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'So How Was Big School Today?' Family Perceptions of HE Participation

Introduction

This book recognises that if we wish to deeply understand the motivations and experiences of the first-in-family (FiF) cohort, then it is necessary to listen carefully to *both* the students themselves *and* the voices of those in proximity to them. This chapter foregrounds the words and stories of the family members of participants in this research, drawing upon both interview and survey material. The inclusion of family members in the study of higher education (HE) participation is not a common feature of research in this field (Barsegyan & Maas, 2022; Heath et al., 2011) yet those closest to the student may play a key role in this undertaking (Gofen, 2009). Much of what we know about education and the family relates to the influence of parents and parental educational levels on the academic outcomes of their child dependents. There remains very little understanding about not only how the internal dynamics of the household impact upon students but also how these dynamics are affected when someone attends university, particularly when this attendance can be regarded as a 'non normative transition' (Mercer, 2007, p. 30). This has prompted researchers in the field to call for scholarly work on the

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educational outcomes of FiF students that firmly places 'family at the center of analysis' (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021, p. 294)

This chapter seeks to explore the relational repercussions of having 'significant others' present within the university environment, on those closest to them. Extending the lens of investigation to include those in proximity to the student, both relationally and geographically, may assist in understanding the impacts upon family and community members' considerations and imaginings of educational futures, when one of their own goes to university. Equally, it is important to understand how these others, located in familial networks and communities around the student, may facilitate this access to HE, even when this facilitation may not be in ways customarily understood as supporting university participation.

The chapter begins with a summary outline of the literature and research relating to parental and/or familial influences on educational participation. This is followed by an exploration of the concept of family capital, which extends theorisations around social capital to consider the ways family members may both influence, and be affected by, the university attendance of their student member. To generate deeper understanding of these effects, the chapter will draw upon the voices and words of significant others derived from both Study A and Study B in order to examine how the decision to come to university reverberated throughout the household. The chapter then concludes with discussion about why it might be important for HE institutions to engage with those closest to the student and the possible benefits such interactions could have for individuals and those around them.

Family and Educational Participation

Research has indicated that levels of parents' education are strong indicators of an individual's academic achievement and also aspirations for continuing education (Johnston et al., 2014; Marginson, 2015). Indeed, across a number of countries the education of parents is statistically correlated to the likelihood of university attendance for the young person in the family, indicating the disparity in HE participation:

> *In Australia, young adults who have at least one university educated parent are 4.3 times more likely to attend university compared to young people whose parents have less education, and in England the likelihood is 6.3 times and the United States 6.8 times higher*. (Pires & Chapin, 2022, p. 3222)

However, we cannot assume that educational levels remain static across generations. Wainwright and Marandet (2010) argue that when learning is brought into a household, there is potential to alter the 'tactile fabric' of this environment (p. 461). These authors identify that one of the repercussions resulting from such an introduction is change to parents' aspirations for children's educational futures. However, these authors contend that research conducted with and alongside parents and carers is required in order to create spaces for 'the voices of parents to reflect on the perceived impact their learning has on themselves and their families' (p. 452), a *gap* echoed by Feinstein et al. (2008).

Researching 'Family' within First-in-family Student University Experience

Pascarella et al. (2004) in their foundational review of research on FiF learners highlight three main categories of investigation related to this cohort. The first body of literature largely compares the characteristics of this cohort to their second and third generation peers. This comparative analysis indicates that this cohort can generally be regarded as disadvantaged, or in deficit, with this disadvantage manifested via assumed knowledges, poor finances and false expectations of the degree programme. The second body of literature explores the nature of transition for this cohort, particularly between school and university, which is also identified as being more problematic for FiF. The third focus is on attrition and post-graduation opportunities. Again the authors conclude that FiF students have increased chances of leaving the institution and often have poorer outcomes after completion of their degree.

