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'Teaching' the path towards university: understanding student access through storied-futures and meritocratic grand narratives

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ABSTRACT

The notion that the stories of our lives shape dispositions towards imagined futures is another lens through which university underrepresentation should be viewed. A storied lens attends to how futures, like university attendance, are storied during childhood to the extent that some youth imagine, and therefore plan, these futures as natural progression. Such was the case for study participants, indicating that childhood stories contain answers for mitigating social reproduction connected to parental education and cultural forces within the home. Examining social mobility through the underexplored storied-futures grand narrative presents unique solutions that lay hidden within the dominant meritocratic grand narrative.

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Social class and the meritocratic myth

Why is university attendance in Canada associated significantly with socio-economic status? Indeed, a significant number of studies have demonstrated that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely than students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to earn a university degree (Allen 2003; Brennan and Naidoo 2008; Finnie 2012; Finnie, Lascelles, and Sweetman 2005; Finnie, Wismer, and Mueller 2015; Fleras 2005; Knighton and Mirza 2002; Krahn 2009). The perpetual exclusion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds from higher education leaves them with 'fewer opportunities for meaningful participation in an economic system that increasingly requires post-secondary credentials for access to well-paying jobs' (Whitehead 2006, 103). Canadian society largely operates within the meritocratic grand narrative, particularly concerning university attendance. Grounded in neoliberal ideology, citizens trust (blindly) that the higher education system is appropriately designed to admit individuals with the demonstrated knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed; those meeting the standards have proven their standing among equal peers to enter higher education. This social-Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' philosophy relegates any type of underrepresentation simply to lack of ability to compete – validating faith in market-based competitive processes and enabling continued

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ignorance of deeper forces that shape pursuit of university. The result is an established system of higher education that continually reproduces economic and social benefits for students from higher socio-economic class backgrounds. The meritocratic grand narrative must be disrupted within the context of these class-based patterns because 'in virtually no Western industrialized society has formal education become an instrument by which disadvantaged and impoverished groups can achieve a substantially greater degree of social and economic equality' (Taylor 1994, 47). Krahn illuminated this enduring socially reproductive pattern of privilege through a discussion of data demonstrating that Canadian middle-class youth perform better in high school, are more likely to participate in high school academic streams, value post-secondary education, and have higher educational and occupational aspirations. Especially pronounced is Krahn's conclusion that children from families where at least one parent completed university are almost three times more likely to complete university (56%), compared with children who come from families where parents did not complete university (21%) – a finding that has reverberated throughout the literature concerning access and persistence for underrepresented populations (Andres et al. 2007; Finnie, Lascelles, and Sweetman 2005; Knighton 2002; Krahn 2009; Lambert et al. 2004; Lehmann 2007; Parkin and Baldwin 2009; Tinto 2007).

By exploiting comprehensive and longitudinal Canadian data from the Youth in Transition Survey concerning educational pursuits, Childs, Finnie, and Mueller (2010) discovered many important and statistically significant correlations between university students and their childhood experiences, illuminating the salience of this period in shaping dispositions towards university. Childs, Finnie, and Mueller poignantly directed the conversation about university access by posing the following question: is it 'parental education per se that determines access to PSE [post-secondary education], either through its influence on the formation of preferences or the parental support provided for pursing higher education?' (2010, 245). Required is a deeper understanding of how parental education operates (Finnie, Sweetman, and Usher 2008). Finnie (2012) extended this inquiry through an examination of family income and parental education variables, concluding that socio-economic status vis-à-vis parental educational level significantly predicts whether a child will pursue post-secondary education, particularly university:

> It now appears that if a child is *taught to value PSE*, is *prepared for PSE* (academically and otherwise), and ultimately *wishes to attend PSE*, there is a high probability that the child will participate in PSE – and cost will not stand in the way. (2012, 1163; original emphases)

Finnie further commented that the data clearly indicate that a novel perspective is burgeoning, whereby access to university should also be examined as 'a matter of "culture" in addition to "economic" considerations' (2012, 1163); however, he noted that little is understood about the nature of cultural factors towards truly equalizing both university opportunities and outcomes, particularly for first-generation students. This study, conducted with an ontological commitment to experience as narrative composition, discusses how examination through the storied-futures narrative opens up deeper understandings of cultural factors shaping university decision-making by illuminating the salience of story.

