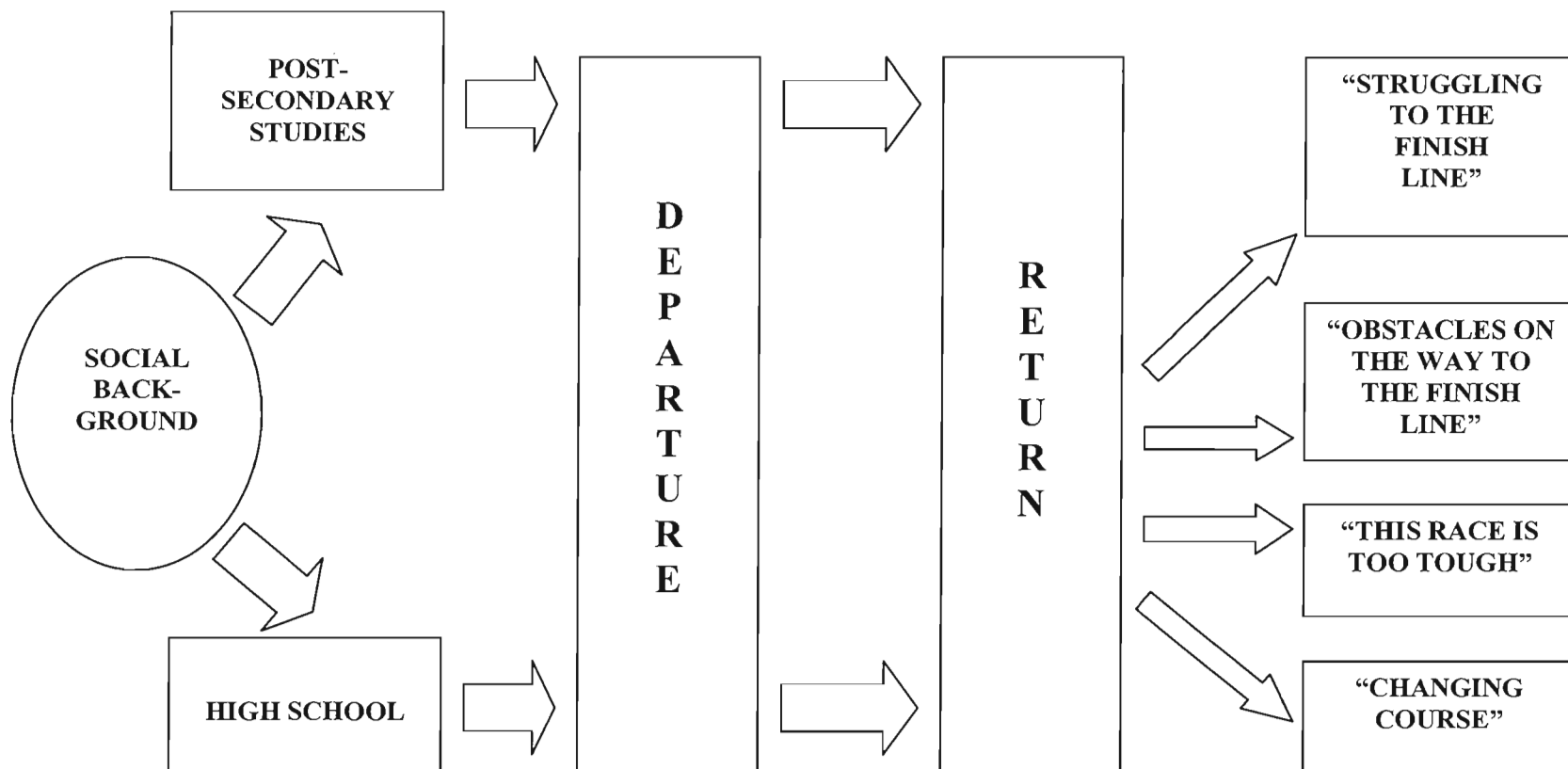
5.3   Before Their Return to School: The Roots of their Cégep Experiences

One of the most striking characteristics of the parent cohort is their relatively low educational attainment prior to their current technical studies and their mother and father's even lower educational attainment. As previously noted in Chapter Three, three of the parents had to complete their high school diploma at an adult education institution immediately prior to their Technical program[34], while five (in fact, possibly seven) had neither mother nor father who had completed high school. In fact, of the three women who had not completed high school until they returned to school, two (and probably the third) had neither mother nor father who had completed high school.

Unfortunately, with the exception of Isaure, and to a lesser extent Gisèle, we do not have nuanced information on how the parents' social background influenced their educational trajectories. However, if we are to take the statistical information on their mothers and fathers at face value, then it is safe to say that there is probably a relationship between the level of education reached by the individuals in the cohort and their mother and father's lower level of schooling. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of *habitus*, in which the attitudes and behaviour of those in one's social world are appropriated by the individual, provides an explanation.

Isaure offers us the chance to understand this dynamic. Her fathers' contempt for education most probably led to her early departure from high school. Not surprisingly, she did not undertake any formal schooling until years later, in her thirties, when she decided to complete her secondary studies at an adult education institution in order to embark on Cégep studies. Her difficulties in Cégep can be partially attributed to her lack of preparation for postsecondary studies while at an adult education institution, as well as to individual characteristics. However, the fact that she needed to complete her compulsory schooling so late in life acted as a significant disadvantage. This can only be traced back to her social

---

[34] In addition, Justine had previously had to complete her DES at an adult education institution.

background, her decision to drop out of high school and her subsequent lifecourse as mother with low-skilled, low-paying employment. In a nutshell, until her mid-thirties when she returned to school, her life trajectory reflected that of her upbringing and, more specifically, was surely influenced by her mother and fathers' lack of schooling. Importantly, these early biographical incidents had direct repercussions on her Cégep studies.

Indeed, in taking into account their social background and their probable lack of *cultural capital* regarding education, we can understand the trajectories of many of the women in the parent cohort. Given their mother and fathers' low educational attainment, it is safe to assume that a number of these women come from *social milieux* in which schooling was not prioritised and, as such, they decided to have children instead of pursuing an education. In these cases, as witnessed with Isaure, their social background determined their life trajectory and, in turn, their educational history – that is, until their current studies.

At a more general level, whether or not the parents had acquired previous postsecondary experience or not, they were all returning to school in order to achieve economic mobility. They were individuals with limited postsecondary experience, or none at all. At the very least, their social background provided them no advantages in regards to their forays into postsecondary education.

While there is a general correlation between the cohort and their mother and fathers' educational attainment, it is not, however, always consistent. Of the two parents who had pursued a university education, Marielle had neither mother nor father who had completed high school. Similarly, although among the better educated of the parents' mothers and fathers, Madeleine had only a mother who had graduated from high school. Likewise, Gabrielle had neither mother nor father with more than a primary school education but, nevertheless, she had almost completed a DEC prior to her technical studies. Not surprisingly, their attitude to school spoke of familiarity and a pleasure in learning. Moreover, Marielle demonstrated a great amount of confidence regarding her academic skills. Along similar lines, throughout his Cégep studies, Barnave employed systematically successful strategies, despite the fact that we can safely assume that his parents did not have

much formal schooling. The educational paths of these individuals, then, diverged from the more limited experiences of their mothers and fathers.

In fact, the notions of *habitus* and *cultural capital* cannot explain large parts of the parents' trajectories. The most obvious problem is that, at some point in their lives, every parent in the cohort made the decision to pursue postsecondary education regardless of their mother and father's lower educational attainment[35]. In other words, whether successfully or not, they attempted to break away from their mother and father's educational patterns. A second point is that the parents' social origins are too similar to account for the differences between their life trajectories and, more specifically, their educational careers. In other words, while it is true that some parents had mothers and fathers who did not get much past primary studies and that others had mothers and fathers who had some level of secondary studies, the fact remains that their social background is, on the whole, remarkably modest. These differences do not explain why some parents pursued postsecondary studies long before their technical studies and why others had dropped out of high school and were forced to attend adult education institutions before enrolling in their Cégep studies. Finally, there are too many exceptions to the rule to support the concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus* (Ibid.).

These trajectories, then, point towards the more fluid propositions that blend *structure* and *human agency*[36]. Heinz (1999 and 2001), like Giddens (1979), proposes an approach that encompasses the socio-economic background, life experiences, decision-making processes, transitions and *linked-lives*[37] of the individual. By allowing for both the imprint of socio-economic background and the role of individually-determined factors such as decision-making, Heinz is considering structural factors without being deterministic. Importantly, he

---

[35] A possible except is Gisèle, for we do not know if her mother undertook Cégep studies prior or simultaneously to her own entry into her technical program.

[36] Alheit (1994) frames the relationship between the individual and societal structures as the interplay between structure and subjectivity. He explains that individuals have the impression that they determine their biographies although they are, in fact, largely influenced by the social and economic constraints of society..

[37] By *linked lives*, Heinz is referring to a concept proposed by Elder (1995). The idea of *linked lives* takes into account the "interrelationships of partners'. Spouses' parents' and children's life courses" (Heinz, 2001, p. 5).

125

places individuals in the context of socio-economic changes that occur both at global and societal levels. In other words, he highlights the influence of macro-structures on individual lives. According to Heinz, "variations among nations in rhythms of life and in the timing of transitions are seen as resulting from differences in labour markets, educational institutions, and social policies that structure the biography from school to retirement" (Heinz, 2001, p. 4).

The parents in this cohort were, indeed, reacting to the socio-economic structures of the day. They live in a Québec very distinct from that of their parents. The values and behaviour that worked for their parents may no longer work for the generation of the cohort. Indeed, formally recognized education has become increasingly important in today's job-market and a higher level of education is generally required. The parents' common decision to pursue a postsecondary degree in order to enter the job-market can be interpreted as a reflection of this reality. They were simultaneously responding to contemporary employment realities and taking advantage of the educational opportunities available to them. Barnave's declaration that one needs a degree in order to work in an "interesting field" and Justine's continued gaze towards education, despite her decision that she is "not made for school", are manifestations of the (subjectively perceived) relationship between education and the job-market.

It is, in fact, no accident that technical studies appealed to the parents in the cohort. They were generally individuals with low educational attainment who desired better working conditions and saw technical studies at Cégep as a sure way to achieve their goal. Indeed, both the Computer Science program and the Laboratory Technology program promise high job placement rates and require only three years of full-time studies. According to Hayes (2000), "[i]n a world where opportunities are not equal, qualifications offer a degree of 'transparency' in relation to progression to higher education and employment for people from less privileged groups" (p.10).

It is interesting to note that, not only did some parents already possess postsecondary experience while other did not, but that there was a significant age difference between some of the parents. Said differently, some of the parents had perceived the importance of

postsecondary studies quite early on in their adult lives, while others were entertaining this idea only once in their thirties. Of course, for individuals such as Gabrielle and particularly Isabelle, their young age may explain their quick transitions from high school to postsecondary studies. For their generation, the necessity of postsecondary studies may be an unarguable reality.

The parents' common decision to embark on technical studies at Cégep is certainly structured to a large degree by contemporary socio-economic realities. That said, it can also be viewed as a product of individual decision-making and action – in other words, individual *agency*. At some point in their recent lives, then, the parents decided to change the course of their lives by attending Cégep. Importantly, they went to great lengths in order to create the conditions necessary to embark upon their technical programs. Indeed, as evidenced by their accounts, the decision to undertake Cégep studies involved planning and self-initiative. In some cases, they had to undertake studies in adult education for years prior to their Cégep studies. In many cases they had to re-arrange their lives, juggling schedules, redistributing domestic responsibilities and even moving, in order to begin their technical programs. The parents, then, employed a great amount of individual initiative and effort within the confines of the socioeconomic realities of the day and, specifically, the nature of Québec's postsecondary educational system.

In their concept of *careership*, Hodkinson and Sparke (1997) present a model that is particularly adept at explaining the educational trajectories of the parents and their common decision to embark on a technical program. The authors view ruptures, such as the parents' divergence from their own parents' educational background, as *self-initiated turning points* (Hodkinson and Sparke, 1997, p. 39). Behind this concept is the notion that "the habitus of the person is changed" (Op. Cit.). In other words, through their experiences and changes in the world around them, the parents' *schemata* were transformed, which then led them to respond to their realities in new ways. As this dialectical shift occurred, their *habitus* and, consequently, their perceptions of their *horizons for action* shifted. This then brought about their decision to embark on postsecondary studies – whether long before their technical

program, as in the case of Gabrielle, Ida, Justine, Madeleine and Marielle[38], or immediately preceding the initiation of the program, as in the case of Isaure, Irma and Gisèle.

In the cases of Justine of the "This Race is too Tough" school career, as well as Irma and Isaure of the "Changing Course" school career, they made the decision to return to school regardless of both their parents' low educational attainment and their own limited educational experiences. Isaure, as mentioned earlier, came from a family with little esteem for education and had dropped out of high school as a result of her parents' pressure to do so. Her decision to return to school took place in the context of a spouse and family-in-law who were very supportive of her desire for educational attainment. In other words, along with changes in Isaure's *habitus*, came changes in her attitude towards education.

While Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theory of *careership* can explain the parents' decision to undertake a technical degree, it cannot always explain what transpired afterwards. In Hodkinson and Sparkes' interpretation, individuals undertake decisions that then lead to *turning-points*. In other words, they lead to changes in the individual's routine and identity. And, indeed, in Madeleine's case, her previous postsecondary education did lead to such a *self-initiated turning-point*, in that her familiarity with postsecondary studies meant that her decision to undertake technical studies was met with an ability in her technical programs[39]. Her decision and her subsequent success in her program then lead to a *turning-point* in her life. Likewise, among the parents from the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school category, both Gisèle's decision to complete high school in adult education and to begin the Laboratory Technology program, and Barnave's decision to leave his job and embark upon the Computer Science program, resulted in success in the program and a *turning-point* in her life. Indeed, in Gisèle's case, we know that she achieved the professional mobility for which she was aiming. However, not all the parents experienced such success. Parents such as Justine and Irma, undertook Cégep studies but were unable to stay in their programs. In fact, Justine had

---

[38] Barnave had pursued one year of postsecondary studies in the Congo, but, given that his parents completed high school, it does not seem that he was diverging from his background.

[39] Although Gabrielle and Marielle had to depart from their programs, regardless.

attempted to embark on Cégep studies while in her early twenties, only to depart within the first year. As such, while a combination of changing *schemata* and individual *agency* led to their decisions to embark upon their technical programs, it did not lead to a change in their *routines*. Instead, they departed from their programs and reverted to their previous situations[40].

The question remains, then, what led some of the parents to experience successful *self-initiated turning points* (in other words, complete their programs), while others did not. Two additional explanations lie in their more recent past and their present.

Those parents with previous postsecondary experience tended to fare better than those without such experience. Therefore, if a parent had previously pursued postsecondary education, then his/her chances of success in the technical program were greater. For example, Madeleine, who had only a mother who graduated from high school, had obtained a Social Sciences university degree and, as a result, took a number of academic skills with her to the Laboratory Technology program.

Boudon (1973), like Bourdieu, argues that social class influences the individual's educational attainment. However, he also points out that the further the individual progresses through the educational system, the weaker the impact of social class on his/her academic performance. He attributes the academic success of those who originate from lower social strata to their academic talent. Lahire (1994, 1998) offers another possible explanation for the success of students from disadvantaged social backgrounds and, in so doing, introduces a concept applicable to the parents in this study. According to Lahire, family values and their transmission have a much greater effect on the child's academic performance than the family's socio-economic position. It is therefore not the parents' *school capital* that will

---

[40] Isaure had a similar experience in her first program choice but, in changing programs, she was, in fact, successful. As such, her decision to begin technical studies and then change programs did manifest itself as a *turning-point* in her life. Like Irma and Justine, Ida did not succeed in her program for reasons related to her academic skills. However, unlike them, she had had previous Cégep experience and had been working as a secretary as a result. Nonetheless, as her decision to undertake the Computer Science program did not prove fruitful, she did not experience an additional *turning-point* in her life.

determine how a child does in school. Instead, it is how much attention the parents pay to their child's education and the value they attribute to this education.

The concept of *school capital*[41] explains some of the parents' experiences in their technical programs. Of the four parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school category, Barnave, Isabelle and Madeleine had postsecondary experience. In fact, Isabelle not only had the advantage of having done one year of "Reception and Transition", but she basically had the experience and advantages of a recent high school graduate. In addition, Gabrielle and Marielle of the "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" school career had postsecondary experience and managed to pass all of their courses despite particularly difficult school-family-work balances. In other words, only Gisèle distinguished herself among the perseverant parents in terms of a lack of previous school experience.

Gisèle had dropped out of high school and had only completed her secondary school requirements at an adult education ten years later, just before embarking upon the Laboratory Technology program. However, she exhibited relative confidence regarding her academic skills and, as she progressed through the program, this confidence appeared well founded. From the outset, Gisèle distinguished herself from the other parents who had preceded their Cégep studies with high school completion at an adult education institution. First of all, her program choice was well researched and based on interest. Secondly, she anticipated a tough program and willingly adjusted her study habits. Lastly, she adapted well to the program and to the other students. Indeed, she was one of the few parents who felt at ease with her younger counterparts. Behind this facility in the program were a number of significant factors. Regardless of the fact that she had no postsecondary experience, she had always found school easy, whether in high school or adult education. Moreover, she had based her program choice on precisely those subjects that she had the most ability in and that she enjoyed the most. Furthermore, although she had dropped out of high school, her parents seemed to possess more *school capital* than most in the cohort. Her mother had almost

---

[41] We use the term *school capital* in the first sense denoted by Coulangeon (2003), as a set of "cognitive resources".

completed high school and, later on, had studied at Cégep, a DEC, while her father valued education highly. Despite the fact that he did not have a high school diploma, he had encouraged reading and the acquisition of knowledge – a factor that Gisèle claimed to have influenced her heavily. In other words, Gisèle's facility at school might indeed be related to her parents' attitude towards education.

Although unrelated to her previous school experience, Gisèle's family-school balance bears including in the equation. Indeed, her situation at home contributed to her success in the Laboratory Technology program. Although she bore most of the child-care responsibilities, her children were of school age and thus afforded her more time than younger children might have. Moreover, she did not have to work during her studies and her husband was morally supportive of her school project.

While the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" and the "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" school careers tended to have previous postsecondary experience, the effect of *school capital* upon the parents in the "Changing Courses" and "This Race is too Tough" school careers is less clear. Indeed, three of the four women in these categories, had had Cégep experience. Whereas neither Justine nor Isaure had completed their degrees, Ida already possessed a DEC in Administration.

While Ida's previous Cégep experience seems to have made her adaptation smoother, she nevertheless exhibited a number of difficulties. First and foremost was the fact that her program choice was poorly researched. As such, her expectations of the program and the content of the program itself did not actually correspond. This proved disadvantageous for two reasons. Firstly, she had not anticipated the challenges she would face in terms of academic difficulty and, secondly, she was disappointed in the content of the program. Moreover, she had been badly advised and obviously did not have the pre-requisite knowledge necessary for her maths course. Once enrolled in her program, Ida had difficulty in her core courses and proved unable to adjust her academic strategies.

It bears noting that neither of Ida's parents had completed high school and that she had dropped out of her initial Cégep studies in order to raise a family. Ida had, in fact, undertaken her previous DEC in two phases, with more than ten years between the time she had begun her studies and the time she had completed them. This broken trajectory may have meant that she was never fully academically integrated into her previous studies. Importantly, it had been almost twenty years since she had had to choose a program – a factor that may have affected her poor program choice in her current studies. Moreover, despite her passion for the field, Ida did not possess much knowledge of computer programming. In sum, she began the Computer Science program without solid previous postsecondary experience and without much, if any, familiarity with computer programming.

5.4   During Their Studies: The Factors that Influenced Their Experiences at College

As the parents' outcomes at Cégep cannot be predicted by their past experiences, we must therefore look at their immediate experiences in their technical programs to understand their outcomes. In other words, we must consider how they fared academically and socially at Cégep, as well as how they managed their competing roles as student and care-giver. In doing so, we must pay particular attention to the dynamic between the parents and the educational institutions they attended, as well as to the dynamics of the family-school balance. In exploring these factors, we come to see the importance of the parents' *individual agency* in determining how and why they persevered, departed or changed programs. In other words, it was the individual's ability to adapt to his/her programs, devise strategies, and pull together resources that, in the end, decided whether s/he would be perseverant or not.

5.4.1   The Interplay between the Institution and the Individual

Understanding educational trajectories through the subjective perspective allows us key insight not only into how individuals perceive their experiences, but why they do. Focussing on how subjective interpretation affects school experiences, a number of researchers examine educational trajectories by looking at attitudes towards learning. Others, in developing the

concepts of *integration* and *commitment*, have looked past subjectivity and have instead focussed much more on the dynamic between the institution and the individual. As such, these authors recognise the importance of subjectivity but are also able to explain the development of individual behaviours in the context of the educational institution.

Dubet (1994) and Dubet and Martuccelli (1996) are interested in how the individual perceives and gives coherence to his/her experiences. In their minds, although school acts as a socializing force, it is ultimately the individual who filters the rules and codes of the institution according to his/her own perspective. Dubet and Martuccelli argue that, in order to understand the educational institution, we must grasp how students create their social relations, strategies and meanings within the school context (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996, p. 14). They specify that integration is an important aspect of being a student: "Être élève, c'est comprendre et intérioriser les attentes de l'organisation, se situer dans l'ordre des hierarchies scolaires, c'est aussi se socialiser à travers le jeu des groupes d'appartenance et de groupes de référence" (Ibid., 62). With this integration comes the development of strategies with which to deal with the perceived rules and norms of the school. Finally, the subjectivization of the experience allows the individual to distance him/herself from the norms and rules of the school and apply an individual interpretation. Importantly, while Dubet and Martuccelli emphasize individual subjectivity and the role the institution plays in shaping this perspective, they do not deny the effect of structural factors that lie outside the educational institution.

The process that Dubet and Martuccelli describe is an important one in understanding the parents' experiences in their technical programs. With one exception, all of the parents experienced a difficult adaptation to Cégep. Their complaints largely centred on the pedagogical style, the fast pace of the courses, and the heavy workload. However, as noted earlier, the perseverant students quickly distinguished themselves from those in the "Changing Course" and "This Race is too Tough" school careers. Once the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school career understood what was required of them, they found ways of making certain that they could achieve this. As noted previously, their strategies were often meticulous. Barnave, for example, would read ahead on certain subjects

in order to make sure that he was up-to-date on the course material – an approach particularly appropriate for the ever-changing nature of information technology. In recognizing that her study techniques were inefficient, Isabelle asked a teacher for advice and quickly began to focus on general comprehension, rather than detailed note-taking. In such examples, these parents assessed their own abilities, evaluated what was required of them and adjusted accordingly.

The parents in the latter categories failed to grasp the evaluation system their courses, their roles as students and their teachers' roles, and did not learn how to negotiate course selection for maximum advantage. Moreover, they failed to recognise the significance of their difficulties until it was too late[42]. Indeed, for one reason or another, Justine, Ida, Irma and Isaure never seemed to adequately understand nor "interiorize" (Ibid., 62) how the Cégep system functions. Consequently, they appeared at a loss to understand why the strategies they applied did not work. In contrast, the perseverant parents appeared to grasp the expectations of the teachers and the structure of their programs as a whole. This corresponds to Dubet and Martuccelli (1996) explanation that:

> Au lycée, la charge de travail, la diversité des méthodes d'enseignement, le poids des contrôles, l'horizon du baccalauréat, et surtout la distance entre les goûts et les intérêts, font apparaître plus nettement le métier d'élève et développent un instrumentalisme scolaire. (p. 248)

In reconciling themselves with their programs, they were then able to develop a slew of strategies that facilitated their Cégep experience[43].

---

[42] Lahire (1994) describes students who have not had the advantage of practical and moral encouragement from their parents as not possessing the "dispositions, les demarches cognitives et comportementales leur permettant de répondre adéquatement aux exigences et injunctions scolaires" (p.80). While the non-perseverant parents' behaviour might have been independent from their parents' influence, we can probably link it to their previous school experience

[43] This does not mean, however, that their adaptations were easy. Both their busy schedules and the workload remained problematic. As evidenced by Isabelle and Madeleine, they suffered from exhaustion and, at times, desperation, due to these factors. Some parents mentioned adaptation difficulties more specific to their individual experiences. Barnave, for example, had trouble adjusting to the pedagogical style in Cégep due to his previous schooling in the Congo.

Dubet and Martuccelli imply that the subjectivization of the student experience occurs after a successful integration into the school system. However, in the case of the parents, it seemed to occur in both the cases involving perseverance, as well as those involving departure. Not surprisingly, the parents in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" tended to express distance, anger and disappointment with their Cégep experiences and all who comprised these experiences. This is particularly notable in the case of Ida, who declared that she would never return to Cégep, and Justine, who came to the conclusion that she was "not made for school". In regards to the perseverant parents, as they grew more familiar with their programs, they distinguished more readily between their interests and disinterests, as well as between the courses and teachers they did or did not appreciate. Interestingly, and in opposition to Dubet and Martuccelli's postulation, they did not appear to "distance" themselves from their programs, nor from the Cégep institutions as a whole. Indeed, while they certainly had a stronger sense of themselves as students, they appeared more integrated in their programs and with their fellow students.

Tinto (1987) develops the concept of *integration*. Tinto distinguishes between *intellectual* and *social integration*, arguing that the absence of either one may lead to student departure from college. Moreover, he points out that a lack of *social integration* can be so debilitating that it leads to an absence of *intellectual integration* or vice versa (Ibid., 108-109). Like Dubet and Martuccelli (1996), Tinto recognises what he calls the "structural" and "normative" aspects of student integration. In other words, whereas "structural" *intellectual integration* involves meeting the academic standards set by the institution, "normative" *intellectual integration* means that the individual understands and identifies with the academic system of the institution.

