Return to School of Dropout Single Mothers: A School-Family-Community Partnerships Perspective

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There are few studies on those who resume their education after dropping out of high school and fewer still on single mothers who decide to return to school. The present study, initiated by the organization *'Mamanva à l'école'* (MVE)(Mom Goes to School), aims to (1) identify the facilitating elements and challenges encountered by single mothers enrolled in general adult education and vocational training and (2) identify ways of supporting them in their roles as students and parents in order to foster their retention and achievement as well as their parental skills for educating their children and getting involved in their schooling. Conducted by means of six group interviews with 39 single mothers and analyzed using a qualitative approach, the study reveals needs specific to the reality of the participants' lives. For instance, some express the desire to form a separate group apart from young students. They are clear about their need for daycare in their learning centers. These findings can inspire MVE in its mission and guide the Tracking Table in deciding what avenues to privilege in the next stages of a school-family-community partnership regarding mothers' relations to school and to children's school learning.

Keywords: Dropout, single mothers, challenges, parent-child relations, school relations.

Background and Issue

The fight against school dropout continues to be a top priority of the Québec government (CSÉ, 2012). According to the latest statistics from the '*Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisiret du Sport du Québec*' (MELS, 2012), the dropout rate has fallen during the last three decades to now about 20% for Quebec public schools as a whole. This varies, however, depending on remote and/or disadvantaged regions, reaching up to 28% in some regions of Quebec (MELS, 2013). Although boys are more likely to drop out of school than girls, the dropout rate for the latter has risen sharply (CSQ, 2008), highlighting the many negative consequences they experience.In addition to low education, these dropout girls, who often become single mothers, suffer from social exclusion, isolation and dependency (Galarneau, 2005).

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Their poverty represents major costs for society and undermines their sense of parental competence (Lareau, 2011; Marchand2012; Sacker, Schoon, & Bartley, 2002 cited in Harris & Goodall, 2007).Now, because is mothers rather than fathers who most often accompany their child in his or her school trajectory (Deslandes, 2012; Flouri, 2006; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Tremblay, 2008), the situation provides fertile ground for the transmission of difficulties from one generation to the next (Feinstein & Sabates, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Marchand, 2012). It comes as no surprise that mothers' schooling is the main variable retained by the MELS (2003) in calculating the socioeconomic indicator used to determine a portion of school financing. Hence it is important not only to prevent girls from dropping out, but also to encourage their return to school and their retention and achievement.

The present article focuses precisely on this last aspect. It begins by portraying the situation as regards dropout and return to school in Quebec. This is followed by a description of the not-for-profit organization '*Mamanva à l'école'* (MVE),

whose goal is to offer single mothers access to solid training, regardless of their age, while identifying ways to support their retention and achievement as well as their parental skills for educating their children and getting involved in their schooling. Our study, moreover, constitutes the first stage of a school-family-community partnership undertaken by MVE. After presenting the theoretical framework, we describe the aids and challenges encountered by single mothers enrolled in adult education. This is followed by the solutions they propose for facilitating their roles as students and mothers. We then discuss their education needs and the points of convergence among the solutions offered to identify ways to support their retention and achievement as well as their parental skills for educating their children and getting involved in their schooling. A few recommendations are given in the conclusion.

Dropout and return to school

Like the MELS (2011), we define school dropout as "the proportion of the population that does not attend school and has not obtained a high school diploma" (p. 60). Since the 1990s, myriad studies in Quebec, Canada, the United States and Europe have focused on the risk factors and consequences relating to school dropout (e.g., Blaya, 2010; Feyfant, 2012; Fortin , Royer, Potvin, Marcotte & Yergeau, 2004; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Prêteur, Constans, & Féchant, 2004; Raymond, 2001; Rumberger, 2004; Symeou, Martinez-Gonzalez, & Alvarez-Blanco, 2012). The now well-known predictors of dropout involve an inter-play of factors operating at four levels: the individual, (e.g., learning difficulties, behavioural disorders, depression), the family (poorly educated parents, weak parental support, engagement and supervision), the school (e.g., poor teacher-student and peer relationships), and the environment (e.g., neighbourhood and poverty). The consequences of school dropout, in turn, include reduced access to employment, poorer quality of life and less citizen participation; these appear to be worse for dropouts, who frequently cope with significant financial hardship (Galarneau, 2005; Marchand, 2012).