Narrative ontology of experience

Thomas King (2003), a notable Aboriginal educator, discussed the philosophical roots of human experience and suggested that the human essence is inherently storied: the truth

about stories is that is all we are. And he is right. Recall the story of Santa Claus: one of the most iconic capitalist symbols in North America features a jolly, older gentleman (temporally paused around age 70), who monitors children's behaviours and delivers presents to good boys and girls on Christmas Day. Children hear the story about Santa: from the elves making toys in the North Pole and Santa's archaic tracking list, to reindeer that fly his sleigh around the world in mere hours. Children are told this story by parents/guardians, older siblings, aunts and uncles, the media, and even strangers, who further reinforce the story by asking questions associated with the story plot. The story of Santa shapes children's values, dispositions, and beliefs. They believe that this strange man flies all over the world in a matter of hours to deliver presents to good boys and girls. They value being good in order to be on Santa's nice list in order to get the presents asked for. Their dispositions or behaviours are congruent with the story, from writing letters to Santa and going to bed early to leaving out cookies and milk for him. The Santa story is ubiquitously embedded in the cultural fabric, but at some point children learn that it was 'just a story'; nonetheless, the story had socializing qualities. It shaped their inner and outer socials words, resulting in feelings and behaviours. Stories are socialization.

Stories as conditions of existence

We live storied lives (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The stories of our lives (comprised of family, social, cultural, institutional, and self-stories, for example) shape our values, dispositions, and beliefs – or habitus, a construct that features prominently in Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of social class and reproduction. His theorization of class-based behaviour is appropriate for examining cultural factors influencing post-secondary attendance because it attends to 'providing a more accurate and detailed vision of social interaction' (Horvat 2001, 197). Bourdieu's framework explores practice; that is, action at the intersection of one's habitus and capital in a given field. These constructs, formulaically depicted by Bourdieu as '[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice' (1984, 101), are a hallmark of his framework. Bourdieu elaborated that habitus is a 'system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (1971, 83). Habitus represents a tacit perspective of the world that individuals with similar lifestyles share: an unconscious understanding of the 'rules' of social interaction (Horvat 2001). Capital represents forms of power in a given field: money and other monetary resources are referred to as economic capital; *social capital* refers to the social networks where one has influence; cultural capital encompasses many facets, which include knowledge, mannerisms, and practices associated with the 'upper class' and credentials; and symbolic capital refers to non-material artefacts that are ascribed with prestige or denigrated. Horvat defined the concept of field 'as the embodiment of the rules of the game as well as the site wherein the struggle to own or control these rules takes place' (2001, 213).

In an attempt to clarify and operationalize the concept of habitus for research, Reay (2004) stated that habitus is not solely composed of an individual's mental attitudes and perceptions, but also embodies the social world:

> The habitus is a socialised body … which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu 1977 as quoted in Reay 2004, 432)

As a structured structure that structures, Bourdieu (1984) asserted that one's habitus is moulded by their conditions of existence; that is, available resources, power, and privilege shapes how one interprets and interacts with their social world. Further, when people share similar socio-economic backgrounds, such conditions can shape a similar habitus – one that is class based: 'Through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions' (1984, 6). Kerby, a narrative scholar, discussed habitus within the context of the stories of our lives, suggesting that habitus can be seen as one's storied history turned into nature: 'The formation of a habitus, then, is the relatively abiding result of our temporal genesis … one's habitus is the mediatory style of one's contact with the world, and that it generates a cultural world correlated to its structures' (1991, 20). Kerby further articulated that unity between the habitus and the life-world is a unity between the self and prevailing environmental and cultural conditions, further emphasizing the socialized nature of the habitus: the habitus encapsulates 'values, beliefs, and attitudes, the unity of which must be accounted for by similar environmental conditions and prevailing cultural conditions' (1991, 20). In referencing both environmental and cultural conditions, Kerby suggested that the external social world shapes or conditions the habitus; that is, the social world is a condition of existence that shapes the values, attitudes, and beliefs comprising the habitus. Working with the conceptualization that the stories of our lives reflect both environmental and cultural conditions, stories can be considered Bourdieuian conditions of existence that shape the habitus (similar to the aforementioned story of Santa), thus providing insights into cultural factors that shape post-secondary decisions. Said differently, the stories illuminate socio-economic conditions and how such a class-based habitus shapes post-secondary pursuits. In order to deeply explore the class-based experiences of the participants, narrative inquiry was chosen as the most appropriate methodology because it is a way of understanding experience where experience is ontologically narrative composition.

