

“Starting From the Bottom”: An Analysis of Student Success
Stories in Education Nonprofit Marketing Materials

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Abstract

Given the structural inequalities low-income, urban, first-generation college bound students face, how do they make sense of success? The myth of success tells students that through educational achievement, which is supposed to lead to economic achievement, students can achieve equality. However, does living out this success story serve more to uphold the status quo than enact the social change students from low-income minority backgrounds, their families, nonprofits, and schools want to see created? Using success stories from education nonprofit marketing materials, I analyze how education has been used as a tool for assimilation. Here, assimilation works through the success story as students learn to be competent in changing socio-economic classes by leveraging cultural and economic capital, such as a college degree or a story about perseverance. Education nonprofits use student success stories to gain donors and, rather than sell a product, sell the outcome produced through their program; the success story. I draw out implications about the success described in these stories which is characterized by economic and academic achievement. The crafting of these stories is telling of the way that education is seen as a conveyor or guarantee towards upward mobility and social access via extracurriculars, modes of dressing and speaking, education degrees, and jobs. The ability for a student to barter their education for economic gain is essential to the performance of a success story. However, these stories may fail to acknowledge what a student stands to lose in seeking this type of success. My data consists of student stories from two different education nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area working with middle school to college level students. Looking at a set of 15 different stories, from newsletters, organization websites, and speeches I use textual analysis to understand

how success is constructed and, ultimately, how these stories are ripples of a larger narrative where education is used as a tool for assimilation.

Key Terms: success, competence, performance, education, assimilation, stories, narratives, alienation, first-generation, low-income, assimilationist narrative, racial uplift, nonprofit, literacy myth, high-school, college, sacrifice economy

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“You taught me language, and my profit on’t
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!”
—Caliban, *The Tempest*¹

“...I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had
given me a view of my wretched condition, without remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit,
but to no ladder upon which to get out.”
—Frederick Douglass²

¹ Shakespeare, W. (2004). *The Tempest* (P. Hulme & W. H. Sherman, Eds.). New York: W.W. Norton.

² Douglass, Frederick. (1989). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New York: Bantam.

Reaching The Promised Land

“You are the Moses of your family.” I heard this phrase repeatedly from my hispanic pentecostal church community in California. Likening my move across the country to attend Yale University to the experience of Moses entering the court of Pharaoh to learn the laws of the land and gain the knowledge of the people in power, this community asked me to think of my singular educational success as connected to a larger community, my low-income Latino immigrant community. Becoming literate in the court of Pharaoh, Moses would one day return to Egypt to free the oppressed people of Israel. The Israelites would leave Egypt adorned in all the riches of the Egyptians, and in a way, I imagined that when I graduated from Yale I would leave marked with a certain level of cultural and material capital, denoting the wealth of knowledge I had acquired. My family and my community asked me to exceed by the standards of the American system such that I could repay what sacrifices had been made by my immigrant family, specifically the women in my life, to provide for me. To succeed was essentially tied to providing for my family and lifting them out of a low-income status.

Education, then, was the wilderness that I had to cross to lead me, my family, and my community to the promised land.

Since being at Yale, I have questioned more and more the ways I have been asked to tell my own “success story” to family friends, to donors for the nonprofits I have been a part of and others. Through these story-telling exercises I have come to the conclusion that achieving a success which is so essentially tied to legitimized forms of knowledge, which asks me to turn my

academic labor into economic gain, and which pretends to be the ultimate key to social acceptance and peaceful living in this nation will only let me down because this success is built on myths. While the Israelites were able to leave Egypt and create a new space for themselves, students, like me, must work to reconcile our often disparate experiences between home and school. I have come to understand education as a sort of wilderness where I have struggled to find my way back to myself and my roots, to not be drawn into a system that will only allow me to succeed insofar as I can provide for myself and my family by its rules and standards without changing the systematic inequalities I face.

It is because of my personal experiences that I feel able to speak on this topic. I take both from what I have lived to cue me into questions to ask, and I use my own discomforts to examine these stories. One of the integral parts of this research for me is the ability to build community knowledge, working to share my scholarship and academic work with SRA and SMART as they support me in my research, and with peers that come from similar backgrounds. Joey Sprague (2005:46-47) writing about Black Feminist epistemology explains how this type of research:

incorporates emotions such as empathy and attachment into the notion of intellect, holding that feeling and caring can usefully guide knowers in asking and answering questions. Further, because each individual is unique, emotional identification with and empathy for the other is an important vehicle for understanding another's position.

It is with a similar approach that I conduct my research, carrying an extreme empathy for the stories I analyze and the communities to which I belong. This is an opportunity to think about a community that I care for deeply and am still a part of. It is an opportunity to analyze the stories of a generation that is dealing with a quick intake of story-content through social media platforms and also being asked to relay their experiences and life narratives. I believe these narratives hold real-world value and an analysis of these student narratives can give our communities better insight as to how we are shaping ideas of empowerment, success, and

progress. Re-thinking success can also help educators develop culturally relevant pedagogy and make success a more expansive term that can open up possibilities for students rather than only allow room for the select few that are chosen by organizations or that excel at standardized testing.

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Introduction

Education is understood as the great equalizer where success is essentially tied to economic prosperity. Tied to this is the American idea that an individual can through sheer ability, effort, and work become successful. The narratives we tell about success in America, intertwined with the American identity, are embedded in family and individual narratives that explain why people choose to invest their labor and time in trying to achieve social mobility in this nation. The false promise of formal education as the great equalizer and the American Dream as a guarantee of unending satisfaction, stability, or social acceptance comes into full view as young students try to live out these age-old narratives, attempting to overcome poverty, crime, and inequalities. In this thesis, I look at how student success stories are situated in their own social context— instead of examining how to change the inequalities in the education system or evaluate the effect of nonprofits, I engage with the way that students make meaning of their lives and the idea of success given the structural inequalities surrounding them and their engagement within the nonprofit and education spaces. Specifically, I look at how education is used as a tool for assimilation through the narratives told about success. Nonprofits specifically affect how students construct an idea of success, as nonprofits are focused on telling and creating a narrative of success that stems from education, where educational achievement is seen as the conveyor for success. This thesis specifically focuses on the impact that the stories surrounding education inequality, as used in school, home, or nonprofit settings affect students' life narratives. Education nonprofits create a window into the meaning-making and story-telling students engage in because education nonprofits ask students to write stories about their educational experiences which are shared with the public and in education communities.

Google “Students Rising Above” and you will quickly find a link to videos that have been broadcast on a California Bay Area local news station about the students in this program who are “rising above” their circumstances. A couple headlines for these videos are: “Oakland Student Excels After Grandmother Steps In For Missing Parents” and, “SF Student Rising Above Fends Off Hunger, Homelessness Risk To Set Example Of College Success For Family,” (CBS San Francisco). News broadcasts are one of the media forms that education nonprofits like Students Rising Above use to bring awareness to their organization and acquire donations. For education nonprofits, marketing means selling donors on why they should contribute to their organization. To gain donations, education nonprofits often use student narratives to embody the change that they are creating, as they do not offer products but the changed experiences of their students.

My data will come from two organizations I have been a part of, Students Rising Above (SRA) and Schools Mentoring and Resource Team (SMART). Both organizations focus on education, working as resource programs for low-income students in the city of San Francisco and the Bay Area. Additionally, both organizations are relatively new and are both dealing with issues of longevity, rebranding, and re-strategizing. These student stories from low-income high achieving students can be seen as a reflection of what the outreach communities see as successful and worth sharing. This thesis will not be looking at the way education nonprofit success stories are received in the school space, rather it will focus on how schools or education work as components in these stories. Through the language of these student success stories, I analyze how these stories reflect a grand narrative of education used as a tool for assimilation. Finally, I draw out some of the implications embedded in these stories such as alienation, physical and emotional labor, and a failure to address what is at stake when success is performed.³

³ A note on language: For the purpose of this thesis I will use the word narrative and story interchangeably.

One of the major questions I tackle in a forthcoming section that elaborates my data is *What defines success in these student stories?* I think about how success is defined by the people within the education nonprofit community and outside of it, meaning how families and larger American society define success, the student narratives providing a portal into these conversations. I question what success means for students, thinking of an alternative way of looking at these stories, namely looking at these stories through a lens of education used as a tool for assimilation, focusing on how educational institutions change the life trajectories of young generations. Historically, I am reminded of the use of schools as a way to “whiten” or prepare indigenous and vulnerable peoples groups to live by the standards of white society. With integration and assimilation being some of the socialization effects that schools have, these student success stories can be seen as ripples of this effect. In these stories, a successful performance requires students to modify their behavior, whether it is through the way they speak in a video or give a speech, or in the choices they make about their majors or summer internships, or the life careers students chose and a successful performance may have consequences that are not often discussed.

