

Articles

EXPERIENCES WITH CULTURAL CAPITAL IN EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL LIFE STORIES OF FIRST-GENERATION POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This article discusses the educational life stories of three first-generation university students as relates to cultural capital. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theory of cultural capital as a framework, the research sought to examine how the participants experience cultural capital that is typically privileged in education. It explores how the interactions between possessed and privileged forms of capital affect educational experiences and perceptions. A focus on each participant's experiences with culture, capital, and education revealed themes corresponding to familial, institutional, economic, social, and represented forms of cultural capital. Understanding first-generation students' educational life stories sheds light on the complex challenges facing those who confront and deal with privileged culture in the education system. This article adds to the growing body of research about cultural capital as relates to first-generation university students and argues for a critical exploration of education through individual experiences.

Résumé

Cette analyse traite des expériences de vie reliées au capital culturel de trois étudiants universitaires de première génération. Basée sur la théorie du capital culturel en tant que cadre conceptuel de Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1986), cette recherche étudie comment les participants vivent l'expérience du capital culturel qui est typiquement privilégié dans le monde de l'éducation. Elle explore comment les interactions entre les formes du capital hérité et du capital privilégié affectent les expériences et les perceptions éducationnelles. Une étude plus approfondie sur les expériences de chacun de ces étudiants en culture, en capital et en éducation, a exposé des thèmes étroitement liés à la famille, à l'institution, au système économique et au système social, et nous a révélé des représentations de

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formes du capital culturel. Comprendre le vécu éducationnel de ces étudiants de première génération nous éclairera sur les défis complexes auxquels doivent faire face ceux qui y sont confrontés et qui doivent composer avec la culture privilégiée du système de l'éducation. Cette recherche vient s'ajouter aux autres recherches de plus en plus nombreuses sur le capital culturel des universitaires de première génération et supporte le besoin d'une exploration critique de l'éducation à travers les expériences de vie personnelles.

Introduction

Education systems have a number of direct and indirect purposes. Transmitting knowledge and providing opportunities for social mobility are often considered predominant direct purposes of education systems (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000). Indirectly, however, education systems transmit more than knowledge by promoting dominant forms of culture that socialize students in socially acceptable ways (Davies & Guppy, 2006). Culture is not limited to heritage or ethnicity but can be defined generally as "the ways of perceiving, thinking, believing, and behaving that characterize the members of a particular social group" (Barakett & Cleghorn, p. 4). By promoting particular forms of culture, the education system has the ability to "allocate people to particular statuses and provide a socially recognized rationale for such allocation" (Davies & Guppy, p. 200). Social status (or social class position) is influenced by the organizing effects of education and supported by how well a student's cultural capital aligns with the cultural capital promoted in schools. In this article we define cultural capital as specific forms of culture that are valued by a group of people within a particular context that can promote or inhibit social mobility within the group. In dominant Western society, the culture that is most privileged is typically represented by middle-class, White, heterosexual, able-bodied men (hooks, 2000), thereby placing those who do not fit this representation into marginalized social positions.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that schools are sites for cultural reproduction where particular forms of cultural capital are promoted, which has implications for social mobility and economic success. If a student's cultural capital aligns with that which is privileged in schools and by teachers, he or she is more likely to be academically successful (Monkman, Ronald, & Théramene, 2005). However, if the cultural capital promoted at home is different than that promoted at school, a student may disengage from taught material and question his or her sense of self and belonging (Gonzalez, 2001; Reay, 2005; Sullivan, 2001).

This research examines the educational life stories of three female, first-generation post-secondary students (those who are the first in their immediate families to attend university) in order to understand their educational experiences with cultural capital. This article therefore discusses literature connecting cultural capital, first-generation students, and the education system; details the use of educational life stories; and presents findings that relate to various forms of capital. Understanding first-generation students' educational life stories sheds light on the complex challenges facing those who confront and deal with privileged culture in education. This article adds to the growing body of research about cultural capital as it relates to first-generation university students and argues for a critical exploration of education through individual experiences.