Digging deeper into cultural factors with narrative inquiry

According to Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013, 577), 'narrative inquiry … both research methodology and a view of phenomenon, is the intimate study of an individual's experience over time and in context(s)'. In this sense, the stories that emerge in the midst of experience are both the phenomenon of experience and data for research purposes. In privileging qualitative depth over quantitative breadth, the emergent stories are intended to be 'an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which the individuals' experiences were constituted' (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, 42). In other words, the stories 'offer us insights into experiences and resonate in ways that help us to learn and form connections with others' (Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin 2013, 583). Consequently, samples for narrative inquiries are small – four in this study – in order to 'dig deep' and create conceptual propositions that hold similarly among participants (Riessman 2008).

Researchers experience participants' experiences through a three-dimensional inquiry space framed by sociality, temporality, and place. Examining sociality becomes a process where inquiry moves inwards and outwards from the participant's internal world, consisting of hopes, feelings, morals, and attitudes about their social environment. This outward place also encompasses the situational and contextual milieu, in addition to the physical attributes

of the environment where the inquiry is located. Moving backwards and forwards focuses examination on the temporal nature of experience where, while situated in the present, the past and future constructs of the events or experiences are examined. Narrative inquiry is an approach largely absent in the student experience scholarship, making it an ideal methodology for elucidating enhanced understandings of the largely not comprehensively understood factors of cultural conditions associated with parental education levels and university pursuits. As a result, first-generation students were chosen to be participants, with the narrative inquiry driven by the following research question: how do the stories of the first-generation participants' lives shape their transition into and through university? Recruitment took place at Pillar University in Ontario, Canada, a large research-intensive institution high in symbolic capital, through circulation of a social media invitation to first-generation students. A specific criterion was that students were first generation as defined by Pillar University: students whose parents(s) and/or guardian(s) did not complete postsecondary education in Canada.[1] Four students met Pillar University's criterion and confirmed their desire to participate: Kayla, Katrina, Marina, and Dani (all pseudonyms). Kayla, Katrina, and Marina were all in their second semester of the first year during the research stage, whereas Dani was in her second semester of the third year and also a student leader with the first-generation programme at Pillar. Further, all of the women were from immigrant families (Kayla, Katrina, and Dani are first-generation immigrants, having been born outside Canada, while Marina, having been born in Canada, is a second-generation immigrant), which features prominently in their experiences. It is noteworthy to highlight that, while they all met Pillar's definition of a first-generation student, Kayla and Katrina's parents both attended university outside Canada while Marina and Dani's parents did not attend university at all. This caused an interesting conundrum given that other scholars (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport 2012) would, rightly, exclude Kayla and Katrina as first-generation students; however, the decision was made to proceed with the inquiry and explore any variation in conditions of existence between these two categories of first-generation student. As will be discussed, this proved to be a serendipitous decision because it enabled exploration across the, arguably, different cultural elements associated with parental education and generated similar narrative themes towards storied-futures.

Movement from methods to research texts

Field texts – the data in narrative inquiry – were cultivated from multiple sources, beginning in December 2011 through Facebook where participants shared a high and a low of their university experiences to date. Each month between January 2012 and April 2012, every participant attended a two-hour interview and submitted one journal that included a picture and description of a salient moment (i.e. a total of four two-hour interviews and four journal entries each); this part of the inquiry proceeded as per the journal and interview guide approved by the institutional ethics review board. Of note is that the first theme (January 2012) focused on family stories about university through the following questions: tell me a story you were told about university by your family. How did these stories affect you? Further, participants were asked to take a picture representing the stories they heard about university and to unravel the meaning of that picture. Once transcription of the interviews was complete, there were four kinds of field texts for each participant: the interview transcripts; journal entries, which included pictures with expanded explanation; and the

