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BACK TO SCHOOL:
AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY OF ADULT STUDENTS
AT SECONDARY SCHOOL

A Thesis
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of
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in
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at
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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were two-fold: to establish a profile of the adult student returning to secondary school on the basis of a selected sample [N=36], and to derive from an in-depth and systematic view of the everyday experiences of this sample an account of the processes involved in becoming an adult student. In meeting these objectives, a further priority for the study was: to elaborate upon the application of field research techniques within an educational setting. This involved the provision of an ongoing autobiographical component to the report, detailing the 'processes, pitfalls, dilemmas, and discoveries' encountered during the development and implementation of methodological and analytic strategies. Throughout the 1984 school year, data was collected from the sample of adult students, school Principal, Dean of Adult Students and classroom teachers, using a selection of field research techniques (e.g., participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, diary accounts, and documentary materials). The data was gathered within a broadly categorised symbolic interactionist perspective and subjected to a 'grounded theory' form of analysis. This 'emergent' form of analysis, combined with the data gathering strategies, provided a basis for the elaboration of the social and cultural landscape necessary in this initial attempt at documenting the processes of becoming an adult student. The outcome of using these two approaches in tandem was the identification of six 'factors of influence' as organizational headings to subsume the day-to-day experiences of becoming an adult student: Returning to School; School Policy, Adult Status and the Role of the Dean; In the School; In the Classroom; Decision Points; and, Goal Achievements. Furthermore, two overriding themes indicated the processes through which the adult student was, at one and the same time, both 'integrated' into the overall school culture and 'differentiated' as a member of the separate adult student subculture.

The notion of these processes of becoming was subjected to a theoretical elaboration incorporating the establishment of a conceptual model and explanatory constructs. From this cumulative form of theory development, linkages were indicated suggesting a group of 'common processes' existing across a variety of different comparative contexts. In addition to the recommendation that the further development of theories of such processes need to explore such linkages, the final sections of this report discuss a number of implications and uses which might be derived. For instance, it is suggested that this preliminary, yet extensive, investigation provides both descriptive data and theoretical categories which may be of use to: teachers, adult students, policy-makers and researchers interested in the study of adult students in secondary schools, developments within the areas of methodological and analytical strategies, and in elaborating the processes of becoming. Finally, an overall implication arising from the report is that the complex, dynamic and individualistic nature of the processes involved in becoming an adult student lends little support to deterministic models and theories, or to superficial accounts derived from 'one-shot' methodologies and perspectives of such processes and experiences.

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