

Québec's Young Adults and Educational Pathways: A Collaboration in Research and Ethnography

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Abstract

The extension of time needed by numerous learners to complete high school, especially in the Province of Québec in Canada, poses an educational challenge and not only a matter of statistics. Educational sciences require an in-depth overview of those learners to better understand the social system in which they evolve. Adult learners are considered, for the purpose of this research on intrinsic educational pathways, as co-constructors of the knowledge and involved as expert-informants in order to open an observation window on adult education from the perspective of the adults themselves. In this paper, I will discuss the methodology, based in ethnographical methods and the knowledge gleaned over 20 years of experience in adult education, which I developed to document the profile and the life path of adult learners completing their high school education in adult learning centers. The results are organized along the format of adults' ethnopedagogical biographies. These life stories highlight such expected factors that have had a negative impact on the adult's educational pathway (traumatic experience in primary school and high school, learning difficulties, social background, etc.) as well as other less expected factors (a welcoming environment, lifelong learning, etc.) that have assisted these same adults, via their andragogical experiences, to build a bridge through acquiring a recognised diploma, their own social integration and their resilience.

Keywords: Adult education, on intrinsic educational pathways, resilience, ethnographic methods

Introduction to Adult Education

In Quebec, ten entry-level educational training services are offered to a very diverse adult population; they are provided at specialized schools called Adult Education Centers (A.E.C). Most adults use the Common Core Basic Education program (CCBE); high school's 1st and 2nd grades, or the Diversified Basic Education program (DBE); and high school's 3rd, 4th and 5th grade (MELS, 2009). Adults completing their schooling in one of these programs were selected as the subjects of our study. Using their ethnopedagogical portraits it is possible to understand the process that leads to secondary education success among individuals who have followed a nonstandard educational path, as well as the elements arising from that path, the pedagogic practices and the environments which ensure school perseverance, and the conditions through which social integration becomes possible. The concepts of pedagogical relationship and pedagogies (from an andragogical tradition) are here studied in terms of their impact on the school perseverance of adults.

Problem Statement

This project is composed of three research questions:

1. How does establishing an ethnic-pedagogic profile designed for adult general education allow the user to understand and explain those factors in the school environment and biographies of adults that have caused them to extend their high school studies?
2. How can we define the pedagogical relationship specific to the experience of adult education and the pedagogy of individualized instruction in a context of school perseverance?
3. How can we document the issue of social insertion of adult learners and how to connect this issue with the educational path and its successful completion in adult general education?

Conceptual Framework

Ethnography allows us to deeper delve these research questions. We have adapted its design to the context of adult general education, using the Adult Education Model of Belanger (2011) and the Self-Study Theory of Carré & Moisan (2002). Belanger's model stems from the achievements of the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) held by UNESCO in 2009. This model posits that adults are entitled to basic education throughout their life (*life long*) that takes into consideration the deeper dimensions of their being (*life deep*) and that works with the learner's experience (*life wide*). Participation of adults in learning activities rests upon their aspirations and the response society gives them in terms of supply and educational structure. This model allows to frame the general problematic linked to the diversity of adults' pathways and their right to a full basic education in relation to adult general education, which is seen here as both an educational offer and as an educational structure in which student live their experience and which lead them to exercise their free will in pursuit of their career training and social insertion. With respect to the Self-Study Theory, Carré & Moisan (2002), which relies on the works of Long (1999), analyse the training of an adult under three axes: a psychological axis (school and life objectives), a pedagogical axis (linked to an educative perspective) and a sociological axis (social fact). Indeed, school and life paths are influenced by various factors, especially of a psychological nature (motivation, desire to succeed and persevere, and self-esteem), of an educational nature (relationship with the teacher, achievement of objectives, use of resources) and of a sociological nature (educational offer, A.E.C operations, adaptation, social insertion). Regarding psychological factors, the self-study approach rests on the learners' psychological ability to control their learning based on the perceptions they develop from their overall objectives; in this case, their journey in A.G.E. This factor is the basis of our concern for the ethno-educational portrait of the adult. Regarding educational factors, they rest on the learner's ability to control the following components of the learning process: locations, length, resources, and support. This factor is the basis of our interest in the question of pedagogy. Regarding sociological factors, vocational training is seen as a living part of the society on which adults depend and that they control in terms of the specific choices they make. This factor is the basis of our interest in the issues of perseverance and social insertion in connection with the A.G.E. These three axes were therefore selected for the research.