Facebook introductions. To develop the narrative accounts (i.e. partial stories to situate the inquiry and explore social significance) from the field texts, the three-dimensional inquiry lens was employed to identify and weave together narrative elements related to sociality, temporality, and place. Clandinin and Connelly articulated that, 'as narrative researchers engage in this work, they begin to hold different field texts in relation to other field texts. However, it is responses to the questions of meaning and social significance that ultimately shape field texts into research texts' (2000, 131). Riessman further stated that stories participants tell should draw the reader into experience, but that 'determining the boundaries of stories can be difficult and highly interpretive' (2008, 74). The narrative accounts were co-constructed with participants within this context.

Accounts of experience: Kayla, Katrina, Marina, and Dani's journeys

As participants reflected on their experiences, oriented towards the past, present, and future (and even simultaneously spanning the temporal continuum), they reconnected with formative stories during their journey – a sense of wideawakeness (Clandinin 2013). During this time, I was drawn to similar themes across the four narrative accounts; resonant narrative threads open up 'particular plotlines that threaded or wove over time and place through an individual's narrative account' (2013, 132). The threads illustrate that similar class-based cultures (resulting from parental education levels) serve as conditions of existence that can shape one's habitus in similar ways. The fact that resonant narrative threads surfaced across the storied lives should not be surprising; this is concomitant with Bourdieu's notion of 'the set of agents who are placed in homogeneous conditions of existence imposing homogeneous conditionings and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices' (1984, 101). Before progressing to the resonant narrative threads, it is worthwhile to highlight that, within narrative work, while the word story is commonly understood as a noun, reflecting an account of something, story within narrative inquiry can also be a verb, reflecting the notion that we live, tell, relive, and retell stories (Clandinin 2013). When one tells the story about experience, the act of threading together the narrative elements is storying. Further, as people imagine futures for themselves, they can begin to story (or thread narrative elements together) this imagined future and how it might come to pass. The resonant narrative threads will illuminate how stories, particularly those during childhood, can and should be considered cultural factors that result in the participants' storying futures for themselves as university students, particularly around valuing education and enhancing social class standing for themselves and their families.

Thread one: do well in school – education is important

Childhood stories about education featured prominently for Kayla, Katrina, Marina, and Dani; all vividly recalled stories about the importance of education to the extent that, while they were young, valuing education became part of their habitus. Indeed, these family stories served as conditions of existence, shaping the habitus towards valuing education and an imagined future for their lives to lead. Interestingly, while Kayla and Katrina may not be considered first-generation students (given that their parents completed university outside Canada), this thread illuminates that it is family culture and the resulting stories around education which shape imaginings towards university attendance. That is, while

university-educated parents may naturally story university as a normal rite of passage, non-university-educated parents may also story university attendance as an important for their children's futures.

Kayla

Although Kayla's grandparents did not finish high school, they storied the value of education and future roles as university students into the lives of their children: 'Though my grandparents didn't even finish high-school, their children and all my cousins are highly educated, being doctors or lawyers or engineers.' Kayla's early childhood was similarly storied: the value of education and future as a university student were introduced quite early:

> As you can tell, university is expected … My parents want the best for us: they're not forcing me or my brother into anything specific, just that we must go to university and get an education. The message started early. For example, ever since my brother was three (he's 14 now), they'd tell him that he'd be a great architect

Stories about education are prominent in Kayla's family and are reflected in her habitus and behaviours, to the extent that others in Kayla's life serve as a mirror to her family stories and thus reinforce stories about education and her future:

> Everyone expected that I would go to university and do something big. If I told people that I was just going to go to college or just work, it would be a total shock (in such a case, I think my dad would find me a husband because I wasn't doing anything with my life.)

Katrina

Katrina's father, in particular, believed so strongly in the value of education that he and his sibling interceded when Katrina's cousin was not being encouraged to pursue university:

> My dad's sister passed away from cancer and left behind a two year-old daughter (my cousin). Her father didn't think she needed to go to university or be educated, so my dad and another sibling came and took my cousin for 'a drive,' but then took her to a boarding school that was known for its academics.