Although Quebec has one of the highest dropout rates in Canada, it demonstrates, on the other hand, a relatively high rate of school return (Statistics Canada, 2010). Indeed, in 2009-2010,

close to 72% of non-degree students aged 16 to 24 were enrolled (McMullen & Gilmore, 2010) in general adult education or vocational training (MELS, 2010). Note that the Quebec government has sole responsibility for its education system, which calls for 11 years of study at the primary and secondary levels. School attendance is mandatory for children aged 6 to 16 (MELS, 2010). After 16, non-degree students can enrol in general adult education centres ('*Centres deformation générale aux adultes'* [FGA]) to complete their high school studies or attend vocational and technical education centres ('*Centres de formation professionnelle'* [FP]) to obtain a vocational diploma ('*Diplôme d'études professionnelles*' [DEP]) or Skills training certificate (STC). They can thus access training in sectors such as metallurgy, nutrition, health, business administration, computer science, the arts (photography), beauty care, printing, etc. and thereby improve their chances of finding employment. We point out that those enrolled in these training courses are mainly young people aged 16 to 24 (MELS, 2010), and that a good number drop out again before completing a particular degree (Bélanger, Carignan, & Staiculescu, 2007; MEQ, 2004; Rousseau et al., 2010).

Aside from a few studies on school return that include both men and women in their mixed-age sample (e.g., Bélanger et al., 2007; Marcotte, Lachance, & Lévesque, 2011; Savoie-Zajc, Dolbec, Desjardins, & Zniber, 2010), there is little information on girls and women - and specifically on single mothers 24 and over - who have returned to adult education to obtain a first diploma. Now, the study by Bélanger et al. (2007) reveals that participants who persevered in their studies at general training centres (FGA) were mainly single men under 25. This information is highly relevant if we hope to better prepare single mothers for a successful integration into the workforce. And it is all the more important in a city such as Trois-Rivières, which has one of the highest unemployment rates in Quebec – 7.9% - and a region such as the Mauricie, where that rate stands at 9.7% ('*Information sur lemarché du travail en région'*, 2012) and where the need for food assistance continues to grow (Lacroix-Couture, 2012).

Our research focuses on the following question: How do single, non-diploma mothers experience their return to school as students and parents? Attention will be paid to single mothers' relations

to school and learning of their children. The collected data may guide the avenues of action in the Tracking Table hosted by the organization 'Maman va à l'école' (MVE), which offers solutions aimed at (1) increasing the number of single mothers who persevere and complete their training and (2) strengthening their parental self-efficacy in terms of educating their children and assisting them in their schooling. Furthermore, chances are that a first diploma/certificate will ease these mothers' entry into the job market, thus contributing to the regions' growth and economic expansion.

'Mamanva à l'école'

Maman va à l'école' (MVE) is a young Quebec not-for-profit organization which opened in April 2009 with the mission of helping single mothers of all ages access solid training. The organization hosts a Tracking Table of partners composed of administrators of adult training centres in the Mauricie region, senior management at '*Emploi Québec'*, a representative of the regional MELS, teachers and staff members at the two school boards targeted, and a number of other regional organizations. MVE does far more than simply organize occasional activities. On the contrary, it aims to ensure that every educational institution acts to enable single mothers to obtain a first degree, enter the workforce, lift themselves out of poverty and build an environment favourable to the education of their children. MVE has organized large-scale activities such as the *Open Door* of April 5, 2011, which included kiosks that distributed information on available measures of support as well as testimony by women who were currently working as a result of their return to school (Duguay, 2010). The present approach is part of the process begun to assess needs (or *identifying starting points*) (Epstein, 2011; Epstein and associates, 2009),and the ways to address them, which is considered the second stage in every school-family-community partnership project (Deslandes, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