Normative *intellectual integration* seemed to be lacking among the parents in the "Changing Courses" and "This Race is too Tough" school categories. Justine, for example, misunderstood the evaluation system at Cégep to the point where she failed her physical education course. Both Isaure and Justine thought it entirely the responsibility of the teachers to make sure they could grasp the course material. In fact, Justine expected an individualised

teacher-student rapport very similar to that which she had experienced in adult education. Behind their specific criticisms and frustrations was a general discontent with the academic system in Cégep and with how it was affecting their experiences. Not surprisingly, the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" had quickly grasped the expectations of their teachers and, moreover, demonstrated a strategic understanding of how their programs worked. In fact, the more they progressed in their programs, the more familiar they seemed with their teachers, fellow students and the courses and, thus, the more able they were to devise study strategies. Indeed, Tinto links successful *integration* with the development of skills: "the greater students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills" (Tinto, 1987, p. 130-131).

Tinto highlights the characteristics and conditions of student integration, both in terms of how it is affected by the students and by the institution. He cautions, for example, that the relationship between student investment in learning and perseverance is not a straightforward one. According to Tinto, "[m]uch depends on the degree to which student involvement is a meaningful and valued part of the classroom experience. Having a voice without being heard is often worse than having no voice at all" (Ibid., 131). And, indeed, parents such as Justine and Ida ("This Race is too Tough") were discouraged by their experiences in the classroom. Ida claimed that teachers only focussed on the "good students" (in her mind, the "good" students equated the younger students), to the detriment of the weaker students. Justine was immensely frustrated when one teacher repeatedly refused to answer her questions. Whether such factors within the classroom were critical in determining their departures is debatable. However, they certainly contributed to the parents' sense of alienation and isolation, which, in turn, contributed to their departures. Such experiences contrast with those of the four parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school category. These students rarely blamed their teachers and, in fact, sympathised with them. Moreover, in a few cases, they felt encouraged and even favoured by their teachers. By the second interview, Madeleine, who had initially been reticent to ask any questions of her teachers lest she draw negative attention to herself, described a warm relationship with her maths teacher. This rapport obviously

encouraged her, not only in terms of her academic performance, but also regarding her general sense of ease in the program.

Ashar and Skenes (1993) argue that among adult students in a university-level Commerce program, *social integration* influenced student departure, while *intellectual integration* did not. Although *social integration* certainly did not appear to have taken a lesser role over *intellectual integration* among the parents, it was nonetheless important. Indeed, the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" distinguished themselves from all the other parents in regards to this form of integration. For Barnave and Isabelle, their relationships with their fellow students appeared a critical element of their success. Although less important to their success, Gisèle and Madeleine also maintained good working relationships with their colleagues. Interestingly, whereas Barnave and Gisèle seemed immediately willing to interact with their classmates, it took Isabelle and particularly Madeleine more time. As such, their *intellectual integration* preceded their *social integration*. None of the parents in the other three school categories used their student counterparts as a resource and none appeared willing or able to integrate with them socially. The result was that a few of them were socially quite isolated. In many cases, they felt that their age or their life experiences made it difficult to associate with the students fresh out of high school. Of the women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line", Gabrielle, for example, felt unaccepted by the younger students, while Marielle was uninterested and saw socializing as a waste of time. Ida and Irma, of the "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Courses" school careers respectively, expressed resentment towards their younger counterparts as they were seen as being at an advantage compared to the older students. In Isaure's case, because she did not have any contact information for her fellow students, she failed an exam and, consequently, a course.

In exploring student perseverance, Pirot and de Ketele (2000) use the term *insertion*, as opposed to *integration*. This difference is important. *Insertion* implies student entry into school with the individual's "baggage", in other words his/her socio-cultural background, previous school experiences and life situation. *Integration*, however, invokes the idea of assimilation; that the student adopts and adapts to the school system, regardless of his/her

background and past experiences. Given the obvious links between the parents' past school experiences, not to mention their socio-economic background, we must use Tinto (1987)'s concept of *integration* with caution[44]. While this concept encompasses to a large degree the parents' experiences in their technical programs, we cannot use it to the exclusion of taking the parents' past experiences and background into account.

Pirot and de Ketele (2000) analyse the effect of student strategies on their academic performance and perseverance. The focus of their analysis is two-fold. First of all, they highlight how the specificity of academic programs determines the kind of strategies students develop. Secondly, they privilege the role of the individual in affecting his/her academic outcome over the role of the institution. Pirot and de Ketele distinguish between two types of commitment: *quantitative* and *qualitative commitment*. *Qualitative commitment* involves more "holistic" strategies, based on, for example, general comprehension. *Quantitative commitment* is more "superficial" and includes more "serialist" strategies, such as preoccupation with the number of hours spent studying.

Substantiating their assertion that *qualitative commitment* is more instrumental in determining a student's success than *quantitative commitment*, are the counter-examples of Isabelle ("Struggling to the Finish Line") and Isaure ("Changing Courses"). Whereas Isabelle altered her study strategies in order to focus more on general comprehension than on details and, in so doing, reduced the amount of time she spent on homework, Isaure continued to spend long hours on her homework despite limited academic success. In her mind, the number of hours spent on homework, not the specific methods applied, should equate success - an approach that Isabelle quickly dismissed. As she continued to obtain poor results, Isaure's frustration mounted and she began to blame her teachers, rather than her unsuccessful strategies. Indeed, Pirot and de Ketele assert that "[l]es étudiants qui ont une approche 'en surface' décrivent en effet leur engagement plutôt par des indicateurs quantitatifs, tandis ceux qui ont une approche 'en profondeur' les décrivent par des indicateurs principalement qualitatifs" (p.

---

[44] As mentioned above, Dubet and Martuccelli's (1996) make the point that they do not deny the structural factors that lie outside school. However, as their theory is based on the experiences of elemtary and high school age students, they do not make reference to previous school experiences.

389). According to the authors, it is this more "in-depth" approach that leads to successful strategies at school. Interestingly, they also link the possession of effective strategies to previous school experience: "En outre, ce sont les étudiants qui ont le mieux réussi en fin de secondaire qui travaillent le plus et qui manifestent davantage des approches d'étude globalistes (faire un résumé, un plan de la matière, relier les notions entres elles, etc.)" (p. 381).

The examples of Isabelle and Isaure point to another element of Pirot and de Ketele's theory. One of the four aspects of their definition of commitment is the extent to which "l'étudiant prend conscience de ses démarches d'apprentissage et adopte un regard réflexif sur ses apprentissages..." (Doray *et al.*, 2003*a*,. p. 363). Indeed, as mentioned previously, the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school category all demonstrated a degree of self-reflection that enabled them to adapt successful academic strategies. The parents in the "Changing Courses" and "This Race is too Tough" school categories did not possess this tendency towards self-analysis. Indeed, they tended to deflect blame for their failures from themselves towards their teachers, their academic advisors, their situations outside school or a combination of all three.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000*a* and *b*) propose that individuals will attribute meaning to learning that will, in turn, affect how the individual behaves in a learning context. "These meanings and notions are formed and reformed as part of the meaning-making which takes place in social interaction while giving shape and direction to that same process" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000*b*, p. 5). In other words, what occurred in the learners' past, as well as their present experiences, will affect their *learning dispositions* and, therefore, their actions.

Bloomer and Hodkinson also point out that intrinsic to the notion of *learning dispositions* is the idea of "worthwhileness" (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000*a*, p. 598). Indeed, all the parents attributed value to postsecondary education as they saw it as a vehicle towards professional and/or economic mobility. Moreover, as the perseverant students progressed in their programs, they found more value in the course content as it brought them closer to their ultimate goal of professional integration into the workforce. In other words, their progression

through the program validated the efforts they were making towards program completion. In a reverse example, as Justine confronted her inability to succeed in the program, she could no longer justify the economic cost of embarking on postsecondary studies. Unfortunately, while the notion of *learning dispositions* does partly capture the process involved in individual participation in learning, it leaves much unexplained. Indeed, the value an individual attributes to learning is not enough to explain how and why they persevere or depart from their educational project.

A direct descendant of Bloomer and Hodkinson's concept of *learning dispositions* is Gallacher *et al.* (2002) and Crossan *et al.* (2003)'s notion of *learner identity*. In fact, this notion is a cross between *learning dispositions* and Hodkinson and Sparke's (1997) aforementioned concept of *careership*. By conceiving of the concept of *learner identity*, Crossan *et al.* highlight the interaction between the learner and the learning activity. They define this interaction as occurring between the educational institution, including the educational providers, and the individual's subjective perspective. Gallacher *et al.* and Crossan *et al.* view *learner identities* as crucial in allowing individuals to engage in learning.

The departures of Ida and Justine ("This Race is too Tough") conjure up the notion of *fragile learner identities* (Gallacher *et al.*, 2002). The authors point out that, while the process of acquiring a *learner identity* is usually associated with a growing self-confidence, it can actually be a much more tentative experience. "Engagement with learning may begin, falter, stop, then start again as people weave learning into their lives" (p. 506). Ida and Justine began their Cégep experience with great enthusiasm and optimism. Unfortunately, however, their excitement was soon quelled with difficult adaptations, frustrations with the pedagogical system and eventual failure. These women expressed great disappointment. Ida vowed never to return to Cégep, while Justine decided that she "was not made for school". As such, and following the logic of Gallacher *et al.* (2002) and Crossan *et al.* (2003), the above-mentioned parents had begun their Cégep experiences with a certain self-confidence and image of themselves as learners (whether acquired in adult education or previous postsecondary studies). Their Cégep experiences then altered these *learner identities*.

Again, while the concept of *learner identities* does take into account a number of important factors, such as subjective perspective and commitment, as well as structural and institutional factors, it does not manage to explain why some individuals are able to persevere and others not. Indeed, both Madeleine and Ida had healthy *learner identities* based on successful experiences in their previous postsecondary studies. Moreover, Ida enjoyed a much easier school-family-work balance and appeared more interested in her chosen program. Nevertheless, it was Madeleine and not Ida who persevered in her program. The reasons for her success therefore lie beyond her *learner identity*.

Although the concepts highlighted in the preceding pages focus on different aspects of the individual's experience within the educational institution, they do so in a complementary way. As such, they all shed valuable light on the parents' experiences at Cégep. Indeed, they not only serve to explain how some parents were perseverant and others not, but, as a whole, they revealed the extent to which there are a range of elements related to the school experience. Dubet and Martuccelli (1996), as well as Tinto (1987), offer us a general framework that can explain the processes that led to perseverance or departure of the parents, with the exception of those who departed due to their family-school balance. While Dubet and Martuccelli's analysis is based more on the subjective experience than Tinto's, these authors share the common goal of understanding how some students adapt to the school system and develop the necessary strategies when others do not. Following this logic, Pirot and de Ketele (2000) look in more detail at how students develop appropriate strategies. Finally, while Bloomer and Hodkinson's notion of *learning dispositions* (2000a), as well as the concept of *learner identities* as proposed by Gallacher *et al.* (2002) and Crossan *et al.* (2003) do not explain perseverance and departure, they do describe an important element of the student experience. Moreover, the development of *learner identities* can be seen as a process which reflects the accumulation of a number of subjective and structural factors.

5.4.2   Keeping the Scales Equilibrated: The Balance between Life Inside and Outside School

Women constitute the overwhelming majority of parents who return to school and, indeed, are most affected by the school-family balance. Nevertheless, we cannot view this balance as a uniquely feminine phenomenon. Indeed, as witnessed by Barnave, men with dependent children who return to school also have to negotiate care-giving responsibilities.

Courtney suggests that adult learning be viewed as a "choice among competing activities" (Courtney, 1995, p. 119). In the literature on time-management studies, it is often argued that learning projects are the first to go when competing against work and family. Indeed, when confronted with her son's medical situation, Gabrielle decided to leave her program as she could not afford to stop working or to ignore her child's needs. That said, there are a number of parents in the cohort who did not give up their studies despite the difficult balance. Some of the parents, in fact, seemed willing to sacrifice other aspects of their lives rather than leave their program. Isabelle and Madeleine, for instance, gave up large amounts of time with their daughters in order to be able to dedicate the amount of time necessary to their studies. Ida reduced her work hours significantly in order to be able to pursue her program, while Barnave quickly left his part-time employment once he realised that it was jeopardising his marks. Behind this stubborn refusal to give up their studies was their motivation. For many of the parents, their educational could not be considered a "voluntary activity", as suggested in the literature on time management. Instead, it was a necessary step towards professional and economic mobility. In a few cases, namely Barnave, Isabelle, Justine and Madeleine, success was imperative for the economic well-being of their entire family.