Marina

Marina's experience was quite similar in hearing stories about the importance of education; however, unlike Kayla and Katrina whose lives were storied as university bound, Marina understood all post-secondary options to be acceptable:

> I grew up with university being an option, but it wasn't an expectation. Postsecondary was valued and so college or anything would be fine for my family. The big thing that we were always told was to work hard so we can be our own bosses.

Although Marina heard stories of the importance of education and that all post-secondary options were fine, she self-storied university as the only option for her future:

> Though my parents said it's my life, it's really theirs. They put a lot of pressure on me to do well. Even though university is not better than the other options (and there are many success stories in the subway about the colleges and jobs) and there are different paths, I saw university as the only path because of them … if I chose college, they would be disappointed.

Dani

Similar to Marina and Katrina, Dani's parents also valued education and moved to Canada to provide their children with better opportunities:

> Though they never attended postsecondary, they valued education and, when I was four years old, we moved to Canada as my parents wanted to provide me with better opportunities for education. It's kinda weird in a way: they valued education, but didn't really have any expectation that I attend university.

Dani's relationship with her grandfather had always been quite strong. So much so that Dani vividly recalls sitting on her grandpa's lap and hearing stories about her ability and future opportunities:

> I do feel that I would have disappointed my family if I didn't go to university. I remember my grandpa saying that he thought I was pretty bright and that 'if you can go to university.' They wouldn't have been disappointed if I didn't go to university because I didn't want to or didn't feel I was ready or able to succeed – they would be disappointed if I didn't go because they believe in my ability.

Thread two: I want more

Kayla, Katrina, Marina, and Dani all deeply experienced their families' struggle with economic capital; indeed, the family stories of struggle and sacrifice resulted in a storied social class view of the world, with the participants identifying their families as working class. This facilitated a strong belief in meritocracy – that rewards are bestowed to those with demonstrated ability and achievement – resulting in them working hard to gain the cultural capital of a university degree in order to realize social mobility.

Kayla

Kayla vividly recalls how hard it was for her parents to 'make it' in Canada, to the extent that her father would work for most of the day in order to make enough money:

> My parents worked really, and I mean really, hard to get where they are now … my dad would work a ridiculous amount of hours at a plastic manufacturing company … we'd never see him. My parents were in debt coming here and had to borrow quite a bit of money … I remember my mom dragging us everywhere on the bus because we didn't have a car and we would bring groceries home in the freezing cold with a stroller. Those times were hard: when you've seen the bottom, you don't want to be there.

Kayla has storied a future role for herself as more upper class in order to provide for her family:

> I work hard now so that I can hopefully move up the social class ladder … so that I can take care of my family (my aunt will be my responsibility when my dad retires). As the saying goes, I'd rather cry in a Mercedes than on a bike (money doesn't buy happiness, but at least you're comfortable).

Katrina

Katrina's family also struggled financially, which was a difficult transition because in Saudi Arabia they had ample resources:

> The move to Canada wasn't easy. When we were in Saudi Arabia, the accounting company that my dad worked for gave us a house, tickets to travel, and a car (in addition to his salary), so we really only had to spend money on food. My mom also worked as an educator and she started her own school for children.

Katrina's father made a significant sacrifice for the family and went back to Saudi Arabia to make more money, while the family stayed in Canada: 'That time was rough. It wasn't a situation where we were trying to "make ends meet," but we had to adapt for a while until things got better, which they did!' Katrina's storied-future does not include what she considers 'labour jobs':

> It was expected that we would go to university because the belief was that, if you're educated, you're going to be treated better, get a better job, and be around smarter people. I don't want to not have a university degree and have to do normal labour jobs!

Marina

Parental struggles and lack of resources also feature prominently in Marina's narrative account, to the extent that she does not want to be considered working class and has storied a different future for herself:

> My parents are both working class and work as managers at a restaurant and constantly say, 'work really hard in school so you don't have to work in a restaurant.' I hope I'm not working-class in the future; I like eating at restaurants, not working in them (ironically, I do work at a fast food chicken place during the year to help pay for university – I hate it).