Student success stories are a specific collection of stories that come from a unique generation of students experiencing the efforts to equalize class and societal differences through educational outreach. These nonprofit organizations seek to empower students of a lower socioeconomic class and the stories used in marketing materials reflect the ideas of success and empowerment that organizations such as these deem important. Imbued in the valuation of a success story is an assumption about what success means in the United States, for low-income students, and low-income communities. Through my study of how these students make sense of their lives and experiences of educational intervention and outreach, I add to the understanding

of how values are transmitted through narratives, and how people adopt and create communal ideas such as success via story-telling.

Why Narratives?

Personal narratives have started to be used by more and more social scientists as a way of understanding social phenomena. In his book, *Why War?: The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez*, Smith (2010) uses personal narratives to discuss reactions and justifications for war and military decisions. Smith discusses how personal narratives can follow typologies or common themes that can be used to understand something about the social world. Using student narratives as a window, I analyze how common narratives are formed in these education nonprofit communities. Part of my interest is in how these groups of students come to understand their hardships and begin to form life narratives. While most research has focused primarily on the stories of adults, the stories I would be looking at are those of adolescents who are forming crucial life narratives (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich 2006). McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2006:4) explain that, “Beginning in adolescence and young adulthood, our narrative identities are the stories we live by.” Through studying these stories I analyze how SRA, SMART, their students and parents measure and present success.

Even though these stories are not typically being told in person, on a one-on-one basis, they still require the two essential items of story-telling: the speaker and the audience. John Robinson (1981) stresses the importance of the context of stories; why, when, and to whom they are being told, and the interdependence of the storyteller and the audience. Thinking about the relationship between speaker and listener, Pierre Bourdieu and his co-authors present the difficulties of listening to stories of suffering (1999). When listening to a story, the tendency of a person might be to “economize on thought, on emotion, in short on understanding” (Bourdieu et. al 1999:614). Personal narratives can be a beautiful learning experience for an individual as

they become aware of the lives of others but for this effect to take place a connection must be made between audience and speaker. The risk of telling stories is in this, that a story could lose the potential to become a “*spiritual exercise*” and be received by a desensitized audience (Ibid. 1999:614). The telling of a story can serve as a “*spiritual exercise*” for the speaker as they divulge their experiences and reflect on their lives, creating a life narrative. In this way, the student narratives used in marketing materials can be a cathartic and useful experience for students as they make sense of their world. However, there is a risk that these stories could be manipulated or even devalued in the process of story-telling and story-making.

To understand how these stories are crafted it is necessary to look at consumer psychology and marketing research which has addressed the speaker-audience relationship as it pertains to advertisements. An increasing number of nonprofits are using marketing strategies to appeal to donors as businesses would to consumers due to the rise in nonprofits and the competition for donors (Drucker 1990). In his book, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*, Drucker (1990:xiv) explains that what nonprofits offer to a person is dissimilar to a product or good; what a nonprofit offers is a “changed human being”. Drucker explains that there has been a shift in how nonprofits view management from a complete aversion to management to a growing need for this tool. Evangelia Blery, Efstathia Katseli, and Nertilda Tsara (2010) speak to this growing need in the nonprofit world to use more business management and marketing tools to be successful in a competitive environment. To present their image and mission, education nonprofits use the success stories of their students to present their product—the “changed human being.” This is unique in that essentially what organizations use as their selling point is the experiences of a person as an object of value. So, a story, or an experience and the way a person understands this experience comes to be the product of exchange.

Education nonprofit marketing media appeals to the human inclination towards narrative-construction and mental simulation through story-telling. In everyday life, consumers use narratives to relate memories, explain experiences, and order their thoughts (Escalas 2004b). When a consumer looks at an ad or a brand they might relate this to themselves using personal narratives, creating “self-brands” that carry a personal meaning (Escalas 2004b:3). Arch Woodside, Suresh Sood, and Kenneth Miller (2008) highlight how consumers use products and services to create stories. The authors stress the value of narrative in understanding consumer psychology, pointing out the emergence of blogging about consumer experiences and the narratives people make about brands. The typical car commercial is a prime example of how advertising can sell an experience or entice customers more readily with a story. A woman in a minivan might sell the story of being a diligent mother, portraying a specific experience and narrative. Similar to advertisements, the student narratives that are used for marketing materials have a process of creation and editing, however this process may have different motives and goals than a product advertisement would.

In looking at these student narratives a necessary tool for analysis will be the sociological imagination that allows a jump from what is biographical to what is historical and societal. In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959:3) draws a connection between biography and history, explaining the inter-relationship of the two: “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.” Continuing, Mills (1959:4) writes:

Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary people do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of people they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part.

The deep connection between biography and history points to the value of learning from narratives alongside history and our sociological interpretations. Personal narratives give researchers a rich portal into how people make sense of their world. In “Personal Narratives: Perspectives on Theory and Research” Kristin Langellier (1989:261) writes, “Telling personal narratives does something in the social world. Personal narratives participate in the ongoing rhythm of people's lives as a reflection of their social organization and cultural values”. So, personal narratives serve not only to help individuals to make sense of their life but they also hold social value. Considering the social use of these narratives in a larger speech community, Langellier asks why people tell the particular stories they do. In the past, personal narratives have not been valued as important in academic circles but these stories of personal experience can give insight into the daily lives of ordinary people and these stories can reflect greater social structures. Emphasizing the beauty and importance of personal narratives, Langellier (1989:272) writes, “To study personal narrative is to value the mundane, everyday, private, informal, and often conversational uses of language by diverse and ordinary people. In so doing, we also listen on the margins of society and give voice to muted groups.” Using narratives as a form of data then allows for a unique take on the social world as stories are made for internal reflection and communal understanding.

In the literature about personal narrative studies, one point of interest is the discussion about the self and the cohesion of a narrative. Looking at the narratives of non-heterosexual Orthodox Jews, Tova Hartman Halbertal and Irit Koren question the idea of synthesis in a personal narrative. Halbertal and Koren (Koren 2006:38) explain how these two opposing parts of the group's identity “face each other in all their irreducible and irreconcilable differences.” This causes me to think about how the student life narratives portrayed in television clips,

newsletters, and so on may not be as synthesized and cohesive in real life as they seem to be on paper. In the effort to relay success stories it may be that these student narratives lose some of the nuance or multiplicity that students experience. As education nonprofits are looking to tell a certain type of story, the raw student narrative may be edited to fit some form of a common narrative that shows how this “changed human being” came to be due to the intervention that organizations are offering to students.

The creation of stories does not exist outside of the social world. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2012:4) write:

These stories, we argue, are individual creations but are never simply individual creations; they are told in historically specific times and places and draw on the rules and models and other narratives in circulation that govern how story elements link together in a temporal logic.

This lens can be used to think of student success stories as well—these stories do not exist outside of other narrative logics and a historical and cultural context. To specify what narratives in a sociological study look like, Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2012:4) write, “A *personal narrative* (we also sometimes use the more common term *life story*) in our usage is a retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context.” Student success stories are these personal narratives and life stories where students reflect on their life experiences. These life stories specifically tell of their experiences with education and are unique data from a young generation navigating social mobility, experiencing education in a way their families have not, and entering education spaces that may alienate them from themselves and their families.

The Myth of Success

I contend that these student success stories function as life narratives that highlight how education has been used as a tool for assimilation in these students' lives. While there is no literature surrounding this specific study of education nonprofit marketing materials, there is literature surrounding the assimilation processes that students undergo in and through educational spaces. Here, I turn to studies that explore the myth of success that works itself into student success stories where success is ultimately defined by economic prosperity and social mobility attained through educational achievement. In this review of literature I try to find the types of narratives or histories that come into play as students create their life narratives as their success stories are culturally and historically situated. The myth of success does not exist on its own but rather is assimilated into narratives and sustained in the story-telling that families, students, nonprofits, and schools engage in. In my sustained consideration of education as a tool for assimilation, five different narrative parts came to the fore: assimilation; the literacy myth; families, communities, and success; competence; and alienation. While unable to treat each of these exhaustively, my literature review enters into these components of the success story one at a time and discovers that each narrative thread is part of a single phenomenon: assimilation through education. Beginning with assimilation, I will set up how each of these narrative components, while treated positively in communal and individual success stories, have weighty consequences for students.

Assimilation

“Assimilation is a process of decisions.”⁴ Assimilation is not a natural or passive process, it requires decisions and labor on the part of the social actor. In these student success stories I specifically look at how students assimilate ideas of success and learn to tell their stories in ways that show their decision making processes. These student success stories have roots in American ideologies: going from rags to riches, living the American dream, working with pluck and luck, pulling-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps. Tropes and motifs reoccur in these success stories that are historical. A quote from *The Empire of Necessity* by Greg Grandin (2014:9) comes to mind:

Born in the great upswell of Christian optimism that gave rise to the American Revolution, an optimism that held individuals to be in charge of their destinies, in the next life and this, he embodied all the possibilities and limits of that revolution.

