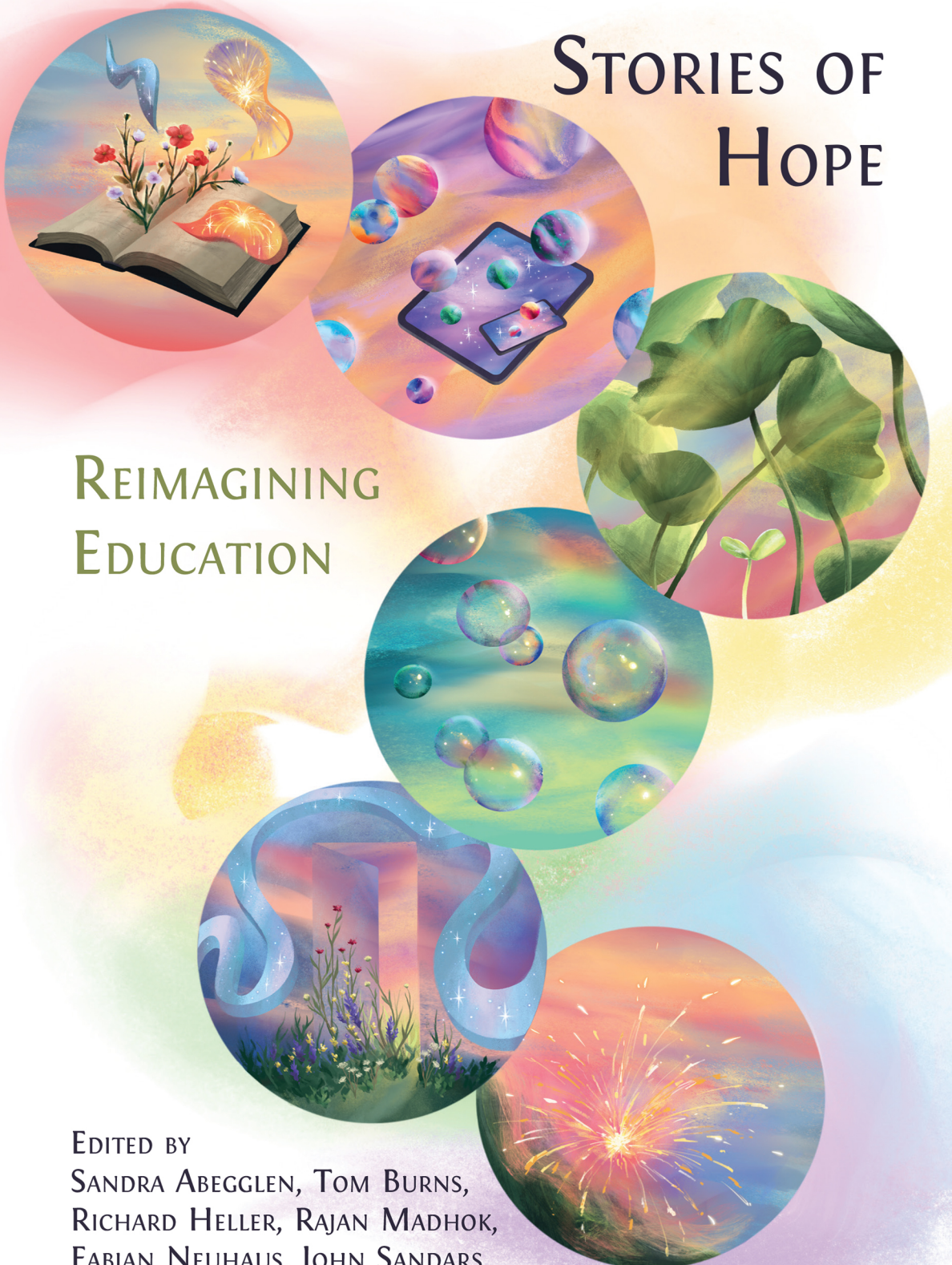
Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education



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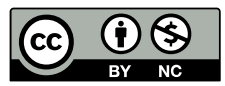

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36. Storying the silences of social mobility

Karen Arm

Abstract

This chapter explores class as a multi-faceted, intersectional concept best understood through subjective, storied realities rather than objective metrics. It critiques the tendency of universities to rely on reductive, clichéd understandings of student experiences and outcomes, thereby overlooking the complex emotional dimensions of class in Higher Education and missing crucial opportunities to design truly inclusive curricula and programmes. Drawing on findings from narrative research, the chapter argues for the creation of collective, person-centred spaces where working-class experiences can be openly shared, recognised, and valued. By illuminating often-unspoken class struggles, it offers empowering insights into social mobility and demonstrates the transformative potential of narrative approaches to class in Higher Education. In a sector increasingly dominated by metrics, such discourse is not only important but urgently needed.