While this review was conducted nearly two decades ago, the research in this field has continued to focus largely on the student as an individual with little consistent attention on those closest to students. This emphasis

on the individual mirrors the approach taken by many education institutions, whereby students are decontextualised and treated as isolated units or individuals devoid of context. While some universities offer outreach and support strategies that may include the parent and the teacher in activities, the emphasis continues to largely remain on the individual student rather than incorporating the family or community more broadly. Yet research shows that 'parents have a substantial influence on children's education pathway choice' (Kilpatrick et al., 2020, p. 22), illustrated by findings such as those from a recent Australian study in which 'parents/guardians, other adult role models and teachers were rated by the students as having considerably higher impact on their post-school intentions'; in fact the impact of parents/guardians was 'nearly twice as strong' as that of university staff (Stone et al., 2022, p. 80). These findings are supported by other studies (see, e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019), with all concluding that families and communities are intrinsic to the delivery of effective university outreach programmes.

The research that does include the family of students reveals a somewhat contested field. How schools, family and communities contribute to building educational capability and the requisite capitals for further education remains unclear (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Johnston et al., 2014). For example, utilising a theoretical framework inspired by Bourdieu, Wilks and Wilson (2012) argue that young people's educational aspirations reflect 'the influence of parents and siblings (cultural capital) and the local environment (social capital) especially in the last two years of primary and the first two years of secondary school' (p. 83). Similarly, Wainwright and Marandet (2010) suggest that parents' involvement in HE can assist in reducing a 'poverty of ambition'. Yet Dyke (2011) argues that when there is a lack of access to an educational memory within the household, there is every chance that young people may not conceive of university as a possibility. As Dyke (2011) explains:

> *[E]conomic and cultural factors may limit the boundaries of what individuals consider possible for themselves in such a way that a decision is never taken and the agenda need never be set … university* [is] *simply not within the bounds of possibility, either culturally or economically*. (p. 106)

The concept of 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) indicates some of the additional barriers that students who are the first in their family to attend university may encounter when considering HE participation. Ball and Vincent (1998) highlight how hot or 'grapevine' knowledge is often a more trusted source of information for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Whereas more formal or 'cold knowledge' sources, often in the form of official publications, is favoured by those from wealthier or more advantaged backgrounds. This situation is not in itself disadvantageous but when a student does not have access to a knowledgeable other within the family, the concern is that the hot knowledge may actually be based upon myth or rumour. In the FiF context, there is often 'the absence of other, more reliable sources of information … a way of filling in the missing information' (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 380). Without this necessary 'insider' information, FiF students may rely solely on 'hot knowledge' that offers only a partial and somewhat uninformed perspective on this educational undertaking.

However, importantly, just as we have argued that FiF students should not be assumed to be deficit or lacking, the same can be argued for the family and the community of the student. Following on from Gofen (2009), we propose that the family of students should not simply be considered as a 'constraint' but rather recognised as a 'key resource' (p. 114) for these students in their HE trajectory. Gofen's work points to family members' capacity to enable educational success through the 'investment of non-material resources' (p. 104). Such non-material resources include the 'families' habits, priorities, belief systems and values' (p. 106), which act as galvanising forces in the pursuit and achievement of education. In adopting a family resilience model, the family unit is regarded not as a limiting factor but rather recognised as a powerful buffer that enables individuals to 'withstand and rebound from adversity' (p. 106).

Clearly, this is a complex and contested field, prompting LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) to recently advocate that when it comes to researching the educational attainment of FiF students: 'Researchers should consider the family as the place to start, focusing on family as a source of resilience and strength' (p. 294).

The concept of social capital is one framing that can be usefully applied to understanding the diverse range of roles that family and community

adopt in relation to university participation and success. The next section revisits social capital, which was initially introduced in Chap. 3. Building upon Bourdieu's theorisation, the following also draws on the work of Putnam (2000) and Croll (2004) to further develop the concept of social capital with particular reference to the family and kin of the student.

Social Capital Theory

Chapter 3 introduced the concept of social capital through reference to the work of Bourdieu (1986); according to Bennett and Silva (2011) theories of capitals combined with the concepts of field and habitus form the 'conceptual cornerstones' of Bourdieu's theories (p. 429). These capitals can be both economic and non-economic in nature and in combination can sustain existing social status and order (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital operates on both a monetary and symbolic level, with social capital broadly referring to the networks of affiliations that people have access to and the resulting privileges such contact enables. This connectedness can actually reproduce social stratification or hierarchies of power, and retains a certain level of taken-for-grantedness within society.