The idea that equality can be proved through ability runs through these stories, working within a framework that stems from the American Revolution and Manifest Destiny. Education specifically comes to be seen as a space where democracy can come to fruition through the work of people like John Dewey who make public schools available for all. As Dayton-Wood (2012:216) describes, education in the 1920s worked to americanize recent immigrants and progressive education specifically “in Lawrence Cremin’s sense of the term, [is] marked by a desire ‘to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals’ (viii).” Focusing on the role education plays in americanization, Dayton-Wood (2012) writes about the book *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yezierska and the question of what college or education, more broadly, has to offer to immigrant students of the working class. While Anzia Yezierska was not an academic scholar, her work “offers what Christie Lunies describes as ‘encounter with the academy’ narratives and Renny Christopher describes as ‘narratives of unhappy upward mobility’ (Launius 125; Christopher 79),” (Dayton

⁴ This quote comes from my notes for a class on November 15, 2016 taken with Professor Stephanie Newell of the Yale English Department.

Wood 2012:216). For education nonprofits, success by ability can prove equality and is seen as the ultimate conveyor of wealth and success. An inherent assumption is that education can serve as the great equalizer, making equal opportunities available to the children that enter these programs. However, this ideology can fail to acknowledge the ways students can be alienated from themselves, their academic labor, their families and larger communities. This ideology also sets success as a narrow trajectory of upward mobility connected to economic gain that comes from educational achievement which may limit the amount of possibility students have in crafting their lives. Further, as Yeziarska's work points to, achieving success may not be a positive experience; suffering or loss can exist even when a person achieves a level of academic or economic success.

The Literacy Myth

The myth of education working as a great equalizer and myth of success via education can be seen under the same light as the literacy myth. Defining the literacy myth, Eldred and Mortensen (1992:512) write:

The literacy myth grows out of the easy and unfounded assumption that better literacy necessarily leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement...The concept of a literacy myth, then, prompts us to interrogate what are often taken as 'natural' assumptions about connections between schooling and social mobility.

Because the literacy myth works off of what feel like "natural assumptions" that schooling leads to social mobility, it becomes harder to understand the falsehood of this connection and the "promises of literacy are so great and so compelling that it seems impossible to argue against it" (Eldred and Mortensen 1992:515). Eldred and Mortensen (1992) discuss how George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* reinforces the literacy myth wherein a person can rise in society due to their dominion of language. Eliza Dolittle's character is especially descriptive of the ways language

and literacy are understood to be conveyors of class and status. Describing the trajectory expected of educational achievement, Eldred and Mortensen (1992:515) explain, “we have romanticized the power of education, have internalized the fantasy that a flower girl can become a duchess through education.” A rags to riches trajectory is typical in the stories of educational achievement. Eldred and Mortensen (1992:514) continue on to discuss how literacy should be seen as more than a skills based ability and can be better defined as “a set of cultural actions intimately tied to issues of ‘culture’: class, race, gender, place and so on.” This definition is useful in thinking about how high-achieving students and students in education nonprofits are not just gaining literacy or academic skills but also a cultural tool set. Ryden (2005:5-6) also examines how schools assimilate students through language offering the critique that “through the literacy myth, we place faith in the abstraction that language, like knowledge, is empowering without asking how, for whom, and at whose expense this empowerment occurs.” This quote elucidates the power dynamics inherent in creating legitimized forms of knowledge. Discussing the work of Deborah Brandt, Ryden (2005:5) quotes, “the myth includes not only the mistaken assumption that literacy begets economic freedom, but also the fallacy that literate persons think better than do non-literate persons.” Ultimately, the effect of working under the literacy myth can be that parents and students work to uphold a type of social order that may be contrary to their desires to create social change.

Families, Communities, and Success

Specifically for immigrant families, the stories told around education and success may be powerful in shaping students’ life trajectories and students’ understanding of success. Speaking on the different theories surrounding immigrant Latino populations assimilating in America, Kalogrides (2009:160) writes, “Classical assimilation theories often associate the process of

assimilation with upward mobility for immigrants and their children as each subsequent generation achieves higher social and economic status and becomes more similar to the American middle-class.” However, Kalogrides (2009:160) points to segmented assimilation theory which accounts for the different paths immigrant populations may follow in their process of assimilation including “classical assimilation and upward mobility, downward assimilation and incorporation into the lower class, or economic advancement while maintaining a strong ethnic identity and embeddedness in an ethnic community.” Fuligni (1997) investigates how family background, such as parent education levels and perceptions of education, and peer groups affect immigrant students’ success in school, finding that family perceptions of success were more important in predicting success than socioeconomic background. Raleigh and Kao (2010) research how parents along a race axis diverge in how they instill college aspirations in their students. Specifically, Raleigh and Kao present how immigrant parents are more optimistic about their students college aspirations because these parents do not envision downward mobility but rather enforce college as a part of the future. Raleigh and Kao (2010:1084) write, “Parents’ college aspirations for their children can be seen as a type of intergenerational social capital (Coleman, 1988) where parents are able to transmit their aspirations for their children into academic achievement.” This is a key idea in understanding how story-telling can become a part of leveraging forms of capital. A parent encouraging their student to aspire for a college education can become economic capital as students adopt aspirations from parents that lead to educational accolades that are then used to gain professional jobs. So, the success myth may be sustained in parent attitudes toward education.

Important to consider alongside parent attitudes toward education and literacy are the larger communities these parents and students exist and participate in that create collective

meaning around education. Gaines (1993:344) studies the African-American racial uplift ideology, explaining:

Since the post-Reconstruction era, as the decline of black political power paralleled the ascendancy of Anglo-American nationalism, imperialism, and white supremacy in the American South—the latter with tacit federal and Northern approval—many leading blacks responded by espousing assimilationist values of racial uplift.

This ideology, Gaines (1993:344) describes as “loyal to the social order and the American nation.” Continuing, Gaines (1993:345) tells of the way “black elites hoped their support for the spread of civilization and the interests of the American nation would topple racial barriers and bolster their claims to citizenship and respectability.” For the black elites to make themselves respectable by the standards of a white society they had to “[implore] the majority culture to see past color and to recognize class differences among blacks, black elites sought to rise rhetorically on the backs of those ‘primitive’ masses presumably awaiting the uplifting benevolence of their supposed superiors” (Gaines 1993:346). So, it is only in distinguishing themselves from the “primitive masses” that the black elite are able to be seen as successful by the standards of white society. Essentially, they worked to support existing hierarchies and maintain power struggles. A consequence of seeing students as exceptional or valuating students in success stories as better than the communities they come from can be that students are encouraged to distinguish themselves from their home communities that are seen as unsuccessful or antithetical to a collective progress.

Competence

The performance of the success story requires that these students also change their behavior to embody a successful life. A big part of the success trajectory is financial stability and the ability to ‘rise above’ poverty and instability through educational and economic achievement.

Writing in dialogue with socialization literature, a key term that Barbara Shade (1983) uses is “competence.” Competence has been seen in socialization literature as the way an organism adapts to their environment and, referring to Afro-Americans, the way that a person is able to achieve in spite of slavery and the rules of a white society. Turning to education, Shade uses the term competence to describe educational and occupational achievement that conveys economic power and status to family and community. Shade sees the possibility and capacity for this competence and achievement to be greatly influenced by significant others and admonishes her readers that the Afro-American community will only be able to achieve if they utilize these vital person-to-person relations to inspire and encourage. Shade’s article provides another dimension to understanding what the term “success,” in student success stories, refers to. Shade (1983:144-45) writes:

Competence has many different definitions. In the early socialization literature, White (1959) defined competence as the organism’s capacity to interact effectively with his environment, Inkeles (1966), on the other hand, defined it as the ability to attain and perform in different sets of status. When applying the term to Afro-Americans, Merchant (1976) defined it as (1) accomplishing individual goals and meeting private challenges of every day life in spite of slavery and the caste system; (2) making it in a white man’s world; and (3) competing on white terms and winning. For the purpose of our discussion, competence is the ability of Afro-Americans to do well in school as measured by grades and a high level of educational attainment and reaching an adequate occupational category which increases both the status and economic power of their family and the community. In other words, competence is educational and occupational achievement because this is the essence of Afro-America’s desire for change.

This definition clues us into some implications that student success stories do not always take into account. To create a sense of equality through student success stories can be seen as playing a game by another person’s rules. You can only win insofar as you play the game by the terms of the creator. How can we expect our students to prove themselves by a measure that is already stacked against them? In these narratives, students are measured by a standard that was not made

with their specific backgrounds in mind. A meritocratic undercurrent works in these narratives such that systematic inequalities are not part of the equation of success.

Alienation

With the other student narratives, as with my own, I come to question what happens when a student experiences alienation, and whether these success stories fail to acknowledge the labor necessary to produce a success story. The need to reconcile educational experiences with familial experiences is exemplified in a quote from *The Reactive* by Masande Ntshanga:

Then he looks at my face and smiles. My uncle pats the side of my leg. Tell me about your studies, he says. Tell me about life at the university. One day you're going to change all of this, aren't you? He lets out another laugh and his smile stays on his face for a long time. You and your whites, he says.⁵

In this quote, the uncle of the main character, Lindanathi, expresses how he is interpreting Lindanathi's academic achievement. Talking to the author, the idea of education as something that is "foreign" and "alien" came up, and that education is also tied to race and who has claim over education spaces.⁶ Ntshanga, speaking to his experience in South Africa, explained how he thought education was still a "system that remains oddly foreign," that is seen as serving a "public good" and "supposed to be a guarantee." However, the characters in Ntshanga's novel who are highly educated come to see this system differently than their parents. Lindanathi, sees education as something that "pulls him into the market place" where he becomes part of a system, "a labor unit." This reminded me of my own immigrant experience and how my family sees education as a guarantee without totally understanding what it is I gain from higher education and what my experience is like. Students are perhaps more likely to experience a certain alienation from their

⁵ Ntshanga, M. (2016). *The Reactive: A Novel*. Columbus, OH: Two Dollar Radio.