Research Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic survey methodology and uses both the written and the oral methods of inquiry, which were designed to document the knowledge from research participants, which for the purpose of this study are called informants (Bonte-Izard, 2000 and Roberge, 1991). The biographical technique is also employed to understand the intrinsic characteristics of adults in pursuit of a personal pathway. It represents a collection tool that allows participants to report their experience which has proved its relevance for the production of educational pathways and transitions. The biographical structure being in itself a form of result, we have chosen for this research to tell the story of five adults – three women and two men – aged from 18 to 30 years of age. These biographies were also useful to cross-examine results, and therefore the high school pathways; this helped us validate our results with that of other researchers. The documentation of this knowledge is made possible by investigating the relationship between the researcher, referred to as the investigator, and the informants. Knowledge creation, arising from this process, rests on focused research objectives and instruments adapted to the context and profile of the informants. In ethnographic investigation, much importance is given to the production of knowledge as an interactive process between informants and investigators: this follows the concept of co-construction of knowledge, which is central to this approach (Lévesque, 2009). Ethnography has been adopted in much recent adult education research because it ensures the recognition of the informants' contribution as central to the construction of knowledge. This method is pertinent to deepen topics which have not yet been addressed and it can be conducted under simple and affordable conditions because it can be achieved with a limited number of informants. This approach cannot thus be reduced to a few techniques and instruments: it implies the use of subjective experience and the rigorous questioning on the form of the results and their object.

Sample Size and Data Collection Tools

Five adults completing their high school grade 5 in an A.E.C in a rural environment participated in the research. Their aged varied and their only required criterion was their pursuit of their high school diploma. They were referred to us by a teacher. We used three questionnaires as our research tool. These were designed with the aim of co-constructing knowledge with these adults.

Questionnaire 1 – Basic ethnopedagogical data; it contains 100 short questions for the purpose of establishing 11 profiles allowing adults to create their school pathway and their life as a learner. It is designed for the composition of a school and life biography also called ethno-pedagogic story, because the questions were focused on the perception of the educational factor. In accordance with Belanger's adult education model (2011), the questions cover the multiple dimensions that make up the life of an adult Profile 1: Basic sociographical data; Profile 2: Adult education pathway; Profile 3: Life circumstances; Profile 4: Work; Profile 5: Information technologies; Profile 6: Creative skills; Profile 7: Secondary school pathway; Profile 8: Primary school pathway; Profile 9: Kindergarten and early childhood; Profile 10; Family and school life; Profile 11: Health practices. Questionnaire 2 – Adult general education perseverance and social insertion: it consists of 15 semi-open essay questions that depict the informants' perception of their level of social insertion through a dynamic approach relating to their past, present and future, and in relation to their perseverance in A.G.E. Questionnaire 3 – Role of the pedagogical relationship in adult general education: Composed of 15 semi-open essay questions, this questionnaire allows the documentation of informants' perceptions of the pedagogical relationship in adult general education regarding the acquisition of their high-school diploma.

Data Analysis Methodology

We analysed the results over two axes: a vertical axis – the ethnographic biographies, and a horizontal axis that allows isolating, for example, the secondary school pathway or the primary school pathway. For the vertical processing, we transcribed the data from all ten profiles; then added the results of each profile to allow the construction of ethnographic life story of each learner. For the horizontal processing, we added data profile to the others for all ten subjects; the data can be thus read and interpreted globally or alternately certain elements can be isolated. The same approach was used for questionnaires 2 and 3, which have for aim to document the perception of the subjects on the concepts of pedagogical relationship, individualized education and social insertion. The data was anonymized, each participant having received a fictitious name.