Marina stories a more upper-class future as a result of working hard:

> I know that if I work hard, there will be personal gain and I won't have to worry about my future and I don't want to struggle like my parents did. I've always wished I was more upper-class … I have an opportunity that not many people have and I'm appreciative of this and am going to make something of myself so that I'm not working-class.

Dani

Lack of resources has been a constant worry in Dani's family for the past two generations and, while she heard stories of valuing education, she experienced stories of sacrificing luxury (education included) in order to afford food and shelter:

> When I was growing up, I also knew that money was a problem and, when it came to education or money, the latter was more immediate. For example, my grandpa would tell me lots of stories when I was younger … he told me that my grandma really wanted to send my mom to Australia or somewhere for a better education, but with two younger sisters, they couldn't afford that luxury as they needed the money.

These financial struggles were rough, with Dani recalling how, although her dad worked many different jobs, money was never enough and would be a source of tension in the family:

> My parents also struggled to 'make ends meet' and I remember my dad working several odd jobs (sacrificing sleep and time with the family) in order to make money … I didn't know details as I was young, but I knew that it didn't work out well (it was a struggle) and remember my parents fighting about money. It wasn't a good childhood experience.

Similar to the other participants, Dani stories a future role of success so that she can make life easier for her family:

> I'm very proud of what my parents did for me and my family and will always be grateful. I will also always be there to support my family through my success and make whatever sacrifices that I need to make life easier for them.

Thread three: I am privileged and value family

The participants have storied their experience as one of privilege, even though they do not necessarily have as much social, cultural, or economic capital as their peers. Further, they storied roles for themselves as future family caregivers to honour the sacrifices of their parents.

Kayla

Working hard, appreciating what one has, and taking care of family are key elements of Kayla's habitus and aspects that she stories for herself as she imagines her successful future self:

> I value family – and not just how Canadians might value family, but deeper and broader. My dad is also the only son and has the additional responsibility of taking care of his parents, so he worked double time to work off the debt, support mom and me, and take care of them. He worked so hard. He really and truly is my hero. That's part of why I'm so determined to work hard; I want to provide him with an easy retirement. No matter what, I'm going to give him something in return for his sacrifice.

Katrina

Part of Katrina's story includes sacrifice for the good of the family, and one can imagine that her story for her future will include sacrificing for her family, particularly around education:

> We moved to Canada about eight years ago and the sole reason was so that my brother and I could go to university. Higher education was not optional – you know there's a lot of pressure when you know your parents moved countries so that their children can study.

Marina

When Marina reflects on her accomplishments, she is proud of what she has done for her family because they are able to tell stories of 'making it' as a result of her accomplishments:

> I have an opportunity that not many people have and I'm appreciative of this and am going to make something of myself so that I'm not working-class. There's also pressure for me to do well to support my family when they're older. It's something that I want to do; they're family and sacrificed for me and I want to provide for them when I'm older.

Dani

Dani strongly values the sacrifices that her mom made and the support her father provided. Indeed, their stories of sacrifice, strength, and encouragement fuel her to take advantage of opportunities they did not have:

> My mom worked for her family instead of getting an education. My mom picked up everything and left Hong Kong so that I could have better opportunities. My mom struggled with my father to provide for us. My mom lost her husband. My mom encouraged me to go abroad and take advantage of opportunities and to live and grow and learn and have fun. My mom is self-less and I will always remember this.