⁶ I had the opportunity to speak with Masande Ntshanga during a skype conversation as part of a sociology course (The Sociological Imagination of African Literature) with Professor Stephanie Newell and our Teaching Fellow Denise Lim on October 25, 2016.

families and themselves as they accumulate cultural capital and acquire a language that allows them to thrive in educational spaces but find difficulty in sharing these experiences and resources with their families or their larger communities. Further, students may have to serve as translators, both literally and figuratively, as they navigate their academic and family spheres. A student may become the only one who understands both sides and thus become alienated in both spheres of their life to a certain extent because there is no-one to share in their unique experience. In the stories I analyze, I will look at this implication and look at how the myth of success may work to ignore the alienation students experience.

Research Methods

The main source of evidence for this project comes from the success stories of students at SRA and SMART. I look at the text of student stories from newsletters, and speeches made at fundraising events and galas. While I do not analyze how a viewer might react to a story on different platforms psychologically, I analyze the content of the communication to see how stories are conveyed. In analyzing the language used in student narratives I look for trends in the wording of stories. Format, common phrases or keywords, story trajectories or certain typologies are part of what I look for in these stories.

I coded ten success stories from SRA's website and five speeches that student's gave on behalf of SMART that are also accessible to the public on their website. The ten success stories from SRA ranged from 416 to 947 words and the five speeches from SMART ranged from 733 to 1,440 words. The stories were coded by hand—I printed the stories out and worked through each story repeatedly to look for patterns, themes, and emergent codes. During my initial reading of these stories I carried three questions in mind: What is the role of education in these stories? What does success mean? and How is family or home life portrayed? Through this process I also looked for narrative strategies that students use to describe their struggles or hardships, how they view education, how they understand their position in relation to American society, and how they create systems of value. The final coding schema is listed in Table 1 under these categories, with verbatim categories placed in quotations:

Table 1. Coding Schema for Student Success Stories

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION	ACADEMICS V. PERSONAL LIFE SUPPORT OPPORTUNITY
STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS	OVERCOMING CARE-TAKER
FAMILY/HOME LIFE	ANTITHETICAL TO SUCCESS SACRIFICE
SUCCESS	MARKERS OF SUCCESS CHOICE DREAM (AMERICAN DREAM)
POSITIONALITY	THE “NORMAL TEENAGER” FANTASY/IMPOSSIBILITY

In selecting my final list of codes, I thought about how students are asked to perform various types of labor in order to function in their home and school spaces. The codes for POSITIONALITY, STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS, and ACADEMICS V. PERSONAL LIFE, are especially indicative of how students have to compartmentalize their lives or work to reconcile what they perceive to be atypical challenges. Thinking about racial uplift and how families come into play in these stories, I created the codes titled DREAM, which falls under the SUCCESS category, and ANTITHETICAL TO SUCCESS, which falls under the FAMILY/HOME LIFE category. These two codes point at a collective dream of success or how students may describe their family or home life as antithetical to success.

Some quotes could have been coded under multiple categories, but I chose to use quotes only once, placing them under categories in which they would highlight a different perspective, or a more nuanced understanding of a category. For example, I did not code every sentence that had the word “success” in it under a SUCCESS category as that quote might have more to say about how students understand their education. I worked holistically, trying to show how these categories are interconnected and derive significance from one another. In these excerpts, I use

words such as “nonprofit,” “neighborhood” or “city” in brackets to replace identifying information, I also use brackets to mark where I have made changes to a quote for easier reading by correcting misspellings or adding missing prepositions. Other than the changes made in brackets, the words in these quotes come directly from students success stories. To retain some anonymity and create a more holistic narrative, I have decided not to identify stories with their authors by name and instead will speak about quotes and excerpts as they relate to one another and work to create a cohesive whole or collective voice. However, I do not do this without acknowledging the distinctiveness of each student’s voice. I look to the similarities in these stories to tell the reader about an overall pattern or shared experience which is not meant to encompass the entirety of these students’ experiences.

Table 2. Student Demographics

	F	M	Immigrant Parents
SRA (10)	7	3	5*
SMART (5)	2	3	4

*out of the SRA stories, 5 students do not explicitly identify with having immigrant parents in their stories, this does not necessarily mean they do not have immigrant parents

Of the stories from SRA’s website, seven students identified with female pronouns and three as male. From the SMART speeches there were two female students and three male students. Additionally, I highlight how students identify with having immigrant parents because I feel this greatly impacts how students and their families speak about success and American society. Half of the SRA students and all but one of the SMART students identify with having immigrant parents. This points to how immigrant children are often selected by these nonprofits because they are also often first generation to go to college so nonprofits seek to support these types of students.

Analysis

The code for POSITIONALITY (see Appendix A) responds to the question of how students understand their lives in a larger social context. The quotes brought out from these success stories point at an understanding of positionality and a construction of a “normal” life. I posit that the idea of a “normal life” is a construction of a white American fantasy and students point at this construction in their writing. This is not to say that any student might identify as “normal” but rather that these students have a construction of what is “normal” and compare themselves to this standard. Students often feel that they face atypical challenges in the home space. Writing about what “most seventeen-year-olds” would do or “just wanting to be a normal teenager,” students interpret an idea of what is “normal,” and, in turn, reveal that they do not believe their lives to be “normal.” This sense of normalcy which they may not ascribe to their own lives may be a component of what these students hope to create for themselves, their parents and siblings, and younger students. What is not “normal” is presented as the experiences these students have that they would not expect others to have. One student compares the well known game of “hide and seek” to hiding “from dangers within [her] home.” While the game of hide and seek fits into the normative story of a typical American childhood, hiding from violence within the home space does not. Having to work as children, two students discuss labor as necessary for survival but not cohesive with what they expected. One writes, “I couldn’t have fathomed then that I would end up working full time at the age of thirteen in order [to] help my family survive.” Another explains, “in my life I had to do things I thought I would never do, but had to do for us to survive.” The idea of a “normal life” is implied in these two quotations about labor as these students do not feel their realities match with their expectations of a “normal life.” Writing about the wish for “the perfect t.v. family,” a student creates a contrast between the

normalcy of a television family and the abnormality of their own life. Part of what causes students to feel dissonance between their experience and the “normal teenager” experience is exposure to violence and poverty. About violence, a student tells how “shootings are something that many people go through life without knowing.” This student became “used to the shootings and other violence” that happened around them but they do not expect others, namely wealthy donors who might listen to their speech, to have experienced the same. Feeling like they are facing abnormal challenges, even though the reality is that there are larger communities of people who share these experiences, leaves these students feeling alone: one student explains they felt “alone having to face these atypical challenges.”

Students in these success stories also exhibit similar characteristics that tell of the physical and emotional labor students use to be considered successful. Under the code for STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS (see Appendix B), are two subcategories, CARETAKER and OVERCOMING. The CARETAKER category tells of how these students are often older siblings and/or expected to take on adult responsibilities in their households. Students may offer support for their families in anything ranging from providing medical care, serving as a translator or taking care of younger siblings. Revealing how heavily their family relies on them, one student draws this conclusion: “if I fell, then my family would subsequently crumble.” Another student who is an older sibling shares how they, “became a caretaker having to go to sleep at 2:00 am or constantly waking up throughout the night because [their] sibling would not stop crying when they needed to be fed or changed.” Students must balance the need their families have for their support and their school demands. One student sums up this balance: “along with being a high school student, I am a caregiver and an English translator.” These students are taking care of their parents, siblings, and other family members through emotional and physical labor, while

also committing to full-time school work. In a way, students can be seen as working multiple jobs. The work of translation can especially leave students feeling alienated as students may feel like the only person who can fully understand both their home-world and their school-world.

