

INTO THE SILENCE: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE OF STUDENT CHOICE, EXPERIENCE,
AND IDENTITY AT A PRIVATE CAREER COLLEGE IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

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**INTO THE SILENCE: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE OF STUDENT CHOICE,
EXPERIENCE, AND IDENTITY AT A PRIVATE CAREER COLLEGE IN NORTHERN
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Abstract

This study explores why six students chose to attend a private career college (PCC) in northern Ontario, and how stories of their experiences and choices impact their identities. In doing so, the study addresses the research problem that despite growing numbers of PCC enrollments in Ontario, PCCs remain under researched (Li & Jones, 2015; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014), and what little research exists excludes the student voice almost in its entirety. The result is that very little is known about how PCC students experience their education, or about what other benefits there may be in addition to the labour-related ones that dominate approaches to PCC research and government data collection. This is particularly problematic in light of demographics that demonstrate that Ontario PCCs serve higher percentages of students who are marginalized and/or underrepresented in postsecondary education than its public counterparts (Malatest & Associates, 2008; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian, & Hicks, 2014).

The study contributes to this research gap with a critical narrative inquiry conducted through a series of three semi-structured interviews with each participant over seven months. Critical feminist theories guided data analysis towards the construction of participant narratives of their early school experiences and decisions to attend the PCC, and an exploration of the thematic threads across their experiences. The critical feminist framework was further used to interrogate how knowledge practices in schools impact PCC student choice, and to privilege the role of participants as co-constructors of meaning.

Key findings include that PCC student choice is much more complex than existing research demonstrates; that PCC education can lead to surprising outcomes (such as increased self-confidence and transformative identity work) that are often overlooked by prevalent labour-related approaches to PCC research; and, that PCC students are impacted by the stigma that

exists in Ontario towards PCCs as low quality education. Recommendations are made for PCCs and policy makers, such as encouraging the reevaluation of how PCC quality is measured in Ontario, particularly given recent pushes by the Ontario government to evaluate PCCs more stringently on labour-related criteria. The study demonstrates that labour-related approaches alone risk eclipsing other (intended and unintended) benefits of attending a PCC.

Keywords: Private Career College (PCC), Career College, Ontario, Student Voices, Narrative Identity, Critical Feminist Framework, Critical Narrative Research (CNR)

Dedication

The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

— hooks, 1989

This dissertation is dedicated to all the people who have had to speak in the language of someone else to be heard, to the people who have felt silenced, or who have been made to feel as though they are not good enough, important enough, intelligent enough, anything enough. This work goes out to you.

Of course, this work is also dedicated to my loving partner Evan, my parents Maria and Carlos, my brother Mark, sister-in-law Stephanie, and niece Mackenzie, my parents-in-law Peggy and Jerold, and my cousin and perpetual supporter Jessica. Thank you for your unwavering support.

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To Dr. Carmen Shields, I thank for teaching me that my own stories are worth pursuing, and for gently encouraging me again recently to continue to search for connections between my experiences and stories and how I live in this world.

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In considering why we know what we know, I do not believe we can leave our pasts behind us.

— Shields, 2005, p. 180

The truth about us is that we tell stories, and in each of our stories we give a piece of ourselves to our listeners.

— Riley & Rich, 2012, p. 100

Prologue: Embracing the Subtext

One morning, like so many mornings, I found a colleague who would come along on a walkthrough of one of our college campuses and introduce me to the instructors and students. We walked into our first classroom to see a dozen or so faces looking back at us. I remember feeling glad I had chosen a blazer and heels. I felt professional, as though my clothing masked that I was the owners' daughter, and gave me a chance to be seen for what I could do instead of who my parents were. I smiled back at them, excited to hear what they had to say. "Class, this is Amanda. She's the daughter of the college owners," my colleague told them with a smile on her face. I smiled at the class as genuinely as I could, asked a few questions about what they were learning, made a joke, and left the room. I took my colleague aside, as I took all colleagues aside who introduced me as the owners' daughter, and reminded her that I had a title and a role. As we walked into the second room, I forced a smile on my face as my colleague introduced me as "Amanda, the Vice President of Academics and the daughter of the owners."

For the first three years in my position as VPA, I was ashamed that I was the owners' daughter because I knew it meant that I had been given a position I might not yet have earned. Certainly, it was clear enough that my colleagues felt the same. Yet, despite reflecting on how I had benefited from my privilege, I was defensive when staff brought my personal life into my

professional sphere, and angry when I felt my projects were undermined behind my back as a demonstration of power. I was frustrated that it took the better part of three years for staff to finally heed my requests to refer to my dad by his name in meetings with instructors or students rather than as *your dad*. I felt that my degrees and experience teaching overseas in Europe were being overlooked. Admittedly, I did a lot of whining at home in those years about how unfair it was that some colleagues felt it was appropriate to openly discuss my personal life, especially when I could have been accused of an Employment Standards Act violation if I even thought about questioning how their personal relationships impacted their ability to perform their roles. I saw them as hurting the professional image I worked very hard to maintain so that students and instructors would not think I was just a privileged kid who was handed everything in life. For a long time, I was not Amanda, the VPA; I was the girl whose parents owned the school, the girl with no name of her own, no role, and no credibility. Mostly, I was the girl who did not need to be taken seriously by her colleagues as having anything valuable to offer.

I am now thankful that my coworkers caused me to confront my position of privilege because it taught me the possible dangers of living a divided life that leaves you ashamed of parts of yourself. In trying to hide what personally motivated me to work there, I spent more time initially in power struggles than on using the passion I had for PCC education and students towards some good. I used my credentials as weapons, and, ultimately, alienated some people I truly respected. In hindsight, I regret that my efforts to prove I was capable made others feel as though what they had been doing before I arrived was not good enough.

However, it took me a few years to learn that lesson. It was students, first (unbeknownst to me at the time), and my PhD cohort and professors, later, who helped me to find power in my subjectivity and stories. I share some stories now in this prologue to overtly show that I am

deeply involved in my research on a personal and professional level, and that I no longer see my personal investment as hurting or dividing me, or as making me a less credible researcher. I now embrace that my stories form an inevitable subtext for this study, from my early ties to PCC education, to the many conversations I have had with PCC students, to my own experiences as a past and current student, to my musings and conversations over the status of knowledge and intelligence in present day Canada, to my relationship with my parents, to my behind-the-scenes exposure to running a school that is at once an academic institution and a business. All of these pieces, and more, have come together to, first, bring me to this study, and, second, to inform the methodological choices I made in designing and conducting it.

I open my dissertation with this prologue with the intention of accomplishing two very important, albeit related, tasks: the first, to explicitly introduce my belief in the myth of objectivity as the sole means through which knowledge can be produced; the second, to work towards achieving Riley and Rich's (2012) critical goal of restoring the human subject to knowledge endeavours by "engaging in acts of storying our lives" (p. 104). Though this project is not a self-study, to ignore the influence of my own stories and experiences would be to propagate the myth of the distanced, neutral, and apolitical researcher who can objectively arrive at truth statements that are irrefutable and universally applicable (Code, 1988/1992, 1993, 1995; Hanen, 1988; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Lang, 2011; Lather, 1991; Smith, 1990). Instead, I begin this dissertation with a "view from a body" (Haraway, 1988, p. 589) that will set the foundation for the many layers of my subjectivity that you will encounter in the subsequent chapters. Such a view allows me to conduct an embodied form of "value-laden research . . . [that is] not to be properly objective" (Code, 1995, p. 17), and to invite you, the reader, to continually interrogate my assumptions, findings, and analysis, to bring into question what we call facts and

research findings, and, most importantly, to give you a glimpse into the relationships and stories that say so much about the PCC sector in Ontario and the students who have, as of yet, had little opportunity to be heard (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014).

My Story as Subtext

The Controversial Family Business

So, how did I come to be the self-conscious VPA of a PCC? I was born into an entrepreneurial, immigrant family, in an age when capitalism was starting to garner serious criticism, in a country that is increasingly liberal, and where privatization is considered by some to be a bad word. That is how I have come to view my context and to frame my background. For as long as I can remember (and long before I knew the criticisms attached to private colleges), I have been part of our family business, part of Canada's private sector. Our family business started as a computer shop that sold computers and provided technical support and training. My brother and I were expected to clean this shop for a weekly allowance. Mostly, we would assemble a makeshift wheelchair out of a four-wheeled dolly and a rogue chair from the storage room, and push each other up and down the long hallways, laughing louder than we should have when our mom would catch us and yell for us to get back to cleaning. Sometimes, we would draw on the paper flipchart in the computer-training classroom, writing things we thought seemed important and that undoubtedly must have caused our dad a sigh or two over the cost of flipchart paper. Other times, we would stare into the insides of the computers our dad had taken apart and ruminate on the similarities between them and the views we had seen looking down from the airplanes that would take us on our summer trips to Portugal.

This small world changed for us in the late 1990s when a local PCC declared bankruptcy. The media reports caught my dad's attention with accusatory headlines of students being left out on the street without anyone to finish their training. At the time, I was too busy learning about

parabolas and Shakespearean dialogue to know what was happening in my city (less a criticism of the education system than a description of who I was as a student). I had no idea that a career college even existed in my hometown, much less that it had gone out of business. It was no less surprising to find on a short drive home from high school one afternoon that my parents had been the ones to purchase this college. My dad had said it casually, and I was suspiciously amused by the idea that someone could purchase a college. *Was he joking?* I wondered. *Can a person even buy a college? What on earth is a private career college?* In the years since, I have forgotten what it felt like to not know what a PCC is, to not be able to readily produce the definition I have now given countless times in person or for doctoral papers. Despite having lived in a city with a PCC my whole childhood, I needed to be told that a PCC is a privately-owned vocational college that offers accelerated career-based certificate and diploma programs. We did not delve into who oversaw PCCs (then the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [MTCU]¹), and how they were regulated in Ontario and Canada (to be discussed in Chapter Two). What was important for me to know was that these schools offered an alternative postsecondary pathway to public colleges and universities, and that my family would be running one.

I now know that my dad did not simply purchase a college. When a PCC declares bankruptcy, other nearby PCCs are responsible for completing what is called a *train out* for the students using Ontario's Training Completion Assurance Fund (TCAF) to which PCCs are required to annually contribute in order to operate (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development [MAESD], 2017). TCAF is meant to protect students in the event of closures by enabling quick transfers of students to other schools to finish their programs. My dad's network

¹ In June 2016, the MTCU became the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD).

and software training company happened to be the school that was asked to provide the train out on this particular occasion. After successfully training out those students, my dad lobbied the former MTCU for a Charter to continue to operate the school, and was successful in his petition. He was fortunate enough to find someone with a passion for education who agreed to go work with him as the Dean of Academics. From there began my dad's initiation into the world of academics. He and the Dean often clashed, with my dad operating from the business standpoint of ensuring the college was sustainable enough to continue operating (particularly with the memory of a not-so-recent bankruptcy), and the Dean with an eye to quality and standards of education. With their individual expertise, they received approval in the first four years for ten of the twenty or so programs the college now offers, including the first primary care paramedic training program to be approved at a PCC in Ontario.

Most important to me at the time was that my cleaning duties were doubled, and that my brother and I became first-time makeshift business owners when our parents let us run the student pop machine. By some miracle, we made enough money from the pop machine to stay in business for a couple of years. This was despite the fact that the pop machine was rarely properly stocked, and never responded to the student complaints taped to the front requesting what our family called *name brand* pop like Root Beer© or Orange Crush©. The pop machine eventually lost all its business to the convenience store that opened in our plaza. As it turns out, we had not yet acquired our dad's aptitude for running businesses. However, the thrill of preparing pounds of change to be deposited into our joint account is still a fond memory that I attach to my experiences at the college. Thinking back now, perhaps that was my first lesson in the possible dangers of not listening to what students have to say.

As the summers went by, my high grades in school inspired my dad to give me odd jobs in the academics department, doing administrative tasks for the Dean of Academics like editing curriculum or course documents, taking notes at program review committee meetings, learning how to audit files for Ministry compliance, learning what paperwork was required for a student to legally attend a PCC, helping with data entry of program approval or accreditation submissions, and other related administrative tasks. Throughout those summers, I came to learn a lot about the programs we taught, the administration required to keep the college in compliance, and to keep the curriculum up-to-date and industry-approved. All of these pieces are important, but I came to see compliance as the only mark of a quality curriculum. What I did not see then was that I would not truly know the sector or our curriculum until I started to know the students. It would be a few more years before I had that opportunity — and until then, I can now say that I had no idea what PCCs truly did for their students.

Learning to Listen to Stories

One day in particular stands out as helping me to better understand the role our college had in some students' lives, and at hinting at the value of stories in creating meaning. The event, a wing naming ceremony held over a lunch hour on the 30th anniversary of the company, was to honour the former Dean of Academics for instilling the spirit of academic excellence that my dad had credited for the college's long-term success. He knew that without her influence, the college might have remained only a business. The small cafeteria was packed with students, the honoree and her guests, college administration and faculty, and a handful of local media representatives. We had organized speeches to honour her. I expected these speeches to be short and formal, but the most wonderful thing happened. The honoree's son took the small podium and started sharing stories about his mom. He told us about what it was like to grow up with a single mother

who would wake up early to walk him to the bus so that she could secure him a spot over the warm heater in the dead of winter because she could not afford a car to drive him; about how she would sacrifice her own comforts (but not his) to be able to attend college and get an education; about being a son who was prouder of his mom than he ever noticed as a child; and, most importantly, about what he valued most about his mother's education; that is, her perseverance and will to succeed and gain an education against the odds of financial hardships, single parenthood, and self-doubt.

Had I been selected to give a speech at that time in my life, I would not have imagined sharing personal stories like that. Admittedly, I initially questioned his approach. By the end of his speech, however, I understood why he chose to tell stories and saw the ripple effect throughout the room. Students streamed out of the cafeteria at the end of the speeches and shared their own stories of overcoming hardship and being inspired by the honoree's path. Though I did not yet see the power of story, what was clear to me then as I listened to one student's story in particular was that education and, in this case, being a PCC student could mean so much more than simply getting a diploma or a job. My concern with compliance and meeting regulatory expectations, though important, seemed as far away as ever as I listened to this student's story. Though I will not share the exact details, her story involved overcoming incredible adversity and self-doubt, with a will and determination I know I would not have had in the same set of circumstances. I could almost feel the pride she had over finally being able to share her story and tell the world that she could succeed and do something intellectual. She shared her belief that getting an education was the best thing she could do to show her three children that she would fight for them, and that they would have a hopeful future. There is so much more to this story that I am leaving unshared, but what is important for me to share with you now in the absence of

her voice is that this student, and many other students since whom I have taken the time to truly listen to, have taught me something I never learned in school: that education is not just about credentials and work opportunities, and decisions to attend postsecondary education cannot always or easily be reduced to one simple reason like wanting a new career. I will never forget this student and her lesson that there is so much to learn from a good story.

It is worth noting that I am not under the delusion that all PCC students have similarly positive experiences; however, what this and other stories have taught me is that there is value in seeking out and listening to them, whether they are negative or positive.

Connecting the Stories, the Study, and the Researcher

A grade school task. Grade four. I remember clearly, almost clearly — good enough and even better maybe. The feel of pen on paper is thrilling, the curve of my penmanship careful and deliberate. What can I write so that I can keep writing?

I know my ending before I write it. “That’s all folks.” A nod to my friends Bugs Bunny and the Looney Toons. Thrilling. And what elegant cursive; maybe four gold stars. I imagine applause. Much better than “The End” or nothing at all.

Heat rising, up, up, up. Neck first, then face; shame in brilliant red. Their eyes are down, right? They know how it feels, right? They won’t look, will they? “It’s inappropriate for a school journal,” she says from above. “Silliness is not for school,” she adds. Slowly — very slowly — she strikes my words out with her red pen. My journal is on my folded lap again on the reading rug. No gold stars. “Next?”

I have so far chosen to share only positive stories that have motivated me to care so deeply about this sector. However, what has also compelled me to seek out the PCC student voice is a trend I began to notice in students believing they could not learn or were presumably *stupid* or *dumb*. I was dumbfounded to hear so many students sharing similar stories of perpetual failures and self-doubt. I noticed that too many graduation speeches were about being surprised to have made it, about having to overcome deeply-held beliefs that they would most likely fail at this too. So many students spoke of one person on their journey who made a difference for them, who made them see and accept that they could learn and reach their goals. Noticing such a trend, I began to seriously wonder how someone could ever come to believe that they truly cannot learn or *succeed* academically. How does this come to happen? How does it influence the choices these students make after schooling because of such beliefs? Is there any connection between student choice and the low status and reputation of PCCs? The more I thought about this, the more the questions came. Why were my school experiences so different from theirs? What made me *succeed* in that environment despite knowing that I had many moments of academic mortification that make the blood rush to my face even now as I write? Interestingly, I had never questioned this before hearing these stories. I took for granted that if I was succeeding, I must be intelligent. Where did I learn that message? How did I come to associate one with the other?

