

An interrupted pathway

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It took me 22 years to get my first undergraduate degree. Not that I studied for all that time, of course, but I first enrolled in 1976 and I didn't graduate with my BA until April 1998. Why did it take so long? Was there something wrong with me? Was there anything anyone else could have done to help me get through university earlier?

These questions are very much on my mind at the moment as programmes have been and are being put into place to encourage more school leavers from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds to go on to university. The South Australian Government's First Generation Programme, Flinders University's Inspire Peer Mentor Programme and the University of South Australia's First Generation University Orientation Programme are examples of such programmes designed because, even though participation in Australian universities has widened considerably since the 1970s, Indigenous students, rural students and those from lower SES backgrounds have been consistently under-represented (Bradley *et al.* 2008, p. xii; Moodie 2008, p. 162; Wyn 2009, p. 17). My interest in the Federal Government's push to increase the representation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds from less than 15 to 20 per cent by 2020 (Bradley *et al.* 2008) is both personal and academic. It's personal because I was a student from a low socio-economic background, and it's academic because I now teach in a university (albeit on a casual or contract basis).

Not that I identified as a student from a low socio-economic background when I first applied to go to university. Back then I was still a foster kid and that made me different, but I didn't see myself as coming from a poor or working class background, probably because everyone around me was in a similar situation. Our neighbours across the road had parents

both of whom worked in a factory and left for work in clothes I wouldn't have been allowed to leave the house in, but generally the mothers were at home and the fathers worked elsewhere. My foster father had worked for the same company for 40 years, gradually working his way up from factory shift work to becoming a supervisor. There was some awareness of status I suppose but that was primarily in relationship to the medical profession. Marrying a doctor was promoted as the ideal, and I remember my foster mother becoming indignant when a neighbour who said he worked at the Royal Adelaide Hospital was discovered to be the gardener there; she forever after treated him with considerably less deference!

The kids at school tended to be from Australia-born Anglo backgrounds, but I recall a few Indigenous Australian children, as well as migrants from English and European backgrounds. Forty years later Blair Athol still has a majority Australia-born population, although 29 per cent of the State's refugees from Africa and the Middle East live in that suburb and the adjacent one of Kilburn (My School 2010). These days 66 per cent of children attending Gepps Cross Primary School, where I went for 7 years from 1962, come from backgrounds in the lowest quarter of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) with 99 per cent in the bottom half of that Index (My School 2010). It may have been similar when I was a kid and perhaps the below national average numeracy and literacy skills were similar too.

I thought I was pretty smart until I went to High School, where the practice of streaming determined I was only average. Maybe that's the reason I chose to go into the commercial stream the following year; I'd accepted my fate of a vocational education, the sort that had been provided for with the mass expansion

of secondary education from the 1950s which was intended to skill up workers for the boom industries of the time - agriculture, manufacturing and business (Branson and Miller 1972, pp. 59-60; Wyn 2009, p. 3). I don't recall why I then suddenly decided in fourth year that I wanted to go to university. This was a decidedly odd, even deviant (Branson & Miller 1979) thing for a kid like me. Research shows that State kids are far less likely 'to continue their education beyond the minimum school leaving age' (Bromfield and Osborn 2007, p. 8) and no-one in my respectable working class foster family had been to university, nor even finished secondary school for that matter. (I was to find out much, much later that nobody in my 'white trash' (Wilson 2002) birth family had either). But it was the 1970s and there was considerable talk of free university education so perhaps I'd imbibed something of that from those exciting Whitlam days.

Doing Year 12 was my first experience of coming unstuck educationally. That commercial stream education had prepared me well for becoming a secretary but not adequately for fifth year, and some of my grades plummeted. I also felt a bit lost and lonely for part of the year as I was only one of four girls to go from the commercial stream into fifth year and the only one to make it through to final exams. I no longer had regular contact with the two teachers who had cajoled and encouraged me for three years either. When I didn't receive the place at the University of Adelaide I wanted, I deferred the offer from the still new Flinders University. Reflecting back now, I think that final year at high school undermined my self-confidence considerably, but I was also experiencing significant conflict at home. I moved out the following year, not long after I'd received my letter from the Welfare Department telling me I was no longer a Ward of the State. Instead of feeling free of family constrictions when I left home, however, I felt so lost, alone and unsupported that I began the first search for my birth family.