The human development model and disability creation process (HDM-DCP) provides background that helps shed light on the situation of single mothers who return to school. This ecological and systemic model illustrates the process of educational resilience (school retention and achievement) which, in turn, relates to a process of adaptation in the presence of adversity (Fougeyrollas, 2010). When applied to the current issue, the model stipulates that the facilitating elements and challenges for single mothers, when examined in terms of the realization of life habits (roles as students and as parents), derive from interactions between personal and environmental factors (micro-system, meso-system and macro-system). In practical terms, the retention and achievement of single mothers who return to school (manifestation of resilience) and who come from a modest social milieu (personal factors) may be promoted by family support, quality relationships among those in their different circles (e.g., peers and their children's teachers), strategies and services offered by community organizations (meso-systemic environmental factors), and support policies at the institutional, local and government levels. Single mothers, despite difficult living conditions (risk factors), then manage to mobilize their resources and adapt thanks to the interaction of protective factors. In accordance with Fougeyrollas (2010), all interventions must help single mothers overcome environmental barriers and make changes in assuming their roles as students and parents with a view to full participation in social life.

Unlike studies dealing with school dropout, those focused on women's return to school are few and far between. Only in recent years has this formerly neglected field of research attracted attention. We identified four Quebec studies conducted with return-to-school adults; all dealt with both genders and had a qualitative component. In the study by Bélanger et al. (2007), the sample consisted of men and women in equal parts; almost half of the participants under 25 years of age (n = 18) were enrolled in an adult education centre. On the other hand, Rousseau's team (Rousseau et al., 2010) used small group interviews (n = 45) to focus on young people aged 16-18 with learning or behavioural disorders who were attending adult education centres (FGA) in three different regions of Quebec. In the same context, Marcotte, Lachance and Lévesque (2011) interviewed young adults aged 16-24 (n = 386) also attending an adult education centre in three different regions. Villemagne (2011) likewise conducted case studies of six adults aged 17-57 who had completed training for a semi-skilled trade in an adult education centre. The studies all examined, notably, the reasons for the

participants' return to school along with the facilitating elements and barriers to continued study. Students mentioned, among other things, their desire to obtain a diploma, find well-paid work and develop their potential. Facilitating elements and challenges were divided among the various levels - individual, family, school and environmental - with a particular emphasis on the family, the school and financial support. Personalized modular learning and the assistance of teachers and various other parties were highly appreciated.

But it is the research by Savoie-Zajc and her collaborators (2010) that commands our attention the most. Not only does Savoie-Zajc stand out thanks to her focus on vocational training programs in regions other than those previously mentioned, but she also includes secretarial science and accounting in addition to programs in automobile mechanics and pulp and paper. This cohort was represented by 22 female students (7 aged 21-25 years, and 15 aged 26 +), most of whom had the double status of student and parent. Regarding their return to school, the participants cited both personal reasons such as improvement of life conditions and pride in continuing their studies as well as professional reasons such as obtaining a better job and a better salary. The facilitating conditions identified were divided among various levels: personal (positive attitude, determination), family and interpersonal (encouragement from the entourage including their partners), school (personalized program, support of teachers) and environmental (access to financial aid). Barriers, on the other hand, included fatigue from efforts to reconcile school and family life, the sometimes long waits for teacher feedback in the personalized program, financial difficulties due to insufficient government aid, and problems with family management. However, this study did not permit us to determine either the barriers or the facilitating conditions in terms of the participants' traditional versus non-traditionalfamily structure.

Research Objectives

Two research objectives emerged from our initial questions concerning the situation of single mothers who return to school: (1) to highlight the facilitating elements and challenges encountered by dropout single mothers who decide to continue their studies at an FGA or FP, and (2) to identify ways to support their retention and achievement as well as their parental skills for educating their children and getting involved in their schooling.

Method

Participants

A total of 39 single mothers from the Mauricie took part in the study. Twenty-two had been back in school for 1 to 3 years; with a few exceptions, most were over 24 years old. Their children's age varied from a few months to about twenty years. Of the mothers, 21 were attending a general adult education centre (FGA), while 18 were enrolled in a vocational training centre (FP).

Data collection

Data were collected from six group interviews. These were preferred to individual interviews because, in addition to providing the participants' personal viewpoints, group interviews demonstrate how the parties involved express and communicate their ideas (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Based on the literature on school dropout and return, and using an eco-systemic approach (e.g., Marchand, 2012, Villemagne, 2011), the interview framework examined single mothers from two angles: as students and as parents. Besides focusing on their reasons for returning to school, questions dealt with facilitating conditions, challenges and possible solutions to the barriers to retention and achievement. The framework was validated by five experts including the two researchers, a representative from MVE and two training centre employees.