More importantly, why did it take hearing so many bright and capable students telling me that they were *dumb*, *stupid*, *failures*, *unable to learn*, for me to really question what marks intelligence? Why did these differences in academic success come to be so directly related with differences of intelligence? As I ruminated on these questions, I began to remember stories about my school experiences that made me see why I might have so easily empathized with these student stories. Part of it might have been guilt over having such a different set of experiences,

but the other part was knowing how easily I could have been that student who did not do well within academic settings, and how much of myself I had to give up in order to ensure I was not. I remembered how often I did well because I refused to say or write anything until I knew what everyone else thought about a topic; or because I looked to the literature to tell me what I thought; or because of the many hours I would spend in the library reading all of the literary criticism I could find on a novel before I formed my opinion of its merit; or because I could write well because I had accidentally absorbed academic vocabulary and sentence structure by spending more hours than people knew reading academic writing; or because I knew early on not to use personal pronouns in essays for certain subjects or teachers; or because I was more comfortable expressing my thoughts in writing than when speaking; or because I could somehow take cues from professors that I should hide how much I truly enjoyed Jane Austen for more than just the social commentary and satire; or because I usually knew what my teachers wanted, and I sacrificed my thoughts, opinions, myself in order to give it to them in a format I knew would please them. This was what made me *successful*. That is what I realize now made me subconsciously fear that failure was always just around the corner, that I would be revealed as a fraud.

The story with which I opened this section is a real one as I remember it now, in all its mortifying glory. Beginning my doctoral journey caused me to reflect not only on the student stories I have shared in this prologue, but also to look inward and try to connect how their stories resonated with mine. I had always thought my school experiences were overwhelmingly positive because I could say with certainty that I had a successful student life. I had achieved high grades, scholarships, awards, and recognition. However, I now recall this fourth grade memory often, wondering how these small moments of mortification and so-called *failure* can indoctrinate us

into the academic mores that lead to success or failure, of how one's reaction to such a moment can either lead to conformity to avoid more mortification, to rebellion against the system to take a stand, to self-doubt, self-hatred, confusion. How many similar moments does it take to influence a person's self-worth? How many times does someone need to be told that they have failed before they believe they are failures? What has to change for classifications to stop being about ability and inability, success and failure?

I do not ask these questions to argue that all PCC students feel this way or that the whole of the education system is bad. However, based on the interactions I have had far too many times with students who did not believe in themselves and my own memories of my school experiences, I cannot ignore the possible influences of educational experiences on the lives of students. Now, as I think about the incredible responsibility I feel I have to PCC students in my current role as VPA, I cannot help but recognize the urgency in rising to Riley and Rich's (2012) call for educational practitioners to reflect and "take risks and begin to understand our professional lives differently" (p. 104). For Riley and Rich (2012), taking such risks allows us to re-evaluate the taken-for-granted interactions we have as part of our professional lives, and to thus become more self-aware educators who can "devise alternative plots and encourage our co-learners to do the same" (p. 104). In embarking on this doctoral journey, I am actively choosing to see past only the compliance and regulatory matters that take up so much of my job. I hope to re-evaluate those taken-for-granted interactions I have with students, other staff, everyone I encounter in my professional and personal life, in order to truly listen and seek out the ways that education can support such "alternative plots" (Riley & Rich, 2012, p. 104). I no longer cringe when my personal background is revealed. Instead, I know that I can use my personal side to generate genuine and deep interest in the well-being of our students, and to allow me to "become

[a] stronger, more self-aware [person] who [is a] co-learner and who can critically reflect on who [I am] and who [I] want to be” (Riley & Rich, 2012, p. 104). Right now, I choose to be someone who devotes my time and effort towards providing a small glimpse of a student voice that, to date, remains relatively unheard (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014).

Conclusion

At its most fundamental level, this dissertation will be a mosaic of storied experiences that, once told, become the impetus for meaning making. I was interested in this study long before I knew it, entering doctoral studies instead to study best practices in asynchronous online learning environments. The subject itself is a worthy one; however, it spoke more to my desire to bolster my own credibility than to truly serve the students who have inspired me to continue on in a job that at times can seem more about compliance and red tape than anything else. I hope that this piecing together of experiences will be meaningful for each reader in some way. The goal is not to transfer all findings to all educational contexts, but rather to allow the complexity of the experiences to encourage us to create our own meanings that can help us towards Riley and Rich’s (2012) urgent goal of “understanding our professional lives differently” (p. 104).

I close this prologue with comfort in knowing that I have provided you, the reader, with enough access to my beliefs, assumptions, and viewpoints to be able to critically engage with the dissertation to come. My goal in this dissertation is not to cunningly persuade you to agree with the findings I have co-constructed with the participants of this study; rather, it is to give you relevant contextual information for your use in decoding the subsequent analyses, and, ultimately, in deciding whether or not you agree with them. With such context, I invite you to read on as I work within the goals of critical research (explained further in Chapter Four) to

share the voices of six PCC students, and to demonstrate that their perspectives matter and deserve to be taken seriously.

“I remember hearing you once say, Mr. Darcy, . . . that your resentment once created was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its being created.”

“I am,” said he, with a firm voice.

“And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?”

“I hope not.”

“It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion, to be secure of judging properly at first.”

— Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813

Chapter One: Study Overview and Purpose

Overview

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study with the purpose of foregrounding subsequent chapters in the relevant contextual details that inform my approach to the topic of PCC student choice in Ontario. I also demonstrate how my personal interest in PCCs led me to the research problem and questions I explore in this study, and how the unique history of and attitudes towards vocational education, broadly, and PCCs, specifically, influenced the theoretical and methodological choices that guide its design. In doing so, I demonstrate how this inquiry will contribute to a knowledge and research gap on Canada’s postsecondary education system.

Research Problem: From Personal to Academic

My personal interest in PCCs led me to discover a research problem I might otherwise not have encountered; that is, the problem that there is very little research about PCCs in Canada, particularly any that can shed light on the many questions I shared in the Prologue about PCC students who expressed feelings of inadequacy and low self-confidence in relation to their

intelligence. In fact, what little literature I was able to find demonstrated that PCCs remain largely misunderstood or unknown in Canada (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012; Larocque, 2015; Li, 2006; Martin & MacLaine, 2016), seem to be of little interest to researchers (Li & Jones, 2015; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014), and face “reputational issues” (Martin & MacLaine, 2016, p. 72). There are a handful of studies on PCCs that offer important information about the sector; however, these studies mostly have the same objective of quantitatively gathering and updating statistics about student demographics or rates of enrollment, graduation, and employment (e.g., Environics Research, 2017; Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012; Larocque, 2015; Li, 2006; Malatest & Associates, 2007, 2008, 2009; Martin & MacLaine, 2016). Such research provides information on the sector and its students that helped me to situate PCCs in Canada’s postsecondary landscape, but, overall, I was left with the overwhelming feeling that there is still a lot to learn about PCCs in Canada, and very few people interested enough to do so.

Fortunately, the past two years have seen an increase in research interest (still quantitative) in the sector, with two new studies having been published in Ontario since the time I gained approval to begin data collection for this study (e.g., see Environics Research, 2017; Martin & MacLaine, 2016). However, there is still a pervasive lack of PCC student voices in the literature. I could find no traces of the PCC students I had come to know so well in my years at the PCC. This absence, or, in my view, silence, is particularly distressing when considering that PCC students comprise approximately one in fifteen of Ontario’s postsecondary student population (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014), or between 40,000 and 90,000 students each year (Career Colleges Ontario [CCO], 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Environics Research, 2017; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014). Among them, there are high percentages of students who are considered nontraditional students or students who are at risk of being

marginalized within schools; namely, students who are older in age; female; from lower income backgrounds; primary caregivers of young children; immigrants and/or non-native speakers of English; visible minorities; and, students with financial difficulty, family issues, or a lack of interest in education (Malatest & Associates, 2008; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014). Some existing studies attempt to ascertain why students choose to attend PCCs; however, they do so with a limited set of pre-determined options, such as a desire to increase earning potential, to change careers, to obtain training required for a job, or for general interest (e.g., Environics Research, 2017; Larocque, 2015; Malatest & Associates, 2008; Martin & MacLaine, 2016). Furthermore, because of the career-focused nature of PCC programs, most research evaluates PCCs in terms of their ability to increase, or not, the human capital of their students, which, albeit important, does not provide much insight into my experiences with PCC students with negative experiences with school or with low opinions of their intelligence. The most recent study commissioned in Ontario by Career Colleges Ontario (CCO) culminates its report with a cry for “a significant amount of deeper analysis” (Environics Research, 2017, p. 59) of PCC student choice at the “‘micro’ level” (Environics Research, 2017, p. 59).

Disappointed with a lack of qualitative information that could shed light on student experiences, I was forced to turn to literature on vocational education more broadly.

Unfortunately, more bad news awaited. Instead of answers, I found a long history of scathing criticism of vocational education, much of which I felt willfully misrepresented what vocational education can be. For example, instead of portraying vocational education as a place where some students find purpose and self-confidence, I was faced with opinions of vocational education as being “less noble” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1971, p. 36); of lower quality than more academic forms of education (Kinser & Levy, 2006; Moodie,

2009; e.g., Hodges Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004); as “preparation for second-class citizenship” (Lyons, Randhawa, & Paulson, 1991, p. 137); as more suitable for students who are “less bright” (Ryan, 1998, p. 399); and, as “a key way in which social inequality is mediated and reproduced” (Wheelahan, 2015, p. 3). For some critics, vocational education is thought to be “pushed by businessmen and efficiency-minded educators interested in using the schools to control workers and stabilize the corporate industrial society” (Kantor, 1986, p. 402). For others, vocational education is too specialized, resulting in students who are not broadly educated enough to participate in their communities and become civically engaged (Davey, 2004; e.g., Hodges Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004). Even scholarly publications reinforce these views by classifying vocational education at the bottom of a hierarchy of educational tiers and incorrectly defining it as less academically rigorous with virtually no admissions requirements (e.g., Moodie, 2009), a considerable problem when considering that there is a lack of research that can shed light on what PCC education might be, and how its students experience it in Ontario.

In the face of such overwhelmingly negative perspectives, I could not shake the feeling that the conversations taking place in the literature to date have been limited to those written by researchers with little experience with PCCs, and, possibly, with an interest in upholding and promoting traditional postsecondary models. I felt a deep-seated injustice in the fact that these opinions did not coincide in the least with my personal experiences working at a vocational school. How could I ethically throw aside that nagging feeling that researchers were not asking PCC students more open-ended questions about what vocational education means to them or if they see it to have any value in their lives? I wondered what more we could learn from a student that could not be understood solely based on whether or not that student selects *yes* to a question about their school’s commitment to civic engagement. I imagined what it might feel like for PCC

students to read time and again that the quality of education they received was *less than*, regardless of the many nights they might have stayed up into the morning hours studying for something that felt difficult. I wondered what these authors and researchers might say if they could attend one of the annual Career Colleges Ontario conferences during the Outstanding Graduate awards portion of the gala. I have had the pleasure of attending many of these conferences, and listening to these graduates share their unique stories about why their educational experiences helped them to feel more valued in Canadian society. Though these stories represent a limited and positive snapshot of PCC student experiences, these student voices and self-representations nevertheless offer quite a different take on the “less noble” (OECD, 1971, p. 36) vocational education.

For example, at the 2016 Career Colleges Ontario Conference, Jacob Teschke, the recipient of the Outstanding Graduate in Health Services award, gave a speech so moving that he got a standing ovation. Jacob shared his story of having been unsuccessful in both the university and public college environment, leading him to withdraw early on from both. He was left feeling as though he could not study or “be successful in anything” (Teschke, 2016). Wanting to do something with his life, Jacob reluctantly enrolled in a PCC to try postsecondary education for a third time. This time, he chose a Physiotherapy Assistant program, and found that the ability to apply what he learned in the workforce helped him to re-evaluate his belief that he could not succeed academically. What was so moving about Jacob’s speech is that he shared how much his success impacted his self-confidence and belief in himself. He spoke about how often he had felt written off as a failure, but that he had been able to get a permanent job in a hospital doing what he loved most, a feat he was proud of in today’s labour market. I cannot do justice now to Jacob’s speech, but I can surmise that had I only known that Jacob had been fortunate enough to

secure an attractive job in a volatile labour market, it would have failed to relay to me how important Jacob's education was in helping him to gain a sense of achievement, self-worth, and purpose. I also cannot help but wonder what Jacob's story might look like on a survey if Jacob had been asked to choose a predetermined option for why he chose to attend a PCC. I feel so deeply as to how much would have been lost in not hearing his story in his own words.

Fortunately, there is a significant body of qualitative research on vocational education in the United Kingdom that sought out student stories and perspectives. As will be explained in more detail in Chapter Three, such work has led to significant contributions to knowledge on postsecondary student choice, most notably that educational choice is influenced by students' self-perceptions of their educational identity, with many students choosing vocational pathways as a result of a dislike for academic programs, or a sense of real or perceived inability to succeed within them (e.g., Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Fuller, 2009; Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012). These findings importantly demonstrate that how knowledge is legitimized within schools, and, consequently, how students are made to feel about their intelligence and ability has important implications for the choices they make, as well as for how students experience their education and the world around them (Fuller, 2009; Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Melamed & Devine, 1988).

In Canada, research on PCCs has not yet delved into these more complex possibilities for student choice that are demonstrated in the United Kingdom. For example, what else in addition to what is listed on a survey might bring students to attend PCCs? Why does research indicate that approximately 72% of PCC students consider their PCC to have been their first choice of postsecondary institution (Malatest & Associates, 2008)? In what ways, if any, are students impacted by prevalent views of vocational institutions as "less noble" (OECD, 1971, p. 36) education for the "less bright" (Ryan, 1998, p. 399)? How, if at all, do students' educational

experiences and perceptions of their intelligence and ability inform their choices? In seeking to explore and work towards greater educational sustainability of vocational education in Ontario, in this study I seek to explore the richness and complexity of a student voice that has of yet been unheard and seemingly undesired towards providing answers to such questions.

Research Question

This gap in Canadian literature led me to extend the line of inquiry begun in the United Kingdom into the Canadian educational context by asking, how did a small group of students come to attend the PCC where I work, and what impact do their stories and choices have on how they define their identities? I further wonder in what ways, if any, do previous and current educational experiences contribute to how students conceptualize their identities and “ways of knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997)? What meaning do students draw from their experiences at this PCC? What might PCCs glean from students’ educational experiences and stories that can lead to the enhancement of learning environments? In what ways, if any, might the use of critical narrative construction during the research process contribute to student empowerment or transformation?

Bridging Topic and Research Design

There are also theoretical and methodological gaps in private vocational education research in Canada that I seek to address through this study. Specifically, I have yet to find research that takes a critical and feminist approach to the study of Ontario PCCs. Such theories allow me to raise questions about how knowledge practices in schools might, or not, impact PCC student choice. While critical theories guide the exploration of how power, oppression, and marginality might impact student experiences and choices, feminist theoretical traditions allow me to focus on how self-perceptions of intellect and worth impact how students experience

education, as well as the choices they make as a result. This approach departs considerably from the more common human capital, labour, and business approaches of examining PCCs that primarily seek to gather demographics, assess whether government regulations are stringent enough, and determine how responsible the sector is to its stakeholders in terms of addressing skills gaps in the labour market, leaving employers satisfied, and giving its students higher returns (i.e., jobs, good salary) on their investments (i.e., tuition, time) (e.g., see Auld, 2005; Davey, 2004; Malatest & Associates, 2007, 2009; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Sweet, 1993). By diverging from this approach through the use of critical feminist theories, my study seeks to understand PCCs from the perspectives of students, and to explore the more subtle complexities of their experiences, including the diverse, interconnected factors that may influence their choice of postsecondary institution. Additionally, this framework demands I not lose sight of my subjectivity (namely, my position of authority within and personal relationship to PCCs) or the political context of my topic (a history of ill-repute and stigma towards vocational education, a lack of interest in PCC student voices, and the higher percentages of students who have traditionally been excluded from postsecondary education). In Chapter Three, I elaborate on how I use critical and feminist theories to frame this study and guide analysis.

The methodological approach for this study was chosen for its commitment to the same goal of critical and feminist theories to expose and challenge power and oppression. Critical narrative research (CNR) is an embodied form of research that seeks to challenge social forms of oppression while highlighting and privileging participant perspectives through the use of story (Iannacci, 2007). It honours both the critical and feminist goal of helping participants to better understand their experiences (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983/2009; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; Lather, 1986), and a feminist standpoint and epistemology approach of going to

the margins to seek out what participants have to say about their experiences (Bar On, 1993; Harding, 1993; hooks, 1984, 1993), in this case their educational experiences and postsecondary choices. Critical narrative research is particularly appropriate for its commitment to exposing the subjectivity of the research process, privileging the participant voice, and challenging dominant forms of oppression and exclusion in society such that social change can be enacted (Iannacci, 2007). Ultimately, critical narrative research allows me to leverage the power of story to both represent the perspectives of students previously unheard in the Canadian research arena, and to co-construct meaning with participants that can lead to the critical capacity to better understand our world (Freire, 1985; Lather, 1986). In Chapter Four, I elaborate on how I use critical narrative research to explore PCC student choice.