In attempting to grasp how the parents managed their Cégep programs, it is necessary to understand the conditions under which they studied. In so doing, it becomes clear that their Cégep experiences truly were a *balancing* act. The single mothers, for example, had a much more delicate school-family balance than many of the other parents. The challenges they faced can be interpreted as a question of resources. Whereas Isabelle could rely on her partner to pick up their baby from daycare, Justine and Madeleine did not have this small luxury. Other parents felt tremendous financial pressures and, again in the cases of Justine and

Madeleine, had no choice but to work during their studies. Indeed, in Justine's case, her situation as single-mother not only accentuated her academic difficulties in that she could not find enough time to study, but it meant that she could not afford to change programs once she departed from Computer Science. Regardless of the specifics of each case, however, it remains that all of the parents were forced to grapple with a severe shortage of time and, in a number of cases, money. While in a number of cases they successfully managed these balancing acts, in other cases – namely those of Gabrielle and Marielle – their responsibilities as the principal care-givers to their children, were simply too much.

What is most remarkable about these parents, then, was their ability to exploit the limited resources available to them. Many of them went to great measures to create the conditions that would increase their chances of success in the program. Particularly remarkable was their ability to make do with very little, namely time. Indeed, a number of the parents, particularly the perseverant students, took advantage of every bit of free time that they had in order to study.

The question remains, however, if this difficult balance between family responsibilities and school actually determined their outcomes. In the cases of Gabrielle and Marielle it is very clear that it was this balance, and not their school experience, that led to their departures. However, in the other cases, this seems less certain. While we cannot underestimate the degree to which this balance complicated their studies, nor the tremendous efforts the parents made in order to overcome the odds against them, the explanations for their perseverance or departure lay elsewhere. In Madeleine and Isabelle's cases, for example, the school-family balance rendered their perseverance more fragile but did not ultimately steer them away from program completion. In Ida, Irma, Isaure and Justine's cases, the difficulties that lead to their departures or program changes must also be attributed to reasons other than the school-family balance. Indeed, although this balance made their school experiences much tougher and, ultimately, helped to tip the odds against them, it did not determine their outcome.

5.4.3   Structural Constraints that Stick: Gender

It is no accident that nine out of ten of the parents in this cohort are women. Indeed, this balance respects Whaley's (2000) assertion that, in Scotland, the majority of adult returners with children are women. Due to the nature of women's life trajectories, their educational careers are often "interrupted" as they, by and large, tend to be the care-givers of the family unit. As such, they often return to school later in life, once their family situation allows them to do so[45]. Nevertheless, as witnessed by the experiences of the parents in the cohort, family responsibilities continue to colour the school experience.

It is frequently argued that lifecourse models are based on the experiences of men and do not take women into account. In the literature on the workforce, Moen and Han found that:

> The existing study and modelling of occupational careers typically views workers as without family responsibilities. Thus, family factors are frequently discarded while, at the same time, the institutional organization of career paths presumes that someone else – a wife – will facilitate an employee's occupational allegiance and mobility. (Moen and Han, 2001, p. 436)

Importantly, then, due to women's childbearing and childrearing responsibilities, such life trajectory models cannot be assumed to represent women's experiences. Merrill (1999) describes women's working lives as typically involving "low-paid female work interspersed by periods in the home bringing up children" (p.104). In her study of working-class women in Northern Ireland, Heenan (2002) found that "women were willing to give up or postpone their own educational opportunities in order to help their families. The women displayed characteristics that have been described as indicative of feminine duty..." (p. 48). While Heenan associates this gender division of labour with class background, Marks and Houston found similar cultural values amongst middle class women. Despite the assumption of gender equality, these young women tended to assume that they would be primary caregivers and, therefore, did not aspire to postsecondary education or to full-time careers.

---

[45] Such trajectories can be contrasted with the educational paths of "traditional students", who transition from high school to postsecondary education without interruption and who, typically, have fewer responsibilities in their lives outside school.

The women in the parent cohort were, by and large, from a socio-economic background more reminiscent of that of the women in Heenan (2002) and Merrill's (1999) studies than the young women described in Marks and Houston's study (2002). As indicated by their family origins and professional status, they tended to come from relatively modest backgrounds and had not climbed the socio-economic ladder in any significant way. On the whole, if the women worked, they occupied low-paying and low-skilled jobs. Moreover, the women adhered to the characterization of women's educational and professional careers as "sporadic" and "interrupted". A number had gone on and off the job-market depending on their family situation. Two more were planning on having more children and wanted flexible jobs so that they could take time off to raise their children. Moreover, two women had dropped out of their secondary or college studies in order to begin a family. Another woman consciously put her educational aspirations on hold until her children were older so that she would not be overwhelmed by her care-giving responsibilities. These experiences are quite distinct from those of Barnave who had been acting as the principal breadwinner for his family for a number of years and, once he found a job, did not foresee leaving the workforce. Likewise, two of the single mothers had been active in the labour force almost continuously and did not plan on taking a break. Moreover, due to the arrival of her daughter late in life, Madeleine had been able to pursue quite a long postsecondary educational career prior to her Cégep studies.

Most of the women, then, were returning to school in the hopes of developing a profession that they had never previously had the chance to do. And they were doing so in the context of always having been the primary caregivers of their children. Moreover, their school experience, not to mention their professional aspirations, would continue to be affected, if not determined, by the degree to which they remained responsible for these children.

The women's family responsibilities reinforce to what point they had fallen into the confines of traditional gender roles. In fact, while there is no doubt that these women tried to change the delegation of domestic responsibilities within their families, the division of labour remained largely unchanged. Regardless of any practical or moral help their partners may have offered them, it still appeared that they were the principal caregivers of their families.

This is best exemplified by the cases of Gabrielle and Marielle who were forced to depart from their programs due to their roles as the primary care-givers to their children. In many cases, they simply could not change the domestic division of labour, no matter how supportive their partners would or would not have been. Their partners were the economic providers and, with dependent children, they could not afford to change these roles, at least while the women were still studying[46] and not earning a significant income. As such, their studies did not act as a catalyst for change, at least not immediately[47].

Much of the literature on women returners to postsecondary education not only describes the effect of the traditional gender division of labour, but it also refers to unsupportive partners who exacerbate women's difficult school-family balance. Merrill, in fact, depicts such partners as occasionally "obstructive" and even "hostile" regarding the women's return to school (Merrill, 1999, p. 160). She attributes this sort of discouraging behaviour to men's resistance to any shift in the domestic division of labour. Education thus becomes a threat as it has the potential to change the economic and power structures within the family unit.

The encouragement the women in the cohort received from their partners does not corroborate Merrill and Heenan's depiction of unsupportive male partners. While all of the parents spoke of a difficult school-family balance, none of them complained of "obstructive" partners. In fact, in a number of cases, the domestic division of labour in their family units did appear to change, if only slightly. Any additional help they received from their partners during their studies, and any consequential shift in the domestic division of labour, probably occurred as a result of dialogue and negotiation. This sort of negotiation backs up Crompton and Harris' (1998) view that women actively manipulate the socio-economic structures of the day in order to optimize the opportunities available to them.

---

[46] In Gabrielle's case, her partner was also studying while she was in the Laboratory Technology program but, nevertheless, she seemed to bear most of the care-giving responsibilities.

[47] That said, Isabelle educational ambitions were linked to the desire to radically change her domestic situation. Isabelle wanted to liberate herself from a situation of economic dependence from her boyfriend. Indeed, she wanted to be able to provide for herself and her daughter without her boyfriend.

Gisèle, who seemed to bear most of the childcare responsibilities, spoke of how her husband had begun to help more around the house to accommodate her studies. And the further she progressed in her studies, the more active he became on the domestic front. Isabelle's partner, who in other respects was a detriment to her studies, took on a lot of responsibility for their baby and, as a result, Isabelle had a sufficient amount of time to dedicate to her studies. Interestingly, Barnave, whose wife had also begun a technical program, seemed to bear as much responsibility for their child as did she. Although he did not seem to be as affected by the school-family balance as did some of the parents in the cohort, he certainly did have to negotiate this difficult balance throughout his program. The one notable difference between Barnave's accounts of the school-family balance and that of many of the women in the cohort was that he spoke less of the guilt associated with not spending enough time with his child.

Outside the practical help that the women in the cohort received from their partners, many of them spoke additionally of the encouragement they received. Indeed, contrary to the experiences of the women in Merrill's study, with the exception of Isabelle, the women in this cohort seemed confident that they had the support of their partners. In fact, rather than being threatened by the women's return to school, it seemed that these partners had a vested interest in the women's studies. Marielle's partner, for example, pushed her to study rather than have another child as he felt that they needed the additional income. Isaure's husband not only encouraged her to return to school, but he found her an internship with his company once she was in the Accounting program. In Isabelle's case, however, such support was less evident. Although her partner helped in practical ways, she also spoke of the resentment he harboured regarding her studies. Importantly, such sentiments were expressed in the context of a troubled relationship and it is difficult to judge to what extent they were the product of Isabelle's educational project or simply the tensions between them. In sum, while there did not appear to be a significant shift in the domestic division of labour, nor did it appear that the women's partners resented their educational and professional projects. Moreover, in cases such as Gisèle's, the male partner's help was so substantial that she claimed it contributed to her success in her program.

The single-mothers represent a "non-traditional" domestic situation in that they were not only the sole care-givers, but they were also the sole economic providers. As such, they occupied dual roles within their family unit and, in Justine and Madeleine's cases, they had no one to ease the burden of these responsibilities[48]. The effect that family responsibilities had upon their studies had a similar, but perhaps more exaggerated effect on the single mothers. In other words, their family responsibilities meant that it was very difficult for them to manage school as well. Their studies certainly became yet another weight in their busy schedules. Importantly, like the women with partners who negotiated their domestic responsibilities, the single mothers sought ways in which to overcome their situations. Justine, for example, went back to school partly because she realised she was eligible for loans and bursaries to which she had not been privileged before the birth of her son. Madeleine constantly juggled her schedule, balancing her time between her work, her daughter's school and the availability of the babysitter. She also sought financial help from members of her extended family in order to make it through the program. Nonetheless, like the other women, her constant manoeuvring was always counterbalanced by the pressures of her responsibilities outside school.

5.5 What the Future Holds: How Expectations for the Future Influence the School Experience

Expectations for the future can play a pivotal role in determining not only a student's decision to return to school and their program choice, but also their motivation once in the program. More specifically, the drive for economic and professional mobility influenced both the parents' program choices and their commitment once in their programs. While this commitment did not decide whether they would persevere or not, it certainly did fuel the perseverant students' motivation.

---

[48] Irma's case is slightly different. We know that the father of her child shared some care-giving responsibility for him. Moreover, the father may have contributed financially as she did not seem to need to work. As we are not certain of her situation outside of school, I do not wish to include her in the description of the single-mothers situations.

148

Béret (1986) and Sembel and Felouziz (1997) argue that students' future school and/or professional projects influence their school experiences. The authors highlight the evolving and subjective nature of these projects, as they depend not only on the structures of the job market and the postsecondary educational system, but also on how students perceive and react to these realities. Sembel and Felouziz also depict students as juggling and adjusting their projects according to their academic performance and thus their futures in their current programs. However, while the school and professional projects of the students in Sembel and Felouziz's study appear relatively fluid, the parents' ambitions appeared much more fixed. As exemplified by Barnave, who seemed to take a "now or never" approach to his studies, for many parents their technical studies were their perceived last chance at postsecondary education and, consequently, at professional and economic mobility[49]. The result was that their motivation to remain in their chosen program, expressed in terms of "determination", played an important role in their experiences in the program.

This determination was a key element in the perseverance of all of the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school category. Indeed, Barnave and Gisèle cite their determination as key factors in leading to their success. Barnave's desire for professional and economic mobility was so strong that he successfully plodded along in his studies despite the realisation that he had picked the wrong program. In another example, despite Madeleine's disappointment with the pay rates in her chosen professional field and her moderate interest, she was also driven by the desire for professional mobility. Interestingly, this determination also coloured the experiences and decisions of the non-perseverant students, particularly Isaure, in the "Changing Courses" school category. Despite her difficulties, she continued in the Computer Science program for three semesters before departing. Moreover, she would have embarked on the same program at another Cégep had she been accepted. In short, it seems that Isaure simply did not want to give up her professional aspirations.

---

[49] Sensing the feeling of "urgency" experienced by many adults in her program, Isabelle had an interesting analysis of this phenomenon. According to her, many adults felt it was their "last chance" due to their advancing age.

The only aspect of the parents' professional projects that seemed to undergo a marked transition was the perseverant parents' familiarity with their professional future. In other words, the more they progressed in their programs, the better their sense of their chosen profession. According to Sembel and Felouziz, "les formations supérieures produisent des 'identités professionelles' en relation avec les 'debouchés' les plus probables" (Ibid., 58). Indeed, with the exception of Barnave, their experiences in their programs reinforced and refined their interest in their chosen field. Gisèle, having been privileged to an internship after her second year, is testimony to this. Already enthusiastic about her courses, Gisèle's summer internship confirmed both her interest in the field and the relevance of her program. Isabelle presents another interesting case. The youngest parent in the cohort, she was the only one to seriously consider university studies. She fluctuated between her desire to embark on a Bachelor's degree and her need to enter the job market as quickly as possible. In this sense, she was quite akin to the students described in Sembel and Felouziz's (1997) study. This is not surprising given that, as the youngest member of the parent cohort, she had more flexibility regarding the timing of her entry onto the job market.