Procedure

*Participant selection.*The administrators and assistant administrators of the training centres were informed of the research project as members of the MVE Tracking Table. A letter of invitation was first sent to each of the four information centres that agreed to take part in the study. The letter described the aims of the study and the confidential nature of the approach, and offered a symbolic amount of $35 from the MVE by way of compensation. On-site personnel drew up a list of potentially interested candidates who met the following criteria: they were single parents, they had returned to study at an FGA or FP, and they had one or more children who were mainly, but not necessarily, of school age. These candidates were invited to appear for interviews on the specified dates.

Interview process and analysis. The ninety-minute group interviews conducted by the two researchers and two master's students trained in this regard took place in the participants' training centres (FGA and FP) between February 20th and April 4th, 2012. They were then recorded, re-transcribed and coded using Atlas-TI software. Next, the categories were determined based on the components and sections of the interview framework: reasons for returning to school, facilitating elements and challenges encountered on the individual, family, interpersonal, institutional and community levels as students and parents, and finally, the solutions proposed in this double capacity. The verbatim transcripts were reread several times by two master's students and the main researcher to ensure consistency of codification. One problem pinpointed was that the categories were not mutually exclusive in that the facilitating elements, challenges and solutions could apply to single mothers as both students and parents. We underscore that the project had the prior approval of the university's ethics committee: CER-12-176-06.94. In the same vein, all the participants signed a consent form indicating the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidential nature of the comments made.

Findings

Reasons for return to school

Participants gave both personal and professional reasons for pursuing their studies. Personal reasons included the desire to develop self-esteem and strengthen their children's respect, satisfy an enthusiasm or an interest for a particular subject and develop a structured and stable lifestyle. Professional reasons were as varied as bettering their situation and acquiring a certain financial security (obtaining a diploma, having a job and/or better salary, improving their family's conditions and quality of life (get out of poverty), and ensuring the future of their children.

Owing to a lack of space, the following section groups the facilitating elements into two categories: (1) personal, family and interpersonal on one hand, and (2) institutional and community on the other, depending on the single mothers' status as students and parents. Table 1 provides a few examples of categories and verbatim transcripts relative to the status of student. The

solutions proposed by the students regarding their dual role are then discussed.

Facilitating elements and challenges encountered as studentsIndividual, family and interpersonal levels. In terms of facilitating elements, participants mention personal strengths such as self-confidence, determination and curiosity. Some mothers say they are interested in going to school as long as there is no outside pressure to do so. A few rely on their achievement to enhance their self-esteem. Others mention the emotional or practical support of their parents (e.g., help with finances or babysitting), while others point to the support of their own children. As well, they note the undeniable contribution of friends who attend the same training centre by highlighting the similarities between everyone's situations, which encourage sharing, exchanges on day-to-day experience and mutual assistance. As for challenges, the mothers say they feel exhausted. Balancing school and family commitments (e.g., meal preparation, housework, child care and child schooling) translates into a heavier workload that exacerbates stress, a situation made worse when children are sick or have behaviour problems. Next is the financial strain that most experience. Even when financial aid is available from the Loans and Bursaries Program or '*Emploi Québec'*, the amount is clearly inadequate as it does not take into account the number of children and is not adjusted for the high cost of gas. The participants complain that coverage for dental and eye care, among other things, stops when they are no longer in the '*Programme des prestations de revenugaranti'* (Social Assistance Program). The mothers are obviously unaware of other possible financial resources, since their knowledge is not up to date. Finally, romantic or social relationships outside the training centre are difficult because of the difficulty of finding babysitters.

*Institutional and community levels.*As regards the institutional level, participants discuss aspects concerning the welcome, adaptation and return to school, the teacher-student relationship, teaching methods, additional available resources and extracurricular activities. The various ways of welcoming new students are much appreciated; these include visits to the training centre on the first day with workshops (20-30 minutes) in each subject area, explanations on how the class operates and the accompaniment of sponsors.