Summary

This chapter briefly introduced the research gap in Ontario and the body of literature in the United Kingdom that informed the development of my topic, research questions, theoretical framework and methodology. Though the gaps in the literature on PCCs are many, I have zeroed in on the student voice as one that is missing almost in its entirety from research on PCCs (i.e., in qualitative forms of research that privilege the student voice in the construction of meaning), raising the question of what else PCCs are that we cannot understand from existing literature alone. For example, what do they mean to students? Why would a student choose a PCC over another postsecondary institution? Why have so many students expressed surprise to me over feeling as though they could be academically successful for the first time in their lives; or shared stories of being told they were not suitable for postsecondary education; or cried at their graduations because their achievements meant so much more to them than the possibility of securing a job; or had to work harder than they should to truly learn they are not *stupid*, *dumb*,

less than? Though PCCs have garnered very little interest from researchers (Li & Jones, 2015; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014), these student experiences nevertheless represent a very real part of the postsecondary landscape in Ontario.

In the following chapter, I contextualize my topic within the historical and contemporary context of vocational education, broadly, and PCCs, specifically, including an explanation of the structure, oversight, role and contribution of PCCs in Ontario. Such context will provide a rationale for the subsequent chapters on the design of the research, including more in depth discussions about why I have chosen to conduct critical narrative research that is framed by critical feminist theories.

“I dare say, I was even considered a pretty fair classic in those days, though my Latin and Greek have slipt [sic] away from me since. But I ask you, what preparation they were for such a life as I had to lead? None at all. Utterly none at all”

“Did not the recollection of the heroic simplicity of the Homeric life nerve you up?”

“Not one bit!” exclaimed Mr. Thornton, laughing. “I was too busy to think about any dead people, with the living pressing alongside of me, neck to neck, in the struggle for bread.”

— Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, 1855

Chapter Two: Contextualizing Vocational Education

Overview

In this chapter, I provide a foundation for the two subsequent chapters on the theoretical and methodological design of the study. By explaining how the unique history of and attitudes towards vocational education, broadly, and PCCs, specifically, have shaped the development of vocational education in Ontario, I clarify why my study takes a critical and feminist approach that privileges student voice and experience. I begin with a summary of relevant historical issues related to the institutionalization of vocational education in the United States and Canada, and demonstrate why such a history is important to our understanding of the status of PCCs today in Canada. I subsequently provide an overview of the Canadian PCC sector and relevant studies, with a particular focus on Ontario. Finally, I demonstrate how historical and contemporary contexts contribute to popular human capital approaches to vocational education research, as well as provide a rationale for this study’s diversion from such approaches.

Historical Context

The Institutionalization of Vocational Education

PCCs are Canadian postsecondary diploma-granting institutions offering programs that are vocational in nature. In the *Private Career Colleges Act, 2005*, The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD)² defines vocational programs in Ontario as those that provide “instruction in the skills and knowledge required in order to obtain employment in a prescribed vocation” (2005, c. 28, Sched. L, s. 1 [1]). In other words, PCCs must offer programs that aim to help students obtain the skills and knowledge necessary to work within the scope of a given career or vocation. Historically, there was debate between policy makers, educators, and business owners as to what vocational education should entail. To better understand this, it is helpful to look to the inception of mass general education in the United Kingdom and the United States. Mass general education gained traction with the rise of industrialization and the ensuing demand for more skilled labourers to support increased production (Kantor, 1986; Violas, 1981). Prior to mass general education, education was provided by churches, voluntary groups, and private individuals or tutors (Gidney & Millar, 1990, p. 3). Mass general education, on the other hand, was introduced as a public form of education that could become a way to meet the increasing needs for skilled labourers. It was defended with what we now call human capital theories (Becker, 1964/1994; Schultz, 1961) that argue that poverty can be minimized by educating the poor who, prior to mass education, had no access to education by helping them to become skilled labourers (Violas, 1981).

However, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, concern arose as to the effectiveness of the general curriculum offered by mass education at helping students to develop trade skills (Kantor, 1986). Mass education at the time primarily adopted the traditional

² Formerly the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (prior to June 2016).

academic focus that had long existed in private education. Many students felt this general curriculum was not useful for their needs (Kantor, 1986; Violas, 1981), and that it was unable to recognize their “powers, passions, and tastes” (Kantor, 1986, p. 409) due to its privileging of academic content. In 1915, both Charles W. Eliot, President Emeritus of Harvard University, and Meyer Bloomfield, Director of the Vocation Bureau of Boston, argued that students were not interested in school work because of a lack of relevance. Eliot (1915), for example, argued that students could see no relationship between their education and their ability to earn a good living or find a suitable job, causing such students to “drop out of school far too early of their own accord” (p. 1). Bloomfield (1915) justified the need to reform education towards vocational delivery models by arguing that vocational education can “make school life more interesting and purposeful, and working life more educative and productive” (Bloomfield, 1915, p. vi). Employers were also dissatisfied with the outcomes of mass education, arguing that the goal of higher productivity never materialized (Violas, 1981).

Widespread discontent that mass general education did not effectively translate into higher productivity in the workforce caused a shift in how education was viewed. Vocational education became a viable solution, and the “spirit of vocationalism” (Kantor, 1986, p. 401) started to spread such that the domain of formal education came into question. Proponents of vocationalism believed that education should be a means of increasing the material wealth of the masses by providing them with the necessary skills to find gainful employment, a belief that many felt would, in turn, make the masses happier with their lives (Violas, 1981). Under this guise, proponents argued that education reforms would “democratize the educational system and . . . expand occupational opportunities for working-class and immigrant youth” (Kantor, 1986, p. 402). Indeed, support for vocational education was wide-reaching, with supporters ranging from

labour leaders and business people to educators, intellectuals, and liberal reformers (Kantor, 1986, p. 403). Bloomfield (1915) wrote, “As a result of the vocational-guidance movement, there is now a country-wide endeavor to help children make their start in life with purpose, preparation, and insight” (p. vi). Though we are not told directly from students of their response to this type of vocational education, Bloomfield (1915) hints that it offered students education that was meaningful and interesting, a prominent difference when set against the more traditional academic goals of mass education.

Consequently, twentieth-century United States saw major formal changes to their educational system (Kantor, 1986; Lazerson, Block McLaughlin, McPherson, & Bailey, 1985; Violas, 1981). Courses were added to secondary schools to teach job-related skills, and vocational tracks became available to more students (Kantor, 1986). By the 1930s in the United States, attrition due to students leaving to enter the labour market had decreased significantly:

The percentage of 14 to 18-year-old males at work dropped from 43% in 1900 to 12% by 1930. For females, the decline was from 18% to 5%. Simultaneously, high school enrollment of 14 to 17-year-olds between 1900 and 1930 climbed from almost 3% to over 44%. (Lazerson et al. 1985, p. 19)

While there could be many reasons that account for these statistics, they notably represent a growing number of youth who were participating and staying in formal education.

Vocational Education in Canada

In Canada, Lyons, Randhawa, and Paulson (1991) show that vocationalism had a similar but different beginning to that of the United States. Canadian proponents of vocationalism also struggled with a mass education system that did not meet the needs of their youth; however, vocationalism was an integral part of “nation-building” (Lyons et al., 1991, p. 140) and a need to

stay competitive with the industrialized United States. Though there were disputes over the federal government's constitutional responsibility to provide vocational education, the federal government nevertheless stepped in several times during the twentieth century to provide funding for technical and vocational training in order to solve economic problems, leading to the creation of several vocational education Acts that promoted and supported vocational education. For example, driven by the belief that vocational education was tied to sustaining Canada's main industry of agriculture, federal assistance was given in the early 1900s for vocational programs that train agriculturalists (Lyons et al., 1991). The federal government also stepped in after World War I, when Canada lacked the sufficient industry to thrive in a post-war economy. The *Technical Education Act* (1919) provided federal funding for provinces to establish technical training to address this lack of industry (Lyons et al., 1991). While this Act helped Canada fare better during World War II, there was nevertheless another skills shortage when Canada could not meet the increased manufacturing needs required to keep up with Britain's decreased manufacturing capabilities (Lyons et al., 1991). The increased need resulted in the *Vocational Training Coordination Act* (1942), which led to more federal, shared-cost funding to the provinces to provide the training necessary to keep up with the increased manufacturing during the war (Lyons et al., 1991).

However, it soon became apparent to the federal government that the widespread need for technical and industrial training was easier to meet by encouraging emigration of trades people from war-torn Europe into Canada than it was to train Canadians (Lyons et al., 1991). This temporary solution resulted in less support for vocational education until the 1960s when concern arose as to the skills of Canadian youth, with many Canadians fearing that their children would be disadvantaged in the work force by a lack of technical skills (Lyons et al., 1991). To

address this large-scale worry, the *Technical and Vocational Training Act* (1960) was passed, which again provided federal funding for vocational and technical training (Lyons et al., 1991; Martin, & MacLaine, 2016). Such funding was abruptly withdrawn by the late 1960s because the federal government felt that provinces were neglecting programs for which they received no federal funding. Provinces were left again to foot the bill for vocational education, with the federal government choosing to focus instead on shorter term vocational training and universities through their new *Adult Occupational Training Act* (1966-1967) (Lyons et al., 1991).

When, two decades later, Canada experienced another shortage of skilled labourers due to less federal support of vocational programs and less immigration due to an improved economic situation in Western Europe (Lyons et al., 1991), federal focus shifted to support job-specific training for industries in high demand through the *Canadian Jobs Strategy, 1985*. Even with this, the skills shortage remains today (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2017; Komarnicki, 2012; OECD, 2014). Weiermair (1984 as cited in Lyons et al., 1991) explains that wavering federal support undoubtedly had an impact on the perception of vocational education as education for “society’s marginal or outcast elements such as orphans, young people with criminal records and slow learners” (p. 5). The stigma and negative perception of these vocational schools and programs remains today (Martin & MacLaine, 2016). Currently, there is no direct funding for PCCs in Ontario, though many argue that PCCs still benefit from public funding because their students are eligible for provincial student loans through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

Contemporary Context

PCCs and the Postsecondary Landscape in Canada and Ontario

PCCs do not share a unified name across Canada. For example, what is referred to as a private career college in Ontario and Nova Scotia is a private vocational institution in Manitoba, a private vocational school in Saskatchewan, a provider of private career or vocational training in Alberta, a private occupational training organization in New Brunswick, a private training school and career college in Prince Edward Island, a training institution in British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, and Quebec, and a private trade school in the Yukon (Martin & MacLaine, 2016). However, despite differences in nomenclature, all share that they are privately-owned vocational colleges that offer accelerated career-focused certificate and diploma programs. Only a handful of PCCs are approved as degree-granting institutions (Martin & MacLaine, 2016). PCCs have been operating in Canada since the 1800s (National Association of Career Colleges [NACC], 2014a), and in Ontario for over 140 years (CCO, 2013a). Westervelt College in London, Ontario, for example, is a PCC that has been operating since the late 1800s (Auld, 2005; Westervelt College, 2016). Across Canada, there are over 1,300 registered private vocational colleges (Martin & MacLaine, 2016), of which approximately 600 operate in Ontario (Environics Research, 2017; MAESD, 2011). Of the more than 170,000 student enrollments Canada sees annually (Martin & MacLaine, 2016), between 40,000 and 90,000 are in Ontario alone (CCO, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Environics Research, 2017; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014), making Ontario the biggest provider of private vocational education in Canada.

All PCCs are provincially regulated and require government authorization to operate as private vocational colleges (Auld, 2005; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Hicks,

2014). In 2005, the *Private Career Colleges Act, 2005* gave oversight to the sector in Ontario and security for students, standardizing how programs were advertised and delivered, and how student contracts were completed and fulfilled (CCO, 2013c; MAESD, 2011). Under such oversight, PCCs may only offer vocational education programs that are reviewed and approved by the MAESD, and are subject to similar, though often stricter, reporting and compliance guidelines and inspections than public colleges and universities (Auld, 2005; MAESD, 2011). To offer new programs, PCCs must demonstrate market need and receive approval from MAESD after successful third party assessments (both subject matter and adult education experts) and a MAESD review (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014). Auld (2005) argues that “overall, the PCC sector is one of the most highly regulated across Canada” (p. 9), a sentiment echoed by Career Colleges Canada and the National Association of Career Colleges in defence of the sector (e.g., see Buy & Maloney, 2016).

Despite the high number of PCCs in Canada, student numbers tend to be smaller with PCC enrollments accounting for only approximately one in fifteen of Ontario’s postsecondary enrollments (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014). The other fourteen in fifteen are part of a broad postsecondary system in Ontario that includes degree-granting public universities and colleges, relatively few degree-granting private universities and colleges, certificate- or diploma-granting public colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs), few faith-based universities, Indigenous institutions, and apprenticeships. In terms of postsecondary vocational training specifically, PCCs are the second largest classroom-based postsecondary provider in Ontario and Canada, with public CAATs and polytechnic colleges — e.g., Conestoga, Sheridan, Humber, George Brown, Seneca, and Algonquin (Munro, MacLaine, & Stuckey, 2014) — being the largest (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014).

Increasingly, PCCs have demonstrated that they have “a viable role . . . in the province alongside our publicly assisted colleges and universities” (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014, p. 5). They are often defined as small colleges with career-focused programs, small class sizes, with more start dates that allow students to begin programs at various times throughout the year rather than more traditional starts in September and January (Auld, 2015; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Hicks). Among the most popular training programs are legal services, health services, business, information technology, and community services (Martin & MacLaine, 2016). However, PCCs also offer programs in commercial transportation and flight, cosmetology, culinary arts, emergency services, performing arts, and trades.

PCC program offerings are most similar to the programs offered by CAATs (or community colleges) in Ontario, often with both institutions offering many of the same programs. The most striking differences between the two institutions are PCCs’ small maximum class sizes, the frequency of enrollment dates, and the accelerated and intensive learning environment (Auld, 2005; Martin & MacLaine, 2016). Another significant difference remains its student demographics. As previously reported, compared to public community colleges, PCC students tend to be “older, predominantly female, and socio-economically more vulnerable than public college students” (Martin & MacLaine, 2016, p. iii). In a previous study, Malatest and Associates (2008) similarly found PCC students to also be more likely to be older, female, socio-economically vulnerable, immigrants or non-native speakers of English, visible minorities, or students with young dependents and financial or family difficulties. Most recently, Environics Research (2017) confirmed that Ontario PCCs have higher percentages of students who are older, female, and first-generation immigrations than public colleges, but did not see differences in visible minorities or disabilities between the two.

Existing Research on PCCs

Despite the significant presence of PCCs in the Ontario postsecondary landscape, there has been very little written thus far on PCCs in Canada, and the research that has been conducted is concerned primarily with gathering important demographic and outcomes-based information. I draw most heavily on four major studies on PCC student choice, whose findings I outline in Tables 1 and 2. The most comprehensive study to date is a three-phase study conducted by Malatest and Associates (2007, 2008, 2009) at the request of the Human Resources and Social Development Canada, the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, and the National Association of Career Colleges. The study collected data through three phases: an institutional survey of PCCs (Malatest & Associates, 2007), an in-school survey of PCC students (Malatest & Associates, 2008), and a graduate outcomes survey of PCC graduates (Malatest & Associates, 2009). Of particular relevance is that a key objective of Phase II is to better understand why students choose to attend PCCs in general. As Table 1 demonstrates, students most often wanted to pursue postsecondary education at a PCC in order to change careers or pursue a job (36%) or for general interest or personal development (25%). Table 2 demonstrates why participants chose to attend their specific PCC, with the most cited reasons being a desire to take a specific program offered by that PCC (45%), the short program length (37%), the institution reputation or quality (37%), and class size (22%) (Malatest & Associates, 2008). Moreover, findings also indicate that 79% of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with their institution, findings that prompt curiosity into student experiences at these PCCs.