Cultural Capital, First-Generation Students, and Education

Cultural capital includes the aspects of culture, such as family background, traditions, education, attitudes, behaviour, and taste, that are privileged in society and typically help one achieve economic success. Cultural capital can present itself in an “embodied state” (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), an “objectified state” (cultural goods such as pictures, books, instruments), and an “institutionalized state” (academic qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). Cultural capital can be used to promote social capital (Monkman et al., 2005), which is the network of social connections that are developed through socially organized groups (Fukuyama, 2001). Capital is not only dependent on financial position but also ascribes value to particular representations of culture. Valued forms of cultural capital are reflected in socially legitimized norms and expectations (Apple, 2000).

Bourdieu (1986) argues that, to understand how the social world is structured, it is also important to understand the many different forms of capital. Drawing on traditional economic theories surrounding capital, Bourdieu contends that, in addition to financial capital, cultural representations and social relationships account for social class position. Society functions in accordance with norms determined through human interactions influenced by definitions of what capital is and is not accepted. To act in a manner that is most accepted and encouraged can often guarantee positive reactions and, therefore, a form of return.

In challenging traditional interpretations of cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu, Yosso (2005) argues that certain forms of cultural capital are recognized while others are left unrecognized. Traditional theorists propose that students who “lack” cultural capital do not do well in school, thereby assuming that students from diverse backgrounds have “cultural deficiencies” (Yosso, p. 70). Through these assumptions, certain interpretations of Bourdieu attempt to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while other communities are culturally poor, thereby widening the gap between dominant and marginalized communities (Yosso). However, it is crucial to note that marginalized communities are not culturally deficient; rather, their cultural capital is not always privileged in accordance with dominant society.

Many researchers have examined relationships between educational systems and forms of capital (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Bourdieu, 1984; hooks, 1994; Jaeger, 2009; Print & Coleman, 2003; Sullivan, 2001). As a result of how power structures privilege certain cultural practices, the education system has become a field that reproduces culture and perpetuates privilege for those who identify with the norm (Bourdieu, 1984). In her exploration of “socially and economically disadvantaged young people living in a post-industrial Cape Breton community,” Brann-Barrett (2009, p. 54) draws on Bourdieu to contend that “it is the values of the dominant that tend to serve as the norms within fields, thus supporting the status quo that reinforces inherent inequalities” (p. 55). Brann-Barrett describes her investigation to “shed light on their struggles to secure capital that would help them experience social and economic health” (p. 56). Our research adds to Brann-Barrett’s work with a focus on educational success of first-generation university students as relates to cultural capital.

Students who are the first in their family to attend university or college are identified as first-generation students who often face challenges when navigating through the culture and expectations of the education system (Jehangir, 2010; Lehmann, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007). Parental institutional cultural capital can be a "determinant of educational and occupational expectations and attainment" (Lehmann, p. 90). Additionally, intergenerational class reproduction can also be affected by how well a first-generation student can negotiate cultural, social, and academic transitions when entering post-secondary education (Gofen, 2009; Lehmann; Stieha, 2010; Swartz, 2008). Students whose parents have not attended post-secondary institutions may find the environment more intimidating and less familiar than students whose parents have attended post-secondary institutions (Lehmann). While families can help ease first-generation students' transitions to post-secondary institutions by utilizing various forms of capital, in general many first-generation students are at an academic disadvantage when compared to non-first-generation students (Gofen; Lehmann; Stieha; Swartz). McLean (2009) argues that universities, thereby, are "institutions that reinforce and give legitimacy to social and economic inequalities" (p. 17).

Universities promote student involvement in an effort to ease transitions to post-secondary institutions for first-generation students. However, student involvement programs often problematically assume that "social integration is desirable, regardless of student background" (Stieha, 2010, p. 247). Lehmann (2007) agrees that social background plays "an important role in how students experience university and ultimately how they form dispositions to either persist or drop out" (p. 105). Students may therefore feel they need to conform to dominant forms of capital to become academically successful (hooks, 1994; Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008).

While some researchers have attempted to make direct connections between cultural capital and educational achievement (e.g., Kingston, 2001) or explored the tensions between home and school life (e.g., Gonzalez, 2001; hooks, 2000), more work is needed in order to examine how first-generation university students interpret and utilize cultural capital embedded within the education system. Studies attempting to identify direct relationships between cultural capital and academic achievement (e.g., Dumais, 2001; Kingston; Sullivan, 2001) often do not explore how students have constructed meanings from their experiences. One way to understand the complexity of cultural capital is to explore the perspectives of individual students through their educational life stories.