Adjustment to school is facilitated by tutors who monitor students, teams or groups of four depending on their level of progress (fosters mutual aid), the support of the school staff (teachers, personnel members) and the flexibility of certain teachers who authorize the mothers to receive emergency calls regarding their children. A teacher-student relationship based on trust develops thanks to the encouragements of teachers (challenges, mastery, openness to creativity), who take an interest in personal life situations and demonstrate a genuine desire to help students succeed. In other words, positive relations to school contribute to their motivation as students.On the other hand, some participants feel that a lack of support and compassion on the part of teachers compromises their sense of belonging. Accordingly, they point to certain un-motivating behaviours such as condescending remarks, poor responsiveness and impatience, all of which demonstrate certain teachers' lack of respect for and understanding of single mothers. In addition, most participants favour an individual, independent teaching method that respects each person's learning style. A few regret that certain tutors are responsible for too many students and that there is time for only two meetings per year.

*Table 1.*Examples of categories and transcripts regarding status as students

Categories	Transcriptexcerpts
Reasons for returning to school	
Personal interest	The fact you're going to do something that you like, that you really love.
Professional interest	When you don't have a diploma, you're closer to the door than somebody else.
Facilitating elements and challenges encountered as students	
Individual, family and interpersonal levels	
Facilitating elements	
--Family support	Me, my kids are the ones who support me the most.
Challenges encountered	
--Fatigue	I get up at 5 every morning, I wake my kids up at 5:50 and everybody leaves at 6:45.
--Financial difficulties	One day I didn't have money to put gas in the car, so I sold some empty bottles. I made $5 like that, otherwise, I wouldn't have gone to school.
Institutional and community levels	
Facilitating elements	
--Teachers' support	Me, my teacher …, she's practically my closest friend. I come in and it's How's it going today? When something's the matter, I talk to her. She gave me a certificate of perseverance because she sees I'm all alone with my little boy and it's not easy.
Challenges encountered	
--Some teachers' behaviours	Sometimes, I feel really stupid. A teacher told me I was the worst student she had in her whole career.
--Sharing classroom with younger students	…they fool around in class, they throw paper at each other. We're older, we're there to pay attention, to work, we don't have time to waste.
--Bus schedules	I leave the house at 7:30, I have to be at the bus stop at 7:30 and in school at 7:55 when the bell rings. It's very tight.

As for the teaching method, they complain that waits to see the teacher are too long, and the amount of time with the teacher is not enough. Some feel that teaching is not sufficiently in tune with the student's learning style (e.g., auditory or visual). They also find it difficult to be in class with young people 17-18 years old. A further problem is that computers and software are available only at school, which prevents them from making progress at home. As for additional resources in the learning centre, they mention guidance services, occupational therapy, social services and counselling. Some request the services of a psychologist and say they are unaware of other available services and resources. Generally speaking, the participants tend to rely on their tutor, who is usually a teacher. With regard to extracurricular activities, students in certain training centres say they take part in after-class activities such as social gatherings, fundraising (e.g., washing cars), occasional outings or activities in particular fields of interest such as boxing or yoga. Few extracurricular activities are organized in training centres, however, and not many mothers are interested in them because of the additional costs. They point out that activities adapted to their situation are scarce. To remedy the situation, they suggest "mandatory" activities organized for student mothers during class hours or events in which their children can take part.

At the community level, transportation services receive the most attention. Participants travel with their own car, share a ride or take public transportation. For many, transportation is a daily problem thanks to incompatible bus schedules, multiple transfers or the breakdown of defective vehicles.

Facilitating elements and challenges encountered as parents

*Individual, family and interpersonal levels.*Comments in this section focus for the most part on the mothers' role as educator and their relations with their children's teachers and school. Some say they feel competent and recognize the need to spend time with their child, secure in the belief they are giving the best of themselves. Others, however, have little sense of parental competence because their children may have learning and/or behavioural disorders (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD). They also claim they lack time for their children because of the burden of responsibilities involved in the dual role of student and parent: "Being a single mother and

taking care of kids at home is hard enough. If besides that I have to deal with babysitters, school, baths, supper, homework, and everything all by myself, it's just too much." Whereas some mothers benefit from family support that offers some relief, several others point to the difficulty of keeping appointments with specialists or others because of the limited number of absences allowed. The situation is easier for mothers in the program *Ma Place au Soleil (My Place in the Sun)* because, along with workshops, it authorizes a larger number of school absences. For many, the quality of the relationship with their child's teacher is enhanced by a regular written or phone communication, whereas others see themselves as victims of prejudice. Generally speaking, the participants experience discouragement and stress during homework. Put in other words, school work can be a burden on some single mothers.