Table 1

Reasons for Pursuing Postsecondary Education at a PCC

Malatest and Associates (2008)	Larocque (2015)	Martin and MacLaine (2016)	Enviroics Research (2017)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change career or pursue a job (36%) • General interest or personal development (25%) • Study at an advanced level or gain further skills in same field (10%) • Gain specific practical skills in addition to academic qualifications (10%) • Increase earning potential or compensation (6%) • Gain recognition of foreign education/training or experience (4%) • Change careers since education from other country not recognized (3%) • Responses cited by 1% or fewer responses (5%) 	<p>N=270</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To prepare for an attractive career (101) • To change the direction in my life (101) • To get a good job (57) • To obtain a diploma (16) • To get a high-paying job (16) • Could not find employment (15) • For the enjoyment of studying and learning (10) • Post-secondary education is a family expectation (2) • To avoid having to work (1) • To make new friends (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change career or pursue a job (58%) • General interest or personal development (10%) • Study at an advanced level or gain further skills in student's same field (9%) • Gain practical skills in addition to academic qualifications (8%) • Increase earning potential or compensation (7%) • Gain recognition of foreign education/training or experience (3%) • Other (6%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needed education and training for a new career/job (52%) • Needed more education and training for first career/job (20%) • General interest / personal growth (19%) • Further education for current career/job (9%)

Table 2

Reasons for Enrolling in a Specific PCC over other Institutions

Malatest and Associates (2008)	Larocque (2015)	Martin and MacLaine (2016)	EnviroNics Research (2017)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific program (45%) • Program length (37%) • Institution reputation or quality (37%) • Class size (22%) • Location (20%) • Recommendation (20%) • Availability of courses not offered in public institutions (16%) • Hours of classes or instruction (13%) • Employment/ placement record (12%) • Frequent start dates (11%) • Located in a city I want to live in (8%) • Cost (7%) • Entrance requirements (6%) • Size of institution (6%) • Financial assistance (4%) • Special needs services (2%) • Other (3%) 	(n=275) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program length (210) • Class size (85) • Specific program (78) • Institution near home (50) • Hours of classes or instruction (50) • Frequent start dates (48) • Recommendation (41) • Course not offered at a public institution (32) • Institution reputation or quality (32) • Employment/ placement record (27) • Entrance requirements (26) • Other (22) • Cost of the program (14) • In a city I wanted to live in (12) • Offered financial assistance (9) • Size of institution (9) • Special needs services (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific program (40%) • Hours or classes of instruction fit their needs (36%) • Program length (34%) • Convenient location (28%) • Small class sizes (22%) • Institution reputation or quality (20%) • Recommendation (18%) • Frequent or convenient start dates (15%) • Employment rates for graduates (13%) • Program or courses were not available elsewhere (12%) • Entrance requirements (7%) • Financial assistance or scholarships available (6%) • Cost of the program (5%) • Special services (2%) • Other (5%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered the program I wanted (52%) • Small class sizes (37%) • Work placement opportunity (37%) • Convenient location (36%) • Could start the program without long delay (33%) • Flexible start dates (31%) • Shorter/more intense program (29%) • Recommended by others (25%) • Flexible timetables/class hours (25%) • Reputation of the program (23%) • Personal environment (19%) • No summer break in classes (10%) • Cost of tuition (9%) • Availability of online courses (2%) • Other (8%) • No particular reason (1%)

Larocque's (2015) master's study sought to supplement data on PCC student enrollment and satisfaction by conducting an adapted version of Malatest and Associate's (2008) Phase II study at a PCC in northern Ontario. Through a 20-question survey, Larocque (2015) gathered information on student demographics, reasons for choosing the PCC, satisfaction with the PCC, and future plans for use of education acquired at the PCC. As Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, her findings regarding student choice were very similar to Malatest and Associate's (2008). For example, 75% of participants indicated a PCC was their first institution of choice, compared to Malatest and Associate's (2008) 72%. Furthermore, Larocque's (2015) study adds to what we know about student satisfaction. In her study, students were most satisfied with student-faculty relationships and the value they felt as students. These items were selected with more frequency than course content, instructional quality, up-to-date equipment, job market preparation, or skills development (Larocque, 2015). Such findings prompt further questions of why high numbers of students indicate that they feel valued as PCC students.

More recently, Martin and MacLaine (2016) published a series of reports on behalf of Conference Board of Canada on the status of and challenges to PCCs that emerged from research seeking to better define PCCs and their role and value in Canada. Data was collected from four sources: existing literature and data; a quantitative survey of PCC students and graduates between July and November 2015; 45 interviews (in-person and telephone) and email correspondence with PCC operators, associations, academics and observers, government, students, graduates, employers, and representatives from accrediting and regulatory bodies; and, feedback from a workshop presentation on preliminary research findings in Alberta in November 2015. Martin and MacLaine (2016) note some self-selection bias for the online survey phase of their data collection, and that their survey was not representative. To attempt to minimize such

bias and to achieve more representative findings, Martin and MacLaine (2016) compare their findings in the report to data gathered from other studies on PCCs.

To their surprise, Martin and MacLaine (2016) discovered that 43% of PCC students in Canada have some prior postsecondary education (complete and incomplete), with the remaining 56% entering with high school education or less. Consistent with previous studies, PCC students were found to more often possess “characteristics that frequently interconnect with marginalization, such as immigrant status or disability” (Martin & MacLaine, 2016, p. 62) and “face noteworthy disadvantages relative to learners in public PSE [postsecondary education]” (Martin & MacLaine, 2016, p. iv) in terms of being more economically vulnerable than students at public colleges. Also similar to previous overview reports of the PCC sector, Martin and MacLaine (2016) found that the most common reason students choose to attend a PCC is to train for a particular job that will help them to secure employment (58%), with the second highest option of “general interest or personal development” trailing behind at only 10%. When it came to choosing a private institution over a public one, survey results showed that students choose PCCs instead of public colleges because of more convenient hours and locations (62%), shorter program durations (61%), perceived better-quality training than offered by public colleges or universities (34%), program offerings (24%), more affordable programs or better financial assistance available (17%), and not being able to gain admission to a public institution (13%). Martin and MacLaine (2016) supplement these results with answers gathered during the qualitative interview phase, with some students adding that they were happy with the continuous enrolment, the self-paced option of some programs, the personal learning environment and small class sizes, and the more flexible entrance requirements (Martin & MacLaine, 2016).

Though Martin and MacLaine's (2016) focus is on the regulatory aspect of PCC education, the small qualitative portion of their program enabled them to gather data that they used to present three PCC student stories in what they call "vignette text boxes" (p. 8) interspersed throughout the final report to supplement their findings. In these vignettes, they briefly explore how PCC training helped three students to gain meaningful and gainful employment. While their focus was not to provide in depth examinations of participants' experiences, nor to include excerpts from the students themselves, I took this as a positive indication of the need to move towards better understanding these statistics in context; that is, through the individual and complex experiences of PCC students.

Most recently, Environics Research (2017) was commissioned by Career Colleges Ontario to conduct a quantitative student demographics study in Ontario. They conducted their study via an online survey made available to all PCC students in Ontario at the time of their study. Career Colleges Ontario encouraged PCCs to inform their students about the survey, which resulted in participation from 163 PCCs, with a total of 5,867 respondents. With regards to reasons for attending a PCC, the findings from this study are fairly consistent with the aforementioned studies in terms of the most popular reasons being a specific program of interest, small class sizes, work placements, location, and convenience. Similarly, almost three quarters of the respondents went to the PCC in order to train for a new or different career (some their first careers), with 19% of respondents wanting to pursue it for general interest. Like in Malatest and Associate's (2008) study, 72% of respondents were satisfied with their education, 26% were neutral, and 2% dissatisfied. Interestingly, satisfaction was highest among participants with the shortest program lengths and amongst older respondents. No reasons were provided for what contributed to these satisfaction rates, and I again found myself wondering why these students

felt so satisfied with their education, and what we could learn from hearing their detailed reasons.

Environics Research (2017) found notable differences between PCC students and community college students that I summarize in Table 3. Their comparison supports previous findings that PCCs have higher percentages of students who are older, female, non-native speakers of English and/or immigrants, but not with regards to self-identifications of visible minorities, Indigenous status, or disabilities.

Table 3

Comparisons Between Ontario PCC Students and Community College Students (Environics Research, 2017)

Percentage of students who...	PCCs	Community Colleges
Enter the institution directly from high school	9%	33%
Are female	69%	51%
Are over the age of 30	57%	10%
Are under the age of 25	26%	79%
Were not born in Canada	52%	13%
Are a visible minority	30%	28%
Identify as Indigenous	4%	7%
Have a first language other than English or French	38%	23%
Self-disclose a disability	12% ³	16%

³ What is interesting given the northern focus of my study is that Environics found higher percentages of students self-disclosed a disability at northern PCCs (26% in the north, 6% in Toronto, and 9% in the 905 region).

I was encouraged to see the proliferation of studies on PCCs in Ontario and Canada, with three of the most notable studies having been conducted after I enrolled as a doctoral student. However, the problem I encountered when I first began my program still remains; that is, a lack of qualitative research that elaborates on student motivations for attending PCCs, as well as on their experiences as PCC students. To date, I have found one fully qualitative study on PCC student choice in Ontario; that is, Davey's (2004) doctoral study, wherein he sets out to answer why "students choose to pay as much as four times more to attend a private career college in a province that has invested so heavily in accessible, public career education" (p. 4). To answer his research question, Davey (2004) conducted a comparative case study of a PCC and a public CAAT, with each college representing a case that he explores through observation, a review of key documents, and semi-structured interviews with administration and faculty. Without interviewing students, Davey (2004) concludes that the private institution was slightly more responsive, albeit more consumer-like, to student needs; that there is comparable quality and standards between the two institutions; and, a list of findings about the institutional differences that might impact student experiences. While useful, such findings prompt the question as to how accurately one can answer a question of student choice and experience without asking the students themselves.

In the absence of more studies, several papers have been commissioned by the MAESD or affiliated associations in order to shed light on the sector (e.g., see Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012; Li, 2006; Li & Jones, 2015; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014). Such papers provide useful overviews of the sector; however, the focus is again on demographics, student choice as limited by preset options related to market value, and rates of graduation, employment, and satisfaction. In addition, in 2013, MAESD implemented the annual gathering of key

performance indicators (KPIs) for PCCs, something that has been done for public colleges since 1998 (Colleges Ontario, n.d., para. 1). The lack of available KPIs for PCCs has been used to support the criticism that PCCs provide insufficient information to prospective students. So far, data is available only for the pilot collection year of 2013, and only for PCCs approved to have OSAP-funded students. The full KPI plan is to be rolled out by the 2015 collection year (to be collected in 2016), and to include all PCCs in Ontario. Being the pilot year, KPIs were only collected for three of the five KPI categories: student graduation rate, student rate of employment, and student rate of employment in field of study. The remaining two categories of graduate and employer satisfaction were first collected in 2014, and have yet to be released, in spite of the fact that announcements were made that they would be publicly available after October 2016. So far, the only publicly available KPIs are for the 2013 pilot year.

MAESD acknowledges that the 2013 KPI findings are potentially misleading in that the small sample size and the relatively small size of PCC campuses can lead to either deceptively high or low percentages that impact the overall statistics (MAESD, 2016; MTCU, 2016), and warns that the 2013 KPIs were published to inform the collection of future KPI cycles. Keeping in mind these conditions, the KPIs provide some important findings that can shed some light on the sector. The 2013 KPIs demonstrate that the graduation rate for the 2013 reporting year was found to be 77.2%, with 71.2% of the sample population being employed, and 48% of the total sample being employed in their field of study (MAESD, 2016b). Such numbers compare relatively well with KPIs at public colleges, with their graduation rate being 65.4%, and their rate of employment at 83.4% (Colleges Ontario, 2014). Unfortunately, the rate of employment in field of study is not collected for public colleges. In a *Globe and Mail* article, Buy and Maloney (2016) demonstrate that these numbers are even closer when considering that PCCs have a

higher graduation rate, which ultimately can be taken to mean that PCCs have almost equal percentages of students who go on to gain employment versus their public counterparts. Martin and MacLaine (2016) also argue that “demographic differences between PCC students and public college students may partially account for differences in graduate outcomes” (p. iii) and that “employer perceptions and preferences for public college graduates” (p. iii) might contribute to better employment percentages for public college students.

While these findings are significant, the purpose of this chapter is not to pit PCCs against public colleges. In fact, the first cycle of KPIs reveals striking similarities between public and private institutions. Instead, I argue that it could be dangerous to use KPIs alone as indications of meaningful marks of quality. KPIs can be misleading in that there are various factors that can contribute to whether one group of students might be more or less willing to honestly answer survey questions over the phone. Consider, for example, non-native speakers of English, or groups or minorities that may distrust the anonymity of a process that asks for sensitive information like employment details. Furthermore, as Martin and MacLaine (2016) argue in their report on PCCs, debt factors considerably in graduate satisfaction rates six months after graduation (the very month that students become responsible for repaying their student loans).

Implications

Particularly problematic about the lack of research on PCCs is that the sparseness sits in contrast to historical literature that offers denigrating and limiting views of vocational education as “less noble” (OECD, 1971, p. 36); of lower quality than more academic forms of education (Kinser & Levy, 2006; Moodie, 2009; e.g., Hodges Persell & Wenglinsky, 2004); as “preparation for second-class citizenship” (Lyons et al., 1991, p. 137); and, as more suitable for students who are “less bright” (Ryan, 1998, p. 399). The job training component of vocational

education led critics to accuse vocational education of reducing students to cogs in the capitalistic machine who uncritically take alienating and impersonal jobs (Finnie, 2012).

Learners who associated best with practical curriculum often were considered inherently less intelligent than students who gravitated towards more academic forms of education (Ryan, 1998).

Such sentiments still echo in the literature today. While speaking mostly about England and Australia, Wheelahan (2015), for example, offers a scathing view of Anglophone vocational colleges when she argues that they sacrifice theory to the benefit of applied, work-focused skills training. She continues that while such practical programs are marketed as seeking to support students who experience alienation or a lack of success in more traditional or academic forms of education, in reality these schools are “a key way in which social inequality is mediated and reproduced because [they] exclude students from accessing the theoretical knowledge they need to participate in debates and controversies in society and in their occupational field of practice” (Wheelahan, 2015, p. 3). While Wheelahan (2015) seems to be focused more on Australia and England than on the “similar Anglophone countries” (p. 7) she lumps in with them, she does not complicate the notion that *all* Anglophone vocational programs are guilty of being narrowly practical and devoid of theory. She also does not address the reality of or consequences for students who do feel alienated within more traditional academic contexts, aside from arguing that the solution is not to funnel those students into vocational education because having access to postsecondary education is not enough if the quality of that education is questionable. I considered this in contrast to arguments by the OECD (2014) that “some types of practical and work-based vocational programmes are very effective at engaging young people who have previously become disenchanted by academic education” (p. 110).

Similarly, Servage (2009) argues that students who choose private vocational postsecondary institutions in Canada do so based on “poor or partial information about their post-secondary options” (p. 254), not only diminishing the intellectual and decision-making capacity of vocational students nation-wide, but also insinuating that if consumers cannot make informed choices, then we must choose for them by limiting the post-secondary education options to public educational providers. Using cultural reproduction theories and behavioural economics, Servage (2009) argues that socio-economically disadvantaged Canadians do not benefit equally from educational choices because of a lack of ability to make rational decisions or to gather the appropriate information to make informed decisions. In other words, it seems that Servage (2009) would rather see only publicly-funded postsecondary options be available to Canadians to solve that problem that policy-makers so-called mistakenly presume all Canadian students to be “autonomous, rational choosers” (p. 257). While it seems that Servage (2009) is genuinely worried that certain segments of the population will not have the intellectual, cultural or linguistic tools to adequately decide on their educational paths, her argument that “choice may not always be in consumers’ best interests” (p. 258) seems more about protecting the privilege of public institutions than it does about increasing the decision-making power of consumers. Surely, if a prospective student does not have the tools to be “rational” (Servage, 2009) in her/his decision-making, how can we be sure that a student can rationally decide whether a publicly-funded institution will provide the education that meets her/his needs? Servage (2009) does not explicitly state that private education should be taken away as a valid option for consumers; however, she does state that though “there is broad recognition that a diverse student population will yield diverse work and learning paths, . . . this does not mean that all such paths are equally effective and desirable” (p. 259). While she concludes her paper with a call for “effective

policies for consumer education” (p. 259) to address disparities in quality, the reader is left to presume that the true way policy makers can help consumers is by simplifying the decision making process by restricting access to private education.

A quick Google search on PCCs reveals popular blogs and articles that echo such sentiments; (e.g., see Chiose, 2016a, 2016b; ICP, 2014), a serious problem when there is little research to offer less reductionist accounts of what really happens at PCCs. Most recently, an example of this debate on quality and student choice can be seen in the archives of the *Globe and Mail*, with Chiose (2016a) inaccurately comparing the 2013 PCC KPIs on graduate employment rate *in field of study* to the public college KPIs for general graduate employment rate. Chiose (2016a) uses her comparison to argue that “private career colleges in Ontario appear to be failing to prepare students for the labour market” (para. 1) and to call readers to question “why private institutions that lag behind the performance of their public counterparts have access to government funds” (para. 7). Chiose (2016a) takes this as an indication that there is a lack of accountability in place for PCCs, and concludes that “the expensive fees are often a poor investment” (para. 15).

The National Association of Career College’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Serge Buy, and Career College Ontario’s CEO, Sharon Maloney, responded to Chiose’s (2016a) argument that PCC students should be ineligible for public funding by arguing, “Students are students regardless of the class of the institution” (para. 13) and they should be given the right to choose where they want to go to school without being penalized for their choices. They explain how Chiose’s (2016a) arguments are exaggerated when considering that public financial assistance of PCC students only accounts for approximately 4% of the total funds in Ontario, a much lower percentage than Chiose (2016a) leads her readers to believe (Buy & Maloney, 2016).

They similarly demonstrate how the employment rates are more comparable than Chiose (2016a) represented. Buy and Maloney (2016) culminate with the assertion that more data (via KPI collection) is a good thing, but that until we can “ensure that more graduates can be reached for the sample size and be included in the survey” (para. 16), we must consider the findings in context.

In response, Chiose (2016b) released another article arguing that PCC students are unhappy with the quality of PCC education. She shares the experiences of a PCC graduate from a Paralegal program in Ontario who went on to become licenced to practice, but who was unhappy with his education. Though Mr. Gallant’s stories of one teacher are regrettable, and can undoubtedly inform future action within that institution, it seems the point of sharing his experiences is to support Chiose’s (2016a) earlier argument that PCCs are not creditable schools and that students are always disadvantaged as a result of attending them. With pressure from Career Colleges Ontario, the *Globe and Mail* agreed to correct errors in Chiose’s (2016a) initial publication, releasing the revised article later that month with a statement that “an earlier version of this article incorrectly compared the general employment rate of publicly funded community colleges to the employment rate for private career colleges [*sic*] graduates in their field of study” (Chiose, 2016b) and that “the article said private colleges charge fees between \$10,000 and more than \$20,000 a year. There are some full year courses which charge less” (Chiose, 2016b).