While their professional projects played a key role in influencing the parents' determination, it remains questionable whether this determination was decisive to their progress in their programs. Pirot and de Ketele contend that "[l]a motivation, moteur de l'action, est donc une condition nécessaire mais non suffisante de l'engagement" (Pirot and de Ketele, 2000, p. 369). Indeed, simply put, all of the parents exhibited a strong determination at the beginning of their programs but not all completed their programs. It seems that determination remained an important motivating force for the perseverant parents, but a less relevant factor in affecting the experiences of the non-perseverant parents. In other words, while it was the perseverant parents' academic strategies and skills that allowed for their progression through the program, the determination associated with their professional projects spurred them on. Academic success and determination were therefore mutually reinforcing.

In regards to the parents in the "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line", "Changing Courses" and "This Race is too Rough" school categories, however, there was a confrontation between their professional projects and their actual experiences in their

programs. Their departures from technical studies meant an eventual end to their professional aspirations. While these departures were not devastating in some cases, such as for Marielle, who also had hopes of having another child, they were very difficult for others. In several cases, the parents were absolutely determined to stay in their programs and to hold on to their professional dreams until the last minute. Regardless of the implications of their departures, they were sudden and undesired.

5.6 Summing Up the Theory and Practice with the School Careers

The parents' perseverance or failure in their technical studies at Cégep can be understood by looking at both their previous trajectories and their current experiences. Essentially, certain structural factors, namely the macro-level socioeconomic realities of the day, as well as, to a lesser extent, their social background and the gender division of labour, combined with their *individual agency*, to decide how they would shape their life trajectories and, in turn, manage their Cégep studies. In other words, within certain structural confines, there was a certain amount of room for the individuals to manoeuvre. For this reason, not all of the parents from the same generation and from a similar social background, had the same life trajectories nor the same outcomes at Cégep. Similarly, for reasons owing more to the chance conjuncture of life events, not all the parents possessing a similar level of academic skill (or lack thereof) did equally well (or poorly) in their programs.

By the second interview, the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school career had distinguished themselves from the others. In a nutshell, faced with the challenges of the family-school balance, as well as the heavy workload and difficult coursework at Cégep, they quickly developed strategies. These strategies included managing their care-giving responsibilities outside of school and adapting to the demands of their technical programs. As such, their perseverance is characterised by resourcefulness and ingenuity, perceptiveness in respects to the demands of their programs and determination. Said differently, in listening to their accounts of their Cégep experiences, we are struck by their talent and drive to surmount the numerous obstacles facing them. This can be attributed to their *individual agency*, as well as the resources they had available to them.

The parents in this school career succeeded in *integrating* themselves, both in the sense expounded by Dubet and Martuccelli (1996) and by Tinto (1987). The former authors argue the importance of understanding the norms and rules of the educational institution. This *interiorisation* then leads to the successful development of strategies. Likewise, Tinto postulates that normative *intellectual integration*, in which students grasp the requirements and expectations of their teachers, is essential for the development of successful strategies. As noted previously, these parents employed inventive strategies, which reflected the demands of their teachers and the evaluation system at Cégep as a whole. Moreover, their adaptations revealed an important self-awareness. In other words, they recognised their own shortcomings, whether they be related to academic difficulties or a lack of time, and they devised strategies accordingly. Importantly, supporting Tinto's postulation that *social integration* affects perseverance (1987), these parents also relied on their fellow students to varying degrees. In fact, Barnave and Isabelle cited their working-relationships and/or friendships with other students as having been critical for their success.

It also bears noting that the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" tended to have mothers and fathers with slightly higher educational attainment than the other parents[50]. That said, we must remember that in most cases this means simply a mother or father with a high school diploma. Unfortunately, with the exception of Gisèle, whose father encouraged reading, we do not know what sort of *cultural capital* their mothers and fathers passed on to them. Moreover, while Gisèle's mother and father had a positive attitude towards education, she had actually dropped out of high school to have children.

---

[50] Although, it must be said that we do not know the educational attainment of Barnave's parents and can assume it is probably quite low.

Table 5.1 The parents' previous educational experiences and family situations by school careers

SCHOOL CAREER	PSEUDO NAME	SOCIAL BACKGROUND (mother and father's educational attainment)	APPROXI-MATE AGE BEGAN FAMILY	NUMBER OF CHILDREN (during studies)	PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE	CÉGEP OUTCOME
"Struggling to the Finish Line"	Barnave	?	25	1	Cégep: "Reception and Transition" (I year)	Graduated/program almost completed
	Gisèle	Mother: primary school (she later completed a DEC) Father: primary school completed	17	3	Adult Education to complete high school	Graduated/program almost completed
	Isabelle	Mother: high school completed (DES) Father: high school completed (DES)	17	1	Cégep: "Reception and Transition" (1 year)	Graduated/program almost completed
	Madeleine	Mother: high school completed (DES) Father: primary school completed	35	1	BA in Art History completed	Graduated/program almost completed
"Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line"	Gabrielle	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed	21	1	Technical DEC (in the sciences), uncompleted	Departure
	Marielle	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed	20	4	BA-level studies (in the Social Sciences), uncompleted	Departure

SCHOOL CAREER	PSEUDO NAME	SOCIAL BACKGROUND (mother and father's educational attainment)	APPROXI-MATE AGE BEGAN FAMILY	NUMBER OF CHILDREN (during studies)	PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE	CÉGEP OUTCOME
"This Race is too Rough"	Ida	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed	20	4	Technical DEC completed (non-sciences)	Departure
	Justine	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed	36	1	DEP in Administration DEC (non-sciences)	Departure
"Changing Course"	Irma	Mother: ? Father: primary school completed	20	1	Adult Education to complete high school	Program change
	Isaure	Mother: primary school completed Father: primary school completed	29	4	Adult Education to complete high school Cégep: 2 semesters in a Social Sciences program	Program change

These parents also tended to have some form of previous postsecondary experience. As such, at some point prior to their enrolment in their technical studies, they had engaged in a *self-initiated turning point* in the sense that they had gone on to undertake a higher level of education than achieved by their mothers and fathers. Such a *self-initiated turning point* may, in turn, have meant that they brought a certain amount of *school capital* (Lahire 1994, 1998) with them to their programs. If this is the case, it might provide a partial explanation for their more effective adaptations. However, we must take heed that only Madeleine had a significant amount of such experience. Indeed, Barnave and Isabelle had simply undertaken one year of "Reception and Transition" prior to beginning their technical programs, while Gisèle had not attended a postsecondary institution previously.

Finally, with one exception, these parents had a slightly more manageable family-school balance than many of the other parents. In the cases of Barnave and Isabelle, their partners took on, at the least, an equal portion of the childrearing responsibilities, giving them the opportunity to work at the library or spend more time with their classmates. In Gisèle's case, although she was the principal care-giver of her family, her children were of school age and her partner was the economic provider of the family. Only Madeleine of the "Struggling to the Finish Line" faced the precarious balance of being both financial provider and sole care-giver. Fortunately, in her case, she was able to rely on financial aid from other family members.

With one exception, the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" also enjoyed an easier family-school balance than many of the other parents. This meant that, while they were plagued with a deficit of time for their studies, this balance was not as acute as in some other cases. Indeed, Barnave, Gisèle, and Isabelle had partners who either helped considerably with their children or provided financially for the family. That said, Madeleine, a single-mother of an elementary school-aged girl, is an important exception. In her case, she struggled to balance her studies with her care-giving responsibilities and her need to earn a salary. It must be added that she was fortunate to begin dating a mathematics professor, a factor that must surely have benefited her.

The two women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" resembled their counterparts described above in a number of ways. Following the logic of Tinto (1987) and Dubet and Martuccelli (1996), in their short time in the program, they seemed to have *interiorised* the norms of the Cégep system and the expectations of their teachers. Indeed, they achieved a certain level of *intellectual integration* (both structural and normative), in that they were excited about the course content, accepted the workload, and understood the evaluation system. That said, their adaptation and *integration* did differ in a number of respects from the perseverant parents. First of all, Marielle was unusually confident, even nonchalant, about her adaptation to the program. Meanwhile, Gabrielle, who, as time went on had a particularly difficult family-work-school balance, began to experience tensions with one of her teachers, who she deemed insensitive to her situation. Moreover, it bears noting that neither in these women invested in the other students to the extent that the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" did. Indeed, their *social integration* seemed extremely limited. In Gabrielle's case it was expressed as a sense of isolation due to her status as an adult, while in Marielle's case it was expressed as indifference regarding the other students.

It is interesting to note that, while these two women had neither mother nor father with more than a primary school education, they were among the better educated of the parents. Indeed, they possessed more previous postsecondary experience than most of the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school category. This prior experience has several ramifications. First of all, it means that they had embarked on a *self-initiated turning point* quite early in life, immediately following high school. Indeed, here we see the effect of changing socioeconomic realities and a widening access to postsecondary education. For these women had followed a trajectory common to their generation, but radically different from that of their mothers and fathers. Moreover, it meant that they probably brought a considerable amount of *school capital* with them to the program. Indeed, given their severe time constraints, it is remarkable that Gabrielle and Marielle managed to pass all of their courses. It may be that, combined with a lighter course-load due to previous Cégep studies, this *school capital* allowed them to quickly adapt to their technical programs. At the very least, it gave them a head-start compared to some of the other parents in the cohort.

The most significant difference between the women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" and those in "Struggling to the Finish Line" is, of course, the reason for Gabrielle and Marielle's departures. In the cases of the women in this school career, no matter how much effort they put into their Cégep project, *individual agency* would not determine their outcomes. The gender division of labour dictated that when, by chance, their children fell ill, they had to give up their Cégep studies. In fact, their particularly difficult balance between family and studies manifested itself even before their departures. In their lack of *social integration* we see a severe lack of time and lack of willingness to invest that may have been the result of a need to "cut corners" in regards to their schooling. Indeed, in Gabrielle's case, her technical studies were obviously the last of her priorities as she was simultaneously a partial income-earner but the full-time care-giver of her family. In Marielle's case, as her husband provided economically for the family and she was the care-giver, it therefore fell upon her to take care of her daughter's needs.

While the women in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" differed in how they dealt with their departures, they were similar in a number of other ways. Their problems began even before they began their programs as they consistently showed poor research skills in choosing their programs. And, although they began their Cégep studies quite enthusiastically, their *learner identities* (Gallacher *et al.*, 2002) turned out to be quite fragile. Indeed, they were quickly frustrated and disillusioned. Unlike their counterparts in "Struggling to the Finish Line" and "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line", they did not appear to *interiorise* the norms of the Cégep system, nor did they appear aware in regards to their own shortcomings. As a result, they never appeared to *integrate intellectually* and were not able to develop effective strategies. In fact, they employed very little in the way of strategies. Instead, they tended to blame their teachers and the Cégep system for their failings. Moreover, what few strategies they employed were more *quantitative* (Pirot and de Ketele, 2000) in nature, involving long hours of homework but not necessarily adequate comprehension. Given their poor program selection and their lack of effective strategies, it is not surprising that these women did not succeed in their programs. Nevertheless, their strong

desire for economic mobility meant that they were profoundly disappointed with their departures.

These women wanted economic mobility for different reasons. Whereas Isaure and Ida (of the "Changing Course" and "This Race is too Tough" school careers respectively) were desirous of professional mobility and wished to contribute to their family income, Justine and Irma, both single mothers, felt a more desperate need to provide for their children. Interestingly, though, it was Isaure and Justine (again, of the "Changing Course" and "This Race is too Tough" school careers respectively) who had the most difficult family-school balances. While Isaure did not have to work during her studies, she bore most of the child-care responsibilities. She was forced, then, to squeeze her studies between her children's schedules. Justine's case was decidedly even more desperate as she was a single-mother with few economic resources. Not being able to rely on outside help, whether financially or in terms of childcare, she embarked on her Cégep project completely alone while providing for her toddler. Her lack of academic skills aside, the stress, lack of time and financial constraints made her forays into technical studies all the more precarious.

That none of the women in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" school careers had mothers or fathers who had graduated from high school[51] and that three of them had had to complete their DES at an adult education institution at some point is significant. They were not only of the first generation in their families to embark on postsecondary education, but they were of the first generation to complete high school. The *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) in which they had grown up, then, would not provide any advantages for their forays into postsecondary education. This meant that they could not have benefited from any *cultural capital* passed on from their parents. These women also had quite "broken" trajectories in regards to education. Two had only recently completed high school at an adult education institution, while two more had intermittently undertaken previous Cégep degrees, with varying degrees of success. Nevertheless, like the other parents in this cohort, they had attempted to break from their parents' educational paths, whether years

---

[51] We were not informed of Irma's mother's level of schooling.

before their technical studies or more recently. As witnessed by the case of Justine, however, these attempted *self-initiated turning points* were not always successful. Indeed, she had departed from her previous Cégep studies just as she did from her current one.

