
The Psychosocial Process of College Dropout: The CEGEP Experience

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Abstract

The results of this qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research present a psychosocial process of dropping out at the college level. This process is analyzed through three periods (pre-dropout, dropout and post-dropout) comprising eight regressive steps induced by mutual maladaptation between the student and the CEGEP. However, the post-dropout period is a moratorium during which integration and self-reactualization take place.

Résumé

Cet article constitue une recherche qualitative, descriptive et exploratoire sur le décrochage au niveau du collège. L'auteur en présente le processus psychosocial, qu'il a étudié lors de trois périodes différentes (avant, pendant et après le décrochage même), constituées de huit étapes régressives résultant d'une inadaptation de l'étudiant avec le Cégep et vice versa. Cependant, la période succédant au décrochage peut être considérée comme une période de sursis durant laquelle les processus d'intégration et de réactualisation de soi sont enclenchés.

In Quebec, "student dropout has only recently appeared as a subject for concern" (Royer, Moisan, Payeur, & Vincent, 1995). Nonetheless, 38 percent of CEGEP¹ students leave school without obtaining their Diploma of College Studies, and only 25 percent of those who persist obtain their diploma within the prescribed time limit (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997; Terrill, 1997). Thus, despite an increasingly rigorous selection process, CEGEPs retain no more than 60 percent of the students they admit. This situation is very alarming, since students with severe learning difficulties, intellectual limitations, serious health problems and emotional disturbances, normally do not complete high school and thus do not even apply for college studies. This means that CEGEP dropouts usually have a Secondary V (high school) diploma, which has earned them admission to a college level institution. If students are fit and possess the prerequisites, can the effects of the CEGEP system be considered to have a major influence on students' dropout decisions?

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¹ CEGEP is the acronym for Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (college of general and professional education). CEGEPs offer general education at the pre-university level, leading to university studies, and professional or technical programs, which prepare students to enter the labour market (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1998).

Profile of the College Dropout

Two important Quebec studies have sought to define the profile of the college dropout. Duval (1993) carried out a study with 583 participants, divided into three groups: regular students, dropouts, and returned dropouts. This study concludes, first, that the socio-demographic variables measured — ethnic origin, parents' education level, parents' income, and part-time employment while enrolled in CEGEP — do not show a significant link to college dropout.

All sources and methodologies conclude that boys are considerably behind girls academically at the time of admission to CEGEP; this disparity is even greater at the time of graduation, when the success rate for men (31%) is lower than that for women (46%) (SRAM, 1998). Duval (1993) shows that dropout occurs mainly in the first year. The dropouts have below-average high-school marks, a phenomenon that is naturally repeated at the CEGEP level. They are also much less satisfied with their programs and tend to change programs more often. The dropouts devote less time to their studies; they fail and withdraw from more courses than other students. They lack concentration, study methods, work strategies and self-discipline, and are, therefore, more often absent from classes. They have difficulty balancing work schedules and the writing of assignments, and they experience problems preparing for examinations. They seem less motivated and, in the end, they believe that obtaining a diploma is not important.

In their relationships with the academic milieu, the dropouts have a tendency not to request assistance. They complain of insufficient encouragement from their professors and they do not appreciate the CEGEP atmosphere. Often their friends do not attend the same institution; thus they complain of receiving little support from their peers in meeting their academic obligations.

A second study at the college level analyzes data banks covering 17,777 students for 1992 and 42,511 students for 1993 (Terrill & Ducharme, 1994). Twelve variables are measured in relation to academic performance: time devoted to studies, time devoted to paid work during high school, sex, age on entering CEGEP, parents' education level, parental encouragement to pursue studies, parents' income and civil status, financial uncertainty, the diploma sought by the student, the number of courses taken during the first semester, and the student's motivation. The measurement and combination of these variables, with the exception of the marks obtained in Secondary IV and V, did not make it possible to predict academic performance at the CEGEP level. These results, like those obtained by Duval (1993), show that socio-demographic variables seem to have little influence on academic performance.