The perception of prejudice against PCCs led the National Association of Career Colleges and Career Colleges Ontario to try to legally change the names of private vocational colleges across Canada to regulated career colleges (NACC, 2014c). Such a move is not only political, but it is in opposition to a long history of prejudice against the quality of schools that operate as businesses, as well as to the lack of public awareness of what private vocational

colleges do (NACC, 2014c). Orton (2003) unintentionally predicted such a move when he argued on behalf of Statistics Canada that there is little value in the public/private distinction because it says little about how private institutions may be managed by both private and public entities (through regulations), and that we should rethink the postsecondary landscape in Canada by introducing a new typology wherein PCCs would be considered career colleges, with the status of being for-profit. While Orton (2003) makes recommendations with the health of the entire postsecondary landscape in mind (in terms of better statistics), the National Association of Career Colleges and Career Colleges Ontario hope that by moving away from the stigma of the label *private* and the confusion over different nomenclature across Canada, that increased focus will be placed on what career colleges actually do, which they argue is provide an alternative, flexible, and practical pathway to postsecondary education in Canada. While New Brunswick has recently opted to exclude private vocational colleges from being able to accept students who receive government funding (Bartlett, 2016), Ontario remains committed to supporting PCCs for the time being. In fact, the new structuring of OSAP increases the chances of PCC students being granted loan forgiveness than in the past through the Ontario Student Opportunity Grant (OSOG), a program that considered students for grants that reduce the amount of debt acquired through seeking an education. Such restructuring demonstrates support not only for PCCs, but for the larger percentages of PCCs students who are socio-economically disadvantaged. It appears that the Ontario government agrees with Buy and Maloney (2016) that “students are students regardless of the class of the institution” (para. 13).

Auld (2005) predicted such a move when he argued that there were no compelling reasons to restrict funding dollars to students attending private colleges for the reason that “students who graduate from PCCs fare better, economically and socially, than students who

possess only a high school credential” (p. 17), which Auld (2005) argues leads to “social benefits in terms of higher tax revenues and lower rates of unemployment” (p. 17). Auld (2005) even goes so far as to suggest that governments should increase financial support for the sector by reducing loans in favour of grants, something that has recently come to fruition with the 2016 restructuring of OSAP. Such arguments demonstrate the possible role PCCs have in heeding the warning issued by Cheung, Guillemette, and Mobasher-Fard (2012) in an OECD working paper that “the supply of highly skilled labour” (p. 2) will continue to decline “as the population ages and the needs of the knowledge-based economy rapidly evolve” (p. 2). Cheung et al. (2012) argue that a solution is to “encourage access to higher education for disadvantaged socio-economic groups, while enhancing the flexibility of the system to allow students with diverse needs to move between institutions more easily to meet their learning objectives” (p. 2). Both of these goals coincide with efforts made by Career Colleges Ontario and the National Association of Career Colleges to have PCCs recognized for credit transfer with other postsecondary institutions, something that has long been promised but has not yet been realized in Ontario.

Historical Impact on Research

The tendency to evaluate PCCs according to employment statistics was undoubtedly influenced by the history of vocational education. Because of the shift in focus from more traditional subjects like classical literature and languages, human capital theories came to guide research on vocational education in order to justify or challenge its existence, and to determine its value (Finnie, 2012; Kantor, 1986; Lyons et al., 1991; Shavit & Müller, 2000; Violas, 1981; Walters, 2004). Within the context of this dissertation, the human capital theories I refer to are those developed by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964/1994) that have come to be widely used, and that define human capital as those investments in “knowledge, skills, health, or values”

(Becker, 1964/1994, p. 16) that cannot be separated from a person, and that lead to the increased earnings and wellbeing of that person. They differ from other types of capitals (like investments in stocks or physical property) that can still yield returns when separated from the person who owns the stocks or property (Becker, 1964/1994; Schultz, 1961). Generally, human capital theories assume that the more education people invest in, the more human capital they will acquire to enable them to be prosperous and active members of society (Becker, 1964/1994; Schultz, 1961). Within this theoretical approach, there is a limit to how much an investment in education will benefit an individual, meaning that there is a threshold beyond which more education would be unnecessary and not lead to more earnings or benefits (Walters, 2004).

Considering the history of vocational education, it is not surprising that a form of education that came about to make school relevant to the future work lives of its students would eventually come to be analyzed for its ability to increase (or not) the human capital of its students, especially now in comparison to public forms of education that are perceived as requiring less of a financial investment for students. For example, despite the fact that human capital was only formally theorized in the mid-twentieth century, the main concepts that human capital theories examine have long been a part of discussions and debates about vocational education (Violas, 1981). Consider the aforementioned arguments by proponents of vocational education that mainstream access to vocational education would democratize the educational system and narrow the class gap by allowing youth to learn the skills necessary to find gainful work (Bloomfield, 1915; Eliot, 1915; Kantor, 1986; Violas, 1981).

Historically, however, there has been opposition to such an approach by vocational education reformers. For example, at the first annual meeting for the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE), Jane Addams urged policy makers to look past the

purely economic realm of human capital when she argued, “I am not willing to agree . . . that industrial education is one thing, and cultural education is of necessity quite another” (NSPIE, 1908, p. 94). Similarly, Dewey (1916/2009) wrote about what he believed was incorrectly thought to be an “antithesis of vocational and cultural education” (p. 523). Dewey (1916/2009) set out to overturn such thoughts, defining vocation as encompassing not only an occupation, but “the development of artistic capacity of any kind, of special scientific ability, of effective citizenship, as well as professional and business occupations, to say nothing of mechanical labor or engagement in gainful pursuits” (p. 525). This expansion of vocation to include more than only employment allowed Dewey (1916/2009) to argue for a type of vocational education that is not so “narrowly practical” (p. 524) and that has more value than leading to employment alone.

Such calls for new perspectives and evaluative tools did not, however, thwart human capital theories from remaining the prevalent means of examining vocational education (Violas, 1981). For Violas (1981), this all too prevalent approach erroneously portrays vocational schools as seeking to acclimate students to alienating jobs by focusing merely on helping students develop the necessary capital to increase their earnings, regardless of the employment. Violas (1981) is careful to clarify that it is not vocational education itself that is the problem, but rather evaluating vocational education solely on the basis of human capital. Instead, vocational education can and must extend past vocational skills to include skills that would benefit students personally (Violas, 1981). To better understand whether this is indeed happening, Violas (1981) calls for human capital defences of vocational education to be supplemented or indeed replaced by models that no longer “conceptualize schooling as a preparation of specific saleable ‘skills’ to be offered on the labor market” (pp. 149-150).

Finnie (2012) similarly argues that economic models of evaluating postsecondary student choice reduce choice to a simple equation of whether or not the future benefits will outweigh the immediate costs of attending. The danger is that this approach eclipses other factors that could influence student choice. For example, Finnie (2012) lists cultural factors, like the education level of a student's parents, as possible influences on the choices students make by giving them more information about the true cost and benefits of pursuing postsecondary education. Such cultural factors can cause students from objectively similar family and socio-economic backgrounds to have different perspectives on the costs and benefits of schooling (Finnie, 2012). Furthermore, Finnie (2012) contends that economic analyses fail to account for the fact that many students may not act in accordance with their long term goals, even if they agree that those long term goals would be beneficial to their future happiness or prosperity. In other words, "short-run self-gratification often takes 'irrational' precedence over actions that would increase our well-being in the long-run — which is essentially 'irrational' in the economic choice paradigm, thus again pointing to a departure from the standard neoclassical model" (p. 1165). Finnie (2012) concludes that "a new model is needed for understanding decisions regarding whether to attend PSE — and one that takes 'culture' into account" (p. 1169). The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2007) supports such a call, arguing that "education affects people's lives in ways that go far beyond what can be measured by labour market earnings and economic growth" (p. 9).

In Ontario, human capital is still arguably the measure that is most prevalent in evaluating or analyzing PCCs today (i.e., through KPIs). As aforementioned, compared to public colleges that also offer vocational programs, PCCs are evaluated on an additional labour-focused category of employment in the field of study, making 60% of the tool geared towards assessing

job-related criteria. This additional category seems to imply that in order to determine the success of PCCs, even for programs that may be offered by public colleges, additional job-specific criteria must be added to the evaluation tool. In other words, to determine the quality of a PCC education, we must know if a student experiences higher odds of securing gainful employment in their specific field of training as a result of the human capital s/he accumulated at their PCC. It would be easy to argue that PCCs are evaluated in this way because they themselves claim to provide career-related education. However, the problem is that public colleges often offer courses that are career-focused as well, yet the systems of evaluation are different, suggesting at least for now that quality at PCCs is seemingly synonymous with gainful employment (McGrath & Powell, 2016). Furthermore, the KPIs do not explore the ways in which employer satisfaction rates may be impacted by the poor reputation of the PCC sector.

Moreover, using employment statistics that are difficult to compare can be used by critics to support arguments that PCCs have no additional value in the Canadian educational landscape because public institutions have better rates of employment. One only has to recall Chiose's (2016a) inaccurate use of incomparable employment statistics to discredit PCCs to understand how damaging such comparisons can be. However, when appropriate comparisons are done, public and private colleges have comparable general employment rates, which begs the question of what other reasons than securing a job might lead students to choose a private option over a public one, and why 72% of PCC students consider their PCC to be their institution of choice (Malatest & Associates, 2008; 75% in Larocque's [2015] smaller study of one PCC). It seems that there may be more than simply the promise of finding a job that could lead students to attend these schools.

While it may seem that I am painting employability to be a negative measure of quality, I do not mean to undervalue the benefits of employment or to argue that PCCs do not need to be accountable to students who may go there seeking greater opportunities in the labour market. I recognize the value in securing a job that can provide financial stability, and it is true that PCCs boast employment rates as something of which to be proud (e.g., CCO, 2013c; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; NACC, 2014b). However, I wonder what further qualitative research with more complex interviews with students might add to what we know about PCC student choice in Ontario. As I have demonstrated, most existing studies are conducted through quantitative surveys that ask students to select preset options that are often related to measuring their motivation to accumulate various forms of human capital. For example, consider the preselected options listed in Table 4 to the question of why PCC students chose to enroll in their studies.

Table 4

Possible Survey Responses to Question of Why Participants Choose to Enroll in PCCs

Malatest and Associates (2008)	Larocque (2015)	MacLaine and Martin (2016)	Environics Research (2016)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain my GED • Gain recognition of foreign education/training or experience • Change career since education from other country not recognized • Change career/fields or pursue a job • Study at an advanced level or gain further skills in same field • Gain specific practical skills in addition to academic qualifications • Finish education started prior to current program • Employer required or encouraged training • General interest or personal development • Increase earning potential or compensation • Other (please specify) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain recognition of foreign education/training or experience • Change career since education from other country not recognized • Change career-fields or pursue a job • Study at an advanced level or gain further skills in same field • Gain specific practical skills in addition to academic qualifications • Finish education started prior to current program • Employer required or encouraged training • General interest or personal development • Increase earning potential or compensation • Other (please specify) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change career or pursue a job • General interest or personal development • Study at an advanced level or gain further skills in student's same field • Gain practical skills in addition to academic qualifications • Increase earning potential or compensation • Gain recognition of foreign education/training or experience • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I needed education and training for new career/job • I need more education and training to get my first career/job • I was interested in taking a program for general interest/personal growth • I needed further education and training for my current career/job

It can be argued that most of the options listed relate to the development of human capital as defined above. Undoubtedly, responses to these questions provide valuable information about the choices PCC students make, but one can surmise that there may be other reasons for why participants attend PCCs that they may not take the time to try to explain on a small space listed next to “Other” on a survey. Similarly, just because a student chooses an option that is directly linked to employment, it does not mean that there are no other influences (Environics Research, 2016). Hardiman (2014) suggests that participants might be led to choose career-based options on surveys about vocational choice because they are more culturally acceptable motivations for wanting to participate in vocational education. Within Hardiman’s (2014) mixed method study of the motivations and experiences of mature students enrolled in vocational education, participants selected employment motivations on the quantitative survey, while other motivations emerged from the qualitative portion, such as self-doubt and fear of failure. These were not options on the survey, yet they remained significant, albeit implicit, motivations.

Resulting from their research on vocational education in Australia, McGrath and Powell (2016) similarly argue that “it becomes necessary to ask very different questions than have characterised the debate in recent decades” (p. 1) on the quality of vocational education. They make a strong case for the need to begin examining vocational education “not just as a summative evaluation but as a process of improvement” (McGrath & Powell, 2016, p. 1). They do defend the importance of employability and human capital approaches, but they argue that those perspectives alone only represent a partial glimpse into what is really happening in vocational schools (McGrath & Powell, 2016).

Instead, McGrath and Powell (2016) propose “expanded employability” (p. 2) as a more complex understanding of who accesses vocational education, what their motivations are, what

they value about vocational education, and what barriers they might face in being successful within vocational schooling, all with an eye to sustainability and shared responsibility for employability. This human development and capabilities approach is gaining traction in Australia for its insistence on focusing “on the freedom and agency that human beings have to live flourishing lives” (McGrath & Powell, 2016, p. 2), rather than on the more strictly economical approach of evaluating the human capital ratio of investment to earnings. I do not adopt a human development and capabilities approach outright in this dissertation, but I do draw on this move towards gathering broader and more complex knowledge about the motivations and values of vocational students. Specifically, I adopt from this approach the need to better understand who PCC students are and how their life goals and experiences influence their decisions to attend PCCs. I take heed of McGrath and Powell’s (2016) “insistence on the importance of putting vocational learners at the heart of a discussion of [vocational education and training] quality as they have the most at stake in this debate” (p. 3).

Consequently, though human capital is an important measure of PCC performance and accountability to its students, it is not the only criterion we should be examining if we are to fully understand the education being offered at PCCs, including what other possible values it can have for its students. By ignoring other elements of PCC education, it would be almost as if to say that because PCCs and public colleges share almost identical general employment rates, they offer almost identical educational experiences. Yet, other differences — for example, in student demographics, start dates, class sizes, program duration, etc. — tell us this cannot be the case.

Summary

In this chapter, I demonstrated the long debate over the need for vocational training as an alternate form of education to more traditional academic approaches. While government support

for private vocational colleges in Canada wavered throughout history, PCCs have nevertheless remained an important part of the postsecondary landscape by virtue of offering a unique postsecondary alternative to public options. This history is important in understanding the participant experiences I share in Chapters Five and Six, in so far as the stigma against PCCs and a tendency to think about PCCs in contrast to public institutions emerged as notable themes from their experiences.

I also defined the structure, oversight, role and contribution of PCCs in this chapter, and demonstrated that the sparse literature that is available on PCCs is unfortunately predominantly negative and often either limited or misrepresentative of the sector. Though the gaps in the literature are many, I have zeroed in on the student voice as one that is missing almost in its entirety from research on PCCs (i.e., in qualitative forms of research that privilege student voice in the construction of meaning), raising the question of what else PCCs are that we cannot understand from this chapter alone. To answer such a question, there is a need to adopt approaches being used outside of Canada that privilege students as integral in conversations about vocational education, and that adopt newer frames of analysis that allow us to look past merely economical factors.

In the following chapter, I build on this chapter by explaining how my theoretical framework departs from human capital approaches to vocational education research. I also demonstrate how my framework guides the ethical and rigorous exploration of my topic while remaining sensitive to the need for a critical approach that is cognizant of a long history of prejudice, a possibly disadvantaged student population, and contemporary calls for less government support for PCCs.

“All choice of words is slang. It marks a class.”

“There is correct English: that is not slang.”

“I beg your pardon: correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays.

And the strongest slang of all is the slang of poets.”

— George Eliot (pen name of Mary Ann Evans), *Middlemarch*, 1871

“Yes; I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible.”

— Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 1817

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Overview

In this chapter, I share the theoretical framework and literature review for the study. Some theories I share for the reader to more fully understand my critical feminist leanings and how they influenced the study and the construction of meaning, while others I share to introduce the reader to theories I draw on later in the dissertation when I analyze the data. To that end, I begin with an overview of several key studies on vocational education in the United Kingdom to explain why I adopt a feminist critical framework. I then discuss how critical and feminist theories enable me to explore the complexity of PCC student experience and choice, without losing sight of the political context of my topic. In the latter half of the chapter, I explore additional theories that informed the data analysis and discussion, including theories on the possible connections between school to career transitions, identity, and narrative theory; adult learning theories, including transformative learning theories; theories on the role of caring and support in education; and, research that encourages Canadian educators and policy makers to reconceptualize how student learning and success are measured.

Vocational Education Research in the United Kingdom

In my search for literature on vocational education, I came across a line of inquiry in the United Kingdom that offered some possible answers to the questions I raised in the first chapter about why so many students were sharing stories with me about a lack of self-confidence or belief that they could succeed in an educational context. Through efforts to better understand why students choose vocational programs, these studies paid attention to how previous experiences with academic success or failure impacts postsecondary choices. While the following summary is not exhaustive, it provides the reader with a basis for why I have selected a theoretical framework that prompts exploration of how educational experiences impact student choice, and what consequences these experiences have on students' self-perceptions of ability and intelligence.