Keywords: class; identity; narrative; social mobility; higher education

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The political rhetoric

Political promises of social mobility via Higher Education (HE) are well rehearsed in the UK. University degrees are "sold" on the premise that they enhance job prospects, earnings, social position, health, and happiness; or the chances of a "better life", as the former Minister for Further and Higher Education put it (Donelan, 2021). This rhetoric not only blatantly "pathologises the working classes" (Archer, 2007) but fails to mention that graduates from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often end up working in less prestigious jobs and being paid lower salaries than their advantaged peers (Savage, 2015). This is, in part, due to a hierarchically ordered UK Higher Education system, which sees people from lower social class backgrounds concentrated in the least prestigious institutions and degree courses (Waller et al., 2018). Despite this, the UK government continues to go to great lengths to engineer aspirations for social mobility through its arguments of the private benefits of HE participation. Examples of those who have achieved top professional jobs from disadvantaged backgrounds are showcased as evidence as a thriving meritocracy (rather than the anomalies that they really are) and used to fuel the "mobility myth" (Littler, 2017; Reay, 2017). Implicit within this discourse is the view that social mobility is a wholly positive and enriching experience for those individuals that accomplish it. Yet, little is known about the experiences of those that achieve the social mobility aspirations of UK HE policy by securing professional work. These stories fall outside of the government focus because, in policy terms, they are simply considered "job done".

In the UK, the Office for Students requires all eligible HE providers to consider differentials in the progression outcomes of their students as part of their institutional Access and Participation Plans.[1] This involves universities drawing on occupation and salary data of graduates collected via the Higher Education Statistics Agency Graduate Outcomes survey[2] to determine their success as institutional enablers of social mobility. Such quantitative analyses are problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the findings are not always statistically reliable because they are based on low—and unrepresentative—survey responses (HESA, 2023).

1 For more information see OfS, 2018.
2 For more information, see https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates

Secondly, they do not reflect the long-term social mobility of graduates because they draw on a fixed set of data collected at a fifteen-month interval after degree completion. Thirdly, the proxies used for social class background (such as POLAR4[3] and IMD 1 and 2)[4] are limiting when measured in isolation (Gorard et al., 2019). Class is a multi-faceted and fluid concept that is lived intersectionally in multiple and nuanced ways. It is not just about the job you do, or the salary this gives you, but is something that is embodied "in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being" (Kuhn, 1995, p. 9). The socially mobile do not simply leave their working-class background at the entrance doors of the university. Nor do they pick up a middle-class identity on the first day of their graduate jobs. They experience complex, diverse, and protracted shifts in their class identity through and beyond HE. Yet, a rhetoric that exclusively focuses on objective markers of social mobility silences these subjective dimensions. My study has redressed this, by giving voice to the oft unspoken.

Narrativising the journey

The doctorate research explored the lived experiences of those who had achieved social mobility via the HE goals of the UK government, that is, the disproportionately few people from working class backgrounds who secure a professional graduate job.[5] Yet, rather than focus on the *measurable* aspects of social mobility, the study used narrative inquiry to instead focus on the *meaning* attached to this experience by the individuals themselves. As Pat Sikes and Ken Gale (2006) remind us, "human beings are storying creatures. We make sense of the world and the things that happen to us by constructing narratives to explain and

3 For more information see OfS, 2022.

4 For more information see Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government (2019).

5 All research participants included in the sample were purposively selected for being from National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification and Social Class (NS-SEC) groups 4–7 (based on parental background) at the point of first entry to Higher Education—commonly deemed "working-class" 2) and NS-SEC groups 1–3 based on their own occupation at the time of the first interview—commonly deemed "middle-class". In this sense they would, in policy terms, be considered social mobility "success" stories. For more information on NS-SEC see Office for National Statistics (n.d.).

interpret events both to ourselves and other people". It therefore follows that our best hope of understanding the subjective dimensions of social mobility is through narratives.

Seven individuals were invited to tell their stories of social mobility via HE and all accepted. They were all British people, but were of different ages, with varying educational histories and occupations, and at different life stages.