Meritocratic and storied-futures grand narratives

Grand narratives significantly shape how individuals interpret and interact with their social world; they serve to totalize cultural schema that order and explain knowledge and experiences (Stephens and McCallum 1998), with some having dominance over others, while others are still awaiting discovery and recognition. Grand narratives exist within various fields, including higher education, where the meritocratic grand narrative has achieved and sustained dominance. Through this narrative/schema/paradigm, the populace believes that social class is not a barrier; opportunities for social mobility are bountiful and available to anyone with merit. A core assumption with this paradigm is that all students are created equal and, therefore, the educational system should be trusted to sort those capable for university studies from those who are not. Culture, whether associated with parental education or not, does not have a place within this rational system of thought. Within the meritocratic narrative, disparities in economic capital are acknowledged, but disparities in social, symbolic, and, in particular, cultural capital are not comprehensible – they simply do not resonate within a paradigm focused on merit and market-sorting. Finnie's (2012) research has indicated that cultural factors may be key to equalize access, but the paradigm problematizing access must change; the neoliberal tenets of competition and market-sorting are glorified banners behind which other truths lie. Evidenced in this research, Kayla, Katrina, Marina, and Dani's experiences cannot be totally explained through the meritocratic grand narrative; although they cherish the concept of meritocracy and its promise for social mobility, other forces were also at play. These stories reflect the conditions of existence in which they grew up, composed of social, cultural, self, and family (which include parental views towards education) stories. These stories, as Bourdieuian conditions of existence, shaped the participants' habitus towards university – to the extent that they imagined futures for themselves as university students. These stories (of university futures), while generally told within families of university-educated parents and reflecting a family culture of university as natural progression (Lehmann 2007), can exist (although in a nuanced manner reflecting different class-based experiences) in families where parents did not attend university – a serendipitous insight by including Kayla and Katrina (who would not normally be considered first-generation students) in this study. As such, these stories elucidate the nature of cultural forces that Finnie (2012) alluded to in previous research.

The other grand narrative that surfaced – what I have termed the storied-futures narrative – is concerned with how future stories to live by are imagined and created for a life to play out. The storied-futures narrative illuminates how transitions to and through university are experienced by first generation students (and arguably others associated with historically underrepresented populations, such as students with disabilities and Aboriginal students), towards what Finnie highlighted as pivotal – the nature of culture. When experience is viewed as narrative composition, the stories of experience, as conditions of existence, illuminate important cultural aspects that shape university decision-making, most profoundly

through exploration of how futures are storied for a life to play out. The storied-futures narrative echoes Ben Okri's discussion of dreams and fate:

> We plan our lives according to a dream that came to us in our childhood, and we find that life alters our plans. And yet, at the end, from a rare height, we also see that our dream was our fate. (2011, 253)

Exploring the narrative elements of temporality, sociality, and place illuminates how the stories of Kayla, Katrina, Marina, and Dani's lives serve as a 'script' that underpins how their transitions in, through, and beyond the university system play out.

Temporality is, arguably, the anchoring thread, in the sense that the stories of Dani, Kayla, Katrina, and Marina's lives (particularly during the formative childhood period) were conditions which shaped a resilience-oriented habitus where social mobility became a desired goal and the means became education. This resilience-oriented habitus gave rise to future protentions of social mobility that propelled the women. Imagine a futuristic mountain climber situated at the base about to begin the journey to the summit. Except, in this futuristic scenario the climber has one of those 'James Bond' grappling-hook devices that allows them to accurately target their destination, activate the device, and attain a clear and secured means to proceed to their goal. In this analogy, the climber is the first-generation student (or immigrant or, arguably, any underrepresented student type), the summit is the future goal of social mobility, the base represents the foundational childhood experiences (including formative stories of their lives), and the line becomes the secured and clear path of formal education and degree completion to realize the goal (which is woven from the fabrics of a resilience-oriented habitus and imagined future story as a university student). As with all pathways towards significant goals, there are challenges to overcome, but commitment to the goal of degree completion and social mobility (shaped early through life stories, exemplified in the threads 'do well in school', 'education is important', 'I want more' and 'I am privileged and value family') is fuelled by identification as a university student and a habitus of resilience.

This habitus of resilience, and moving the discussion to the construct of sociality within the three-dimensional inquiry space, was the taut line in the climber analogy that kept Dani, Marina, Kayla, and Katrina anchored and progressing towards to their goals. Although they felt disparities in social class as a function of possessing less capital, evidenced in the 'I want more' thread, they were focused on the goal and such experiences of other students' privileged situations just made them work harder. Experiencing the lower social class was also motivating in a different sense: the participants felt privileged for the opportunity to study and that they must take advantage of this opportunity (a function of their families' sacrifices) so that they can also provide for their families in the future ('I am privileged and value family'). Participants also discussed the importance of belonging and, specifically, the roles that upper-year students played in normalizing the transition through stories of their own academic and social struggles – thus serving supportive roles to reinforce the three resonant narrative threads. Not only did upper-year students serve to facilitate belonging within the academic and social communities, but they also helped the participants build social and cultural capital to feel more confident.