Methodology

This research focuses on educational life stories through the use of life history interviews (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The goal of life history interviews is "depth over breadth" (Cole & Knowles, p. 67) as a means to "create an in-depth profile of the respondent's life experiences relative to the research problem being investigated" (Labaree, 2006, p. 126). As a significant amount of information can be generated through life history interviews, a limited number of participants are chosen to represent depth of experience (Cole & Knowles; Labaree).

A life story, within life history research, can be defined as “a written or oral account of a life or segment of a life as told by an individual” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 18). The life stories told through life history research connect individual stories to broad life contexts in order to understand “experiences as they are lived out” (Clandinin, Huber, & Huber, 2006, p. 2). In organizing life histories into a series of life stories, participants’ narratives become “a conceptual way to narratively understand the connections among ... knowledge, contexts, and identity” (Clandinin et al., p. 10). For this research, the life history focus was specifically centred on stories that related to participant educational experiences—in other words, their educational life stories.

In seeking participants, a generic recruitment letter was e-mailed to the coordinator of an Ontario university first-generation program, who forwarded the e-mail to students within the program. Forty-two first-generation students responded to the recruitment e-mail and were sent a formal letter of invitation and an informed consent form. Six participants expressed an interest after reading the letter of invitation and informed consent form, from which three could arrange to meet at a mutually convenient time.

The participants’ pseudonyms are Anna, Brooke, and Colleen, who individually participated in two interviews that each ranged from 1.5 to 2 hours. The first question that participants were asked was to describe their life history, beginning wherever and including whatever they chose. Through guided conversation, open-ended questions were then used to ask how the participants would describe themselves, their home lives, and their school lives to encourage “recollections and reconstructions of elements of the participant’s life” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 35). The interviews were thematically analyzed in order to clearly identify how the themes connected to their lived experiences and how the participants’ stories connected to one another (Gouthro, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995; Taber, 2011). This process of analyzing themes is described by Ahn and Filipenko (2007) as “teasing out the themes from the narratives and the ways in which each narrative links to that theme, while identifying possible links between key concepts” (p. 282). This process resulted in five main themes that were then mapped onto forms of cultural capital as discussed above.

This research analyzes the educational life stories of three female, first-generation students. The stories of these participants are not generalizable but are valuable in understanding the intricacies of day-to-day educational experiences within a larger educational system. In ways similar to Stieha (2010), this research examines a small group of participants to illuminate their voices. Although findings are not transferable to other first-generation students, they “capture students’ perceptions” that will allow educators to better understand experiences “as a student moves through the university system” (Stieha, p. 238). The educational life stories discussed are not focused on university alone, but on the ways in which compulsory and post-secondary education are connected to wider society.

Findings

From the three educational life stories shared by the participants, five prominent themes emerged that connected directly to different forms of capital:

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- Familial capital: The importance of parental support in education
- Institutional capital: Gaining access through recreating normative pathways
- Economic capital: Working harder to gain capital
- Social capital: Networking to utilize cultural capital
- Represented cultural capital: Prestige and the “all-American student”

While these themes were evident in each of the participants’ educational life stories, they were discussed in different ways in relation to their lived experiences. Their experiences highlighted how they navigated, utilized, and confronted privileged forms of capital. To provide context for the themes, summaries of the participants’ educational life stories are briefly discussed.

Anna

Anna is a 19-year-old, White, female, first-year university student. Anna and her younger sister were raised solely by their mother as their father left when Anna was 6 years old. As a child, Anna was bused to a Catholic elementary school that was in a nicer neighbourhood than her own. While her town had “nice” areas, Anna believed that outsiders often considered the area undesirable due to its proximity to industrial plants. Anna’s mother was academically supportive by encouraging Anna to do well in school in order to attend university. With little support from her guidance counsellor, Anna completed her own research on academic pathways. Knowing that she would be supporting herself financially through university, Anna worked 20 hours per week at a part-time job, maintained a high average, and applied for scholarships throughout high school. Anna applied to universities that would offer her opportunities for networking in her field, and she was accepted to her desired program. Since starting university, Anna describes her experience to be positive. Social networking has become an important tool to distinguish herself from other graduates when she enters the workforce. Although Anna admits that balancing many extracurricular activities can be difficult when facing financial pressures, she feels that her efforts will eventually “pay off.”