Name	Gender	Age	Life stage	Occupation	Higher Education[6]
Julie	Female	Early 30s	Mother Single Living with partner and child Employed part-time	University Careers Practitioner	Undergraduate (Russell Group University) Postgraduate (Post-1992 University)
Tim	Male	Late 30s	Father Married Living with wife Employed full-time	Middle Manager in a bank	Undergraduate (Russell Group University) Postgraduate (Russell Group University)
Jessie	Female	Mid 20s	Single Living with partner Employed full-time	University Research Assistant	Undergraduate (Russell Group University) Postgraduate (Russell Group University)
Adam	Male	Mid 30s	Single Living alone Employed full-time	Design Engineer	Undergraduate (Russell Group University)

6 The UK has different types of universities. For more information, see https://www.ukstudyonline.com/types-of-uk-universities/

Name	Gender	Age	Life stage	Occupation	Higher Education[6]
Sophie	Female	Early 40s	Mother Married Living alone Self-employed	Owner of Graphic Design Business	Undergraduate (Post-1992 University)
Jason	Male	Early 50s	Father Married Living with wife and children Employed full-time	Fine Artist and University Teacher	Undergraduate (Post-1992 University) Postgraduate (Post-1992 University)
Paul	Male	Late 40s	Father Married Living with wife Employed full-time	University Enterprise Manager	Undergraduate (Post-1992 University). Postgraduate (Plate-Glass University).

Table 36.1 Interviewees' self-described characteristics at the time of the first interview.

Narrative data was (co)created via a series of semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation methods over a four-year period. The data was juxtaposed with an autoethnographic account and narratively analysed using a "cleft habitus" Bourdieusian conceptual framework (Bourdieu, 1999, 2007).[7] As expected, no two stories of social mobility were the same. Each contained a unique plot, setting and characters. This is partly because people tell stories differently but mostly because social mobility is lived in nuanced ways. Whilst all presented themselves as examples of social mobility "success", under the glossy surface of their stories were three sub-narratives that told more complex accounts of the journey. It is to these stories that I now turn.

7 The fully theorised outcomes of the study were written up as a doctorate thesis at the University of Bristol (Arm, 2022). This chapter is an extract of the thesis.

Stories of dislocation

Stories of dislocation were characterised by feelings of being "stuck" between two classed worlds and belonging to neither. This "cultural homelessness" created identity displacement in both the class of origin and the class of destination (Friedman, 2014), which was "lived as grief—a pain that is constantly spun from the recognition and experience of loss of a previous home without the pleasure of feeling safe in the new location" (Hey, 2003, p. 325). For example, my own autoethnographic fieldwork helped me reflect on being a mind and body out of place at university. Adam's story echoed the same sentiment with his discussion of attempting to belong in "a posh and wealthy" world, which inherently was never his. Similarly, Julie's story shows the cultural clash she felt studying and working at a university and not fitting in. (Fear of) being culturally exposed in the new class milieu created a psychological burden on many of the socially mobile in my study, as they developed "a heightened awareness of threats and dangers... constantly attuned to possible attacks and a resurgence of the humiliations and shames that populated a working-class past" (Reay, 2016, p. 37). For example, in Julie's interviews, she talked about the anxiety caused by her middle-class peers continuously making fun of her working-class accent throughout her time at university. Similarly, Jason discussed the anxiety caused by trying to hide his "working-classness" at art school and pretending to be more cultured than he was. Experiences like these not only create social distress but also ambivalence within the self... "leading to 'discomfort', 'paralysis' and 'suffering' leaving the individual plagued by a central internal conflict that organises every moment of their existence" (Friedman, 2014, p. 362). Far from straightforward stories of success, this sub-narrative demonstrates the emotional torment of social mobility via HE.

Stories of dual location

Whilst stories of dislocation emphasise identity displacement, stories of dual location speak of dual placement or "duality of the self" (Stahl, 2013). Indeed, some socially mobile individuals demonstrate an ability to hold dual class dispositions and apply them according to the social

context in which they are in (Lehman, 2013; Abraham & Ingram, 2013). These "double agents" (Hurst, 2010) use their "class bilingualism" (Wakeling, 2010) to flexibly move in and out of different cultural spheres. For example, in my own narrative of social mobility, I discuss how I used train journeys between home and university as an opportunity to "get in class character". This helped me to successfully manage the competing parts of my identity and maintain a strong connection to both my class of origin and destination. Tim's story of social mobility demonstrated his comfort at moving between his working-class family and middle-class friends, turning cultural codes on and off accordingly. Sophie also discussed her learnt ease at employing different ways of being in different social spaces, describing herself as a "class chameleon". Whilst this sub-narrative offers a more positive account of social mobility, it is not entirely trouble free. As Diane Reay (2002, p. 223) points out, successfully holding a dual perception of the self requires "an enormous body of psychic, intellectual and interactive work in order to maintain… contradictory ways of being". The ways that socially mobile individuals manage the ambivalence in their class identities and successfully operate in different classed spaces, however, is markedly different from the sub-narrative of dislocation discussed above.