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is not distributed evenly across society, with those in more elite or powerful classes having greater access to the social capitals that matter. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain:

> *Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition*. (p. 119)

While Bourdieu's theories of social capital have provided some insight into the ways that capital operates at a symbolic level, the definition of what it comprises is not fixed. For example, rather than focus on power differentials, Putnam (2000) considers the potential for social capital to increase civil engagement and social well-being. Whilst Bourdieu's social capital is largely reproductive, a networking that serves to legitimise the positioning of the powerful and dominant classes, Putnam (2000) views

this concept in a more collective sense. In this way, social capital can be regarded as a mutually supportive network for maintaining democracy. Putnam's theorisations focus broadly on the wider community, and he does caution that this social capital effect is in decline due to less connection between individuals, as well as less trust and reciprocity.

Undoubtedly, social capital is also operationalised within the family but defining this effectively can be somewhat 'elusive' (Croll, 2004, p. 401) largely due to the debates and differentials in the field. Therefore, building upon the work of Gofen (2009) and Yosso (2005), this chapter explicitly draws upon the concept of 'family capital' in the sections that follow. This is a form of social capital but focuses on the ways that families mobilise existing resources to positively influence and support members' hopes and ambitions. These resources include relational links, values or beliefs as well as less tangible capitals derived from biography, community status and emotional assets (Gofen, 2009). Yosso (2005) similarly reflects upon familial capital and extends this to include much broader family networks that include people both present and past as well as extended kinship networks, which are not necessarily biological in nature. Yosso and Garcia (2007) explain how it is this 'familia' that 'model lessons of caring, coping, and providing, which helps us develop our emotional, moral, educational, and occupational consciousness' (p. 165). This is a powerful resource that can be a rich source of support and encouragement in educational endeavours (O'Shea, 2015).

The following section examines the perspectives of the extended family in order to unpack the types of support and encouragement that were derived from this source. Of similar interest is how this 'family capital' was potentially developed and further resourced by this return to education, particularly the flow of capitals between university and the home place.

Survey and Interview Data

The following data is drawn from the interviews and surveys only conducted with family members of the students, a perspective, as discussed above, that is not commonly reported in the literature on this area. This

is a gap that needs to be filled to better understand the role of family in the HE journey. Adopting an embodied methodology such as narrative inquiry enables entry into the lived experience of participants and is also powerful in its ability to evoke deeply personal responses from readers. As an 'ontological condition of social life' (Somers, 1994, p. 614), telling stories, both written and verbal, negotiates human action and identity as well as providing the means to make sense of life occurrences. The stories have been derived from two sources: interviews conducted with family members and current students (n = 5: including one interview from Study A) and surveys completed by family members (n = 40). The following section outlines the survey structure and provides an overview of the respondents.

Survey Respondents

Survey methodology was introduced to Study B when it became difficult to encourage family members to come to campus or commit to an interview; this is perhaps not surprising when the majority of students interviewed indicated that their family members had rarely, or never, been on-campus. The surveys were distributed to family respondents by way of snowball sampling where student participants nominated an email address for a family member whom they considered would be willing to provide insight into their HE trajectory. The survey proved to be very popular and generated a very rich source of qualitative data due to the open nature of the questions and the clear engagement that respondents identified in relation to the project. Similar to the interviews, and as outlined in Chap. 1, the open-ended survey responses were analysed for emergent themes in NVivo and the quantitative data was collated for descriptive statistics.

The survey participants were derived from various generations, having a range of relationships with the student. For example, family members whose daughters were studying numbered 15 (37.5%), while those with sons were less represented (n=4, 10%). Family members whose mother was studying were eight (20%), with a similar number for partners (n=7, 17.5%). Sisters, brothers and grandchildren accounted for the remaining

15% of responses (n=4, 1, 1, respectively). Interestingly, no family members of fathers returning to education completed the survey. Family members reported that their highest educational qualification was a high school leaving certificate, known in New South Wales as the Higher School Certificate (HSC) (n=12), a TAFE certificate or equivalent (n=12) and a trade or workplace qualification (n=8). Eight family members indicated that there were others in their family considering university, 15 indicated none, while six were unsure.