The Dropout Process, a Little-Known Phenomenon at the College Level

At the college level, the dropout process is not well known. Bibliographic research conducted in the principal electronic databases identified only Tinto as a theorist on the dropout process at the pre-university level. Generally considered as a precursor, Tinto (1975, 1987) likens the student's progression through school to a journey consisting of a certain number of trials to be overcome, during which the institution must offer all the support necessary. This "academic journey" is described as follows: (a) antecedents: the students arrive at the institution with their familial and scholastic antecedents and their various aptitudes; (b) goals: they set success-related objectives for themselves; (c) institutional experience: they have their first contacts and experience with the academic reality at this level; (d) integration: they assimilate this experience; (e) commitment: they re-evaluate their personal objectives in relation to those of the institution; (f) result: this confrontation results in their decision to withdraw or to persist in their studies.

Another theoretical model describes the dropout process, but at the high-school level; however, there is some question as to whether this description corresponds to college student's level of development. For Cuellar & Cuellar (1991) the major causes for dropping out of school follow a logical sequence and lead to a predictable consequence. This progression suggests a "losers' circle." The following steps are identified in this process: (a) student's educational and social needs are unmet; (b) lack of interest in the school experience; (c) student obtains poor grades; (d) student is perceived as irresponsible by teachers; (e) teachers dislike student; (f) student is frustrated; (g) student dislikes teachers; (h) student is truant; (i) problems with school officials develop; (j) problems with peers develop; (k); student feels more frustration; (l) student drops out.

The CEGEP Institution and Dropout

The institutional environment plays a predominant role in the dropout process. This hypothesis was evaluated by Astin (1991), who analyzed the influence of the college environment on the student's development, taking into account various characteristics at the time of entering and leaving college studies. Astin's work is exceptional because over a 30-year period, beginning in 1960, he developed a file containing data on more than eight million students from 1200 American colleges. Astin (1991) concludes that the more time a student spends engaged in academic and extra-curricular activities while in college, the more likely he is to remain in school. He adds that the characteristics of the curriculum, of the institutional structures and of the overall environment contribute greatly to academic growth, regardless of the individual's program

of study. He places particular emphasis on the impact of environmental characteristics which, when combined with certain individual traits, explain the student's persistence or withdrawal. Thus, the involvement of the student in the college milieu, like the presence and quality of certain institutional factors, can contribute in large measure to the student's development and, even more certainly, to his persistence in school.

Tinto (1975, 1987), like Astin (1991), emphasizes the institution's duty to put the appropriate systems in place to foster the student's integration, adaptation and maturation. Academic failure, from this perspective, is interpreted as the inability of this milieu to initiate and integrate the adolescent into the adult world.

Milen & Berger (1997) have explored the links between Astin's and Tinto's models in the context of academic persistence at the university level. Their findings suggest that students' early involvement with the faculty (first six or seven weeks of a semester), is significantly related to whether they are likely to persist at the institution.

Thus, the originality of the present study resides in its goal of obtaining a model of the college dropout process through the analysis of the following objectives: (a) to identify the elements of the process that are shared by the dropouts; (b) to determine the order in which the various steps in the process appear; (c) to examine whether this order is uniform for all the dropouts; (d) to describe each step according to the data gathered from the dropouts; (e) to identify the relationships between the different steps; (f) to obtain an appreciation of the role the dropouts attribute to themselves in this situation; (g) to analyze the role of the CEGEP in the dropouts' withdrawal; (h) to examine whether there are differences in the dropout process for students in the technical/professional sector and those in the pre-university sector; (i) to explore the differences, if any, between young women and young men who drop out.

METHOD

Given the nature of this study's objectives and its originality, the qualitative research method was chosen. Qualitative research is used to describe a situation centred on a particular question (descriptive research) or to explore certain questions (exploratory research) that are difficult to examine using quantitative methods (Deslauriers & Kérisit, 1997). Mucchielli (1996) specifies that this method, consisting of qualitative information-gathering and analysis techniques, is used in order to clarify the understanding of a human or social phenomenon. He maintains that the relevance of qualitative research is based, among other things, on the fact that it is "comprehensive, favouring the description of the processes rather than the explanation of the causes, the depth of the analyses rather than the multiplicity of cases, the richness of the data rather than the precision of the measurements." Thus the qualitative