Repeatedly, students express a keen understanding of how unattainable the life of a “normal teenager” is for them. Students explain that it is not expected of low-income, minority, immigrant students of color to graduate from college. Some cite statistics, “only 24% of us are expected to graduate college.” Others use counter narratives to distinguish their story from the statistics or expected life trajectory: “as an immigrant, first-generation college student from a low-income family, my life could easily have been drastically different,” and “everyone around me says it is impossible that I’m not on drugs or in the streets, impossible that I’m educated, talented, and compassionate.” The counter narrative that students compare their lives with is important because it tells of both the expectation these students have to fight against in accomplishing their success story, and how success in being “educated, talented, and compassionate” is set up to be impossible or out-of-the-ordinary for low-income, minority students. Specifically, students point to involvement in drugs, gangs, or pregnancy as signs of not being successful and as expectations or stereotypes that they have to defy. In order to perform the success story, students also have to work against systematic inequalities such as underfunded schools. One student recalls, “the best hope I had was to attend the under-resourced schools I was assigned to” and that they believed “college was for the rich.” In these quotes, good education is linked to economic prosperity and geography. As these students often come from low-income neighborhoods that don’t receive enough funding for their schools, students come to experience good education as linked to money and location within a cityscape. Another student writes, “I belong in the schools that may sometimes feel unattainable,” cluing us into an understanding of how the education world can be

exclusive but how these students can come to create a space for themselves in the classroom. A feeling of isolation in having to face atypical struggles in the education space works in conjunction with the stereotypes that set up students to be exceptions to stereotypes in their communities or families.

The exclusivity of the education space or the tension between what students understand as “normal” and atypical is at play when they enter private institutions or seek to perform success through the classroom space. Students have to navigate their home lives or personal experiences with classroom work. In the code for THE ROLE OF EDUCATION there are three subcategories, ACADEMICS V. PERSONAL LIFE (see Appendix C), SUPPORT (see Appendix D), and OPPORTUNITY (see Appendix E). The category for ACADEMICS V. PERSONAL LIFE focuses on how students negotiate their home experiences, which they may understand as atypical, and their classroom experiences. Balancing their school and home life, one student explains, “I cared about my grades, but I also cared about having a place to live.” While students are devoted to their school work and seek to invest in the classroom space, there is a disconnect between the dilemmas they face at home, like not having a place to live or not having food, and a classroom environment that might ask students to ignore these difficulties in order to get good grades. Home troubles come to be seen as something that “interferes” with school work and a student’s ability to be successful by school behavioral and grading standards. The school becomes a space where students are expected to be “normal” or where students are normalized; taught to present normalcy by not revealing their hardships or discussing their home lives. To this point, a student details:

I am tired of all the suffering and all the crying that I see with my little brothers and my mom. When I go to school the next day I try not to let it interfere with my education, but there are some days that I can’t control it.

To be successful in the school space, a student must not allow their home lives to interfere with their behavior or grades. This means students are expected to exert great mental energy to be a successful student by compartmentalizing their home and school lives, and performing success even if they are experiencing taxing and time-consuming struggles outside of the classroom. In this way, the classroom space can become an abilist, meritocratic system where only the students who are able to work past mental health issues and worries about home are deemed successful. Speaking about their struggles with mental health, another student recalls how her friends and family helped them work through their depression and ultimately encouraged them “to do well in school so [they could] go to college.” Others students describe this process by saying they had to remain “determined,” learn how to “multi-task,” balance their time, or use their extracurriculars and nonprofit spaces as an “escape” from their other worries.

In order to function in these classroom spaces, students receive support from educators and nonprofits. A prevalent image in these stories is that of nonprofits as family, providing the cultural knowledge and, sometimes, economic support that biological or legal families may not be able to give their students in order to perform successfully. Nonprofits and educators often understand those parts of the education system that may be alien or foreign to families. Describing the role nonprofits play in their lives, students write “it is like my extended family, a parent who provides for their child the necessities to succeed in college,” and “my [nonprofit] family provided me with the tools necessary to be successful at school, and supported me emotionally as I faced immense challenges.” Support from nonprofits is tied to success in school because these nonprofits are able to provide “tools,” “necessities,” and emotional support that students need in order to balance their personal and academic lives. Continuing with the family metaphor, nonprofits can play the role of a parent by stepping in when a guardian cannot. When

one student's mother could not help him due to illness, the student writes, "my mother tried her best to be there and found comfort in knowing that [nonprofit] was there to assist me with anything I might need." Some support from schools and nonprofits is more material, for example, one student received a laptop from his school which was an immense aid as this student did not have a computer at home. Many students point to the verbal affirmations or encouragements they receive from staff members or educators. Nonprofit staff members provide encouragement in events ranging from haircuts to revising essays to celebrating at college acceptances. In addition to the encouragement staff members provide, the community of students that share similar life experiences is a positive component of students' success stories. In one nonprofit, a student found "an environment filled with peers in similar situations to deal with this HUGE transition together." Having a community of people with shared experiences may allow these students to better navigate the tensions they feel between their personal and academic lives.

Even with the tension and disconnect students feel between their personal and academic lives, the students in these success stories ultimately choose to continue investing in their academic careers. Students draw on their life experiences and use language around their decisions to commit to education that points towards a meritocratic or abilist understanding of success. Another coding category for **STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS, OVERCOMING**, reveals how students turn to hard work and determination to make sense of their commitment to education. Summarizing their values, a student writes, "my parents were never able to give me material things, but they taught me to have strong morals and values including hard work, determination and resilience, which I recognize now as skill sets that helped me get through this experience." The student highlights a lack of "material things," pointing to how the values of

“hard work” and “determination” are a sort of inheritance from their parents. Instead of receiving economic capital, this student receives a work ethic from their parents which pushes them to commit their time and effort to education. Believing in the positive effect of hard work and determination, students and parents can turn to education as a space where opportunity exists. Even the time a student would commit to getting to school can be seen under this light as one student describes:

In order to get to school, since my freshman year I have woken up at 5:00 am to take the bus at 6:10 am for an hour-long ride to [city]. I know my journey will pay off because there is nothing I value higher than having a fulfilling education.

Key in this quotation are the phrases that point to compensation, such as “pay off” and “value higher.” Committing time and energy to education does not exist without a forethought of how education, especially higher education, may “pay off” in the future through economic gain or social change.

There is a continuous sense of upward mobility in the way students describe dealing with their struggles or hardships. This upward trajectory is exemplified by wording such as “rise above,” “overcome,” and “soar above,” where students have to surpass their current circumstances in order to succeed at school or succeed in achieving social mobility. Starting from the bottom and achieving success through determination and hard work is a common formula in these stories. Exemplifying this trajectory, here a student explains, “nothing can erase the hardships I’ve endured, just as nothing can erase my zeal to soar above and succeed.” The future promise of hard work and determination is then social mobility for a student and their family and their community. Another student explains this desire for their future by writing, “despite the challenges, I do not settle for the minimum.” In this story, the minimum may imply remaining in poverty and remaining uneducated. In a similar fashion, another student tells of how they are

“determined to get out of the bad neighborhood,” finding that, “education was the gateway.” Getting out of a “bad neighborhood,” “rising above,” “overcoming,” “not settling,” and “achieving,” indicate a desire within these success stories to become successful via social mobility. This mobility may be exhibited through moving out of a neighborhood that is linked to violence and poverty, into a neighborhood that is more affluent and has lower crime rates.

Students also use language that describes a linear trajectory to success, indicating an understanding of some formula for success. Staying “on track” is important in accomplishing a success story. To stay on track implies that a student is able to get good grades, attend school, and go to college, which ultimately will lead to a good paying job that a student and their family can benefit from financially and socially which may also influence their larger community. Part of the linear trajectory toward success is found in actions such as “[maintaining] a 4.0 GPA” and “pushing [oneself] to succeed.” A mentality of perseverance is important to this, which students describe in “continuously [talking] about college and how [they] could get there.” About accomplishing their goals, one student explains, “I believe that if you set your mind to something, you can achieve it no matter how long it takes.” Education comes to be understood as a space where anyone can succeed as long as you “set your mind” to it, “no matter how long it takes.” This points to a meritocratic conception of the education system within a capitalist framework where any person can by their own abilities achieve the success they desire to any extent they desire.

Conceptualizing their futures, students turn to the idea of choice and autonomy to describe how they are selecting to invest in education and change their social trajectories. Coding for how students describe success, I used three categories **MARKERS OF SUCCESS**, **CHOICE**, and **DREAM** to make sense of students’ constructions of success (see Appendix F). The

CHOICE code category speaks to how students describe their own individuality, autonomy, or ability to define their future. In this quote, a student describes how important autonomy and choice is to them:

However, succeeding in life isn't a miracle for someone with my background. Succeeding is a choice one makes, regardless of where they come from or what they've been through. I made a choice that's hard for most: a choice to not feel sorry for myself, to not turn to drugs for comfort, and to instead step up and care for my siblings. I made the choice to move forward instead of staring at my past. The choice is always in our own hands; I chose.

This student explains success as a “choice” and “not a miracle.” A miracle would be something this student had no power over and something that could not be influenced by sheer effort. Instead, they see their success as something that stems directly from their choice and ability. The student continues, “I made a choice that's hard for most: a choice to not feel sorry for myself, to not turn to drugs for comfort, and to instead step up and care for my siblings.” Choosing to be successful is equated with choosing “to not feel sorry” and not “[turning] to drugs for comfort.” The comparison struck between choosing to be successful or not poses two life trajectories for people in low-income backgrounds: either a person chooses to use their abilities and skills to achieve higher economic and social standing, or they are not able enough to do this and choose to turn to drugs or violence instead. A distinction is drawn between the life students want to create for themselves and the lives they have experienced growing up. Another student explains:

By taking an active role in making sure that I receive the best education possible to me, I can make sure that no child, niece, or nephew of mine will have to sell items to help their family maintain financial stability. Neither will they have to stay up late at night to take care of siblings, and forsake their childhood for the benefit of the family.