Brooke

Brooke is a 17-year-old, White, female, first-year university student raised in a two-parent home with two younger brothers. Brooke describes her classroom elementary experience as a time when she developed a strong sense of community, influenced by the deaths of two classmates in two separate years. Attending high school, Brooke found the school community to contrast her previous experiences in elementary school, describing the community to be “cliquey.” She struggled with some of the relationships with her peers, which influenced her decision to complete an international exchange. After a fight with a girl at her international exchange school and a family emergency, Brooke returned home early with the help of her parents. Upon her return Brooke enjoyed playing a number of sports, but she continued to struggle with cliques and felt “pushed out” of peer groups. Being placed academically ahead of her grade level through the transition from Europe to Canada and deciding to take an increased course load allowed her to complete high school

early. This decision was met with resistance from her school but allowed her to attend university a year earlier than she would have otherwise. She has continued to struggle with her peers' maturity levels. Furthermore, Brooke has struggled with disconnects between her coursework and her career path and the impersonal nature of the university, stating that "you just sit down and you get told what to learn." As a result, she wishes to transfer to a smaller school in the future. Throughout her educational experiences, Brooke's parents were always supportive. Brooke found their trust in her to be very helpful as they rarely questioned her choices and encouraged her to do what she felt was right.

Colleen

Colleen is an 18-year-old, White, female, first-year university student who grew up with her mother, stepfather, and younger brother. Originally born and raised in a small town, Colleen moved to a nearby mid-sized city at the age of 10. Her transition to a bigger, rougher school "was a big change" as she became exposed to many difficult realities facing her peers, such as suicide, depression, and teen pregnancy. She became less interested in school despite being identified as gifted, which frustrated teachers who knew her intellectual potential. With encouragement and emotional support from her friends and parents, Colleen decided to improve her grades in her final year of school with hopes of pursuing a university degree. So far Colleen's university experience has been positive. She is becoming accustomed to working hard to achieve high grades and is enjoying the social environment of her residence. She finds it helpful that her roommate has similar educational goals and comforting that a few students from her high school are living in the same residence. Colleen claims that her peers have helped her to feel more comfortable in social situations where she would normally be shy. She finds that some first-year students in her residence are immature but does not express her frustration because she does not want to create unnecessary tension. After graduation she hopes to obtain a master's degree from an American "Ivy League" school so that she can create career connections that will allow her to access jobs that involve helping people in developing countries.

Familial Capital: The Importance of Parental Support in Education

While research suggests that parents who have not attended post-secondary education cannot academically support their children in the same ways as parents who have attended university (Jehangir, 2010), the participants expressed the importance of parental involvement and emotional support in direct relation to education. Anna cited her mother as being one of the strongest influences on her decision to attend university. She stated, "It's always been drilled in my mind where I was going which is good because my mom didn't go to school, and I think she regrets it because her parents never told her [that she] should go to school." By encouraging her daughter to attend university, Anna's mother demonstrates her valuing of cultural capital attained through educational achievement.

Similar to Anna, Colleen's mother also encourages her daughter to attend university so that Colleen will have access to opportunities she would not have if she did not attend a post-secondary institution. Colleen stated, "A lot of what I do ... is more important to her because she never got to do it so she sees I'm fulfilling her dreams and my own so it's ... a lot of pressure." Colleen's mother did not attain a post-secondary

degree and thus promotes higher education with hope that Colleen will have better life opportunities than she had. Furthermore, Colleen attributes her parents' financial struggle and job limitations to their lack of higher education. She sees herself breaking the cycle of "underachievers" by attending university.

The participants' discussion of parental support aligns with research that argues a student's home life can influence academic success (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Bourdieu, 1984; Sullivan, 2001). All three participants' educational decisions were influenced by support that their parents offered. The participants did not discuss their parents' direct academic involvement in their school; instead, they valued the emotional support and encouragement that was offered outside school, even though Anna and Colleen sometimes felt familial pressure. In contrast to a deficit model that often assumes first-generation students do not have familial capital, the participants' experiences demonstrated that familial capital took the forms of emotional support and parental involvement.