For example, Archer and Hutchings (2000) conducted a mixed-methods study in the United Kingdom into the motivations of working-class men and women between the ages of 16 and 30 who were either not participating in higher education or were participating in vocational courses through further education. In the United Kingdom, prior to 2013, mandatory education culminated with the end of secondary school when a student is 16 years of age, after which a student had the option to go to what is called further education to gain either the academic qualifications necessary to go on to higher education, or the vocational qualifications to train for a particular career. Conversely, higher education is similar to Canada's postsecondary system in that students are usually 18 years of age or older, and it includes universities and colleges with a variety of degree, diploma, and certificate programs. Archer and Hutchings' (2000) study is set within a context of national efforts to increase participation in higher education in England. Archer and Hutchings (2000) found that the risks and benefits of higher education differ greatly

for students from different social classes, particularly for working-class students. Specifically, working class participants perceived the risks of attending higher education to be higher. More than financial risk, the most commonly identified risk associated with attending higher education was “the possibility of failure” (p. 561), suggesting that student choice can be impacted by student self-perceptions of their ability to succeed within schools.

The theme of fear of academic failure was also found in Fuller’s (2009) longitudinal deviant case study. Fuller (2009) explored the educational aspirations of 63 students in an all-girl British school that was considered to be underperforming in comparison to national educational averages, and whose student population was predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Through the use of observation, focus groups, and a series of interviews, Fuller (2009) worked with students of all levels of educational aspiration to get a sense of their school experiences, including relationships with family, friends, and staff, as well as their future educational aspirations. Particularly with students who do not aspire to continue education after high school (what Fuller [2009] terms low-aspiring students), experiences of academic failure became a theme, with these students being linked to higher instances of negative experiences or failure that impacted their decision to not attend further or higher education. Fuller (2009) also found there to be a strong connection between students’ anxiety and fear over performing well in school and their choice to attend vocational programs.

Fuller (2009) concludes that students’ subjective interpretations and understandings of self are crucial to understanding why students choose particular educational paths over others. The practices and relationships within school are important in sending messages to students about their suitability for different forms of further or higher education after high school; however, it was also “a student’s understanding of self [in relation to those messages] that offers

the greatest insight into why some students in [her] study have aspirations for further and higher education whilst others do not” (Fuller, 2009, p. 162). The practices, relationships, and messages being sent within school, then, carry important consequences for the choices students go on to make because they impact students’ perceptions of self and ability (Fuller, 2009).

Initially intending to examine student aspiration using Bourdieu’s theories on cultural capital and habitus, such findings led Fuller (2009) to conclude that social class and culture alone are insufficient in accounting for the relationship between student self-perceptions of ability and their subsequent choices. She instead turned to individualization, gender, and ethnicity theories for their ability to challenge the “over reliance of class as an explanatory tool to explain different educational outcomes” (Fuller, 2009, p. 4). In Fuller’s (2009) study, aspiration could not be assigned to one influence; instead, the influences were “complex and multifaceted, and cannot be readily understood by adopting one theoretical framework alone” (p. 135). Such an argument is compelling in my choice to adopt a theoretical framework that is driven by a need to represent the complexity and multiplicity of experience, as I demonstrate later in this chapter.

More recently, Fuller and Macfadyen (2012) explored the motivations of 40 vocational students for choosing vocational programs, including why they decided to take a vocational course, what supports they had in making their decisions, and what their experiences were once there. Despite a lack of school support for vocational pathways, students chose to attend vocational programs because experiences with academic failure left them feeling as though they lacked the academic ability for more academic forms of education, though participants were not always explicitly aware such feelings impacted their decisions (Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012). Conversely, many participants felt positive about their experiences at their vocational institutions, interestingly most often because of the respectful interactions with college faculty

(Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012). As a result, Fuller and Macfadyen (2012) point to the importance of identity in understanding student choice and educational experience within vocational education:

Student's educational identity appeared to be an implicit yet important factor in understanding both the motivation for undertaking a vocational course as well as their experience of it. Many students discussed how they had not achieved well at school and this seemed to lead to a lack of confidence. (p. 94)

Underachieving and receiving failing marks in school led to a perceived sense of academic inability, which, in turn, led to a sense of alienation that made participants' experiences in vocational programs seem more rewarding (Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012). Such findings support my idea that qualitative exploration of student identity and experience might enhance what we know about PCC choice in Ontario.

Brockmann and Laurie (2016) also tackle this sensitive subject of vocational versus academic identity by challenging assumptions that vocational learners are naturally “‘non-academic’, ‘disaffected’ with classroom learning and capable of learning only by doing” (p. 230). Drawing on two previous multi-method ethnographic studies they conducted into the learner identities and experiences of students from two different apprenticeship programs in the United Kingdom and Germany, Brockmann and Laurie (2016) discuss how formal learning environments that privilege certain forms of academic learning have the power to perpetuate the false idea that vocational learning identities are necessarily tied to so-called *natural* abilities, or, more often, limitations in ability. In response, they draw on Butler's (2007) gender theories on the discursive nature of identity as a frame for understanding vocational learner identity as “constructed through discursive enactment within the constraints of regulatory regimes” (p. 241) rather than as “fixed identities” (p. 230) that make students incapable of academic learning.

Through biographic-interpretive interviews with the apprentices, semi-structured interviews with college tutors and instructors, and participant observation in the apprentices' classrooms and location of their apprenticeships, Brockmann and Laurie (2016) found that participants from the institution that is seen as less reputable in the United Kingdom had developed practical learner identities as a result of "problematic school careers" (p. 235):

They insisted that academic work was 'not for them', that they were 'not good at reading and writing' and 'much better at hands-on work'. However, the unfolding stories revealed that rather than being naturally 'practical' learners, the young people were constituted as 'non-academic' in school environments that privileged the academic. (p. 235)

The participants from the highly-competitive and internationally-renowned apprenticeship school — who all shared positive and academically successful previous school experiences — did not reject academic learning, nor associate as closely with a vocational identity, though many indicated they preferred hands on work. Brockmann and Laurie (2016) also found that the apprenticeship programs themselves subscribed, in the case of the program of lower esteem, or not, in the case of the program of high esteem, to the idea that vocational students are not capable of academic work, with their curricula reflecting such beliefs.

Brockmann and Laurie (2016) concluded from these findings that "learner identities were constituted through past experiences of learning, through the content and structure of the apprenticeship programme, and through the discursive interactions of the people within it" (p. 241). Thinking about identity as discursively constructed enabled Brockmann and Laurie (2016) to avoid perpetuating the stigma that low-achieving students must necessarily and inherently be practical learners. Instead, they found vocational learner identity to be "negotiated within the multi-layered contexts and discursive regimes within which learning takes place" (Brockmann &

Laurie, 2016, p. 232). The consequences of not challenging such categories is that vocational learners receive less social acceptance because practical is more closely associated with deficient. Brockmann and Laurie (2016) conclude with a call to policy-makers to “break the mould, [and] challenge rather than reinforce ‘practical’ learner identities” (p. 242). I draw on Brockmann and Laurie’s (2016) work particularly for its insights on how vocational learner identities can develop as a result of negative school experiences or being constituted as non-academic by individuals and institutions that privilege academic learning above all else.

Other studies have similarly shown that motivations for vocational pathways should not be reduced to employment alone. Hardiman’s (2014) mixed method study utilized a quantitative survey and qualitative focus group and interviews to explore why a group of mature students decided to enroll in vocational programs at a FE college in Ireland after an extended absence from education, what their experiences were while there, and what benefits they experienced as a result. Hardiman (2014) found that participants had very complex and inter-related reasons for going back to school; however, when asked to select a motivation for participating in vocational education on the quantitative survey portion of the study, most participants selected vocational reasons. During the qualitative portion of the study, however, important themes emerged that were unrelated to job-related motivations, with most participants displaying that their motivations were impacted by self-doubt over their ability to succeed that stemmed back to previous school experiences, with some speaking more generally about their desire to do something that felt important to them and that gave them recognition they felt was lacking (Hardiman, 2014). In working through deep-seated self-doubt, participants had to negotiate the transition to capable student, which prompted them to reinvent new self-identities and self-concepts (Hardiman, 2014). These self-perceptions of ability came to impact whether students

would remain in a given program, with many students seeing instructor reactions to their work as pivotal. Being validated with high or successful grades allowed participants to claim their student identities and to gain self-confidence (Hardiman, 2014). This new confidence extended into their personal and professional lives, particularly in terms of feeling they had found a voice “not just [in] the act of speaking but a sense of agency, respect and entitlement to participate” (Hardiman, 2014, p. 37). Many participants shared surprise over the extent to which they changed over their programs, initially expecting only to increase their skills and job prospects (Hardiman, 2014). Overall, many students experienced positive shifts in identity that were enabled by working through conflict, challenges and crises with the help of mutually respectful and supportive relationship with teaching staff.

Other studies have also noted increased confidence as a benefit participants attribute to pursuing vocational education. Herrera, Brown, and Portlock (2015) conducted a qualitative case study of a foundational degree (FD) program, which is an intermediate level vocational qualification within the United Kingdom that was introduced in 2000 to address a skills shortage in the labour market. Using focus groups with semi-structured interviews, Herrera et al. (2015) explored the learning experiences of 31 students within a medicines management program at a FD institution. Noteworthy about this study is that despite the vocational goals of FD programs, participants surprisingly spoke very little about whether or not their programs were helping them to meet labour-related objectives. Instead, they valued the personal development they achieved, and how it was leading to a host of positive outcomes in their lives, such as “increased awareness, confidence, and empowerment” (Herrera et al., 2015, p. 853). Participants also indicated they were able to self-reflect and learn more about themselves as learners as a result of their participation in their FD program. Herrera et al. (2015) suggest that such increases in

confidence could be due to the relationships participants built with peers throughout their learning, as well as due to awareness of how much learning they were achieving. This study demonstrates the possibility that job-focused programs can have other values than only job-related ones, particularly in terms of learning within a community of practice.

Together, these studies motivated me to take into account learner identity and subjective interpretations of academic ability when exploring postsecondary choice, student experiences, and the consequences of assuming that vocational learners are somehow deficient and capable of only practical learning. Furthermore, they justify a contextualized approach into the complexity of student motivations and choices, as well as the difficulty and possible harm that can result from overly-generalized research findings.

Theoretical Framework: Drawing on the Bricolage

With these research studies in mind, I came to draw on notions of the bricolage as reconceptualized by Kincheloe and Berry (2004), and elaborated on in further works by Kincheloe and McLaren (2008), and Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) for their insights on how to examine the complexity of PCC student choice and experiences in an ethical and epistemologically-sensitive manner that seeks change without leading to further oppression. The bricolage was first theorized by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), who expanded upon the initial idea of Levi-Strauss (1966). In their theories, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) compared research with the act of a French bricoleur who uses the tools most suited to completing a task (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Researchers who worked as bricoleurs, then, would use various methods that were best suited to completing their research rather than “passively receiving the ‘correct’, universally applicable methodologies” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011, p. 168). While Kincheloe and Berry (2004) still adopt this to be true, they push the notion of the bricolage further by

reconceptualizing it as “an evolving criticality” (p. 71) that hinges on a belief in the complexity of the social world around us, and in the ideological power struggles that underpin that complexity (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008; Kincheloe et al., 2011). No longer solely a call to use multiple methods and strategies in research, the bricolage requires that researchers work to avoid reducing the complexity of the social world by exposing the myth that there is such a thing as value- or ideology-free knowledge and truth (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). Truth and meaning are constructed rather than uncovered, and are impacted by several intersecting factors and circumstances that are socially and historically contingent (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). Because knowledge and theory “are more an explanation of our relation to the world” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 2) than fact about a so-called reality, bricoleurs must actively locate themselves within their research in relation to their complex social context, as well as continually analyze how that position impacts the knowledge they produce (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008; Kincheloe et al., 2011). Conceptualizations of the bricolage support my interest in the epistemologies of the margins, and my greater goal of conducting research that can be an emancipatory endeavour.

I found critical and feminist theoretical traditions to best allow me to work within the bricolage to explore how PCC student experiences and stories can be contextualized within society at this given historical time and place.

Critical Theory

Broadly, critical theory provides me with the rationale for seeking to explore the ways dominant ideology and practices can lead to social injustices (Stinson, 2009). It is a theoretical tradition that, while escaping singular approaches or limiting definitions (Kincheloe et al., 2011),

shares some general underlying beliefs that inform my research. For example, Kincheloe et al. (2011) explain that critical theory recognizes that facts and knowledge are always value-laden; that language plays an important role in subjectivity; that certain groups are privileged over others; that oppression and domination are most easily perpetuated when the oppressed groups accept their situations as unavoidable; that oppression has many intersecting and interrelated causes; and, importantly, that research practices can perpetuate oppression by supporting dominant systems. At its most fundamental level, critical theory seeks empowerment and liberation through research that contributes to understanding how societies and people are impacted by the historical factors of their time and location, as well as by a contradictory system of power struggles that underpin those historical factors (Apple, 2000; Kincheloe et al., 2011).

Such critical beliefs best describe my notion of educational sustainability of a sector that carries with it a long history of being considered lower education, and that still has “reputational issues” (Martin & MacLaine, 2016, p. 72) in Canada today (see Chapter Two). This is particularly relevant when considering the aforementioned British research that demonstrates a relationship between students being considered less intelligent and the choices they go on to make after high school (e.g., Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Brockman & Laurie, 2016; Fuller, 2009, 2014; Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Hardiman, 2014). Such research also demonstrates that many vocational students are explicitly aware of and impacted by such views. For example, in their research project on the perceptions of young people towards vocational education and training in England, Atkins and Flint (2015) conclude that despite being happy with their programs, respondents felt vocational education to hold lower esteem in England, leading them to fear that they would receive less advantage than students who attended forms of education that were perceived to be more academic. Atkins and Flint (2015) argue that this is particularly

harmful when considering that larger percentages of vocational students in England are from working-class or lower socio-economic backgrounds. Similar demographics exist in Ontario, and PCCs still remain the only postsecondary institution in Ontario whose students do not benefit from “postsecondary mobility through credit transfers, credential recognition, equal access to funding opportunities, [and] flexibility in learning modalities” (OACC⁴, 2013, para. 8).

Together, these considerations suggest that furthering educational sustainability in Ontario’s PCC sector must include a critical examination of the status of private vocational education, as well as how knowledge is enacted and privileged in schools.

Critical theory offers useful theories for critiquing legitimate or official knowledge within schools that may help shed light on PCC student choice. For example, critical theory contends that knowledge and education are never neutral endeavours (Bhavnani, Chua, & Collins, 2014; Giroux, 1983/2009; McLaren, 1989; Riley & Rich, 2012); instead, education becomes a system wherein only official knowledge is privileged, and wherein privileged knowledge represents the interests and ideologies of the dominant and privileged groups (Apple, 1993; Bourdieu, 1984/1993; Frank, 2013; Giroux, 1983/2009; Goldberger, 1996). All other interests and ideologies, particularly of marginalized groups, are delegitimized within schools by virtue of being absent from discussions in classrooms, curriculum, and testing (Giroux & McLaren, 1986/2008; Riley & Rich, 2012). Worse yet, the system’s inequalities are often masked by the myth that knowledge is equally accessible to all by being merely a technical procedure “that can be mastered” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008, p. 448), rather than something that requires specific cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1984/1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990) to access. Cultural capital — the cultural attitudes and skills that allow individuals the access, ability, and taste to understand art and the dominant norms, practices and language (Fuller, 2009) — is

⁴ Now Career Colleges Ontario.

largely determined by the class system in that participation in cultural experiences and knowledge is limited by a need for financial means that are typically unavailable to the lower classes (Fuller, 2009). As cultural capital is largely rewarded in the educational system, a lack of it can also mean being less successful in school, which can further translate into less opportunity to attain higher-paying jobs (Fuller, 2009).

This disadvantage in education is particularly aggravated by a lack of linguistic capital — the extent to which one can communicate using the scholarly language of the middle class and dominant elite (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990) — characteristic of the working classes. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) argue that social class determines the amount of linguistic capital a student has because “the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family” (p. 73). Academic achievement becomes more attainable for students from certain classes over others because family inevitably reproduces the linguistic systems of its social class due to a vicious cycle tied to financial inequality and limited opportunities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990).

Bourdieu’s narrow view that class is the root of all inequality has certainly not gone unquestioned. A limitation to using Bourdieu’s theories of linguistic and cultural capital is that they focus on social class as the predominant feature through which individuals come to power or knowledge (Fuller, 2009). Fuller (2009) argues, “The idea that people from different class backgrounds have different values and norms and that differential life course outcomes can be predicted on the basis of a structural location is considered simply wrong” (p. 22). Bourdieu’s views ignore the importance of situation and how different people respond differently according to their own understandings (Fuller, 2009). Fuller (2009) argues that over-relying on social class

runs the risk of ignoring differences that exist among students of the same social class and background with regards to educational aspiration, which can lead to the further danger of ignoring other equally important forms of marginalization and oppression.