For this student, success comes from not having to “forsake their childhood” and being able to provide financially for future generations of their family members. Success also implies taking an “active role” which in this case may imply that a passive role would be falling into a stereotypical

existence of “[turning] to drugs for comfort.” Being active, or using one’s autonomy and ability comes to be equated with using the educational system to gain a higher economic and social standing such that a student can provide for their immediate family and help bolster the larger socio-economic standing of their home community or children like themselves.

Socio-economic mobility via education is depicted in the success story as a dream, a gateway or a key. Under the DREAM code, a subcategory for SUCCESS, I coded for quotes from students that frame success as a dream or future aspiration. The language of accomplishing a dream is especially common in the stories of students who come from immigrant families and who are the first in their families to go to college (which is most of the students in these success stories). Speaking on their family’s experience, one student writes, “my parents left Guatemala in 1997 to seek a better future for our family in the United States.” Seeking a better future becomes synonymous with economic and educational achievement for students and their families. Another student explains that his parents “are immigrants who came to this country to pursue their ‘American Dream’ - which to them meant giving their children the power to define their own futures.” In this case, the means to “define their own futures” comes via the education system. The same student continues, “I will work hard to be your American Dream.” A student’s life is dream made reality as they achieve academic success and gain social and economic capital. Yet another student links this dream to labor by distinguishing between manual and intellectual labor:

But I also saw what she wanted for me, to become a well-educated professional who would not have to resort to manual labor to make ends meet, the way she and my father and their parents had to do.

To “become a well-educated professional” a student must use their intellect and mental capabilities instead of their “manual labor to make ends meet.” Comparing manual labor to

professional or intellectual labor, this student brings to light the socio-economic differences between people who do manual labor and people who do intellectual work. Having a professional job promises not having to use manual labor and not having to work “to make ends meet.” One student reminds themselves that their dream promises the end of manual labor: “‘dreams are aspirations ready to take flight,’ I reminded myself as the van dropped me off in the unfamiliar neighborhood and the feeling of dread crawled up my spine.” This student had to help provide for their family by working full time, going around neighborhoods where they felt they were in danger. In this situation, this student still holds on to their dreams, dreams that could mean no more manual labor and no need to worry about “[making] ends meet.”

Education is the gateway to this success that students, families, and nonprofits seek. Often students express that “despite their own lack of education, [their parents] believed that it was the key to their children’s successes.” Another student sets up almost the exact same phrasing, “despite their lack of education, my parents still valued education for their children.” The repeated phrasing tells of how education may play a similar role in different families. For these families, education is “the key” and the conveyor to wealth, social mobility, security and change for a community. A third student presents their trust in education clearly, writing, “through education, I can end the impoverished cycle my family has lived, further helping my family.” As academic accolades can be bartered in the job market for positions with higher pay and educational achievement is a respected investment of time and effort, students can turn to education as “the key” or the gateway to success. A fourth describes, “I started to look at education as a way out of this struggle.” When education is set up as the “way out of this struggle,” “the key” to success, or the way to access security, wealth and social mobility, the home space and home community can come to be narrativized as antithetical to success.

A danger in presenting success as equivalent to getting out of bad neighborhoods, or “rising above” tragedy and family circumstances, comes in painting family or home life as antithetical to success. This is not to say that the trauma experienced in these stories is not legitimate but that when trauma is portrayed as an essential part of these stories and not the success story, trauma or hardship may be seen as nonexistent in a successful model for life. In other words, trauma does not exist as a possibility in the dream of a successful life. Further, trauma becomes associated with poverty and the alternative to living in poverty is depicted only positively. About their family one student says, “I know that who I am is the result of my parents’ mistakes but the strength I have developed has enabled me to move forward and make a better life for myself and my family.” They continue, “I never will make the same mistakes my parents did; I will be better and more successful than they ever were.” This student distinguishes their future life from the past life their parents have lived. Their parents’ choices are marked as “mistakes” and not successful. Another student writes:

I have seen the life my parents have been through without education and I don’t want that for my life. I want the satisfaction that I was able to do something in my life and not be another stereotype of a Mexican.

Here a student speaks of their parents as antithetical to success because they do not own legitimized forms of knowledge (legitimized through documentation such as diplomas that can be used as cultural capital to exchange for economic capital in the form of wages). Creating this contrast can devalue the types of knowledge that exist outside of the education system. One student talks about how their parents describe their older sibling’s un-successful story:

I know my mother really does love me but sometimes she says things that put me down. The things she says to me make me doubt my abilities to [succeed] in college. The major thing my mom says to me is that I’m going to become like my older sister. My older sister doesn’t have a job and has a child.

Posed as the opposite of successful, this student's sister who "doesn't have a job and has a child" is painted in a negative light by their parents. When success becomes intertwined with economic prosperity and legitimate forms of knowledge other life trajectories can only be seen as unsuccessful and negative.

Another element to the success story is the sacrifice economy that students participate in as they seek to provide for their families and support their communities. Here, I turn to the code SACRIFICE under FAMILY/HOME LIFE (see Appendix G). The circularity of sacrifice or the need to repay sacrifice is a significant part of the reasoning behind making an investment in education and seeking success via the education system. Discussing this sacrifice economy, one student refers to their parents, "they made sacrifices so we could get a good education." Making sacrifices for "a good education" is a common theme in these success stories, especially when parents are immigrants. In addition to this, a desire to repay parents' sacrifices runs throughout the success stories where students have migrated or have parents who migrated to the United States. Repaying sacrifices is linked to economic and academic achievement as this student explains, "she is one of the main reasons why I want to go to college; I want to help provide for her the way she has provided for me," speaking about their mother. The symmetry in this phrasing, "provide for her the way she has provided for me," is crucial to understanding how the sacrifice economy works. What is sacrificed for a student must be repaid by accomplishing the promise of a dream, in immigrant stories this is often the American Dream of achieving social and economic security. A student repays by providing for the generation that provided for them; it is duty, it is honor. Honor goes hand in hand with the need to repay sacrifice, as one student explains, "your sacrifices, sweat and tears will not go unnoticed." The labor that parents dedicated to investing in a dream of social and economic security "will not go unnoticed"

because students commit to repaying sacrifices and living out their lives in honor of their parents. Another student touches on the idea of honor through academic achievement, writing, “I would like to honor my parents, my two sisters, and all the people who helped me.” Honoring sacrifices and honoring those who have helped a student achieve becomes part of the altruistic element in these success stories.

Students often show an altruistic desire to give back to their home communities and care for students that come from similar backgrounds. Working within the framework of the sacrifice economy where sacrifice has to be paid back, one student explains, “I appreciate so much more the opportunities my parents sacrificed to get me into [nonprofit] and now I am determined, more than ever, to be an advocate and a leader for my community.” While not to the same extent of economic prosperity, many students experience a similar trajectory to the one that the artist Drake paints in his song *Started From the Bottom*: “Started from the bottom now we're here/Started from the bottom now my whole team fucking here.”⁷ When achieving success, the economic prosperity gained is something to be shared not just with immediate family but with the “team” of people who helped a student get to their position of success.

A component not made explicit in these success stories is the possibility for alienation and estrangement. This division can happen both within a person’s life narrative (a lack of narrative coherence) and within a person’s interactions (i.e. alienation from their family). A phrase commonly used to describe the immigrant experience of Spanish-speaking Latin American groups experiencing a change in their life narrative, is “Ni de aquí ni de allá,” *neither of this place, nor of that*. In the case of these student narratives, alienation from their families can come from their newly accumulated educational capital and experiences that differ from their family’s.

⁷ Drake E.M. (2013). *Started From the Bottom*. On *Nothing Was The Same* (Deluxe) [MP3 file]. Cash Money Records Inc.

Henceforth, the ability for a student to create a coherent narrative or identity may change. The experience of alienation, however, does not need to equate with a psychologically negative narrative. I believe, instead, it means that the student living out a narrative that includes an experience of alienation may have to utilize more mental labor in order to make sense of their life and create a coherent narrative for themselves. To have extremes and paradoxes as part of a narrative requires more than a passive engagement; a negotiation between sides is necessary.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Is social mobility, is the American Dream enough? Simply to accomplish this dream does not solve the inequalities students face, nor solve the problems their communities and families face. Being a successful student does not stop you from being shot by police. It does not stop prejudices and injustices for others like you. Proving equality by the standards of someone else does not change these standards: it reinforces them.