method seemed the most appropriate for this study, whose objective was to understand the college dropout phenomenon by examining the perceptions and conscious actions of students who have dropped out. Bachelor & Joshi (1986) affirm that the mathematical criterion of generalization is not essential in qualitative research, since the method of this type of research enables the researcher to conclude that a phenomenon is present when there is identity of meaning from one example to another, despite possible variations in the phenomenon. Thus, qualitative research focuses on the transferability rather than the generalization of the results. (Lafortune, 1993). Transferability means the ability to make the necessary adaptations for the potential application of recommendations, using such means as work hypotheses, placing the data into context, or a research report describing the characteristics of the research site (Legendre, 1993).

Participants

Participants in this study had to meet the basic criterion, that is to fit the definition of a dropout: the dropout is defined as a person who has begun CEGEP studies, but who has not completed a regular program of study, and who has therefore not obtained a Diploma of College studies, and who is not registered in any other academic institution. Thus, the names of 60 participants were drawn at random from a list of 260 dropouts from Collège Rosemont. Among these ex-students, nine could not be reached, eight had returned to school, four were unavailable and six did not wish to participate in this study. Thirty-three dropouts agreed to participate. Of these, 13 were excluded from the analyses because they had been used to verify the interview protocol and to train the interviewers. To meet objectives (h) and (i) of the study, the researcher ensured that the participants were divided into four equal groups: five pre-university, women; five pre-university, men; five technical, women; five technical, men. The 20 participants were of Québécois origin. The 10 young women were between 17 and 24 years of age, with an average age of 19.4 years. The young men's ages ranged from 17 to 20 years, with an average age of 18.3 years.

Procedure

The researcher tried a first interview model with three of the dropouts. In collaboration with a sociologist specialized in the gathering of qualitative data, this model was corrected so that the wordings used would be easily understood, and neither redundant nor biased. The questions were grouped according to three periods to obtain a good appreciation of what the participants had experienced in the pre-dropout, dropout and post-dropout periods. The interviews were semi-directed, that is, structured not from the interviewer's point of view but from that of the partici-

pants, in order to allow them to express their feelings and interests without a sense of being tricked or trapped (Powey & Watts, 1987).

The interviews were carried out with the collaboration of ten students in Research and Survey Techniques at Collège Rosemont, under the close supervision of their teacher, the sociologist mentioned earlier. Each interviewer conducted three interviews with different participants. The first ten were used for training: the students carried out self-evaluations and obtained feedback from their peers and their teacher. This training was part of the requirements of a course on interviewing practices. All the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim using word processing and a dictaphone.

To begin the analysis, a first reading was done to obtain an overall idea of the nature and pertinence of the information and of the general sense of the descriptions provided by the participants. Next, to explore the research objectives, the researcher established analysis categories based on the recurrence of the units of meaning that emerged from the material analyzed. As indicated by Mucchielli (1996), no categories had been established a priori; rather, previously identified units of meaning served as the points of reference for the establishment of the categories. Each category consists of several units of meaning which express the essence of the different steps. Thus, the conceptual category identifies the idea that is found consistently in each unit of meaning from one participant to another.

The analysis of 20% of the material gathered permitted the creation of an analysis grid composed of ten steps classified according to the three periods already identified: pre-dropout, dropout and post-dropout. With the collaboration of an academic adviser, a specialist in the dropout phenomenon, it was possible to verify whether this analysis grid accurately represented the dropout process. The specialist was asked to carry out a conceptual classification of the units of meaning within the three periods of the dropout process. A final classification was then established by consensus and this grid served to decode all the units of meaning.

RESULTS

The Dropout Process

The analysis reveals that for the participants, dropping out at the CEGEP level is a psychosocial process consisting of ten steps, divided into three temporal periods.

Pre-dropout Period

The first three steps of the process described below correspond to the pre-dropout period.

Need for Maturation. From the outset, the participants believe post-secondary studies will meet their needs for autonomy, personal culture, and social and professional integration: "I wanted to obtain more knowledge; I knew that to succeed in anything in life, you have to have a certain level of education. I wanted to be independent."

Distorted Perception of CEGEP. Before the participants entered CEGEP, their perception of this institution was often inaccurate and lacking clear goals: "I registered but I had no career plan. I had absolutely no idea what CEGEP was like."