Institutional Capital: Gaining Access Through Recreating Normative Pathways

The participants expressed their determination and self-reliance when they discussed overcoming systemic barriers such as restrictive course streaming, lack of teacher guidance, lack of post-secondary knowledge, and high economic costs of education. Instead of fighting against the education system, the participants worked within the system, utilizing their own cultural capital and knowledge of privileged cultural capital to access institutional capital. The participants each discussed experiences that outlined a time when a school staff member had discouraged them from achieving their academic goals. The participants responded to these situations with different forms of resistance that created alternative academic pathways.

Anna discussed her guidance counsellor's doubt in her ability to attend post-secondary school and refusal to recognize her academic potential. In her first year of high school, Anna's school set up a mandatory meeting for students to speak with their assigned guidance counsellor. Anna described her encounters as discouraging and unhelpful, stating, "He didn't help me whatsoever and it wasn't until Grade 12 that he realized that I could actually go to university. He really didn't have an interest in me." She felt that because she was unsure of her academic future, he assumed she was "stupid" and should follow a college pathway. Her guidance counsellor's perceptions did not stop Anna from pursuing university; instead of seeking advice from the school, Anna took it upon herself to research post-secondary pathways and avoid being streamed by the school at a young age.

Describing herself as "com[ing] from a family of underachievers," Colleen found herself succumbing to wider social expectations: "I'm supposed to be so gifted ... but I just don't try and teachers and principals ... the one word they used to describe me was underachiever and I don't want to be that anymore." Colleen was caught in a double bind; she satisfied teachers' expectations by obtaining high marks but also satisfied the social expectation of continuing the trend of underachievement in her family by not acting like a typically "good" student. Colleen concluded by stating that finding her own path, regardless of other people's expectations, was most important to her.

Although responding positively to teacher expectations can be considered a form of valued cultural knowledge and, thus, cultural capital, the participants refused to meet expectations with which they disagreed (Collier & Morgan, 2008). However, this disagreement was aimed at recreating normative pathways within the system (Gonzalez, 2001). In doing so, the participants were able to overcome barriers posed by the norms promoted within the education system at the same time as they supported them.

Economic Capital: Working Harder to Gain Capital

Often a barrier for first-generation students, the participants also faced financial concerns related to attending post-secondary education (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2006, Jehangir, 2010). Although research finds that parental education can have a greater influence on post-secondary attainment than parental economic capital, economic capital still influences access to post-secondary education (Dumais & Ward; Jehangir). To compensate for lacking economic resources and thus access to post-secondary education, the participants worked additional hours at part-time jobs. Although their jobs added to their educational workload, it also increased their determination to succeed academically.

Education is not detached from economic capital, which is evidenced by Colleen's academic and career goals in relation to her financial resources. Through attending university she hopes to get "a good education I guess since I'm paying for it" and "a job so I can pay off all of my student debt." Although she has tried to focus only on school, Colleen admits that she has not saved enough money for her first year of university. To maintain her enrollment and break the cycle of underachievers, she plans to spend more time in her second semester working a part-time job.

Similarly, Anna worked many hours at a part-time job so she could attend university instead of allowing herself to be limited by her lack of economic capital (Dumais & Ward, 2010):

I've always known I've wanted to do better than what I was given so I always worked really hard to achieve that... I just took the responsibility for myself and got a job and did what I could so that I could afford school and ... applying for [financial aid] and ... I feel like a lot of people do have it handed to them. (Anna)

Given her family's lack of access to economic capital, Anna has found herself even more determined to succeed academically in university than her financially stable peers.

Brooke also described her experience working overtime hours to complete high school early and save money for university: "I would go home, usually do ... online homework ... [and] worked [at a drugstore] 25 hours a week ... even my weekends pretty much just consisted of homework." In prioritizing her education over her personal life, Brooke privileged institutionalized cultural capital over the social capital of her friendships.

The participants' experiences with economic capital support Dumais and Ward's (2010) argument that "finances are often an obstacle to first-generation enrolment" (p. 263). Because the participants did not have easy access to economic capital, they felt they had to work harder and longer than their financially privileged peers. However, although

time spent working at part-time jobs may have taken time away from their education, their willingness to take on extra work and the high value they placed on education as a form of capital made them determined to overcome economic limitations.