Further research can be done on how alienation works inter-generationally and how students who become invested in their education reconcile their past and present lives. A study of how people of color and people from low-income backgrounds enter the academic world or exclusive spaces and what can be done in these spaces is an under appreciated but important area of study. In this study I was only able to code fifteen stories but a project like this could be expanded to include more stories and focus also on the differences across stories, taking into account positionalities of race and gender. A similar study to continue this research could be done with the stories used for national nonprofits or scholarship programs that use student stories that are distributed on a larger scale. Another area that could be studied are college acceptance essays from low-income, urban, first-generation students because, in a similar way to the stories being used for nonprofit marketing materials, students are working through the ways they have heard success described and how they come to understand the construct of success. Further research could look at a greater number of stories and compare how stories are told along different social media platforms as well. Additionally, these stories are specific to the Bay Area and another study could work to compare or analyze jointly stories that come from national nonprofits or local nonprofits that are based in other urban spaces. Educators and staff of

nonprofits can look to open conversations and teach culturally relevant pedagogy that allows students to be themselves fully in a classroom space and does not exalt social mobility above all else.

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APPENDIX A

POSITIONALITY

THE "NORMAL" TEENAGER

"most seventeen-year-olds"
 "just wanting to be a normal teenager"
 "feeling alone having to face these atypical challenges"
 "nothing of the ordinary"
 "so that I am no longer an exception"
 "instead of my siblings and I playing hide and seek, we hid from dangers within our home"
 "I couldn't have fathomed then that I would end up working full time at the age of thirteen in order [to] help my family survive"
 "in my life I had to do things I thought I would never do, but had to do for us to survive"
 "shootings are something that many people go through life without knowing. Unfortunately, by the time I was seven I was used to the shootings and other violence that surrounded me and my family"

FANTASY/IMPOSSIBILITY

"I belong in the schools that may sometimes feel unattainable"
 "this fairy tale family came crashing down"
 "I envisioned Disney characters"
 "forever was before our happy bubble was incinerated into an ash"
 "spent years wishing for the perfect t.v. family"
 "I could never [imagine] myself graduating from college"
 "if you asked my family about 10 years ago, would have seemed a laughable impossibility"
 "college was for the rich"
 "work together towards a community of equity so that I am no longer an exception, but a part of a diverse and well-educated society we all deserve to be a part of"
 "everyone around me says it is impossible that I'm not on drugs or in the streets, impossible that I'm educated, talented, and compassionate"
 "growing up, I could never [imagine] myself graduating from college"
 "only 24% of us are expected to graduate college"
 "as an immigrant, first-generation college student from a low-income family, my life could easily have been drastically different"
 "the best hope I had was to attend the under-resourced schools I was assigned to"

APPENDIX B

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

CARE-TAKER

“because of their long work hours and limited language skills, they depended on me- the oldest in the household-to take on a lot of adult responsibilities”

“He taught me the importance of working and providing not just [for] myself but for others”

“My mother worked long hours trying to provide for our family, so at home I was the parent to my younger siblings”

“My life goal is to help others in the way that Poppy helped me”

“Along with being a high school student, I am a caregiver and an English translator”

“As a caregiver, I have the responsibility of taking care of my dad who is bipolar”

“the responsibility of helping to take care of my family”

“I’ve spent the majority of my adolescent life protecting and caring for my siblings”

“Even though I have an older brother, I was often depended on to do most of the work around the house. From filling out applications for Medi-Cal to writing checks to pay bills, I was beginning to hold a parental figure in the house because my parents were not fluent in English despite being in the U.S. for more than a decade”

“I would help my dad with his peritoneal dialysis every night”

“Now, I am still rotating between my parents, but I am able to help not only my father every night with his dialysis, but my mom as well whenever she gets back from work. I still take care of my younger brother and sister and visit my father whenever possible”

“By the tender age of eight, I had become a surrogate mother to my younger siblings”

“I became a caretaker, having to go to sleep at 2:00 am or constantly waking up throughout the night because my sibling would not stop crying when they needed to be fed or changed”

“If I fell, then my family would subsequently crumble”

OVERCOMING

“I found myself too often arguing with the new owners of the building, defending my family against the heartless tactic they were taking”

“I worked hard to earn a spot at [private school]”

“My parents were never able to give me material things, but they taught me to have strong morals and values including hard work, determination and resilience, which I recognize now as skillsets that helped me get through this experience”

“I became more engaged and wanted to work even harder”

“In order to get to school, since my freshman year I have woken up at 5:00 am to take the bus at 6:10 am for an hour-long ride to [city]. I know my journey will pay off because there is nothing I value higher than having a fulfilling education”

“I learned that it is possible to overcome a deep sense of defeat when you are surrounded by supportive family and community”

“The eviction taught me to be resilient and perseverant while going through a difficult emotional time”

“I am determined to honor her memory through contributions I can make to my community and family”

“I am determined more than ever, to be an advocate and a leader for my community”

“I have managed to survive and rise above the tragedies”

“I turned to sports, poetry, songwriting, music, and community service to release the built up aggression I had towards my father and to overcome stressful situations in my life”

“staying on track”

“I am proud that I maintained a 4.0 GPA”

“continuously talked about college and how I could get there”

“I became even more determined to get out of the bad neighborhood and I found education was the gateway”

“but I kept pushing myself to succeed”

“By my junior year, I was back on track to pursuing higher education”

“Though I have been through rough patches in my life, I have found the strength to overcome these challenges with the help of my peers, mentors, and nonetheless my family”

“I believe that if you set your mind to something, you can achieve it no matter how long it takes”

“I also learned not to be afraid to leave [neighborhood], to meet new diverse people, and to challenge myself no matter the level of difficulty that the challenge may bring me”

“Remembering what I lacked during those times, is one of the greatest memories I have. Remembering that you lost something is a great way to find something”

“The immense terror that gripped me on that night has plagued my dreams consistently. As a result, I now aspire to rise above this negativity”

“Nothing can erase the hardships I’ve endured, just as nothing can erase my zeal to soar above and succeed”

“Despite the challenges I had experienced, I took the initiative to apply for a program called [name of program]. I’m one of the few from my school who took the initiative to pursue my passion, which is to be an architect”

“Despite the challenges, I do not settle for the minimum”

APPENDIX C

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

ACADEMICS V. PERSONAL LIFE

“I cared about my grades, but I also cared about having a place to live”

“I learned how to multi-task; being focused at school while also being emotionally supportive to my parents”

“I am proud of myself for thriving in an environment where I didn’t have a financial advantage, and where I was the first person to go through the process of considering college in my family”

“since, 6th grade, I’ve boarded a bus that transports me from [home neighborhood name], one of the city’s most crime ridden districts, to [neighborhood name], the city’s most affluent zone. This journey connected my home to my schools”

“competing against more privileged students who have received a top-tier education was intimidating”

“I became a part of an intimate community, wherein most classmates came from wealthier backgrounds, yet families were not judgmental but rather helped me integrate smoothly into the school”

“in the midst of all these opportunities, I faced some hardships and challenges vastly different from what I expected on my first day at [school]”

“I translated often for my parents who were unable to communicate to my teachers”

“I quickly noticed how my peers around me were more affluent and unlike [old school], at that time, I was the only Chinese speaking student”

“[nonprofit] helped me escape my troubles by giving me an amazing tutor and mentor”

“having this partnership and friendship with an adult was very helpful especially because she went to college and had experiences that my parents were not fortunate to have”

“my mother wanted me to stay in the United States to continue my education she desperately fought for me to have, but I felt I needed to be with my family and we decided to leave the two places I called home: [nonprofit] and [home city]”

“with all the problems going on in my house, it was even more difficult and frustrating to transition to another school, but I was determined”

“my sisters and friends [worked through] my struggle with depression. They encouraged me to do well in school so I can go to college”

“I am constantly rotating between my parents and involving myself in many activities in school that it is hard for me [to] balance my time”

“it has been fairly hard for me to accommodate to my personal life when I am busy at school.”

“he felt I wasn’t home enough, so he demanded that I quit. On the other hand my mother felt that I had been involved for so many years that I should continue”

“I am tired of all the suffering and all the crying that I see with my little brothers and my mom. When I go to school the next day I try not to let it interfere with my education, but there are some days that I can’t control it”

“I was starting to get A’s and B’s, but the problems at home remained the same.”