Inadequate Academic Orientation. The majority of the interviewed students had academic or career orientation problems; they did not know which program to choose or why they were taking it and they had insufficient information to guide their choices. Some of them would have liked to defer their admission in order to take the time to reflect; however, external pressures from friends, but especially from parents, propelled them directly into CEGEP: "I had no clear goal when I registered in CEGEP. I just followed everyone else." "My parents pushed me to register."

In this context, they chose programs that did not correspond to their inherent personal preferences, or which were, at best, compromises in light of insufficient or missing prerequisites. "From the beginning, what influenced me was not being able to get directly into the technical program I'd chosen. [. . .] I ended up dropping out." "I dropped out because I wasn't in my field and I just wasn't motivated."

Some applied to CEGEP without much conviction, mainly because they did not have jobs: "I went to CEGEP, but I had no real interest in it. I went mainly because I didn't have a job."

What is most surprising is the quantity of false and partial information these future dropouts had about college studies, as well as the amount of information they lacked on the subject. These false perceptions were often serious enough to constitute a real scholastic heresy: for example, one participant believed they would be authorized to teach after a CEGEP diploma instead of the university degree required. There is no doubt, in this context, that the orientation process was incomplete. Furthermore, certain participants confirmed that they had applied to CEGEP based on a first impression, without further investigation or evaluation of the programs. That is why they felt a great deal of resentment towards their courses and their high school academic advisers and career counsellors. Their initial feelings of uncertainty and instability became situational shock from the time of registration and attendance at their first classes.

Dropout Period

This period begins with the situational shock step, followed by the feelings of alienation, defensive behaviours, inhibition of action, and resignation to dropping out steps.

Situational Shock. In general, participants perceive CEGEP as a difficult-to-understand world; thus they attest to difficulties in managing timetables and school work. They realize that their lack of prior information is hindering their adaptation to college:

I found it hard. I wasn't well prepared. Not many of us were. We had to fend for ourselves and adapt. The first two or three weeks are hard because you don't know where you're going; the courses are new. You know, there were so many things to get used to, and you had to try to keep up with your courses besides. After a while, I was really discouraged.

From the social standpoint, many of the participants had left their high-school friends, and some had moved away from their families to attend college: "My two friends from high school were in another CEGEP. We had always been together in high school. That had a bad effect on me." Others had no sense of belonging to their new educational institution and no real affinity with their peers:

At CEGEP, there are no strong friendships; there are small gangs that seem to stay separate from one another. A group of two or three will likely always be a group of two or three.

Feelings of Alienation. Participants' relationships with peers and CEGEP staff are often tenuous. Because of their isolation, students do not seek help in spite of major adaptation difficulties: "I didn't expect to be treated the same way I was in high school; I wasn't a child any more, but I would have liked them to show a bit of interest."

If I didn't understand something, I didn't go and see the teachers. I didn't feel like it because sometimes you got the impression they wanted to tell you you were stupid. Even if they didn't actually say I was stupid, they said that I should have listened. I had listened, but I still didn't understand.

While these students had not yet left school, they were already on the fringes of the system. They did not belong to any group and did not participate in extra-curricular activities. Although they were in great need of assistance, they did not always make use of the available resources, such as academic advising, career counselling, psychologists, and tutorial services: "I hadn't reached the point where I needed psychological help. I had a strong enough sense of myself to be able to combat my problems on my own."

Defensive Behaviours. As the future dropouts developed an ever-increasing aversion to CEGEP, they adopted avoidance strategies: neglect-

ing their work, missing classes, dropping courses, passive behaviour in class, disruption of classes, devoting more time to paid employment, etc. "We smoked pot. We went out to clubs. At lunch time, we went for a beer or did all sorts of other things." "When I got home, I watched TV instead of doing my homework." "I sat at the back of the class and didn't bother with the teacher or his course." "I can't deal with having three hours free between classes. When I had three hours I went home. [. . .] I didn't always go back for my classes."