Social Capital: Networking to Utilize Cultural Capital

The participants felt that an important factor in their decision to attend university was how well they fit into the social environment of the school. Furthermore, they underscored the importance of attending a school with a close community within which they felt comfortable. By attending such a school, the participants felt better able to navigate the social capital (Lin, 2000; Nora, 2004). As they noted,

It was either between [a larger university] and here [a smaller university] and so we went to [the larger university] and me and my mom were [agreed that] ... we did not like this at all.... And then we both came here ... and ... this is a lot closer community, a lot like home feeling than any of the other universities. (Colleen)

So, I think [my school] is good because it's a smaller school.... I chose it ... because I could actually talk to people and get to know what I'm getting into. (Anna)

Considering that the participants grew up (in part) in small towns, their desire to attend a school that promotes a similar close-knit community demonstrates the importance of having one's cultural capital represented in the education system. The participants felt that their cultural capital best fit into a smaller community that would enable them to fit in academically and socially (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Lehmann, 2007; Nora, 2004). By feeling comfortable within the academic and social environment of the school, the participants are arguably better suited to navigate a familiar social landscape (Bourdieu, 1984; Dumais, 2001; Dumais & Ward).

Not only did the participants value attending a school where they could navigate social capital, they believed that their degree's utility increased through social connections. Anna and Brooke explicitly connected social capital to career accessibility as they felt that social networks in relevant industries increased access to job openings (Lin, 2000). For Anna, university is viewed as an opportunity to increase her social capital in order to mobilize her degree and distinguish herself from her colleagues following graduation, arguing that "it doesn't look good ... to [just] have a college education or ... a university education, that's nothing anymore." Instead she explains that "it's who you know.... It's good to have references ... when you're applying for a job." Similarly, Colleen perceives the value of her degree as dependant on the social capital of the school, stating that the connections of reputable universities "give you a foot in the door ... to get a job."

Echoing Anna and Colleen's emphasis on social capital, Brooke privileges connections and real-world experience over the usefulness of the degree. She is skeptical of a degree's value if it is not supported with social networking skills. Brooke questions, "If the person that goes to Harvard can't talk, who's going to get the job?" and argues that "college doesn't even teach you ... life skills." Brooke views social skills as more

beneficial than academic skills; capital that is “more accessible, more profitable, or more legitimate ... tends to induce a transformation of asset structure” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 131).

The participants connected social capital to institutional capital in the form of post-secondary education, stressing their perceived importance of having strong social networks in order to utilize their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 2001). The participants believed that access to career opportunities (and thus economic capital) was easier when cultural capital was supported by social capital.

Represented Cultural Capital: Prestige and the “All-American Student”

The participants discussed how schools are represented, perceived, and made desirable based on prestige associated with the school. While the participants focused specifically on how prestige is associated with certain universities, connections were also made between prestige and good reputations in public schools. Furthermore, connections were made between the prestige associated with the school and the students whom the schools target in marketing campaigns. The participants discussed how they saw ideal students represented in ways that sustained and promoted a particular dominant university culture (Stampnitzky, 2006).

From a young age, Colleen believed that a prestigious degree would provide her with a better education than attending a school that did not have a highly regarded reputation. Colleen stated, “Since I was really young I always wanted to go to an Ivy League or a really prestigious university in the States.” Colleen describes images of prestigious schools, stating that they often have “old vines up the old walls of buildings,” and that “I always pictured myself going to school like that.”

Contrasting the image of prestige held for Ivy League universities, Colleen described her elementary school as being rough and undesirable. She identified it as being “one of the most run-down elementary schools in the city ... the south end is sketchy ... and then the north end is more fancy ... higher income homes and families.” Through Colleen’s experience, attending a “good school” is connected with the physical image of the school in addition to the reputation. Not only did many students within her grade level deal with issues such as teen pregnancy, depression, suicide, and eating disorders, they also dealt with these issues within a school with a poor social reputation.

Anna also stressed the importance of prestige in her distinction between following a university pathway over a college pathway. She stated, “I would do the harder classes, academic as opposed to applied and university as opposed to college.” In connecting university courses to a higher difficulty level than college courses she is recognizing the distinction that is often made between post-secondary pathways (Jaeger, 2009). For Anna, prestige is not only upheld by how society values education but also by how universities market to society. Feeding into one another, schools reproduce dominant society while dominant society is reproduced in schools.