Findings

Ethno-pedagogical portrait of learners: One element that emerges from the analysis of this portrait is the complex nature of variables related to the extension of secondary education. It is important to note that ethnopedagogical stories represent themselves a result that takes the form of a biography.

High school pathways accurately illustrate the consequences of a sensitive primary school pathway. They are listed as follows:

- Alexandra, 18 years old: four relocations, grade repetition
- Stéphanie, 21 years old: grade repetition, diagnosed with significant learning disabilities, ostracism and victimization
- Mathieu, 27 years old: relocation, not behind at school but exhibited behavioural problems and aggressiveness
- Chantal, 30 years old: attended several schools, grade repetition; integration, rejection and victimization problems
- Maxime, 30 years old: normal school pathway but difficult family circumstance

A similar high school is also the expression of a particular period in which the student, now become adult, experienced troubles of all kinds that have had repercussions on their school pathway. Alexandra blames her difficulties to a family move that occurred during Grade 4. Sent back to Grade 3, she would drop out of school the following year. She does not regret dropping out but the move that led to this situation. Stephanie repeated Grades 2 and 4; her learning disability followed her and she also suffered from medical problems. She was bullied on a daily basis and suffered teasing, threats and violence at the hands of her classmates. Her experience was horrendous and frustrating; too old to continue she enrolled in A.G.E and says she should have done so sooner to avoid such trauma. Mathieu doesn't suffer from academic delays but presents behavioural problems and he often missed school. Encouraged by his father, he quit high school in Grade 4 due to financial reasons. He regrets that decision. Chantal victimization problems stopped in high school but her educational delay continued (enrolled in an individual learning program and very low grades); a manipulative spouse led her to stop school in Grade 4, a decision she does not regret because that's how she built herself as an adult (school of life). So she cannot say if she would make the same decision, because this decision also forged her identity. Maxime did repeat several grades in high school and admits to behavioural problems. Lacking motivation, he quit school.

He regrets his decision because he wasted time but also does not regret it because he became the man he is. Therefore, he would make the same decision today: motivation and a life goal could have prevented him from quitting high school.

Adult Education: Obtaining a high school diploma (finishing what they started) and the need for better working conditions constitute the two main elements leading to registration in an adult education program. Expectations vis-à-vis teachers stem from the following objectives: answers to questions, help with understanding, satisfactory explanations, effective teaching skills, teaching techniques diversity and improving language skills. The description of the environment is positive. Organisational benefits: progressing at their own pace, individualization of work, autonomy, availability of teachers, atmosphere conducive to study and the possibility to accelerate studies. Andragogical advantages: maturity, responsibility for one's actions and freedom of choice. Psychological benefits: family atmosphere, team spirit and solidarity. It is possible to believe that A.E.C act as a place of transition from a traumatic step (pathway) to a remedial step (A.G.E.). This transition is directly related to social insertion: obtaining a degree, pursuing further studies and/or being employed at a satisfactory job. Individualized teaching, teaching relationship and social integration: adults clearly characterize the pedagogy they live. They value positively the prevailing pedagogical relationship, the study atmosphere and the A.E.C. There is also a marked evolution of the notion of social insertion. Knowledge acquired in French and mathematics, in particular, is regarded by them as important: the latter help them acquire a greater sense of self-direction and encourage their perseverance to complete their studies and consider an equal social insertion as more possible.

Conclusion

Our goal was to establish the ethnopedagogical portrait of adult graduates and probe their perceptions of teaching practices and social integration. Here we targeted both the understanding of the life circumstances of learners that can explain the extension of their high school education and the causes for their long-term perseverance with the pedagogical relationship, the pedagogy of individualized instruction and the desire for social integration. We consider that conducting independent research that engages adults as co-builders from an adult education and ethnographic perspective allows them to take their place in the creation of academic knowledge and integrates them into the research field as holders of a particular knowledge relevant to their schooling experience in our societies. Adults reported in the final comments that they were surprised to have gained a better understanding of their own educational and life pathways.

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