Stories of relocation

Whereas stories of dual location focus on the management of conflicting class identities, stories of relocation suggest the possibility of reconciling these. Nicola Ingram and Jessie Abrahams (2016, p. 141) argue that a socially mobile "third space" "is useful in that it helps us think about ways of being neither working-class nor middle class but something else besides". It is a more positive narrative because it empowers socially mobile individuals to use their positionality as a tool for social action. The stories of relocation generated by my study reveal multiple ways that socially mobile individuals use their "unique vantage point" (Ingram & Abrahams, 2016) to challenge class inequalities within their professional lives. For example, Julie was undertaking research into the employability barriers for first generation entrants into HE to inform careers practice. Jason was exploring the ways that his own working-class identity and experiences could help him better support disadvantaged

students as a Fine Art teacher. Paul was using his own story of social mobility to inspire working-class people into taking up enterprise, business and leadership opportunities. Such findings suggest that the empathetic understanding of class developed through elevating one's social position makes socially mobile individuals well placed to actively dismantle class inequality, in small but significant ways.

The power of the story

In an increasingly metricised academy, stories are a powerful tool. My research has identified three sub-narratives of social mobility: stories of dislocation, dual location and relocation, which tell more complex accounts of social mobility than the metrics allow for. Lived experiences of social mobility, such as these, cannot be reduced to objective data measures but rather need to be understood through subjective storied realities. If we continue to silence these in the academy, we are at risk of perpetuating the myth that is prevalent in the political rhetoric, that social mobility is a straightforward and universally felt good for those who experience it. Yet, HE typically does not make space for such endeavours, opting instead for simplistic and cliched understandings of student experience through measurable numbers. In doing so it not only overlooks the "hidden injuries" (Sennet & Cobb, 1972) of social mobility but also the potential ways that the socially mobile can successfully manage their class identities and use these to challenge inequalities in HE and beyond.

My study has pointed to the need for universities to create purposeful space to talk about how HE feels. As Kathleen Quinlin (2016, pp.1–2) points out, "challenges to attitudes and identities and the forging of new relationships and commitments in a culture beyond family and home commitments are all significant aspects of student experiences and strongly emotional". This person-centred discourse is absent in a HE sector, which is metric obsessed. Pedagogic interventions to support the working classes in HE largely respond to deficits in economic, social and cultural capital rather than confronting the intense conflictions they feel in their sense of self. My research has illustrated the need for giving prominence to these oft-unspoken issues impacting on the socially mobile, which are otherwise side-lined in policy discussions.

Creating a collective space for working-class students to come together to discuss their experiences and to learn from socially mobile graduates who have already encountered (and successfully managed) these would be an incredibly empowering act in a sector that is otherwise preoccupied with promoting a culture of individualism and competitiveness in its student body (Wilson et al., 2021). As Catherine Reissman (2008, p. 5) points out, "stories can have effects beyond their meaning for individual storytellers, creating possibilities for social identities, group belonging and collective action". The work of Quinlin (2016) offers a potential pedagogic model for facilitating this in the academy. Drawing on notions of "post-qualitative research" (Lather & St Pierre, 2013), "poetic inquiry" (Prendergast, 2009), and "methodology of the heart" (Pelias, 2004), Quinlin (2016, p. 3) argues for the value in HE educators using emotively expressed and evocative stories in teaching and learning as a means of "opening up new possible and previously unimagined worlds" regarding how education feels. Creating time and space within the curriculum for storying the personal identity troubles and triumphs of those on a journey of social mobility via HE would not only illuminate an aspect of experience not often spoken about (nor accounted for in metrics) but could also produce empowering knowledge on the topic of social mobility via HE.

Steps toward hope

- Recognise class as a lived, intersectional experience that must be understood through subjective, narrative accounts rather than through reductive, metric-based approaches.
- Challenge universities to move beyond simplistic measures of student experience and outcomes, acknowledging the complex emotional and identity dimensions of class.
- Create collective, person-centred spaces within programmes and courses where working-class students and staff can openly share, reflect on, and validate their experiences.
- Leverage the reflexivity of socially mobile individuals as a tool to critique and disrupt class-based injustices within Higher Education and society more broadly.

- Prioritise narrative research and storytelling methodologies to generate empowering knowledge about social mobility and foster a more inclusive and socially just academic culture.

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