Anna and Brooke both associated normative attire with wearing preppy clothing such as Hollister and Abercrombie. Anna made an explicit connection between dressing in particular ways and fitting into university culture. Clothing companies such as Hollister and

Abercrombie are what Anna referred to as being "all-American," aligning with a Western, White, middle-class norm. Colleen further emphasized the value of being "all-American" as her ideal school is an American Ivy League university.

The participants' views regarding university prestige and marketing reflect Bourdieu's (1984) theory that the education system is a site of cultural reproduction. Connecting to Stampnitzky's (2006) review of cultural capital in Harvard's admissions criteria, universities' advertisement campaigns and reputation similarly screen for cultural capital. Through promoting dominant forms of cultural capital through media such as advertisement campaigns, universities typically recruit students who fit with dominant representations of culture. Dominant culture is then further reinforced by student populations, who also represent and reproduce cultural capital promoted by schools.

Implications

Each of the participants' educational life stories revealed themes that connected to forms of capital. While familial capital was an important resource for academic success, the participants valued their parents' emotional support over direct academic involvement. Even with this support, the education system posed many barriers and tensions. The participants had to recreate normative pathways in order to follow their chosen pathway within the education system and access institutional capital, which was difficult due to their relative lack of economic capital. Social capital was important so that the participants could effectively utilize their cultural capital in their future careers; they believed that strong social networks increased access to jobs more than institutional capital alone. Furthermore, the participants felt it was important that they fit into the social environments of their schools. Finally, privileged cultural capital is present in educational representations such as advertisement campaigns and physical appearances of schools. Each of these forms of cultural capital was important in the participants' educational life stories, interconnecting in complex ways with their educational experiences. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (p. 46).

Cultural capital associated with education is not only promoted by how universities and society interact but is also reinforced throughout various levels of the education system. As expressed by the participants, colleges are commonly perceived as being less prestigious than universities. Attending "culturally heavy" university is perceived as a more valuable form of institutionalized cultural capital (Jaeger, 2009, p. 1945) than attending "culturally light" college (p. 1945). The desirability of a school is not necessarily determined solely by what will be learned at the particular school, but also by the school's social reputation. Schools such as Ivy League schools are equated with representing more privileged forms of cultural capital (Jaeger; Stampnitzky, 2006) and, therefore, students who attend these schools are perceived as having institutional capital that is more valuable than the cultural capital attained at schools with poor reputations.

Research suggests that students whose cultural capital does not align with what is promoted at schools are at an academic disadvantage (Fukuyama, 2001; Yosso,

2005). Nevertheless, the participants in this study used their own cultural capital to create alternative ways of being academically successful within the education system. For the participants, to be successful academically meant working within the system. As cited in Gonzalez's (2001) article, amongst a number of potential outcomes, students can become disconnected from schooling or can take action in response to the cultural capital privileged by the education system.

Feelings of belonging are an important part of academic success, and because first-generation students often feel marginalized within the education system, those who do not identify with norms often disengage from the education system (Jehangir, 2010; Stieha, 2010). However, the participants were academically successful despite the cultural capital promoted through their educational experiences because of their understanding of privileged culture, their own extra work and determination, and their parents' support. It is important that, although the participants were academically successful, tension and conflict were often described throughout their educational life stories.

In analyzing the educational struggles of first-generation students, Saunders and Serna (2004) argue that "success is influenced by the structure of the current system or environment in which they are embedded" (p. 160). In our research, using Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital in education allowed for a critical exploration of the power structures that may affect the success of first-generation students. As evidenced by the participants' experiences, success often meant negating their own forms of cultural capital in favour of conforming to dominant norms. While this strategy helped negate any disadvantage they individually faced as first-generation students, it also worked to maintain the dominant forms of cultural capital that initially formed barriers for their educational success.

The educational life stories of the participants highlight a need to critically analyze the structure and functioning of the education system. Jehangir (2010) suggests that educators should "draw on [students'] cultural capital, bring their stories and lived experiences into the learning process, and allow them to voice and author their selves" (p. 549). Our research answers his call to focus on lived experiences, as it forefronts individual voices through an exploration of their educational life stories. Their stories provide a lens from which to understand how the participants navigated their educational experiences by utilizing privileged forms of cultural capital despite their own marginalization.

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