While some students adopted avoidance behaviours, others tried even more desperately to succeed, although they derived little satisfaction from their efforts:

I didn't feel like a person. I felt like a robot who did nothing but study. I had no real goal [. . .]. I had lost nearly all my confidence. My marks were fine and the teachers had no complaints in that regard; [. . .] I was becoming a zero, nothing interested me [. . .]. It wasn't really a life. [. . .] My marks were good; it was my personality that was suffering.

Inhibition of Action. Neither avoidance nor determination to succeed enabled the participants to meet the academic standards expected of them. Their descriptions characterize the next step as one of indecision and inability to take appropriate action. Thus they experienced feeling of helplessness, because remaining in CEGEP was intolerable and leaving was inconceivable: "I was in a period of indecision: should I leave or should I stay? You know when you have to make a decision and you feel lost. Because it was important, it had repercussions on everything else." The participants were plagued by introjections of incompetence, affecting their self-confidence: "I didn't understand and I said to myself, 'You're a real zero!' I really felt like a failure and it really upset me."

Some students developed psychosomatic illnesses: I had a lot of failures; I didn't really like what I was doing. I had health problems, I couldn't sleep any more, I had stomach pains. You know, when you don't know where you're going, you just wander aimlessly. I was all mixed up.

Resignation to Dropping Out. The participants now entered the final step: resignation to dropping out. At this point, some wanted to avoid becoming sicker or more depressed:

I knew that if I had to continue with what I was studying, and force myself to do something I didn't like and that was doing nothing for me, I was going to go into depression. I was going to go crazy. I was afraid of having a depression if I stayed in CEGEP.

The participants left college officially or tacitly, a first group trying to salvage whatever academic standing they had: "I couldn't think about it for very long because if I didn't want to lower my average I had to drop

out before the withdrawal date so it would look as if I had never been registered in CEGEP.” The second group had no standing worth saving:

I had my concentration courses and I had failed two out of three. It was my first semester and I had failed the prerequisites. I didn't want to be there any more since I had failed those courses.

Others could not continue their studies because they did not meet the criteria for remaining in CEGEP, and would have had to wait until the next year to repeat the courses they had failed, thus unduly prolonging their program. In other words, they saw no possible solution within the system. Their decision was made: they dropped out.

Naturally, participants discussed their decision with their peers, who generally reinforced it, because often they were dropouts or potential dropouts themselves. On the other hand, participants often confronted their parents with a fait accompli, even though parental opinion was very important to them. Parents very rarely agreed with their children's decision to drop out and most of them were distressed by the situation. Dropping out can create conflict within families:

My parents certainly didn't approve. They were really discouraged. But, after all, they couldn't go to school for me. At some point, you know what you have to do, but it caused a lot of conflict at home anyway.

However, some parents were supportive in this situation:

When I was thinking of dropping out, I talked about it with my parents; they were very open. At first they found it strange because I had a nearly perfect academic record, I was able to sit down with them and talk about it [. . .]. Their support surprised me because education is very important to them, and to me, too. [. . .] That's why I was a bit afraid to talk about it, because I didn't want to spoil the image of the model son.

Post-dropout Period

Moratorium and self-reactualization steps constitute this period.

Moratorium. After withdrawing from CEGEP, the ex-students of the study entered a step consisting of recovery, reflection, exploration, reconstruction and reorganization.

At first, for a majority of participants, the decision to drop out engendered feelings of failure, shame, and a very negative self-image: “At first, it was clearly a personal humiliation. I told myself it couldn't be happening to me, the bright light in high school, the one that everyone thought would go a long way. It felt awful.”

Rarely did these students drop out thinking they would never return to school. Rather, they saw their withdrawal as a time out, a moratorium during which they could reflect and explore the avenues open to them:

People often say to me, "You've quit school, you've dropped out." I always correct them, saying, "No, I'm only taking time off but I'm going back." [...] I need to do other things, to go out, to travel, to work, to really see what the job market is like.

Often, participants became disenchanted with their job-market experience, and after a time, they thought about returning to school:

Dropping out wasn't the best solution, since I ended up working in convenience stores, restaurants, etc. because I had no experience. It wasn't as if I had my DEC. A girl who leaves college with a diploma in social sciences doesn't know a lot more than I do with my Secondary V, but she has one diploma more than I have.