“school was another new challenge for me because it was hard to pay attention to the class and I felt lonely”

APPENDIX D

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

SUPPORT

“[nonprofit’s] support and everything they have provided for me are priceless”

“I would not have been able to go through the personal hardships I faced last year, when I felt I couldn’t accomplish my dreams, without their support”

“the emotional safety that [nonprofit] and my counselor’s office...afforded me were my only light during such a dark moment in my life”

“I am forever grateful to them and their role in my success today”

“their never ending badgering”

“she gave me encouragement, revised my essays, harassed me by phone and texts to meet the deadlines”

“receive leadership development programs and most importantly allow me to graduate college without any loans”

“their special attention to us as individuals that changed everything for me”

“an environment filled with peers in similar situations to deal with this HUGE transition together”

“the support that [nonprofit] gave me was crucial to developing my academic and personal confidence”

“if it wasn’t for the staff, I know one hundred percent that I would not be here”

“[nonprofit] coupled this workshop with ways to leverage our own strengths and provided us with tools to ensure our success”

“helped us envision ourselves as college students”

“[school] offered me an abundance of resources and provided me with a laptop, a huge benefit especially since I didn’t have access to a computer at home”

“outside of school, I was supported by the [nonprofit] community”

“these differences I noticed could have easily put a damper on this new opportunity, but it didn’t because of [nonprofit]”

“through the incredible education I received at [private school] and the support my family and I received at [nonprofit], I am proud and extremely excited to enroll in my first choice high school”

“but because of programs like [nonprofit]...I stand before you today”

“[nonprofit] immediately reached out to me and my family and offered to help with anything”

“[nonprofit] staff took me to visit schools when my mother didn’t feel up to it”

“my mother tried her best to be there and found comfort in knowing that [nonprofit] was there to assist me with anything I might need”

“[nonprofit] provided much needed relief for my father to ensure the best possible education for me”

“[nonprofit] helped me apply to and be accepted to an amazing high school with a full-scholarship”

“throughout the high school application process, they helped my father with the application and financial-aid forms, offered SSAT classes for me to take and even drove me around to take tests, visit schools and fairs”

“I was well prepared and I had a positive attitude because [nonprofit] helped me build that self-confidence”

“even today, I feel that I can never go wrong when [nonprofit] is by my side”

“[nonprofit] gave me more than hope”

NONPROFITS/SCHOOLS AS FAMILY

“an incredible community of friends and teachers”

“when I think of family, I think of [nonprofit name]”

“it has become my second home”

“this community has been with me through the smallest and biggest moments of my life”

“gave me moral support when I got my first haircut ever”

“celebrated with me when I received my college acceptances”

“my [nonprofit] family provided me with the tools necessary to be successful at school, and supported me emotionally as I faced immense challenges”

“[nonprofit] is like a family, and they have done so much more for me than just provide academic access and support”

“it is like my extended family, a parent who provides for their child the necessities to succeed in college”

APPENDIX E

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

OPPORTUNITY

“provided me with the privilege of a new way of learning”
 “made more aware of the world around me through service trips they offered”
 “my parents sought out opportunities to help my sister and me”
 “they could not believe the opportunities that the program offered”
 “my mom could only tell me that this was a great opportunity, although in hindsight, we didn’t know what that meant”
 “[nonprofit] offered me the resources to attend some of the best private middle schools in the city”
 “with [nonprofit], I finally found the symbolic shuttle to bring me, and my family, from our lives in [home neighborhood] to lives filled with more opportunities”
 “thanks to [nonprofit], I said yes to opportunities”
 “my world opened up”
 “as a first generation college student, I plan to maximize the opportunities college offers and use it as a stepping stone to uncovering more truths about genetics, an issue that has been so pertinent to my life”
 “while only 8% of low-income students graduate from college, thanks to [nonprofit], I know I will be part of the 92% of [nonprofit] students who will benefit from an incredible college education”
 “the right to a good education should be a given in this great country, but so often the marginalized populations are left behind”
 “I never knew that I had choices in my educational pursuits—until [nonprofit]”
 “a program that provides motivated, low-income students with amazing educational opportunities”
 “through [nonprofit], I was placed into a great middle school and offered rigorous after-school programming twice a week”
 “[tutor] introduced me to different neighborhoods and places I have never been to”

THE “KEY”

“despite their own lack of education, they believed that it was the key to their children’s successes”
 “I now have skills that will be invaluable to me through college and beyond”
 “MY education would be the solution to our financial instability as well as a coping mechanism for the emotional and physical bruises that my father left us”
 “energetic students who came from similar backgrounds to mine, all determined to pursue higher levels of educations”
 “I have a bright future because of [nonprofit]”
 “despite their lack of education, my parents still valued education for their children”
 “through education, I can end the impoverished cycle my family has lived, further helping my family.”
 “I started to look at education as a way out of this struggle.”

CHOICE

"I never knew that I had choices in my educational pursuits—until [nonprofit]"

"I chose not to take the easy way out like some of my friends in [city] and solve money problems by selling drugs and joining local gangs"

"and, I learned how to self-advocate. It helped define me as the independent young woman I am today"

"however, succeeding in life isn't a miracle for someone with my background. Succeeding is a choice one makes, regardless of where they come from or what they've been through. I made a choice that's hard for most: a choice to not feel sorry for myself, to not turn to drugs for comfort, and to instead step up and care for my siblings. I made the choice to move forward instead of staring at my past. The choice is always in our own hands; I chose"

"soon, I realized that I needed to do what was best for me and not just for others"

"I no longer needed to feel the need to please others"

"I believe that in the end, it would be up to me. I believe that college is worth every penny, and I am willing [to apply] for any grants or scholarships in order to succeed in this part of my life"

"If I say I can do it, I know I can"

"such as this time I stopped worrying about my family and started thinking about how I wanted to live my future"

"at least I know I have myself to know that whatever I want to do I can make it a reality with hard work and really the motivation that I have"

"If I look back at my childhood, I can see it is depressing but I have learned not to be worried about the past and to focus on my present"

"by taking an active role in making sure that I receive the best education possible to me, I can make sure that no child, niece, or nephew of mine will have to sell items to help their family maintain financial stability. Neither will they have to stay up late at night to take care of siblings, and forsake their childhood for the benefit of the family"

DREAM

"I am living my dream"

"at that time, I had given up my dream of going to a four-year college right after high school, but applied anyways"

"I realize that I don't want to be decent; I want something better that can make me extraordinary"

"we moved full of hope and expectations for a better future"

"dreams are aspirations ready to take flight,' I reminded myself as the van dropped me off in the unfamiliar neighborhood and the feeling of dread crawled up my spine"

"their dream was for me to be the first in my family to graduate from college"

"they are immigrants who came to this country to pursue their 'American Dream' - which to them meant giving their children the power to define their own futures"

"I will work hard to be your American Dream"

"I have a dream to give back and help others by advancing medicine"

"my parents left Guatemala in 1997 to seek a better future for our family in the United States"

"but I also saw what she wanted for me, to become a well-educated professional who would not have to resort to manual labor to make ends meet, the way she and my father and their parents had to do"

MARKERS OF SUCCESS

Financial Stability

"completing college will open more possibilities to work and travel and enable me to financially [be] able to help support my family"

"With a college degree, I will have more options for helping my mother financially"

Pride

"most importantly, going to college will make my family proud of me"

"it makes me proud knowing that I have fulfilled one of the dreams that my parents had when they came to the United States"

"graduating from college is a great achievement for me"

"With a 4.21 weighted GPA and as a number two in my class of seventy students, I exhibit nothing less than success"

"I learned that being different is a gift and [nonprofit] has helped me find my pride in being Asian and trilingual"

Role Model

"as an African American male who has risen above so much, I feel that it is my duty to give others a positive role model like Poppy gave to me"

"I have pushed myself to become a strong role model for them- to show them that there is more to life than the choices our parents made"

"I know that one day, I can show others that even through rough times, you can do it"

"by myself, I learned that the best way to live is to try new things and give back to the community. Whatever things we give out, will complete an orbit and come around"

"I look forward to coming back as a successful immigration lawyer, and to be a role model for future generations of [nonprofit name] scholars"

"I aspire to be a role model for him and even my future children"

APPENDIX G

FAMILY/HOME LIFE

SACRIFICE

“She is one of the main reasons why I want to go to college; I want to help provide for her the way she has provided for me”

“They made sacrifices so we could get a good education”

“I would like to honor my parents, my two sisters, and all the people who helped me”

“Graduating will be the greatest moment of my life; I share it with them”

“I am very thankful for everything my parents do give me and I appreciate it because I know my parents work really hard for it”

“They sacrificed everything to make this possible”

“Your sacrifices, sweat and tears will not go unnoticed...”

“the undying determination and sacrifices my parents made for me, I stand before you today-a proud, college-bound student.”

“I appreciate so much more the opportunities my parents sacrificed to get me into [nonprofit] and now I am determined, more than ever, to be an advocate and a leader for my community”

ANTITHETICAL TO SUCCESS

“I know that who I am is the result of my parents’ mistakes but the strength I have developed has enabled me to move forward and make a better life for myself and my family”

“I never will make the same mistakes my parents did; I will be better and more successful than they ever were”

“Every time I am at home I just try to be resilient and not let my father influence my behavior at school or at home”

“If can’t do my homework in my room because my mom needs to go to sleep very early because she starts work at five in the morning”

“Every day I feel overwhelmed because I can’t concentrate due to the constant chaos in my house”

“Maybe without the distraction I can have better grades”

“I have seen the life my parents have been through without education and I don’t want that for my life. I want the satisfaction that I was able to do something in my life and not be another stereotype of a Mexican”

“I know my mother really does love me but sometimes she says things that put me down. The things she says to me make me doubt my abilities to [succeed] in college. The major thing my mom says to me is that I’m going to become like my older sister. My older sister doesn’t have a job and has a child”

“But as determined and passionate as they were, my parents could not speak, read or write in English and their own lack of experience as students prevented me from having the resources to fully understand the meaning of graduating high school and attending college”