Two years later I did start doing a BA at the University of Adelaide. By then I had accrued a little cultural and social capital, something kids from middle and upper class backgrounds have in abundance (Power *et al.* 2001; Kendall 2002; Devine 2004) and a friend was able to ring a friend at Adelaide and organise a place for me there. Without those social connections I would not have gone to Adelaide, but it was presented to me as the 'better' university because it had been established for longer than Flinders. I had no concept of it

being an elite university; after all for most of its life it had been the only university in South Australia. When I arrived on campus it wasn't long before my little bit of confidence ebbed away and I struggled with the work, struggled feeling overwhelmed and out of place, struggled to make friends, even to speak up in a tutorial. I was so intimidated by the Barr Smith Library I bought books instead of borrowing them!

If only I had known back then what I know now. According to a number of studies, students from poor and working class backgrounds come from distinctly different cultural backgrounds than middle and upper class students, even though Australian born non-Indigenous Australians are usually regarded as mono-cultural and therefore seen as having equal access to educational opportunities (Jackson & Marsden 1962; Willis 1977; Branson & Miller 1979; Dwyer *et al.* 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay 1993; Miner 1993; Zandy 1995; Lucey & Walkerdine 2000; Livingstone 2006; Furlong & Cartmel 2009). Because of the dominant middle to upper class culture at university, however, poor and working class students are likely to begin to feel ashamed of their backgrounds, to feel like 'cultural outsiders' in what Sennett and Cobb (1973 cited by Granfield 1991, p. 336) have called a 'hidden injury of class.' They can also begin to doubt their academic abilities, feel as if they shouldn't be at university, that they don't belong, or even wonder what the point of a university education is (Jackson & Marsden 1962; Granfield 1991). Making friends is also difficult for these students, unless they are able to link up with students from similarly marginalised backgrounds (Tokarczyk 2004; Stuart 2006; Walker 2007). Poor and working class students may even put energy into learning how to 'pass' as middle class, mimicking the behaviour, speech and clothing of their middle and upper class classmates in order to fit in, which not only makes for a double load of learning but which can also isolate the students from their family and non-university going friends (Granfield 1991; Jensen 1997).

My memory of that first year at Adelaide was that I was a failure. I didn't fit in, I couldn't speak in class, nor did I have any idea of what I was supposed to do, of what a university education was all about, of what I'd do at the end of it. My results, however, show that I was a competent to good university student, but the feelings of being a failure, of being inadequate, of not belonging, prevailed and I dropped out during my second year. The excuse I gave myself and others was a good working class one - I needed to earn money.

After a sojourn working fulltime using some of those 'commercial stream' skills I'd learned in High School and with ten years in the corporate sector where I worked my way up into management, I finally went back to the University of Adelaide in 1991. By then I knew I'd come from a low socio-economic status background although I didn't have the cognitive understanding I do now of the ways in which social class infuse our behaviour, expectations, feelings and thought processes (hooks 2000, p. 103). In the elite corporate environment I'd instinctively learned to manage what I said about my background (Granfield 1991) in order to avoid being looked on with pity and/or contempt. I'd also learned to mimic my middle class associates and 'passed' skilfully and effortlessly as middle class preferring that to being seen as 'too rough, too loud, too dirty, too direct, too uneducated' (Zandy 1995, p. 2), i.e., as from a working class or 'white trash' family. The psychic cost of 'passing' was enormous though (Jensen 1997).

I suffered regular and debilitating bouts of depression which would have had to do with unresolved childhood trauma as well as with ongoing performances to hide the lower class status of my birth and childhood. I'd accumulated more cultural capital, however, and knew that a university degree would transform that lowly status, not that this was my motivation to study; personal fulfilment has always been the driving force behind my academic career.

Still, I learned quickly that even being a student was better than saying I did 'home duties' or was caring for children fulltime, and there was no stigma attached to being on the Austudy student welfare Programme as there was if I had been on the dole (McDowell, 2003, 39). I also had a few more inner resources in my 30s, a spiritual tradition which taught me that I had inherent worth far beyond the humble status of my birth, and emotional support from a husband who thought I was brilliant. According to Werner's (2005) longitudinal study these are factors which often promote recovery in adulthood for those who've suffered as children, but I also felt at home in Women's Studies where I began to connect my personal experiences to oppressive social structures and cultural practices. Studying part-time while juggling parenting responsibilities, having two

more children and doing paid work part time, however, meant finishing that degree took a damn long time.