Interview Respondents

The number of interviews that included family members was quite small in both studies; in Study A only one interview included a family member (mother) who had commenced studying at the same time as her daughter. In Study B, a total of four interviews were conducted, two included children, one included a grandparent, and another involved a mother. Given these very small numbers, a summary biography for each of the participants de-identified using pseudonyms is provided below.

The Study A interviewees were Linda and her mother Natalie. Linda, aged 20, attended an interview with Natalie (43). Both women were in their first semester of university but were studying different degrees. Natalie explained how Linda had dropped out of high school at an early age but had gained entry into an Arts Degree via an alternative pathway; Natalie's entry to a Bachelor of Commerce had been based on her prior work experience and vocational qualifications. They resided together in social housing and described significant poverty in the home, and both had recently received a scholarship, which Natalie described as 'like winning Lotto'. While neither was employed, Natalie was considering reducing her study load and seeking employment to enable Linda to continue her studies full-time.

Two relatives interviewed in Study B were Naomi, aged 19, who was doing a Bachelor of Science (Psychology). Naomi lived with her grandmother, Nonna, who was 67 years old. Coming to university was something that Naomi had always dreamed about but she admitted to being too frightened to come on-campus even when her class participated in a

campus tour, and she stated: 'it's a big campus—it can be scary'. When she was offered her place at university she described how she 'broke down on the floor, crying'. Nonna was an Italian migrant who only attended school until Year 2; she instilled the importance of education into Naomi from an early age and expressed great personal satisfaction that Naomi had gained entry.

Elle attended her interview with her mother, Yvonne. Elle was a 33-year-old single parent with three children aged 11, 9 and 5 years at the time of the interview. Elle was living in social housing and regarded university as an opportunity to show her children how 'they'll be able to go to uni and get a good job themselves'. Yvonne described Elle as a role model for the other nephews and nieces in the family, explaining how her attendance is 'good because it's encouraging them to get off their bottoms and do something with their lives'.

We were initially introduced to Vicki (41) and her son Christopher (16) in Chap. 5, Christopher was the eldest of three children, the youngest being just two years old. Upon completion of the enabling programme, Vicki hoped to enter a Nursing degree and eventually qualify to become a midwife. Christopher was attending school but had ambitions to attend university at some point. Christopher had witnessed his mother undertaking her studies and this had led him to realise that university 'seems like a lot of hard work'.

Finally, Noeleen, aged 47, attended the interview with her 11-year-old son Nathaniel, both of whom also featured in Chap. 5. She reflected that the main reason for enrolling in an enabling programme related to being at a 'crossroads' in her life. Noeleen was married with two children and she described her husband as being very supportive of her decision, initially encouraging her to enrol: 'my husband said "You've always wanted to go to university. Now's the time. Just do it"'. At 11, Nathaniel was still undecided about a future in university, at the point of the interview it was a 'maybe yes, maybe no sort of thing'.

Despite the different data collection methods (interview and survey), there was a high level of congruence in the themes that emerged. The next section explores this data drawing on the following areas:

- Perceptions or beliefs about university
- Reactions from the family
- Public and private changes

Each of the quotes is identified according to its source, either survey or interview; for survey respondents, details of the relationship to the student are provided as well as highest educational qualification level, while as already mentioned, interview participants are identified by the pseudonyms already provided.

Perceptions or Beliefs about University

In the survey, participants were asked: *Before your family member started doing university studies, what did you think about university?* Overwhelmingly the answers spoke to a recognition that while university was a 'positive' ambition it was perceived as something characterised by potential difficulties or obstacles. As one parent explained '[I] thought it was fairly daunting' (Participant #33, Mother of student daughter, 38, Year 11). By far the most common hurdle identified related to the financial implications:

> *My husband and I have successfully raised four children however due to the costs of University we could never afford to send our children … I appreciate what Uni can do in furthering the knowledge of our children but it has always seemed only for the wealthy*. (Participant #37, Mother of student daughter, 46, HSC)

> *That it* [university] *was for people that were able to afford to study*. (Participant #16, Mother of student daughter, 55, HSC)