The most obvious difference between the women in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" is that which defines their school careers. While Justine and Ida departed definitively from their programs, Irma and Isaure decided to change programs. These women had professed equal "determination" and, indeed, all had ample motive to desire the economic mobility that a technical DEC might provide. But, of course, the simple desire for such a change does not bring it about. Instead, we must look to the resources these women possessed, as well as the *individual agency* they employed. In a nutshell, Justine of "This Race is too Tough" simply did not possess the economic resources to pursue further studies. Indeed, she expressed the desire to take English courses but, as it was, she had already indebted herself as a result of one semester in the Computer Science program. In comparison, Irma and Isaure of "Changing Course" were more at ease financially and could entertain such an idea. As such, they re-organised and re-oriented themselves so that they could pursue further studies. In this sense, they differentiate themselves from Ida of the "This Race is too Tough" school career in that she, too, was financially able to undertake another program, but was so discouraged that she vowed never to return to Cégep. In the end, then, what differentiates the two school careers was Irma and Isaure's *individual agency* which meant that they took advantage of the opportunities available to them and undertook subsequent studies.

5.7 Conclusion

The parents' experiences in their technical programs belie that there are myriad possible factors that can influence an individual's educational trajectory. Their past experiences and future aspirations blended with their experiences during their programs, both in and outside of school, to affect their eventual outcomes in technical studies. Moreover, in some cases, unforeseen biographical events occurred and steered their life trajectories away from their expected courses. That said, whatever the combination of elements that affected their

outcomes in Cégep, certain factors remained more central than others. By looking at how these factors played themselves out in the context of their lives as a whole, we can come to a more complete understanding of how they interacted to lead to the parents' perseverance, departure or program changes.

The parents' return to school must be understood as an attempt at economic mobility in a society in which postsecondary education is becoming increasingly necessary. In some cases, they had already acquired postsecondary experience, while in others they were returning after many years of precarious employment and care-giving duties. Given their modest social beginnings, their previous or current decision to embark on postsecondary studies can be viewed as a break from their social background in reaction to present-day socioeconomic structures (or, in other words, a *self-initiated turning point*). In fact, for those who had previous Cégep or university experience, they had either left their programs uncompleted or had reaped little economic benefit from their studies. As such, their previous *self-initiated turning points* had been only marginally successful at best and their current technical studies represented another chance. Unfortunately, for those who departed from their technical programs, they probably fell right back into their previous situations of precarious employment and/or full-time care-giving responsibilities.

While their social background can explain the previous life-course decisions of some of the parents in the cohort, it cannot explain all of them. Moreover, as already noted, there is not an obvious relationship between their social background and their outcomes in their technical programs. Similarly, for those who managed, for one reason or another, to acquire previous postsecondary experience, this experience was not necessarily predictive of success in their current studies. Indeed, while in some cases it seemed to mean that they knew how to adapt to their programs and to develop effective strategies, in other cases this experience did not seem to bestow the parents with such advantages. Along a similar vein, some parents managed perfectly well in their programs with little or no postsecondary experience. It is for this reason that the school careers do not respect any delineations based on social background or previous educational experience.

Heinz's (2001) proposition that we blend *structure* and *agency* in order to understand the lifecourse provides a framework within which to analyse the parents Cégep experiences. In considering their lives and eventual outcomes in their Cégep programs as simultaneously a result of the dominant structures of the day and their individual decision-making, initiative (or inertia) and ability, we can comprehend why, within each school career, there is so much variety of experience.

As such, despite their mother and fathers' modest educational attainment, the parents in the "Struggling to the Finish Line" school career were able to *interiorise* the norms of Cégep, *integrate* both intellectually and socially, and, finally, adapt enough strategies to persevere in their programs. While the women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" managed to pass all of their courses, their *social* and *intellectual integration* was less clear than their perseverant counterparts. That said, whether due to their relatively high levels of previous postsecondary experience or to their own individual ability, they managed to employ enough strategies to succeed academically. Nevertheless, as fate and the gender division of labour would have it, their children needed intensive medical attention and they were forced to depart from their programs. The women in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" demonstrated very little *interiorisation* of the norms at Cégep and, consequently, suffered from a lack of *intellectual integration*. As such, they adapted few effective strategies and their experiences were characterised by frustration and failure. The difference between these parents is that, in the face of departure due to academic difficulties, Irma and Isaure of "Changing Courses" had more resources and proved more resourceful.

The parents' family-school balance is a dynamic that permeated all of their experiences. However, the school careers cannot be delineated along the lines of the parents' situations at home. In other words, with the exception of the "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" school career, the parents' family situations alone did not decide their outcomes at Cégep. Indeed, Madeleine, a single-mother with one of the most precarious family-work-school balances of the cohort, found herself among the perseverant parents, while Irma, a single-mother who only saw her son two weekends a month, was forced to change programs due to academic difficulty. The causes of the parents' perseverance or departure therefore lay

outside of their family-school balances. That said, the parents' situations at home were certainly an important factor in influencing their Cégep experiences. It rendered the perseverant parents' continuation in their programs more fragile at, at times, tipped the balance for the parents in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Courses". This can be witnessed by the case of Justine who, along with her academic difficulties, could not find enough time to dedicate to her studies. Moreover, as the sole financial provider for her young son, to embark on further studies would mean to take an economic risk that she could not afford. And, of course, the family-school balance meant that the two women in "Obstacles on the way to the Finish Line" were forced to depart.

CONCLUSION

Education in Québec has undergone profound changes over the last half century. Such changes are largely a reflection of social and economic shifts that have taken place worldwide. One of the most notable of these changes has been the increasing level of required schooling. What was considered an adequate level of schooling for one generation is no longer considered to be so for the next generation. This has meant that participation in postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important, as well as in what policy-makers and academics alike have coined as "lifelong learning". The parents who are the subject of this thesis are not only a manifestation of these changes, but they seem somewhat caught out by them.

For reasons unfamiliar to us, their mothers and fathers did not take advantage of the widening access to postsecondary education in Québec in the late 1960s and 1970s, which took the most obvious form of the inauguration of the Cégep system. In fact, only a few of their mothers and fathers had even completed high school. This meant that the parents in the cohort did not grow up in a world where postsecondary education was known, at least not among their immediate family members. The most obvious effects of this lack of familiarity with postsecondary education are two-fold.

First of all, perhaps mirroring their mothers and fathers, a good number of the parents in the cohort did not cast their gaze towards postsecondary education prior to their current technical programs. As a result, they were not familiar with postsecondary education upon beginning their technical studies. While the same can be said of any Cégep student who emanates directly from high school, the challenges facing an adult "returner" are of an entirely different nature. In a nutshell, while high school students are accustomed to the latest teaching methods and technologies, adults have often been outside a school context for years. Not only might they be unfamiliar with the latest that the educational system has to offer, but they may simply be not used to learning in a class-room setting. In the cases of those parents who

had only recently completed high school in an adult education institution, they had never even had the benefit of a regular high school education.

A second point related to their mother and fathers' low educational attainment is that, because many of them did not anticipate postsecondary studies, they undertook alternative life projects. Their life-courses unfolded very differently than for "traditional students" who pursue postsecondary education immediately after high school. Those in this cohort who had not gone straight on to Cégep (or who had not even completed high school) were all women and had typically feminine trajectories. In other words, they often found a partner and had children early in life. It is no accident that these women were embarking on a professional project – technical studies – in their late twenties and thirties. They had never had a chance to do so before. The result was that when they found themselves in technical studies at Cégep, they not only had the disadvantage of inadequate educational preparation, but their lives were structured in a way that meant that they had too many responsibilities outside school to afford them sufficient time for their studies.

It is, of course, significant that these parents even considered breaking from the course their lives were taking in order to return to school. Given their declared desire for professional and/or economic mobility, it is fair to assume that they envisioned Cégep studies as a response to the changing nature of the job market. The care-givers to children and desirous of a certain standard of living, these individuals were well-aware that access to "good jobs" requires a certain level of training, for which postsecondary education is necessary. Theirs is a world which has, indeed, changed drastically from the time of the generation of their mothers and fathers. However, while they might have been reacting to changing socio-economic structures, in many cases they were doing so relatively late in life.

There were, of course, some parents for whom the decision to return to school and undertake Cégep studies fit much more into an educational pattern they had already developed. Cégep, and the professional life they hoped such studies would lead to, were much less foreign, much more easily understood and imagined. These parents had already "broken" with their mother and fathers' educational patterns and acquired some postsecondary experience.

Moreover, some had had job experiences which afforded them an understanding of the program they had chosen or of the labour market. Importantly, they had usually gained this postsecondary experience prior to having children. The result was that they began their technical studies armed with postsecondary experience (however limited) and, in some cases, they brought useful study skills with them. They also largely had more clearly defined professional ambitions. Some of these parents make up the "Struggling to the Finish Line" and "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" school categories. Importantly, while two[52] of these parents had mothers and fathers who were (slightly) better educated than the rest, the other three had mothers and fathers who had not graduated from high school. Just like the women who had no previous postsecondary experience, we must view their efforts to take advantage of a more open postsecondary educational system as the result of their *individual agency*.

While the parents in this cohort can be differentiated along the lines of these two types of previous life trajectories, these patterns do more to highlight the modest contexts from which they originate than to explain their outcomes at Cégep. In other words, while their previous experiences did surely influence their Cégep studies, they did not determine them. Indeed, the school careers are not decided by the parents' previous experiences and social background, but instead by their ability and resources once in their programs. As such, the experiences of the individuals in "Struggling to the Finish Line" are characterized by *social* and *academic integration*, as well as more manageable family-school balances. Translated more concretely, these parents were successfully assessed the norms of the Cégep system, as well as the requirements of their teachers, and adapted a variety of appropriate strategies. In a counter example, the women in "This Race is too Tough" never seemed to adequately grasp the courses material nor accept the expectations of their teachers. In other words, they did not *integrate academically* and, as such, they never developed adequate strategies nor did they come to understand where their difficulties lay. The women in "Changing Course" experienced similar difficulties but dealt with them differently. For them, lack of success in

---

[52] And, later on in life, a third : Gisèle's mother completed a DEC probably at some point in Gisèle's life as a young adult.

one program did not equate giving up on their dreams of economic mobility. Instead, they simply re-directed their ambitions and embarked on different programs. The divergent outcomes highlighted by these two school careers can be attributed to the resources available to these women, as well as to their *individual agency*. For the women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line", though, no matter how much individual effort they may have employed, the family-school balance tipped the equilibrium and was the direct cause of departure.

In general, then, the parents' outcomes in their Cégep programs had more to do with their *individual agency* and, at times, with their previous educational experiences, than with their situation at home. That said, this balance did take a toll on their chances for success. Indeed, it not only coloured their Cégep experiences, but it rendered them more fragile.

Essentially, the family-school balance meant that the parents did not have as much time as they felt they needed for their studies. This translated into late nights, missed classes, homework not handed in on time, and a lower standard for their work than they would have liked. It also increased the level of stress and anxiety that they suffered; the women in particular felt simultaneous guilt regarding their children and frustration that they could not dedicate themselves more to their studies. It is unclear to what extent the family-school balance contributed to difficulties experienced by the parents in the "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" school careers. Although it is doubtful that they would have completed their initial programs had they not had such a balance to manage, it is certain that their parental responsibilities rendered their studies much more difficult. That the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" managed to persevere in their studies despite the family-school balance is testimony to their determination. In several cases, their family-school balance appeared impossibly precarious – it was purely the parents' will and talent at finding solutions that allowed them to continue in their programs.

While they represent a minority experience amongst the parents in the cohort, the fate of the two women in the "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" school career offers us important insights. First of all, that this school career consists uniquely of women serves as a

commentary on continuing gender inequalities in today's society. Secondly, that parents be forced to withdraw from their programs because of competing family-school responsibilities has significant policy ramifications. The two women in the "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" school career seemed to bear most of the childcare responsibilities in their families. While in Marielle's case her husband was the sole economic provider, in Gabrielle's case she and her partner contributed equally to the family revenue. Nevertheless, when her child fell ill, it was she who withdrew from her program. Both women appeared to accept responsibility for their children and to have put their studies on the back burner willingly. Nevertheless, the circumstances of their departures speak of the unequal way in which family responsibilities can affect women. And the loss caused by such inequalities – their departures from a technical program in which they were doing relatively well – speak of the cost for such women, their families and the economy as a whole.

The parents' school experiences were not only determined by their past and present lives, but also by the nature of the Cégep system. The positive aspects of technical studies at Cégep include its' promise of professional training within a relatively accessible postsecondary system. In other words, Cégep renders postsecondary education accessible to people for whom university might not be. Indeed, while Cégep programs can be a stepping stone to university education in Québec, few of the parents had ever envisioned university studies. For such individuals, technical studies at Cégep is a one-stop ride which offers the chance for much desired economic mobility.

The opportunities the Cégep system can offer such individuals aside, it also presented the parents with a number of challenges. In fact, the parents' experiences highlight some shortcomings within this system, not to mention in parallel educational systems. The parents who had the most academic difficulties in their technical programs were largely those who had recently completed their high school requirements in adult education (comprising the "This Race is too Tough and "Changing Course" school careers). Adult education in Québec gives students the privilege of an individualised approach in which they can learn at their own rhythm and receive one-on-one attention. In contrast, studying at Cégep requires following a fast-paced curriculum in relatively large classes. It was apparent in the

interviews that those parents whose only recent educational experiences were in adult education, underwent a difficult adaptation upon confrontation with the Cégep system. The learning styles and strategies they had developed in adult education did not work in Cégep. This lack of coherence between the two systems became one more factor contributing to the fragile nature of their experiences at Cégep.