Despite the validity of these criticisms, it is difficult to deny the influence Bourdieu has had on exposing how marginalization and oppression are entrenched in education and schools. For Bourdieu (1993), the school itself is a location wherein class inequalities are perpetuated and indeed worsened by a thriving “racism of intelligence” (p. 177). This racism of intelligence is engendered by the dominant class through the perpetuation of a cultural capital that upholds and justifies its own privilege and self-perceived superiority (Bourdieu, 1993). Of the most racist forms of intelligence, Bourdieu (1993) points to the “scientificization of language” (p. 178). This scientificization of language is prevalent in educational systems through measures of intelligence that uphold and perpetuate dominant forms of legitimate knowledge:

It is the language of ‘leaders’ who feel themselves to be legitimized by ‘intelligence’ and who dominate a society founded on discrimination based on ‘intelligence’, that is, founded on what the educational system measures under the term ‘intelligence’.

Intelligence is what is measured by intelligence tests, that is, what the educational system measures. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 178)

Under this model, class differences become falsely representative of intelligence differences, falsely so because they are largely determined by a system that is characteristically middle- and upper-class.

Furthermore, academic success hinges on a student’s ability to espouse instrumental and technical rationality (Giroux, 1983/2009; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008; Kincheloe et al., 2009). Failure to do so leaves many students silenced and viewed as unintelligent and less credible

(Bourdieu, 1984/1993; Frank, 2013; Giroux, 1983/2009), something that further engenders the racism of intelligence that results in a subtle form of discrimination that “is legitimized and given the sanction of science” (Bourdieu, 1984/1993, p. 178). Consequently, critical theorists see instrumental and technical rationality as among the greatest sources of oppression in society (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008), a notion also taken up extensively by feminist epistemologists. To remedy such problems, critical theorists see the need to give voice to “culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 9), and to encourage them to question the “taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (Giroux, 1983/2009, p. 448; see also Hibbert, 2004). Critical theorists contend that schools and researchers must “take into account the various ways in which the voices that teachers use to communicate with students can either silence or legitimate them” (Giroux, 1983/2009, 454).

Undoubtedly, this theoretical tradition supports this study’s goal to better understand how students experience education differently, and whether those differences lead to oppression and/or feelings of failure. Feminist theory, as I will demonstrate next, has much to add to the exploration of these beliefs and the consequences of privileging certain knowledge over others. However, critical theory provides a lens through which my participants and I can broadly come to understand: 1) the political and social aspects that underpin how they experience their education; and, 2) whether or not coming to that understanding has any impact on how they conceive their identities, including their sense of self as knowers (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). Furthermore, it allows me to raise questions that explore why participants chose a form of education that historically has been considered as antithetical to traditional, academic education.

Feminist Theoretical Traditions

Whereas critical theory provides me with the rationale and the tools to study power, oppression, and marginality within schools (Stinson, 2009), feminist theoretical traditions justify an increased focus on how self-perceptions of intellect and worth impact how students experience education, as well as the choices they make as a result. Specifically, I adopt the traditions of feminist epistemology theory — theory that challenges the androcentric nature of knowledge (Rogers, 1993) — and feminist standpoint theory — theory that believes more truthful representations of the world begin with the perspectives of marginalized groups (Bar On, 1993; Frank, 2013; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Smith, 1999). Adopting such traditions does not prevent me from working with male participants or to looking outside of gender and sex as the only sources of oppression (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). Instead, I adopt these approaches as “theoretical perspectives of critical inquiry” (Scotland, 2012, p. 13) for their interest in a variety of influences on the production of knowledge, including race, class, sexuality, culture, age, and religion (Alcoff & Potter, 1993), as well as for their commitment to examining the specificity of experience (Harding, 1993; Lather, 1991), which I have argued is necessary amidst the sparse landscape of PCC research in order to move away from reductionist views of PCC students.

Feminist Epistemology Theories

I first came to see the relevance of feminist epistemology theory when I was introduced to Belenky et al.’s (1986/1997) *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. Reflecting on the findings of their study, Goldberger (1996) explains that within traditional educational models only certain learners are empowered and respected as knowers. The consequence is that “when a person’s ways of knowing are at odds with the dominant or adoptive culture, he or she may experience a sense of coercion over ‘the right way to know’ or may feel called on to silence or give up ways

of knowing that are devalued” (Goldberger, 1996, pp. 8-9). Indeed, many of the women in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* shared stories of feeling voiceless and without claim to knowledge. They introduce us to women who did not feel validated through mainstream education as being capable of intelligent thought; to women who could only succeed in school in voices other than their own; to women who are so self-conscious and unsure of their intelligence that they feel as though they are “admitted through a fluke” (p. 196) to prestigious colleges; to a student who was told she was wrong to think “she could use her own firsthand experience as a source of truth” (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 191); to women who were surprised to find validation in vocational programs because they were not “looked down on” (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 196) and “there was no oppression” (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 196); and to many others who cause me to question what consequences the legitimization of knowledge in schools can have on the way learners come to conceptualize themselves, their intelligence, and their ability to be knowers with something valuable to say. Seeing similarities between these experiences and those of PCC students I had encountered through my job caused me to select a framework that seeks to interrogate the power relations behind access to knowledge from the perspective of those most affected by them (namely, the students).

Particularly useful in exploring the politics of knowledge is feminist epistemology’s interest in the negative implications of various dichotomies that are equated with the “knowledge/experience dichotomy”, such as “mind/body, reason/emotion, theory/practice, and public/private” (Code, 1988/1992, p. 75). While all of these dichotomies can be framed in terms of gender stereotypes, they also appropriately reflect the aforementioned academic/vocational binary, with academic education being traditionally associated with reason and theory, and vocational being more practical and experience-based (Kantor, 1986; Moodie, 2009). The

primary way feminist epistemology theory works toward illuminating the oppression that results from such binary thinking is by challenging scientific narratives of objectivity as the dominant mode through which knowledge can be legitimated and claimed. What is at stake in doing so is challenging a long tradition rooted in Enlightenment principles that demands that knowledge be produced in a “perfectly detached, neutral, distanced, and disinterested approach to a subject matter that exists in a publicly observable space, separate from knowers/observers” (Code, 1995, p. 15). When knowledge is produced under such circumstances, knowledge is produced “from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 589) and, as such, contains a more justifiable claim to truth than knowledge that is so-called biased by personal or political goals (Code, 1993). The consequence is that modes of knowing that are rooted in experience and practice receive little credibility, leaving many learners — often, non-male or non-dominant learners — excluded from claiming and producing knowledge, or from being taken seriously (Goldberger, 1996).

There is extensive writing on how objectivity is dominant within traditional education systems (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Code, 1988/1992, 1995; Goldberger, 1996; Hanen, 1988; Harding, 1993; Lang, 2011; Lather, 1986, 2004; Melamed & Devine, 1988; Sherwin, 1988). Melamed and Devine (1988) demonstrated this phenomenon through their study on the potential gender biases in the Kolb Learning Style Inventory in Canada and the United States. They confirm that “educational philosophy in most colleges and universities is antithetical to learning from experience” (p. 76). Yet, findings from their study show that fifty-five percent of their participants identified themselves as concrete learners, with the others as more abstract learners (Melamed & Devine, 1988). This is even more pronounced when Melamed and Devine (1988) examined the results by sex (gender in the study), with sixty-four percent of the women in the sample preferring concrete learning over abstract learning (Melamed

& Devine, 1988). Despite these valid preferences, women are measured against the male-preferred learning styles; the result of this androcentric system of measuring intelligence is that women often do not measure up, leaving women “to question their ability to think, learn, and act intelligently in the world” (Melamed & Devine, 1988, p. 70). Importantly, though Melamed and Devine’s (1988) findings may be outdated, they support the need for contemporary research that seeks to understand how women and other potentially marginalized groups internalize the implicit messages about intelligence perpetuated within “educational settings where abstract conceptual learning styles are so highly rewarded” (p. 79).

Notably, not all school experiences engender these same feelings of alienation. For example, Belenky et al. (1986/1997) note that some educational programs helped to ease the common fear women had of not being intelligent enough to pursue postsecondary education, as well as to validate them as knowers. Particularly validating for some was the fact that their life experiences were valued within their programs as meaningful and worthy of classroom time (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). This is not to say these programs and schools were less rigorous, but that they recognized multiple modes of inquiry. Importantly, when experience was considered to be a valid form of knowing, women felt they had something worth saying in an academic setting (Belenky et al., 1986/1997).

This relationship between students and the educational environment provides a link back to the work I shared earlier in the chapter where researchers are discovering connections between how students feel about themselves as academic learners and the choices they go on to make. Code (1995) warns that researchers need to be aware of how dominant epistemologies silence the perspectives of certain races, cultures, history, and class in favour of the mainstream Anglo-American perspective. In that sense, feminist epistemology need not be utilized merely to

analyze the differences between male-produced knowledge and female-produced knowledge, but to examine the connections between masculinity and authoritative forms of knowledge (rationality and objectivity), and how those masculine forms of knowledge impact those who do not fit that model (Code, 1995). Certainly, according to the scathing criticisms launched at vocational education, vocational students seem to represent a population in Canadian society that is arguably less respected as knowers.

Feminist Standpoint Theories

Feminist standpoint draws from feminist epistemology in arguing that knowledge should be produced from the subjective perspectives of marginalized groups for their ability to be “more revealing” (Bar On, 1993, p. 83), and to “result in more truthful representations of the world” (Frank, 2013, p. 364). Such an approach escapes relativism by believing not that all perspectives are equally true, but that “some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start knowledge projects” (Harding, 1993, p. 61). This does not mean that marginalized lives provide perspectives that researchers must leave unanalyzed. Instead, they provide viewpoints that encourage critical questions that would otherwise not emerge from dominant groups (Bar On, 1993; Frank, 2013; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; hooks, 1984). By allowing those with subjugated perspectives to speak for themselves, we ensure that authority is given where it belongs, and minimize the perpetuation of dominant ideology that “everyone is equally capable to know [marginalized peoples] and their situations” (Bar On, 1993, p. 95).

For Dorothy Smith (1999) standpoint theory is political in that it allows researchers to challenge traditional inquiry by exploring topics that have previously been deemed unworthy of inquiry projects; namely, those that begin in the everyday lives of participants who generally do

not get a voice in so-called *serious* research. For example, standpoint begins with the localized body to take into account the actual life experiences of researchers and research participants:

The body isn't forgotten; hence, the actual local site of the body isn't forgotten. Inquiry starts with the knower who is actually located; she is active; she is at work; she is connected up with particular other people in various ways; she thinks, eats, sleeps, laughs, desires, sorrows, sings, curses, loves, just here; she reads here; she watches television. She sits at her computer playing solitaire, analyzing data, sending e-mail messages to friends, writing a paper. Activities, feelings, and experiences hook her into extended social relations, linking her activities to others and in ways beyond her knowing. (Smith, 1999, pp. 4-5)

This approach is different from more traditional research projects that objectify participants or groups “from a standpoint in the ruling relations” (Smith, 1999, p. 74). For Smith (1999), these relations of ruling are the structures that organize social relations, and that historically have come to separate consciousness from action, public from private sphere, men from women, professional from domestic roles, and so on. Research plays an important role in reaffirming or challenging such structures because the ruling relations are predominantly text-based and text-mediated (Smith, 1999). Furthermore, they do not represent the day to day lives of women or the marginalized.

Standpoint theory, instead, demands that inquiry problematize the ruling relations by beginning in “the actual” (Smith, 1999, p. 5). Inquiry that begins from standpoint perspectives becomes localized within “a particular spatial and temporal site, a particular configuration of the everyday/everynight world” (p. 5). It works from within a phenomenon not to merely extra-locally explain behaviour, but to “explicate the actual social relations in which people’s lives are

embedded and to make these visible to them/ourselves” (Smith, 1999, p. 74). For those reasons, standpoint is as much method as it is theory, and is a way to work towards challenging the aforementioned binaries of theory/practice and consciousness/body (Smith, 1999).

Smith (1999) is not alone in her argument that research must no longer hide behind traditional notions of objectivity. Like feminist epistemologists, many feminist standpoint theorists demand that researchers challenge objectivity as a site of resistance through what Haraway (1988) calls “situated knowledges” (p. 581). Such theories contend that researchers can produce knowledge that is more truthful if it starts with subjugated perspectives. In doing so, objectivity becomes reconceptualized in a more democratic way to represent “a view from a body” (Haraway, 1988, p. 589), rather than some disinterested, neutral truth waiting to be uncovered and presented as “life phenomena out of time and place” (Smith, 1999, p. 7). Viewing truth in this way prevents knowledge producers from defending claims of neutrality and disinterest to avoid critically interrogating the knowledge they produce. Situated knowledges also demand that researchers account for all of the historical and social interests, values, and influences on knowledge production, and that they “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway, 1988, p. 583; see also Babbitt, 1993; Bar On, 1993; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Smith, 1999). Being situated for Smith (1999) inevitably involves the situatedness of the reader as well, and points to the “site of reading within which the text is activated, becomes a text” (p. 6), a reminder that the reader shares in the meaning making process of what they bring to life as text through reading. The goal of these theories is to democratize the research landscape of studies on postsecondary education, without which Smith (1999) argues we are at risk of treating topics of inquiry as objects that are detached from both the inquirer and those who actually live in the world being described.

I adopt standpoint theory in this study as both a theory and a method that allows me to seek the same objective of raising critical questions that cannot be answered by quantitative demographics on PCCs alone or from research on other Ontario postsecondary institutions that are vastly different from PCCs. Such a goal ultimately works toward “the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge” (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, p. 14) by beginning knowledge production from a perspective that has generated little interest as of yet (Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014). When I refer to PCC students as inhabiting the postsecondary margin, I do not assume that my participants will necessarily characterize themselves as marginalized within the school system, though this is, of course, possible. I am cognizant that there is a danger that marginalization can become a label that could result in reductionist or stereotyped portrayals of my participants (Lather, 1991; Scotland, 2012). However, when I think to the aforementioned statistics of higher percentages of nontraditional students in PCCs (Malatest & Associates, 2008; Martin & MacLaine, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Hicks, 2014), to the negative perception of PCCs and its students historically that I shared in Chapter Two, and the current lack of recognition of PCC credentials (OACC, 2013), it seems irresponsible to ignore the possible influences of marginality, particularly in terms of PCC students inhabiting the periphery or margins of postsecondary education in Ontario. Rather than leading me to make unquestioned assumptions, a feminist framework guided by standpoint theory provides the safeguards to explore the complexity of marginalization and oppression without further oppressing or stereotyping participants.

Furthermore, the use of such theory leaves open the possibility to reframe marginality in ways that do not assume it to be merely a location of “deprivation” (hooks, 1993, p. 52). Instead, it can be a space of counterhegemonic possibility and resistance that has agency on its own

without having to be assimilated with the centre (Bar On, 1993; hooks, 1993). Within this view, marginality as a site of resistance becomes a place of great creativity and possibility wherein other worlds and lives can be envisioned (hooks, 1993). In fact, the margins are the only place where individuals possess the “power to be able to separate useful knowledge that I might get from the dominating group from participation in ways of knowing that would lead to estrangement, alienation, and worse — assimilation and co-optation” (hooks, 1993, p. 52). For PCC students, I wonder if being part of the postsecondary margins allows for them to access what they need from more academic education but without the alienating effects of being able only to thrive through the use of the dominant, scientific language of academia. For hooks (1993), voice can be a place of struggle and resistance, and any endeavour to meet participants in the margin must be made with the knowledge that the margins can be a space of “creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer” (p. 54).

Therefore, feminist standpoint theory helps me think about PCC students as inhabiting the periphery or margins of postsecondary education in Ontario without minimizing them to that position. It also provides the rationale for my choice to work from within PCCs with my own personal experiences and those of the study participants to dialectically create meaning that is both theory and practice, specific to our localized time and place.

Additional Theories Utilized for Data Analysis

The following theories shaped my thinking about the data collected in this study, and informed the analysis and discussion I engage in later in the dissertation. Because I elaborate on many of these theories when I contextualize them within the context of the study’s findings, I

provide brief explorations of the theories now. What may seem disjointed here becomes cohesive later when set against the experiences participants shared over my time with them.

Identity and Career Training

There is a growing body of literature that demonstrates the importance of understanding how individuals construct their identities when trying to understand their career decisions (e.g., Benjamin, Domene, & Landine, 2014; Brown & Bimrose, 2015; Bullock-Yowell, Saunders, & Peterson, 2015; Domene, Landine, & Stewart, 2015; Maree, 2015; Parada & Young, 2013; Wood & Dahl, 2015; Young, Domene, & Valach, 2014). This literature is focused on career counselling; however, it is useful for its insights on possible connections in this study between participant identity and their decisions to attend the PCC, as well as on what possible values identity exploration during their time at the PCC might have on their future careers. For example, Domene, Landine, and Stewart (2015) argue that “a crystallized sense of identity can facilitate the transition into the labor force and engagement in worker roles” (p. 482). Yet, despite its importance, identity formation is becoming increasingly more confusing because the rapidly-changing labour market is causing individuals to confront incredible fragmentation, instability, and uncertainty (Benjamin et al., 2014; Maree, 2015; Parada & Young, 2015). When considering that careers are a key way that many adults negotiate and reconstruct their notions of self, and, often, a key means through which people create meaning in their lives, the realities of an unstable and rapidly-changing labour market can have serious effects on self-worth and notions of self (Maree, 2015), and can leave individuals feeling a lack of ability to exert control over their lives (Parada & Young, 2015).