However, just over 41% of the survey respondents indicated that their opinion of university attendance had changed since their family member had commenced. The optional qualitative comments (n=13) that followed this question indicated changes in perceptions of educational quality, value for money, levels of difficulty, and emerging ambitions to attend. Interestingly, in both interviews and surveys, the children of students

indicated a new appreciation of the level of difficulty of university and in one case this led to reconsideration of future attendance:

> *I see how much work it is for my mum and wonder if I really want to do this anymore*. (Participant #11, Daughter of student mother, 15, High School student)

> *I didn't know people could study online. I didn't think it would be so stressful*. (Participant #23, Son of student mother, 14, High School student)

Most of the family interviewees had never been to the campus before and so knowledge about the university was quite limited, as Nonna pointed out: 'Well I didn't know what the uni life was like because I've never been here or known anybody that was coming'. This suggests that the 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) that these students and their families had access to may have had little application to the actual reality of the HE environment.

Overall, it was the environment and size of the campuses that came as quite a shock to the family members who attended an interview. Christopher described how the university 'was cool, really big. I didn't expect it to be so large. It looks expensive', while Elle's mother thought:

> *"Wow, this is really big and nice" and that and I thought "Oh". I was just looking around taking it all in and I thought "Wow. You'd get lost in this place if you didn't know where you were going".*

While Nonna summed up her impressions of this scale by simply stating 'It's like a little city isn't it?'

Reactions from the Family

The support and pride of family members for these students was palpable in both surveys and interviews. Overwhelmingly, going to university was viewed as a great opportunity, albeit risky, for students, with possible wider benefits for other family members:

I was and am very proud of my daughter studying at university. I have always known that she can achieve anything so to see her completing this makes me the happiest mother. (Participant #15, Mother of daughter student, 43, HSC)

I felt proud that a family member was getting to University and it made me want to follow in her footsteps. (Participant#14, Sister of student, 21, HSC)

I was all for it. I encouraged her and told her "Yeah, that's a good choice". No, she's done well, made us proud. (Nonna, 67 interviewed with granddaughter)

Whilst individuals regarded this move into university as largely a positive one, this was often mixed with fears. The concerns expressed included the ability of the students to cope with the demands of study. As mentioned, this included the financial implications but equally there were reservations expressed about the academic demands in relation to health or well-being concerns.

I am proud that she is trying to further her education, however I do worry about her supporting herself while studying. (Participant #22, Mother of daughter student, 54, TAFE Certificate)

I was aware of the pressure she would be under trying to complete a degree and working at the same time. She always had and always will have, my total support. We spoke at length about the need for her to have work/life/study balance and she's shown that she can juggle all three effectively. (Participant #34, Mother of daughter student, 46, TAFE Certificate)

These excerpts are significant as often the family is portrayed as a constraining factor for FiF students (Gofen, 2009), but our research clearly indicates that for the most part, these respondents were 'facilitators' in this academic undertaking (Gofen, 2009, p. 104). However, it is important to note that those family members who elected to respond to the survey (or attend an interview) may have been more positively biased. As detailed in the next chapter, students' own narratives presented the diversity in levels and types of support proffered by family members.

Overall, high levels of support were also reflected in both the student and the family interviews, the former describing positive reactions from various kinship sources. One example of this affirmation was the family

interview with Elle and her mother; Elle described how her decision to come to university was derived from recognising that she 'deserved better than being a single mum, wanting more for myself and growing up in housing commission and seeing how some kids can go so I thought … I [will] set the path for my kids'. Yvonne, her mother, concurred and explained how both herself and Elle's father were 'very proud of her, very proud and give her all the support she needs and yes, just very proud of her'. Yvonne admitted that while she had never been to university, Elle often asked her for advice and so she would

> *sit there and listen to her, what she has to tell me on the phone all the time, "Oh mum I had to study this today" and … she asked me, you know, some advice about some subject or something like that that maybe I might know something about, you know, so … I'll tell her I don't know about it and tell her what I've experienced in that subject or whatever she's learning.*

Yvonne also described assisting Elle practically by providing babysitting or assistance with money where possible, her pride in Elle's achievements is clear as the following interchange indicated:

Yvonne *She's been doing very well and yes, she's just been doing great. I've noticed that she's, you know, she keeps telling me "I've got so many passes or so many points" and there are times she said she's gets a distinction, "Oh congratulations" and everything. Well, first time she said "distinction" I went "What's that?" I didn't know.*