Self-reactualization. According to the interviews, this step is a time for making resolutions. It is a time of stabilization during which dropouts regain self-confidence, make decisions, and commit themselves to new personal projects. Their self-image improves:

The nine months I was out of school gave me the chance to see other things and to realize that education is important. [...] I realized that I have everything I need to succeed, in the sense that I have a better knowledge of my qualities and what I am capable of doing. [...] I have a purpose, I'm going to CEGEP to take my courses, to do what I have to do. [...] I've realized that it's time I finished my studies so I can leave school with something and get on with other things. [...] I didn't think this way before.

Confirmation of the Dropout Process

Under the monitoring of a guidance counsellor, an educational psychologist and an academic-counselling intern, the results concerning the dropout process were submitted to a group of eight (two women, six men) returned dropouts from different CEGEPs. Each of them was asked to give a written individual account of the similarities they recognized between their own experience and that of the research participants. They expressed the perceived degree of conformity as a percentage, averaging 92%. This result shows the similarity between the experiences of the dropouts who participated in the study and those of the eight young people who had completed the process by returning to their studies. Because this level of conformity was obtained with reference to young people from different CEGEPs, it may be supposed that the model of the psychosocial process of college dropout, established in this study, would correspond to the reality of a large number of dropouts at the college level.

RESULTS

Objectives in Relation to the Process

The results describing the dropout process correspond to objectives (a) to (e) enumerated previously. In this regard, various elements of the

dropout process and the order of the steps composing it have been identified. While the order of the ten steps seems uniform for all the participants, there are particularities within each phase. For example, for some, the defensive behaviour step consists in adopting avoidance strategies, and for others, in studying desperately to achieve success. The description of the steps makes it possible to attest that they are connected by logical links, since the elements of a first step seem to influence the course of those that follow. Thus, the students are pulled into a regressive process of maladaptation induced by the interaction between the individual and the environment. In spite of the participants' great aspirations before entering CEGEP, gaps in their prior education, the inadequate information they possess, and the lack of adequate structures contribute to the situational shock they experience on entering college. This milieu, perceived as adverse, awakens feelings of alienation and defensive behaviours in the participants, leading to a phase of inhibition of action and finally to their dropping out. However, this downward trend ends with the post-dropout period, which seems to permit a re-examination of their situation that results in self-reactualization.

Participants' Role versus CEGEP's Role in the Dropout Process

What is the participants' role in the dropout process? The analysis of the interviews, in relation to objective (f), makes it possible to obtain a portrait of the CEGEP dropouts. The participants reported having false perceptions as well as erroneous beliefs and information concerning CEGEP. Their academic and professional objectives were confused and their academic orientation was problematic. They did not have the necessary basic knowledge and work methods. Several of them were in programs that were not their first choice, resulting in a reduced interest in their studies. They attested to a certain degree of social isolation. For this reason, they had little motivation to participate in extra-curricular activities or to seek the help necessary to overcome their problems.

The role attributable to the CEGEP in the dropout process (objective g) is the opposite of the psychosocial profile of the student dropout. With regard to the social isolation and the lack of information on program and career choices reported by the participants, it appears that the CEGEP does not take adequate preventive measures for the detection of these problems inherent to dropout. In fact, none of the participants spontaneously reported that a staff member recognized his or her distressed state or was interested enough to offer help. In the same vein, the participants who were forced to register in a program that did not correspond to their personal choice did not mention having received any particular support, whether structured or informal, to foster their success in that context.

Pre-university and Technical or Professional Sectors

The analysis of the interview content reveals that the process and the order of the steps are the same for participants from the pre-university and technical sectors (objective h). Nevertheless, some variations have been observed: among those admitted to these programs, many who dropped out could not meet the demands of the technical or professional programs. Others chose social sciences as a last resort because they were refused entry into a technical program or because they had no clear sense of direction. Lack of interest in this field led to failure or dropout.

Reactions of Dropouts According to Gender

Concerning objective (i), the analysis does not reveal great differences in the dropout process between the male and female participants; however, some aspects took different forms for men and women. Young men more often mentioned developing avoidance strategies, as opposed to young women who sometimes allowed themselves to become ill before withdrawing from CEGEP. For some women, social integration in the college context also seemed problematic.