By the end of my BA I knew I wanted to study theology, and I also knew I wanted to do a field of study from the beginning and without interruption so I signed up for another undergraduate degree, a BTh at Flinders. This time round I was a much more confident student; even with all the juggling I still had to do I managed consistently high grades, first class Honours and a scholarship to do my PhD.

I've always thought that my meandering, interrupted, at times tortured pathway through higher education reflected badly on me: I didn't know what I wanted, I couldn't figure out how university worked, I clearly wasn't as smart as other people. At some level I must have assimilated the myth that Aus-

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tralia is a classless society, as well as its corollary that an individual's lack or surplus of talent determines their place in society and therefore if they struggle academically it's their fault (Dwyer et al 1984, p. 32; Kadi 1993, p. 94; Tokarczyk and Fay 1993,

p. 4; Miner 1993, p. 74; Fieldes 1996, p. 27; McHugh & Cosgrove 1998, p. 37; Ball and Vincent 2001). The latter of course perpetrates the longstanding myth that those who are poor are also stupid (Brothe 2005, p. 19). Small wonder I often felt stupid, learned to 'pass' as middle class in order to survive, and dropped out of university in my early twenties. According to American and British research, students from low SES backgrounds are four times more likely to have interrupted pathways compared to students from families with more resources including parents who went to university themselves. Even if they fail subjects, the latter students are more able to find out about and negotiate complex procedures which allow them to sit supplementary exams or apply for extended extensions (Power *et al.* 2003, pp. 86-87; Goldrick-Rab 2006, p. 69; Furlong & Cartmel 2009).

Much has changed for university students these days. There are student learning centres to visit and learn the formula for doing essays, library tours, opportunities to get counselling and even Programmes which encourage high school students to familiarise themselves with the campus before they enrol. The experience of first year students is now recognised as

crucial to their ongoing success and perseverance and a number of universities, such as Charles Darwin University, have asked first year students what they need in order to learn more effectively. However, the First Year Experience Programmes appear to treat students as a homogenous group all needing clear directions on assessment criteria, and all needing to belong for example. That it might be more difficult for a student from a marginalised social class to belong appears not to have been considered.

All of those initiatives may have helped me as a student to persevere had I been able to overcome my self-consciousness, anxiety and shyness in order to access them. Probably what I most needed, however, was to not feel ashamed and stigmatised by my background but to know that my personal struggles were connected to the wider social structures and different cultural background I came from. It would have helped, too, to not feel so alone, a feeling that might have been alleviated by being connected with both students and staff from similar backgrounds who could offer understanding, friendship, encouragement and know-how (a point also made by Greenwald & Grant 1999, p. 29). What a difference it might have made if the First Generation Stories Project (First Generation 2007) at California State University, Fresno, which makes provision for first generation university staff to write their stories, had been available then. Or if first generation university students from poor and working class backgrounds had been encouraged to form an organisation to support each other as well as write their stories, as students at the University of Michigan (The Michigan Story Project 2010) now do.

A university education for many middle and upper class students is all a bit ho-hum, a quite usual transition into an independent adult working life. For those of us from poor and working class backgrounds, however, it's far from usual. By my reckoning, fewer than three per cent of Australians from low SES backgrounds would have a university degree; even fewer will have postgraduate qualifications. Surely this means that rather than having joined the ranks of the elite, we are a unique group of people with resilience, courage, perseverance and determination who have overcome any number of barriers – not of our making – in order to be successful educationally in an environment which reproduces middle and upper class privilege. Our knowledge and experience should therefore be called upon in order to inspire, promote, mentor,

befriend and encourage current and prospective students from similar backgrounds, but this appears not to be happening in Australia, even though, as I've said above, it is beginning to occur in the United States.

Would I recommend university education for other people who come from similar backgrounds to mine? I do, all the time! Once I did get settled in, took subjects that appealed to me and balanced strategic and deep learning, I felt enriched, nourished at the very core of being. I still cringe when I think about how far better off financially we would be if I'd not taken this path though. Between the enormous debt I have from tuition fees (HECS) and other financial supplements, and the money I haven't earned over the years because of studying, the financial cost has been a constant strain, and I've yet to see any returns on the 'investment'. I still think it's been worthwhile, however, not only because I love my life now, but also because I've demonstrated that you don't have to be an academically gifted high school student from a low SES background to get a PhD – being average will get you there too.

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