Elle *I got one.*

Yvonne *Well at least you got one and I know that's important.*

(Yvonne, 56, Interviewed with daughter, Elle, 33)

However, it was not only the adult members of the family who provided encouragement; parenting students also described children as being strong motivators for their academic pursuits. Participants in the family interviews similarly expressed this support as being both practical and forthright. For example, Vicki described how her nine-year-old daughter is 'amazing' in the ways she provided care for the youngest child aged

two: '[S]he'll get Emma up out of bed and give her breakfast and all of that kind of stuff. I mean that type of thing in some ways gives children responsibility and ownership.' Eleven-year-old Nathaniel provided advice to his Mum about starting assignments and explained:

> *I just say "Use a simple word and just write it all the time", like I think it was five days ago, pretty sure, I said "If you can't write anything just write 500 words of blah, blah, blah".*

While the child respondents in the family survey did not speak explicitly to the support they provided, other participants provided details of how they assisted the student in the family. For example, one husband described how he is more involved with babysitting, finding 'activities outside the house especially during school holidays. I have to take time off work to mind our youngest during exams' (Participant #6, Husband of female student, Trade Qualification). Whilst another father explained how he was supporting his daughter 'more financially and … by driving her to uni to avoid paying for parking' (Participant #4, Father of daughter student, Primary School). Again these types of support may not be those foregrounded as important within the university environment but this type of foundational help may have assisted these students to persist at their studies. While the family of these students did not necessarily have much 'insider knowledge' of this environment, there was still opportunity to make valid contributions to this educational journey. This new educational venture did not only result in relational assistance but also led to broader transformations within the household. The final section will identify some of these changes.

Public and Private Changes

Linda and her mother, Natalie commenced university together and are both in the first year of their respective degrees. Each admitted that this decision has resulted in fundamental shifts in the ways that others perceived them as well as in their own self-perception. Linda and Natalie explained that coming from a very disadvantaged area and being in receipt of welfare payments meant that others 'constantly put us down into a

category and boxed us into this little thing that we fit into because housing, Centrelink [Government Welfare Department] and you hear those words and it's immediately judgement' (Natalie, 43, interviewed with daughter, Linda, 20). However, such attitudes did not deter them; instead Natalie explained how such 'judgements' had increased their desire to continue: 'So that's a motivation too—"Stuff you all"'. Both referred to transformations they had undergone personally, Linda explained how six months ago 'all I wanted was a job at Myer [Department store]' whereas 'Now I'm thinking about it, I can be an intern' (Linda, 20, interviewed with mother). While Linda and Natalie spoke to their own personal and public shifts in perspectives, in other interviews family members described witnessing changes within the household and within the student.

While Nathaniel described his mother as being both happy and excited about university, this positive change was, however, tinged with some negativity. He admitted that his Mum was now very busy resulting in a level of preoccupation, or as Nathaniel explained 'she's been like…"Talk to the hand" sometimes because she's working really hard'. Family members in both surveys and interviews regularly commented on the repercussions of hectic schedules, this was particularly the case for the younger respondents. Christopher explained how 'mum's not as involved as she used to be. Because she's so focused on uni work, she doesn't have enough time to spend with us kids'. He continued by describing how 'you don't see her as much because she's always in her office typing and we're like "Where's mum gone?"' These underlying changes in the household routine were similarly revealed in the surveys:

> *Mum is on the laptop a lot. The routine changed a bit. Mum asks me to be quiet a lot*. (Participant #4, Son of mother student, 14, High School)

> *My mother is incredibly busy with her studies and commits a lot of her time to completing the amount of work required. My father is a lot more involved with us children and is also really involved with the domestic aspects of life*. (Participant #3, Daughter of mother student, 17, High School)

However, with changes to the household routine also came new conversations in the household and different perceptions of educational futures. For example, one brother explained that prior to his sister

attending university, he 'didn't think it [university] was a possibility or even consider it an option'; however, witnessing his sister 'has made me and my brother consider higher education.' Similarly, a husband described how he now regards his wife as 'a role model to our children and also to other family members'. Becoming an exemplar for others in the extended family was also reflected on by Elle's mother Yvonne, who described how Elle had 'started a trend … you know, it's very encouraging for the up and coming nieces and nephews that she's got—"Not only Elle can do it, you know, we can do it too" type thing'. This movement into HE had evoked a new phase in this family's educational aspirations. In observing one member of the family achieving at this educational level, others were encouraged to consider this as a possibility.