With place, the final construct in the three-dimensional inquiry space, the students were fuelled by Pillar's prestige: Dani, Marina, Kayla, and Katrina were told that they were at a prestigious place (even though they did not know it during the application process), perceived that expectations were higher when they communicated with students from other

universities, and valued the enhanced cultural capital that a Pillar degree would provide. Being at Pillar not only motivated their desire to complete, but provided reinforcement of their storied role as a university student. Moving to broader aspects of context, the students' narrative accounts point to different and, arguably, more impactful directions for policy.

All parents will never have a university education in order to story values of education to their children so that the children, in turn, imagine futures for themselves as university graduates – so that it is a normal and expected rite of passage – but leaving the responsibility to parents maintains the inherent structural inequities prevalent today. What is needed is a way to alter the structure itself so that a child's future social class is independent of their parents.

Generation mobility: stories are the key to imagined future destinies

International research concerning university participation points to childhood as central to improving generational mobility; that is, uncoupling children's social fate from that of their parents. Finnie (2012) suggested that when a child is taught to value post-secondary education, they will attend; consequently, Finnie called for research to elucidate what 'teaching' means – because it is a matter of culture. This research illuminates that stories during childhood shape children's values, dispositions, and beliefs of university education, towards storying futures for themselves as graduates. While discussing immigration in totality is outside the scope of this article, it is worthwhile to note that research concerning university access for student from immigrant families punctuates conclusions from this research; that is, while parental aspirations are strongly associated with post-secondary attendance – as Finnie suggested – immigrant families have higher expectations and invest significant resources into transforming the social class of their children through formal education (Childs, Finnie, and Mueller 2010; Finnie and Mueller 2010; Webb, Schirato, and Danaher 2014). This underscores that stories, particularly within family culture, may be the common salient denominator to attend to widening participation for all underrepresented student populations – but also that potential solutions could lie within early childhood education approaches to equalize class-based conditions of existence.

Lefebvre and Merrigan concluded that 'the shaping of skills and the educational attainment of children are intimately related to the child's family environment at all ages and, in particular, at early ages (investments, resources, transmitted skills, values, motivation, etc.)' (2010, 220) and that 'within a portfolio of interventions geared to helping children attend PSE, proportionally more resources should be devoted to early childhood' (2010, 237). This is not surprising given the resonant narrative threads that surfaced across Dani, Kayla, Katrina, and Marina's narrative accounts indicating how profound childhood stories were in shaping habitus towards imagined futures. In the Canadian context, Mueller advocated for early interventions 'in school to level the playing field between children from different family backgrounds' (2008, 52) towards becoming truly socially mobile. According to Esping-Andersen, generational mobility is a reality in Scandinavian countries through implementation of high early-childhood standards for all students that neutralize cultural capital, such that 'children from disadvantaged families … benefit disproportionately' (2004, 308).

Good international research concerning university participation points to childhood as central to improving generational mobility; that is, uncoupling children's social fate

from that of their parents requires interventions during the formative years to introduce scripts for different future storied possibilities. This aspect features strongly in Dani, Kayla, Katrina, and Marina's narratives. Indeed, upon examination of the scholarship pertaining to first-generation students, immigrant students, and generational mobility, the issues and desired outcomes are the same, although the 'labels' assigned to the students are different. The issue of social reproduction and generational mobility, therefore, is not narrowly a first-generation or Aboriginal or immigrant student problem. The problem is a social class issue and the solutions – building resilience and introducing future storied possibilities – seem to residence within the entire education system, and childhood in particular.

Note

1. Most institutions in Ontario define a first-generation student as one whose parent(s)/guardian(s) did not complete post-secondary education anytime or anywhere, which is a more accurate definition because it recognizes the transmission of capital and shaping of habitus that is associated with parental education – regardless of country of education. The Pillar University definition was chosen in order to simplify participant recruitment; students at Pillar who were admitted as first-generation students would identify with the institutionally defined term and respond to invitations to participate.

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