The reading and interpretation of the above results must take into consideration the qualitative (descriptive and exploratory) nature of this study; no generalizations should be drawn.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of the results reveals the presence of a psychosocial process that seems common to all the participants in the study. This process manifests itself through regressive learning induced by mutual maladaptation between the student and the institution. In the absence of adequate institutional support, the dropouts have their first experience with repeated failures, resulting in negative attitudes towards themselves and the CEGEP. These attitudes in turn cause behaviours reflecting a decreased commitment to their studies, until they finally drop out. However, dropping out is followed by a moratorium during which the ex-student finds new structure for his life, enabling him either to return to his studies or to better enter the labour market.

The image of a downward spiral can serve as a metaphor to illustrate the regressive movement experienced by the participants during the process leading to dropout. Other authors use similar metaphors to illustrate a process of regression tied to academic success. Even if they felt that dropping out and academic excellence are the opposite extremes of a same continuum, Cuellar & Cuellar (1991) illustrate the paths leading to success or dropping out by a circle to show that logical

sequences lead to predictable consequences. According to Staats (1977), young students whose motivational systems are deficient learn much less than others, and their overall development is jeopardized; they have less and less intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcement and their capacities for attention decrease. They go into a cumulative regressive learning process that can be compared to a descending spiral.

This regressive adaptation movement appears to be the consequence of an interactive process between the student and the institution. According to McLaughlin, Brozowsky & McLaughlin (1997), a unifying theme in the academic research is the idea that a student's involvement in the social environment as well as the academic environment is critical to success in college. Like Tinto (1993), they underline that the sense of belonging is increased or decreased through interactions with the academic and social environment of the institution. They also conclude that students tend to be successful at institutions that enhance their abilities to feel good about themselves. From a qualitative study, Nordquist (1993) reports that interviews supported Tinto's model as they revealed that students view their departure from college in terms of isolation and incongruence. Faculty-student interaction was seen as essential for a positive educational experience, and mentoring relationships appeared to have the greatest impact on academic and social integration and student retention. Another study reports that when a university tries to improve programs and services that contribute to student satisfaction and success, students are more satisfied and remain in school longer (Hodum & Martin, 1994).

In addition to creating a climate favourable to student retention, institutions should play an active role in helping dropouts return to their studies. Too often, as Metzger (1997) observed, institutions have no policies on establishing contact with dropouts to encourage or attract them to return. That is the case with the CEGEP used for this research.

The description of the dropout process proposed here is based on a qualitative analysis method, of which certain steps were validated by experts in the dropout phenomenon; in addition, returned dropouts attested that the process described accurately reflected their own experience. Nonetheless, this theoretical model should ideally be validated by quantitative research, to permit its generalization and its use in developing tools for detection, prevention, and counselling.

At the college level in Quebec, intervention plans for avoiding dropout are left to the discretion of each establishment; thus, it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive view of detection and prevention strategies.

With regard to detection and counselling, a psychometric instrument consisting of items based on the dropout process could be developed. This instrument would serve to identify students who are in the process of dropping out. In the counselling context, knowing which step in the

process a student is experiencing would permit more appropriate intervention.

Certain preventive measures are also desirable. Given the important role that students' involvement in the institutional milieu plays in their success (Milen & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1975, 1987; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996), action should be taken to foster this integration. For example, training sessions could be organized, as described by Metzger (1997), to enable students to learn about their institution's culture and the resources available to them. These courses could be credited, as suggested by Rivière (1996). The description of the dropout process suggests other avenues of intervention. In the students' interests, all initiatives favouring (a) adequate academic preparation, (b) motivation and self-esteem, (c) sympathetic contacts with peers and professors, (d) flexible and vigilant institutional support, (e) course choices corresponding to students' preferences, would constitute dropout-prevention strategies.

In order to better understand and curb the dropout process, research should be conducted to determine the real impact of the college education regulations, the pedagogical curriculum, and institutional administrative practices on students at risk of dropping out. This research would make it possible to understand how CEGEPs, as institutions, can better support their students' potential in a process of persistence in studies at the college level.

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