While it could be argued that the family members who participated in interviews and surveys were likely those who were the most supportive, these findings were similarly echoed in the surveys and interviews conducted with students, as outlined elsewhere in this book. Repeatedly, student participants referred to the key role played by family and community in their HE journeys. While this was not always positively perceived or enacted, the overriding theme was one of assistance and support. This is perhaps best indicated by the question on the student survey that asked: *At crisis points, what or who has assisted you to keep going with your studies?* In response to this question, just over 71% of the student respondents (n=101) indicated that it was the family that they turned to in these times of difficulty, this was second only to 'self' as a source of support (n=103). The following comments from student surveys indicating the wealth and depth of this support:

> *Even though family members haven't studied at university, they do encourage me to keep going, to keep moving forward*. (Female Student Survey Participant #30, 18–21, B Psychology, 2nd year, Online)

> *I am reminded by the supportive members of family and friends that the opinions of those who are not supportive simply don't count, which is true, their opinions don't matter because I am doing this for me, to be satisfied with my life and career and achievements. Financially, my mother's support has been vital in my choice to continue studying. My grandmother has also been very supportive and treats me to something nice where she can, which I am very appreciative of*. (Female Student Survey Participant #3, 21–25, B Arts, 1st Year, Online)

Conclusion

Predominantly, the stories told by both the students and their family members were those of affirmation and encouragement. This is important to note as often the lack of a HE 'memory' or biography within the household is regarded as negatively impacting on students' experiences. However, what this chapter has highlighted is that family and familial networks provide other, more subtle but equally fundamental forms of assistance. These might be words of encouragement, a sympathetic ear, or a lift to university to save parking fees, but collectively such actions can be regarded as forms of family capital significant to these students. Equally, this return to university also provided new resources within the household, sometimes this was simply initiating new conversations of learning and in some cases new possibilities for the future. The survey and interview data point to shifts in perceptions of academic futures combined with a more nuanced 'hot knowledge' that would inform future educational endeavours.

The students in these studies may not have had ready access to the various capitals defined by Bourdieu but this did not automatically equate to lack on their part. Instead, the capitals these students drew upon were derived from 'broader relational wealth that can provide both inspiration and support for first-in-family students' (O'Shea, 2014, p. 13). This is a source of capital that is often disregarded in the HE environment, yet our research indicates how this can be not only a source of motivation, but can also provide the necessary 'non-material resources' (Gofen, 2009) to aid success. In order to better leverage these resources, institutions need to reconsider the false separation between home and the institution. Rather than treat students simply as individuals, a more holistic approach to student engagement that is inclusive of their significant others is required. Removing the boundaries or demarcations between the family and the institution also has the potential to engage and support future generations of students. When someone in the family commences university, household dynamics change, new conversations are held, and educational horizons may be broadened. However, if the family is not included in this transition then arguably they are only offered a partial

view of this undertaking. The implications of this are perhaps most clearly seen in the quotes from the young people, some of whom were reconsidering their own university attendance after witnessing first-hand the demands of this undertaking.

The concept of 'family capital' has been used in this chapter to acknowledge the powerful role played by both family members and the family unit in the enactment of educational aspirations. This has foregrounded how the 'cultural and familial 'baggage' that first-in-family students arrive with is not necessarily a deficit but also an asset (O'Shea, 2015, p. 236). Family and extended kinship networks are strategically positioned to assist FiF students persist in these learning endeavours. Yet these networks remain under-utilised and largely ignored by HE institutions. This is a vital resource that we suggest can underpin this educational journey.

Chapter 8 focuses on the narratives of the parent students to provide a deeper understanding of how the FiF student experience was enacted within households that included children. This material provides insights and a richly descriptive understanding of the complexities of this FiF student experience, particularly for those older students with parental responsibilities.

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