The Cégep system betrayed the parents in a number of other ways. Simply put, it remains unclear why certain individuals, such as Irma and Justine (of the "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" school careers), were even accepted into their programs. These parents demonstrated a foggy notion of the programs they had selected and they did not have adequate preparation. They were struggling in their programs no sooner had they begun and dropped out by the end of the first semester. If they had been better prepared for their programs prior to being enrolled than they would have had a better chance at success. Related to this issue is the question of academic advising. Ida had not been required to re-take a maths course critical to success in the program, even though she had completed it twenty-two years prior to her current studies. The result was not only that she failed that course, but that she spent so much effort on it that she failed her core courses. Given the sacrifices in terms of time and money that these women invested in their studies, their participation should not be taken lightly. They needed all the chances for success that they could get and should not have been admitted into such programs until they were adequately prepared. Indeed, in several cases, their negative experiences at Cégep meant that they never wished to undertake postsecondary studies again.

Technical studies at Cégep currently require full-time enrolment. Given that these programs are academically demanding and require many hours of studying, that they are only offered on a full-time basis renders them less accessible for some students. For those who have any sort of time constraint, it is extremely difficult to find adequate time to pursue such studies. It goes without saying, then, that for parents who have care-giving responsibilities and who, in many cases, had to work to provide economically for their children, many sacrifices had to be made in order to fit their studies into their already busy lives. Had the parents been able to

undertake such programs on a part-time basis then their work-family-school balance may have been less precarious and their perseverance less fragile.

Adult participation in education is widely acknowledged as being more fragile than that of "traditional students" (Cross, 1981; Courtney, 1992). It goes without saying, then, that embarking upon an educational project is particularly difficult for adults with dependent children. The parents' situation actually had a double – and contradictory – face. It simultaneously made their chances for perseverance more fragile but was, to a large degree, the driving force behind their determination to continue in their studies.

The OECD (2003, 1996) calls for the participation of adults in lifelong learning and urges governments to encourage the participation of more marginal individuals. Cross (1981) declares this participation a "necessity" in order to deal with the "escalating pace of change" (p. ix). To a large degree the parents in the cohort were "marginal" – they came from a modest social background, had notably limited educational experiences and were in a precarious position on the job market. Indeed, they looked towards technical studies in response to their fragility and the changing economic landscape around them. Most importantly, they saw such studies as an avenue to improve the standard of living of their families. If policies on lifelong learning are to improve access to those who need it the most, then the particular needs of individuals such as the parents must be taken into account. It is a sad commentary on the postsecondary educational system in Québec that precisely those who need it the most and who are willing to try, are not adequately supported and guided through their educational project. Likewise, it is a testament to the power of determination that some of the parents in the cohort managed to navigate their way through parental responsibilities and technical studies towards program completion.

In the process of writing this thesis, I have explored and, hopefully, highlighted the challenge of being a parent returning to postsecondary schooling in Québec. Moreover, I hope I have underscored how (in all but two cases) their experiences and outcomes are coloured, but not determined, by their situation as the caregivers to dependent children. In other words, ultimately, the explanation for their perseverance or departures lay elsewhere.

We must understand the parents' social backgrounds and their subsequent life trajectories in order to understand their professional projects, in other words, their reasons for embarking on technical studies at Cégep. That said, we must recognise that, at one point or another in their lives, these parents tried to shape their life trajectories differently than according to patterns established by their mothers and fathers. Said differently, they had previously attempted or were attempting to embark on a *self-inititated turning point*. Once in their programs, it was again their *individual agency* that shaped their experiences and outcomes more than any reasons related to their past experiences. For this reason, the school careers are not designed along the lines of their social background, nor their previous educational experiences. As such, the parents in "Struggling to the Finish Line" were not only able to assess and adapt to the requirements of the Cégep system, but they managed to negotiate the financial and time resources at their disposal in order to facilitate their studies. The women in "This Race is too Tough" and "Changing Course" did not understand what was expected of them and, consequently, could not evaluate their own shortcomings, nor could they adapt appropriate strategies. However, in the case of the women in "Changing Course", they compensated for these difficulties by changing programs. Of course, the women in "Obstacles on the Way to the Finish Line" speak to us of the sometimes impossible challenges of balancing childrearing and full-time studies. In conclusion, whatever the specific reasons for the perseverance or departures of the parents, and whatever the possible effects their social background may have had, their outcomes are directly related to the *individual agency* they employed during their programs. As such, we must recognise the relevance and importance of providing such adults the opportunity to return to school in postsecondary education under adequate conditions.

While I hope that I have been able to shed some light on the particularities, as well as generalities, of being a parent returning to school at a postsecondary level, I also hope that this thesis has raised questions. As highlighted previously in this thesis, the "Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial" project does not allow us the privilege of knowing about the participants' earlier trajectories in any significant detail. Understanding individuals' school experiences through such a comprehensive perspective would allow a

more complete grasp of what factors determine the school experience, as well as how they interact to do so. Indeed, such an approach is particularly relevant for "non-traditional" students whose previous trajectories deviate from the norm. At a more general level, in witnessing the particularities of being a parent returning to school, it would be instructive to learn exactly *who* the adults returning to Cégep are. Understanding the similarities and differences between adult students may lead to a more effective accommodation of their needs. Regarding the nature of their lives outside school is the question of how the family-school balance affects the fathers of dependent children – a subject about which we know very little. In fact, we need a more complete comprehension of the circumstances under which these individuals embark upon their return to Cégep, at the very least to facilitate an awareness of their financial and time-management constraints. Again, accounts of a more biographical nature arguably allow for a much more nuanced understanding of *how* adults return to school.

Such queries ultimately seek to clarify what leads some individuals to persevere and others to depart. Given that adults' experiences are distinct from those of "traditional" students, it is important to ask such questions if we wish to improve their success rate in Québec's postsecondary system. Indeed, if approximately one-quarter of Cégep students are twenty-four years or older (Doray *et al.*, 2003*b*), to accommodate their needs inadequately would be to risk losing an important portion of the province's postsecondary student population.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GRIDS

Guide d'entretien **Aide-mémoire**		
ENTRÉE EN MATIÈRE	Accueil Présentation Objectifs Questions ? Programme exact Arrive du secondaire?	Déroulement Confidentialité Enregistrement
A. Expérience actuelle du programme	Collège Cours (énumérer) et professeurs Différences secondaire/collégial	Étudiants/Pairs
B. Choix du programme et du collège	Historique Choix collège Alternatives Rapport aux sciences	Démarches Poursuite d'études Réactions
C. Antécédents scolaires	Matières Expériences postsecondaires Expériences professionnelles	Type d'étudiant
D. Intérêts extra-scolaires	Loisirs et amis Travail Activités scientifiques Milieu de vie et d'études	
E. Perspectives futures	Horizon 2 ans Projets professionnels Style de vie	Projets scolaires
CONCLUSION	Ajouts? À suivre…	Remerciements Questionnaire

tée)

érent
quels

Guide d'entretien

A. L'EXPÉRIENCE DU PROGRAMME

L'étudiant peut-il nous indiquer son l'évaluation de son expérience
des études collégiales dans ce programme

Situation par rapport au programme

- Ce qui reste à faire
- Date prévue d'obtention
- État des demandes à l'université (si l'information recueillies au téléphone doit être complétée)

Perceptions des cours

- Les cours les plus agréables, les plus difficiles les plus utiles, inutiles
- Niveau de difficulté des cours
- Charge de travail (Pense-t-il que c'est un programme exigeant?)
- Ce qui pourrait être fait autrement

Perceptions des professeurs

- les plus appréciés, les moins appréciés, Pourquoi ?
- les attitudes et les comportements qui a contribué à la réussite

Perceptions des autres étudiants

- Évolution depuis le début du programme
- Composition du réseau social
- Sentiment d'appartenance (participation à des groupes d'étudiants)

Perceptions du cégep

- Qualité des services (attitudes, ouverture, réponse aux questions...)
- Utilisation des services (lesquels et évaluation)
- Connaissance des programmes de soutien et d'aide à la réussite ou la persévérance
- Utilisation des programmes de soutien et évaluation

Perceptions du programme

- Les aspects les plus agréables, difficiles, utiles, inutiles
- Les aspects qui ont contribué à la réussite
- Les aspects qui auraient pu être fait autrement
- Changement de perception dans le temps

Si c'était à refaire, l'étudiant suivrait-il le même cheminement ? Que ferait-il de différent ?
Si vous aviez un conseil à donner à un ami qui veut s'inscrire en science au cégep, quels
conseils lui donneriez-vous ?

B. ACTIVITÉS ET INTÉRÊTS EXTRASCOLAIRES

Quels changements se sont produits dans la vie non-scolaire de l'étudiant?

Activités de loisirs

- Passe-temps
- Importance des loisirs par rapport aux études (dont le temps consacré au loisir)

Travail rémunéré

- Changements
- Lien avec les études et les intérêts
- Place que le travail rémunéré a pris pendant les études

○ Si c'était à refaire...

Conditions de vie
- ○ Changements (famille, revenus, etc.)
- ○ Conditions ayant contribué à la réussite des études
- ○ Conditions ayant nui à la réussite des études

C. PERSPECTIVES FUTURES
L'étudiant peut-il indiquer quels sont ses projets ?

Nature du projet
- ○ Quels projets ? (poursuite des études, emploi)
- ○ Considérations ayant influencé la décision

Projets scolaires envisagés (autre programme collégial, formation universitaire...) ?
- ○ Motifs du choix
- ○ Comment son choix s'est-il réalisé ?
- ○ Quelles sources d'information a-t-il utilisé ?
- ○ Son expérience collégiale a-t-elle influencé son choix et comment

Si le programme choisi est en science
- ○ mode de décision
- ○ Motifs du choix

Si le programme choisi n'est pas un programme de science,
- ○ l'apport des études collégial en sciences
- ○ Motifs du changement

Perception des études universitaires
- ○ Espoirs de réussite
- ○ Difficultés anticipées
- ○ Temps d'obtention du diplôme
- ○ Performance par rapport aux autres

Perception de son insertion professionnelle
- ○ Genre d'emploi
- ○ Qualités requises
- ○ Lien entre l'emploi et le programme
- ○ Facilité de trouver un emploi
- ○ Revenus

Style de vie dans 10 ans
- ○ Famille
- ○ Loisirs
- ○ Conciliation travail – vie personnelle

D. BILAN DE LA PARTICIPATION À LA RECHERCHE

Quel bilan l'étudiant fait-il de sa participation à l'équipe de recherche?
Quel message tu voudrais faire passer aux personnes qui vont lire les résultats de la recherche ?

REFERENCES

Alheit, Peter. 1994. « The 'Biographical Question' as a Challenge to Adult Education ». *International Review of Education*, vol. 40, no 3-5, p. 283-98.

Bélanger, Paul et Pierre Doray. 2007. « La triple articulation de l'éducation initiale et de l'éducation des adultes ». In *De l'insertion à l'intégration socioprofessionnelle : rôles et enjeux de la formation initiale et de la formation continu*, sous la dir. de Kamel Béji et Geneviève Fournier, p. 65-94. Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

Bélanger, Paul, Pierre Doray, Anik Labonté et Mireille Levesque. 2004. « Les participations atypiques: des exceptions qui indiquent de nouvelles voies ». In *Les adultes en formation: les logiques de participation*, Ministère de Emploi, Solidarité sociale et Famille, Gouvernement du Québec, CIRST, UQÀM, CIRDEP UQÀM. 54 p. Québec : Gouvernement du Québec.

Bélanger, Paul et Ndia Kayembe. 1987. *L'Éducation des adultes au collégial. Un état de developpement?*. Québec: Conseil des colleges. 88 p.

Béret, Pierre. 1986. « Les Projets Scolaires: Contribution à une Théorie de l'Acteur dans le Système Éducatif ». *Formation-Emploi*, vol.13, p.15-23.

Bernard, H, Russell. 2000. *Social Research Methods : Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications. 784 p.

Bloomer, Martin et Phil Hodkinson. 2000a. « Learning Careers: Continuity and Change in Young People's Dispositions to Learning ». *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 26, no 5, p. 583-597.

Bloomer, Martin et Phil Hodkinson. 2000b. « Learning Career: Conceptualising Transformations in Young People and Their Learning ». In *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association* (New Orleans, April 24-28, 2000).

Boudon, Raymond. 1973. *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality. Changing Prospects in Western Society*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 220 p.

Bourdieu, Pierre et Jean-Claude Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London and Beverly Hills: Sage Publications. 288 p.

Braxton, John M., Anna V. Shaw Sullivan et Robert M. Johnson. 1997. « Appraising Tinto's Theory of College Student Departure ». *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, vol 12, p. 107-164.

Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials. 2007. « Postsecondary Education in Quebec ». www.cicic.ca/postsec/volume2/description.en.asp?code=QC. [En ligne] (Consulté le 26 août, 2007).

Choy, Susan P. 2002. *Access and Persistence: Findings from 10 Years of Longitudinal Research on Students*. Washington: American Council on Education, 45 p.

Conseil de la science et de la technologie. 1998. *Des formations pour une société de l'innovation*, Avis, Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 93 p.

Coulangeon, Philippe. 2003. « Compétences scolaires et socialisation : le rôle de l'École dans l'accès à la Culture ». In « Stratification Sociale » (CREST, Université de Paris V), (Paris, 18 décembre 2003).

Coulon, Alain. 1997. *Le métier d'étudiant: L'entrée dans la vie universitaire*. Paris: PUF, 219 p.

Courtney, Sean. 1992. *Why Adults Learn. Towards a Theory of Participation in Adult Education*. London and new York: Routledge, 191 p.

Crompton, Rosemary et Fiona Harris. 1998. « Explaining women's employment patterns: 'orientations to work' revisited ». *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49 no 1, p.118-136.

Cross, Patricia. 1981. *Adults as Learners. Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 300 p.

Crossan, Beth, John Field, Jim Gallacher et Barbara Merrill. 2003. « Understanding Participation in Learning for Non-traditional Adult Learners: learning careers and the construction of learning identities ». *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol.24, no 1, p. 55-67.

Darkenwald, G. G. et T. Valentine. 1985. « Factor Structure of Deterrents to Public Participation in Adult Education ». *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, p. 177-193.

Davies, Rhys et Peter Elias. 2003. *Dropping Out: A Study of Early Leavers from Higher Education (Research Report RR386)*. Norwich: Department for Education and Skills (U.K.). 70 p.

Doray, Pierre, Geneviève Szczepanik, Claude Julie Bourque, Claire Fortier et Lucia Mason. 2003*a*. « Choix professionnel, carrières scolaires et production de la 'relève' technique », In *10ième Journées d'études Céreq – « Les données longitudinales dans l'analyse du marché du travail"*, (21-23 May), Caen, France, p.361-376.

Doray, Pierre, Pierre Chenard, Claire Deschênes, Claire Fortier, Guy Gibeau, Martine Foisy et Brigitte Gemme. 2003*b*. *Les parcours scolaires en sciences et technologies au collégial* Montréal : Centre interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie, Université de Québec à Montréal, 73p.

Doray, Pierre, Paul Bélanger, Anne Motte et Anik Labonté. 2004. «Les facteurs de variation de la participation des adultes à la formation au Canada en 1997 ». In *Les adultes en formation: les logiques de participation*, Ministère de Emploi, Solidarité sociale et Famille, Gouvernement du Québec, CIRST, UQÀM, CIRDEP UQÀM, 45 p.

Doray, Pierre, Paul Bélanger et Lucia Mason. 2005. « Entre hier et demain : carrières et persévérance scolaires des adultes dans l'enseignement technique ». *Lien social et Politiques-RIAC*, vol. 54, p. 75-89.

Doray, Pierre, Lucia Mason, and Paul Bélanger. 2005. « Beating the Odds : Adults Returning to College » . In *Work and Lifelong Learning Conference* (OISE), (Toronto, 20 juin).

Dubet, François. 1994. Sociologie de l'expérience. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 272 p.

Dubet, François et Danilo Martuccelli. 1996. *À l'école. Sociologie de l'expérience scolaire*. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 361 p.

Edwards, Rosalind. 1993. *Mature Women Students. Separating or Connecting Family and Education*. London: Taylor and Francis, 192 p.

Elder, Glen. 1995. « The Life Course Paradigm: Social Change and Individual Development » in *Examining Lives in Context, Perspectives on the Evology of Human Development*, sous la direction de Phyllis Moen, Glen Elder et Kurt·Lüscher, p. 101-139. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Equal Opportunities Commission, 2001. « The Lifecycle of Inequality (Women and Men in Britain) », http://www.eoc.org.uk/PDF/wm_lifecycle_of_inequality.pdf [En ligne] (Consulté le 26 août, 2007).

Erben, Michael (dir publ.). 1998. *Biography and Education : A Reader*. London: Falmer Press, 177 p.

Felouzis, Georges, et Nicola Sembel. 1997. « La construction des projets à l'université. Le cas de quatre filières de l'université en masse ». *Formation-Emploi*, vol 58, p. 45-60.

Fletcher, Catherine. 2002. « Formation continue à la française et système de laissez-faire britannique: quelles chances pour les femmes? ». *Formation Emploi*, vol. 78, p. 17-33.

Gallacher, Jim, Beth Crossan, John Field et Barbara Merrill. 2002. « Learning careers and the social space: exploring fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education ». *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 21, no. 6, p. 493-509.

Gemme, Brigitte. 2003. « Choisir l'informatique : L'orientation des étudiants en Informatique au collégial ». Mémoire de maîtrise, Montréal, Université du Québec à Montréal, 168 p.

Giddens, Anthony. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 294 p.

Gingras, Marcelle, Ghislaine Durocher et Bernard Tétreau. 1995. « Les préoccupations de carrière d'adultes en formation », *Éducation Permanente* vol.125 no 4, p. 57-62.

Glover, Judith. 2002. « Women and Scientific Employment: Current Perspectives from the UK". *Science Studies*, vol.15, p. 29-45.

Gouvernement du Québec. 2004. *L'abandon des études à la formation collégiale technique: résultats d'une enquête. Rapport synthèse*. Québec : Ministère de l'éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 50 p.

_____. 2005*a*. *Statistiques de L'Éducation (Édition 2005). Enseignement primaire, secondaire, collégial et universitaire*. Québec : Ministère de l'éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 269 p.

_____. 2005*b*. *État de la formation de base des adultes au Québec*. Québec : Ministère de l'éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 112 p.

Hakim, Catherine. 1996. *Key Issues in Women's Work. Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment*. London: Athlone Press, 292 p.

Hayes, Amanda. 2000. « Further Education 2000, p. a message to policy-makers and college managers » , *Adults Learning*. March, vol 11, no 7, p. 10-12.

Heenan, Deirdre. 2002. « Women, Access and Progression: an examination of women's reasons for not continuing in higher education following the completion of the Certificate in Women's Studies ». *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol. 24, no 1, p. 39-55.

Heinz, Walter R 1999. « Job-Entry Patterns in a Life-course Perspective ». In *From Education to Work: Cross-National Perspectives*, sous la direction de Walter R. Heinz, p. 214-231. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. 2001. « Work and the Life Course: A Cosmopolitan-local Perspective » . In *Restructuring Work and the Life Course*, sous la direction de V.W. Marshall, Walter.R. Heinz, H. Kruger, et A. Verma, p.3-22. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hodkinson, Phil et Martin Bloomer. 2001. « Dropping out of further education: complex causes and simplistic policy assumptions ». *Research Papers in Education*, vol. 16, no 2, p. 117-140.

Hodkinson, Phil et Andrew C. Sparkes. 1997. « Careership: A Sociological Theory of Career Decision Making ». *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 29-44.

Houston, Diane M. et Gillian Marks. 2003. « The Role of Planning and Workplace Support in Returning to Work after Maternity Leave » . *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. vol 41, no 2, p. 197-214.

Husu, Liisa. 2001. *Sexism, Support and Survival in Academia: Academic Women and Hidden Discrimination in Finland.* Helsinki: Department of Social Psychology, University of Helsinki, 374 p.

Jackson, S. 2003. « Lifelong Earning: working-class women and lifelong learning », *Gender and Education*, vol. 15, no 4, p. 365-376.

Lahire, Bernard. 1994. « Les raisons de l'improbable. Les formes populaires de la 'réussite' à l'école élémentaire ». In *L'Éducation prisonnière de la forme scolaire ? Scolarisation et socialisation dans les sociétés industrielles*, sous la dir. de Guy Vincent, p. 73-106. Lyon : Presses Universitaires de Lyon.

_____. 1998. « La réussite scolaire en milieux populaires ou les conditions sociales d'une schizophrénie heureuse ». *Ville-École-Intégration*, no 114, p. 104-109.

Lauer, Charlotte. 2003. « Family background, cohort and education: A French-German comparison based on a multivariate ordered probit model of educational attainment ». *Labour Economics*, vol. 10, p. 231-251.

Luttrell, Wendy. 1997. *School-Smart and Mother-Wise: Working-Class Women's Identity and Schooling*. New York and London: Routledge. 164 p.

Marks, Gillian et D.M. Houston. 2002. « Attitudes towards work and motherhood held by working and non-working mothers ». *Work, Employment and Society*, vol 16 no 3, p. 523-536.

Mason, Mary Ann et Marc Goulden. 2003. « Do Babies Matter? The effect of family formation on the lifelong careers of academic men and women ». *Academe*. vol 88 no. 6, p.21-27.

McGivney, Veronica. 2003. *Staying or Leaving the Course. Non-Completion and Retention of Mature Students in Further and Higher Education*. Leicester, U.K.: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 206 p.

Merrill, Barbara. 2002. *Gender, Change and Identity: Mature Women Students in Universities*. Aldershot (VT): Ashgate, 227 p.

Moen, Phyllis et Shin-Kap Han. 2001. « Reframing Careers: Work, Family, and Gender ». In *Restructuring Work and the Life Course*, sous la direction de Victor W. Marshall, Walter R. Heinz, Helga Kruger et Anil Verma, p. 424-445. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Munn, Pamela, Carolyn MacDonald et Kevin Lowden. 1992. *Helping Adults Students Cope. Mature Students on Science, Mathematics and Engineering Courses*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Council for Research in Education. 60 p.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. 1996. *Apprendre à tout âge. Réunion du Comité de l'éducation au niveau ministériel*, 16-17 janvier. Paris : OCDE. 363 p.

_____. 2003. *Au-delà du discours. Politiques et pratiques de formation des adultes*. Paris: OECD, 276 p.

Pires, Alvaro P. 1997. « Échantillonnage et recherche qualitative: essai théorique et méthodologique ». In *La recherche qualitative : Enjeux épistémologiques et méthodologiques*, sous la dir. de Jean Poupart, Jean-Pierre Deslauriers, Lionel-Henri Groulx, Anne Laperrière, Robert Mayer et Alvaro P. Pires, p. 113-169. Boucherville: Gaëtan Morin.

Pirot, Laurence et Jean-Marie De Ketele. 2000. « L'engagement académique de l'éducation comme facteur de réussite à l'université: Étude exploratoire menée dans deux facultés contrastées », *Revue des sciences de l'éducation*, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 367-394.

Procter, Ian. 2001. « Becoming a Mother or a Worker: Structure and Agency in Young Adult Women's Accounts of Education, Training, Employment, and Partnership ». In *Restructuring Work and the Life Course*, sous la direction de Victor W. Marshall, Walter R. Heinz, Helga Kruger et Anil Verma, p.489-504. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Raddon, Arwen. 2002. « Mothers in the Academy: positioned and positioning within discourses of the 'successful mother' and the 'good mother' ». *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 27, no 4, p. 387-403.

Reay, Diane. 2002. « Shaun's Story: troubling discourses of white-working class masculinities ». *Gender and Education*, vol 14, no 3, p. 221-234.

Reay, Diane, Stephen Ball et David Miriam. 2002. « 'It's Taking me a Long Time but I'll Get There in the End': mature students on access courses and higher education choice ». *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 28, no1, p. 5-19.

Rich, Lauren M., et Sun-Bin Kim. 1999. « Patterns of Later Life Education among Teenage Mothers ». *Gender and Society*, vol. 13, no 6, p.798-817.

Smithson, J. 1999. « Equal choices, different futures: Young adults talk about work and family expectations ». *Psychology of Women Section Review*, vol. 1, no 2, p. 43-57.

Tett, Lyn. 1996. « Education and the Marketplace». In *The Learning Society: Challenges and Trends*, sous la dir. de Peter Raggatt, Richard Edwards and Nick Small, p.150-161. London and New York: Routledge.

Thompson, R., S. Henderson et J. Holland. 2003. « Making the Most of What You've Got? Resources, Values and Inequalities in Young Women's Transitions to Adulthood ». *Educational Review*, vol. 55, no1, p. 33-46.

Tinto, Vincent. 1987. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 256 p.

Tuijman, Albert C. 1996. « The expansion of adult education and training in Europe: trends and issues ». In *The Learning Society: Challenges and Trends*, sous la dir. de Peter Raggatt, Richard Edwards and Nick Small, p.26-44. London and New York: Routledge.

Whaley, Patricia. 2000. « Women and HE – the good news and the bad news ». *Adults Learning*, vol. 12 (March), p. 13-15.

Woodley, Alan. 1984. « The older the better? A study of mature British student performance in British universities ». *Research in British Education*, vol. 32, p. 35-50.

Van der Zee, Hendrik. 1996. « The learning society ». In *The Learning Society: Challenges and Trends*, sous la dir. de Peter Raggatt, Richard Edwards and Nick Small, p. 162-183. London and New York: Routledge.