*Community level.*Single mothers appreciate access to resources and services like '*Les répits' (Respite)*, which provides respite care, homework help in their neighbourhood or school, food banks, and organizations such as the CLSC (local community services centres), Lion's Club, Camp Tim Horton, the church, the rectory, and the '*Maison des jeunes*' (Youth Centre). One mother noted: "[…] I don't have money, but my two kids needed glasses, so I went to the Lion's Club and they paid for two pairs of eyeglasses for my kids."Some point out they have access to a day care service. Indeed, two training centres offer on-site day care, but the waiting list is long. Some participants, on the other hand, are discouraged by the difficulty of finding a family doctor, on-site day care (i.e., in their training centre), child care on professional development days (since these do not necessarily coincide with the mothers' days off), food banks whose schedules are incompatible with school hours, and the few services that are available to them compared with those for new mothers.

Proposed solutions

The participants suggested approaches, resources and services that would help foster their retention and achievement as well as their social participation as students and parents. The most practical and relevant are given in the following section.

*Individual, family and interpersonal levels.*The students propose that all single mothers have priority access to on-site day care in their training centre as well as a reliable child care

service or network they can use as needed outside class hours. Participants would like volunteer assistance such as that provided by SOS Mothers, for example, a service they can turn to for help at particular times (e.g., after spending the night with a sick child). They are also interested in having a mentor available when advice is needed. Regarding the school and, more specifically, school-family relations, they suggest organizing half-days in both the child's school and the mother's training environment to give mothers and children an improved understanding of each other's experience, thereby promoting positive parent-child and parent-teacher relationships, and thus reducing stereotypes that are often conveyed about single mothers attending school (Kelly, 2000). As well, they recommend homework help services for all their children.

Institutional level. Participants want their hours of training to be more flexible and better adapted to the schedules of single mothers. For example, training could be compressed into four days instead of five, or start around 8:30 a.m. to give mothers a bit more time in the morning. The back-to-school welcome and adjustment activities at the start of the school year could take place gradually. Mothers want their days off to correspond to those of their school-age children. Some are interested in taking yoga classes, workshops in stress, time and work management and courses in communication and psychology, including personal development, at noon or immediately after class hours. They hope to eventually access the services of an on-site psychologist and nurse, and recommend changes to the program '*Ma Place au Soleil';* these would include more inclusive criteria and workshops and training based on the needs expressed by single student mothers. As far as the teaching method is concerned, they call, on the whole, for fewer students per class, classification by age to allow student mothers as a group to study separately from younger students with their behavioural problems, the addition of lectures to personalized modular teaching, the availability in all training centres of a venue where small groups can study and learn to know and help each other, and training for teachers on the real-life situation of single student mothers. Training of this kind would help sensitize teachers to the importance of empathy and support for these mothers. They ask that provision be made for single mothers to lunch together in a separate location within the training centre, thereby avoiding long waits in line for the microwave. Finally, with regard to extracurricular activities, they suggest free or low-cost activities that include both mothers and children.

Community and political levels. The participants want easier access to a family doctor and to health care workers at the CLSC. Some ask for convenience transportation and improved access to food banks where schedules are compatible with school hours. Others would appreciate budget-friendly meal tips (purchase and preparation of food), while most want a one-stop data bank or directory of all available resources and services (e.g., Web site, bulletin board, circulars, message board, electronic screen.). Participants call for improved access to financial aid (the win-win kind, among others), increased aid, and allocations that take into account number of children and the rising price of gas.

Discussion

We recall that the aim of this study was to identify (1) the facilitating elements and challenges encountered by single mothers who drop out of high school, then decide to resume their studies at an FGA or FP and (2) the approaches and methods they suggest to support their retention and achievement as well as their parental skills for educating their children and getting involved in their schooling. To this end, our analysis is based on the human development model and creation disability process (HDM-DCP), which postulates that the social participation of these single mothers derives from the interaction of personal and environmental factors. We also aimed to identify solutions for alleviating or eliminating barriers detrimental to the full exercise of their roles and, in turn, to their school retention and achievement. This approach constitutes the first step in a program of school-family-community partnerships started by MVE with the creation of the Tracking Table, which unites educators concerned with this particular clientele and aiming, among other things at supporting single mothers' relations to school and to their children's schooling. We begin by discussing the facilitating elements and challenges that appear specific to these single mothers while establishing links with the available literature on the subject of school return. This is followed by our recommendations regarding the MVE Tracking Table, which are

inspired by the solutions proposed by the participants themselves.

Many of the comments evoked are consistent with those mentioned in former studies conducted with young dropouts aged 16-24 in particular or that deal with mixed-gender and mixed-age participants (e.g. Bélanger et al., 2007; Marcotte et al., 2011; Rousseau et al., 2010; Villemagne, 2011). Facilitating elements include interest in school, support from family, teachers and other school employees, a personalized modular teaching method, access to certain professionals (guidance counsellor, social worker, etc.) and financial assistance. As was the case in the research by Savoie-Zajc and her colleagues (2010) conducted with women enrolled in secretarial science and accounting in a region other than the Mauricie, complaints were voiced about the time spent waiting for feedback from teachers in personalized teaching, insufficient government aid and the burden of a double workload (school during the day, family responsibilities at night), especially in times of illness for both mother and child. Such comments are consistent with those of single mothers admitted into the work insertion program in the study by the Employment Service for the integration of women into the workforce ('*Service d'orientation et de recherché d'emploi pour l'intégration des femmes au travai')* (Sorif, 2012).

The comments gathered allowed us to pinpoint certain needs specific to single mothers as a group separate and apart from young people aged 16-24 also attending an FGA or an FP. The mothers begin by underscoring the unquestionable importance of their children and school friends, then call for attention, empathy and understanding from teachers and employees in their training centres. They express the desire to form a separate group (apart from young students) in order to learn, share and help each other. Just like some mothers participating in Kelly's (2000) study, they consider themselves as being different from the rest of students. They wish to be better informed about the resources and services available to support their retention and achievement. They want the opportunity to call on sponsors or mentors to advise and help them as needed; they also hope for access to respite care that is better tailored to their needs than that available in some CLSC. They are clear about their need for daycare in their learning centres and for community child care services

that can be relied on as needed. These comments are in line with Kelly (2000) when she reported that few U.S. and Canadian public schools were having on-site day care.Single mothers would appreciate budget-friendly meal tips (purchase and preparation of food) and advice on stress (yoga) and time management. Finally, they emphasize the necessity of more financial aid and sound the alarm about their level of debt.

Conclusion

This study proposed to document how single dropout mothers experience their return to school in general adult education or vocational training centres. Using the HDM-DCP model created by Fougeyrollas (2010), we examined the facilitating elements and, especially, the challenges related to the accomplishment of their roles as students and parents and, therefore, to school retention and achievement. Obviously single dropout mothers who return to school need more help not only regarding their own schooling but also their child schooling. Identifying challenges and the approaches for alleviating or overcoming them corresponds to the stage commonly referred to as *Needs Assessment* (or *identifying starting points*) in an *Action team approach* on school-family-community partnerships (Epstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2009) such as the project initiated by MVE with the other members of the Tracking Table in the Mauricie region.

Although it is clear these findings cannot be generalized for other regions, needs assessment remains a unique and socially relevant element that helps fuel efforts to energize and develop our region's economy. Accordingly, the project can inspire other regional and national stakeholders to examine their own issues in this regard. It should be noted that the comments reported are solely the opinions of the single mothers who took part in the study. Furthermore, some may concern a particular training centre only. Our intention is not to criticize the shortcomings of any training centres which, we point out, serve a highly diverse clientele. Rather, it is up to the administrations of each centre to validate the comments made and decide if the solutions proposed are practical and realistic.

Our observation, however, is that the needs of dropout single mothers are specific and unique, and that some of their proposed solutions

coincide. All in all, these elements can inspire the organization MVE in its mission and guide the Tracking Table in deciding what avenues to privilege in the next stages of a school-family-community partnership with a special attention paid to mothers' relations to school and to their children school learning.

Aknowlegments

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