In trying to help their clients find meaningful work in the face of such instability and fragmentation, career counsellors have increasingly moved towards approaches that focus on

narrative meaning making as a key strategy for decision making (e.g., Brown & Bimrose, 2015; Domene et al., 2015; Maree, 2015; Savickas, 2011). To do so, Maree (2015) explains that “a career counselor’s main aim is to help clients narrate and listen to their own stories because all people use autobiographical reasoning when called on to make a change in their lives” (Maree, 2015, p. 227). Within this approach, great emphasis is placed on helping students to develop a clearer sense of self before they can make appropriate decisions about their careers, which makes it important to understand how participants conceptualize themselves through the stories they tell (Domene et al., 2015). Brown and Bimrose (2015) add that such an approach enables individuals to gain self-awareness that can lead to better career decisions by “prioritizing certain episodes from their varied experiences and giving them a special significance by incorporating them in their strategic career stories” (p. 246). It is not only in the telling and retelling of stories that identity work happens, but in having others recognize and validate emerging new narratives, which can help individuals through transitions (Brown & Bimrose, 2015). Maree (2015) credits this process of examining life stories as something that can be healing for some. Periods of transition, particularly, offer rich possibility for reconceptualizations of the self, despite the fact that many do not realize they are engaged in identity work (Domene et al., 2015).

I draw on these perspectives for their insights on the relationship between identity formation and career choices that I share in Chapters Five and Six, and discuss in Chapter Seven; on identity work that happens during transitions; and, on the impact that others can have on these transitions and new conceptions of self. Though I cannot go back in time to narratively work with participants before their decisions were made, understanding that identity can influence career choice is helpful in exploring past school experiences and how participants select and

share pivotal stories about their decisions. Furthermore, this literature suggests that such identity work has at least the possibility of leading to more successful career transitions.

Narrative Identity

Because career counselling literature only touches the surface of narrative identity, I draw from broader theories about narrative identity provided in literature on narrative inquiry. In Clandinin, Steeves, and Caine's (2013) recent work on transitions and early school leaving in *Composing Lives in Transition*, they situate identity within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space because they believe identity is best understood by the contextual and meaning-making efforts of storying our lives. In this sense, they see narrative identity as the stories we live by, which must be understood as "fluid, as ever evolving over time, as relational, as both personal and social, and as grounded in places" (Steeves, Clandinin, & Caine, 2013, p. 225). Because identity can be understood narratively, it becomes important to understand how individuals "engage in relational ways in the telling, living, retelling, and reliving of their experiences both in and outside of school" (Steeves et al., 2013, p. 226). The way participants select and structure their stories at a specific time can help them to form "new stories to live by" (Clandinin, Caine, & Steeves, 2013a, p. 220) that are inevitably embedded within social contexts as well. Consequently, in trying to understand identity, it becomes important to understand how identity is formed within and in relation to "complex, multi-storied contexts over time" (Steeves et al., 2013, p. 226).

It is not new to explore identity narratively. Polkinghorne (1988) argued almost three decades ago that understanding identity required an examination of how people narratively understand the self because "the self is a concept defined as the expressive process of human existence, whose form is narrativity" (p. 151). Using tools that help researchers to explore

identity narratively enables us to “understand the self as an expression” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 151). For Josselson (1995), this expression exists within conversations that the self has with itself and with the world through time. She argues,

If we wish to trace the growth of whole people, we must cease to regard people as finished entities and, somewhat paradoxically, we must find those places within narrative where the self is most clearly a dialogue with itself. These moments of crisis represent nodes of change in which the individual becomes other than he or she was. (Josselson, 1995, p. 37)

The result of this dialogue is a “place where a person’s self-understanding is put to a self-imposed test” (p. 37) in a manner that has rich possibilities for identity change and reconstruction. Josselson’s (1995) discussion about the importance of crisis in the possible reconstruction of identity is reminiscent of her earlier work on women’s identity development. In her early study, Josselson (1987) explored the identity formation (as a dynamic process) of sixty female college students using Marcia’s (1966) theories about how individuals react to crisis, and how they commit, or not, to identity elements. Fundamentally, Josselson (1987) sees identity as something that requires a holistic view into the differences in how identities are formulated, rather than the more popular views of her time that identity be dissected and quantified. While I find Josselson’s (1987) use of Marcia’s (1966) categories (which Josselson herself argues are a bit pejorative in nature, and something she uses only descriptively rather than evaluatively) to be somewhat prescriptive if I were to apply them to this study now, I draw on her study for its insights into the role of crisis and commitment on identity development and changes.

More recently, McAdams (2008) defined narrative identity as “an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self” (p. 242), and that “the stories people

fashion to make meaning out of their lives serve to situate them within the complex social ecology of modern adulthood” (p. 242). When an individual tries to situate themselves within the complex social ecology, what is happening is identity work as one tries to come to terms with “who we imagine we were, are, and might be” (McAdams, 2008, p. 242). For McAdams (2008), this means that “*the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity* [original emphasis]” (pp. 242-243). In other work, McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2006) define narrative identity as “the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others” (p. 4). These narrative identities then become “the stories we live by” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006, p. 4) in a similar way to Clandinin, Caine, and Steeve’s (2013a) conceptualizations. I draw on these theories of narrative identity for their ability to shed light on how participants draw meaning from their experiences at the PCC, as well as to aid with analysis of possible identity changes or transformations that result from the research process and/or from their PCC education.

Narrative identity is also a powerful tool for understanding the ways in which participants impose, or not, unity and continuity on their life experiences. McAdams et al. (2006) argue that narrative identities are key ways in which individuals give coherence and unity to what may otherwise appear as fragmented existences. Such theories can provide useful frameworks for thinking about causality in narrative inquiry, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue can be a common difficulty for novice researchers to address. Rather than viewing causality as merely a false construct that misrepresents life narratives, theories on narrative identity provide opportunity to analyze and better understand how individuals seek to create coherence from their life experiences (Pals, 2006). Pals (2006), for instance, sees strength in acknowledging causality, but as an interpretive strategy for understanding how individuals make meaning of their lives

through the selecting and structuring of certain stories over others. She argues that “life-story construction is an interpretive process of self-making that operates to produce coherence through the formation of meaningful connections between past experiences and the self” (Pals, 2006, p. 177). Rather than seeing life stories as inevitably causal or continuous, individuals actively, though possibly sub-consciously, try to create coherence out of life stories by interpreting events as the cause of other events (Pals, 2006). I draw on such theories for their abilities to help me navigate the danger of causal views of experience, and for their insights into the importance of the links participants may draw between their earlier school experiences and their time as PCC students.

Identity and Transitions

I also draw on discussions led by Clandinin, Caine, and Steeves (2013a) about transitions for the possible insights they might have on how participants create meaning from their PCC experiences. Mindful of Heilbrun’s (1999) work on the possibilities of thresholds, liminal spaces, and transitions, Clandinin et al. (2013a) see the liberating possibilities of being in transition for the very reason that “there is no prescribed story to live out in a state of liminality” (p. 221). In their study, Clandinin et al. (2013a) found that participants recreated themselves out of these spaces of liminality that resulted from being in transition and being temporarily in between. Within the liminal space of being in transition, participants were able to abandon institutional plotlines that had been dominant in their lives and to refashion their notions of self and where that could take them in future. I draw on their discussions for the possible insights they might have on how PCC students experience transition, particularly when considering that for most participants, enrolling at the PCC marks a great transition in their lives, as will be explored in subsequent chapters. My personal experience at the PCC also told me I might expect to

encounter students who were transitioning to new careers after being laid off, for example; or to being a student again for the first time in years, sometimes decades; or, to preparing for work outside of the home for the first time in years or ever. Certainly, these are my own experiences of the possible transitions PCC students can face; however, even existing research supports the possibility that many PCC students are in periods of transition when considering that the most often selected reason for attending a PCC is to train for a new career, or, in other words, to transition into something new (EnviroNics Research, 2017; Larocque, 2015; Malatest & Associates, 2008; Martin & MacLaine, 2016). The aforementioned study by Hardiman (2014) supports such a claim, finding that vocational education can represent a period of transitioning for its students, the result of which was that,

Time in the college offered them many of the characteristics of a moratorium. . . . This moratorium provides an ‘in-between’ space, a safe place for the latent self to develop and emerge. This is not a straightforward process but involves several stages or crises, the successful resolution of which mark progress to the revised self. (p. 38)

Clandinin et al. (2013a) similarly see the possibility of freedom within transitions to take ownership over our life stories. They conclude that “understanding experience narratively opens the possibility that transitions speak to lives unfolding” (Clandinin et al., 2013a, p. 220).

Adult Learning Models

As I note in later chapters, participants shared many experiences during our interviews that caused me to draw on adult learning theories for purposes of better understanding their experiences. Adult learning models tend to place emphasis on learning centred approaches that focus on the learning process and the learner rather than on teaching, facilitating, or the content to be learned (MacKeracher, 2004). In general, these theories tell us that adult learning should be

a dialectical process that places value on the prior experiences learners bring with them to their learning; recognize the role of emotions in learning; and, acknowledge that learning is social and occurs within a context (MacKeracher, 2004; also see Cranton, 2012). Many theories on the general characteristics of adult learners agree that adult learners tend to want to be self-directed learners who have a strong sense of why and how they want to learn, that they prefer learning to be experiential and problem-based, and that they tend to be much more motivated and focused on learning because they actively choose to engage in the learning (Cranton, 2012; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; MacKeracher, 2004). Because of this, discussion, group work, problem-solving exercises, role-playing, simulations, and field experiences, with a focus on encouraging learners to share experiences between learners, are key ways in which learning experiences are made meaningful (Cranton, 2012; Knowles et al., 2011).

Consequently, the environments that have been deemed most conducive to adult learning are those that give agency to the learners, involve them in goal-setting and assessment, and foster respect and support above all else (Cranton, 2012; Knowles et al., 2011; MacKeracher, 2004). In this environment, learners have control over their learning goals, and learn in a way that is performance-centred, or, in other words, practical and relevant to their immediate life goals (Cranton, 2012; Knowles et al., 2011; MacKeracher, 2004). Ultimately, the goal of facilitating learning that is cognizant of the general characteristics of adult learning is meant to ensure learning that respects the agency and experiences of individual learners such that it can become empowering and liberating. There is debate about whether or not the field of adult learning has advanced far enough into practice for this to happen. Nevertheless, the goal exists and efforts have gone towards forming tighter links between theory and practice such that those liberatory goals can be achieved (e.g., Cranton, 2012; Knowles et al., 2011; MacKeracher, 2004).

As I demonstrate later in the dissertation, of particular relevance to this study are the ways in which adult learners are conceptualized to learn best, as well as the ways in which the classroom environment can aid or hinder student learning and satisfaction.

Transformative Learning

A subset of adult learning theory is transformative learning theory. More recent theories (e.g., Arends, 2014; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Dirkz, 2006; Illeris, 2014; MacKeracher, 2012; Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2009, 2017; West, 2014) are useful within this study for their discussion of the importance of emotional and social aspects of adult learning, particularly in terms of illuminating the other benefits postsecondary education can have aside from employment-related ones. Transformative learning theories have developed greatly since the original theories developed by Mezirow (1991). These earlier theories were criticized for narrowly seeking to understand what it means to teach adults versus how adults learn (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), as well as for privileging rational approaches to learning at the expense of the emotional, social, and embodied ways in which students learn (Arends, 2014; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Illeris, 2014). Newer approaches seek to remedy such narrow theories by challenging dominant conceptions in early theories that rational thinking is the sole means of accessing knowledge (Arends, 2014; Illeris, 2014; West, 2014). Transformative learning, now, is seen to encompass many intersecting influences on learning, and has a more expansive view of what it means to learn.

In order to understand how transformative learning occurs, or not, transformative learning theories demonstrate that it is important to examine how adult learners construct new meaning through reflection on experience, which is in continual negotiation (Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2017). In more recent work, Mezirow (2012) explains, “Transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing

dominant narratives” (p. 84). Given his theories on how transformation occurs through reflection over time, Mezirow (2012) argues that adult learning should “emphasize contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validation of meaning by assessing reasons” (p. 73). Mezirow (2012) believes that transformation is a key component to understanding how we construct meaning in our lives. In that sense, transformative learning theories are preoccupied with the very questions I asked in Chapter One regarding how participants construct meaning of their experiences at the PCC, and become useful later in the dissertation when I explore shifts in participant perspectives and the new meaning they share as a result. This process is a uniquely adult process in that it requires the reevaluation of beliefs and frames of thinking developed earlier in life that may have been uncritically formed (Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2017).

After offering a useful definition of experience (which she separates into four sets: imposed, received, fused, and the process of developing fused experience), MacKeracher (2012) demonstrates the centrality of personal experience in the transformative learning process, and outlines four phases through which experience is challenged and reformulated into action. The first phase involves becoming aware of and having an emotional response to a disconfirming experience (one that challenges one’s construction of reality, assumptions about how the world works, or a part of one’s sense of self). The second phase requires reflection and self-reflection on these new perspectives and how they fit, or not, with existing assumptions or beliefs. The third phase involves naming the experience such that one can share and discuss it coherently with others. The fourth and final phase is working to make active changes in behaviour that will bring old ways of thinking in closer alignment with the new perspective being considered. For MacKeracher (2012), transformative learning is incomplete without this final phase where a

person undergoes a change in perception of self brought about by new behaviours or attitudes, something that she acknowledges can take a long time to truly achieve. MacKeracher (2012) also cautions that transformative learning is not a simple and straightforward process; rather, it is “messy and disorienting” (p. 346), and “involves knowledge, imagery, and sensations; body, mind, and spirit” (p. 346), something that is not always overtly acknowledged in transformative learning theories.

Because the outcome of transformative learning is a shift in the perception of self that comes about through changes in attitudes and actions, transformative learning theories offer insights into how learning can lead to shifts in identity (Illeris, 2014). Specifically, for example, Illeris (2014) argues that identity is of central importance for generations since the 1980s as we are more often forced to answer questions like, “Who am I? Who do I want to be? How can I fulfill my dreams?” (p. 155). West (2014) argues that the search for an identity through illuminating practices — like narrative, I wonder — “can help us build better, more holistic understanding of forms that transform and of how the will to know, and be, may be constrained by oppressive forces but can be liberated in new qualities of relationship” (p. 167). West’s (2014) theories provide links between transformative learning and critical theory when he writes that transformative learning involves “questioning the taken for granted and oppressive forces in a life and to claim space agentically as well as compose greater personal authority” (West, 2014, p. 165). This perspective has grave implications on the self, and on how the self is enacted towards promoting social justice (West, 2014). Though transformative learning theories may require greater shifts in reality than this study may find, they at least provide a rationale for exploring how the emotional changes experienced by participants contribute, or not, to important transformations.

Furthermore, transformative learning has more recently been linked to *Bildung*, which informs the portraits I share in Chapter Five. Within this approach, *Bildung* is seen as a transformative process that causes learners to undergo experiences that change how they think, see and relate to the world, others, and themselves (Koller, 2017). Fuhr, Laros, and Taylor (2017) add that for transformative learning to occur, a learner must also experience “the re-interpretation of prior experience through reflection, particularly of assumptions acquired uncritically during childhood and youth” (p. x). It is unique to adults in that it requires previously-held thinking to be overturned through overcoming a disorienting or change-inducing experience. I took particular interest in these intersections between transformative learning and *Bildung* for their emphasis on the changes that occur in an adult learner’s sense of self, which, in turn, alters how that learner interacts with others and the world.

New Systems of Measurement and Social Emotional Learning

People for Education is a multi-year initiative in Canada made up of a group of education researchers that seek to challenge traditional ideas about the purpose of education and what constitutes success in education, as well as to introduce new systems of measuring success and quality in education (People for Education, 2017). Through the project *Measuring What Matters*, People for Education developed a set of measures that look at education more broadly than only what contributes to traditional academic learning. Various arguments have been made through this initiative (e.g., Bascia, 2014; Ferguson, 2014; Sears, 2014; Shanker, 2014; Uptis, 2014) that student success involves a broad array of skills, experiences and outcomes, including social-emotional learning, health, creativity, critical thinking, and citizenship. Though writing about elementary and secondary education, People for Education (2017) make some important suggestions that could impact how we think about PCC education and how it is delivered. For

example, they argue that it is important to have classroom environments that are safe, welcoming and inclusive, and where student voice and experiences are integrated in learning activities (People for Education, 2017). Learning experiences should cover a range of activities from collaborative discussion to direct instruction and individual and small group work (People for Education, 2017). Assessment is similarly broad and should be gathered from a variety of assessments including in-class work, observations, conversations, and be both informal and formal but judicious in its application. The purpose of such assessment is to support learning and provide ongoing opportunities for students to assess strengths and limitations rather than to formally evaluate them in a punitive way (People for Education, 2017). People for Education (2017) found that relationships with schools are important, and should be characterized by trust, interdependence and empathy.

Most relevant to the data shared in Chapters Five and Six of this study, are Shanker's (2014) discussions on the importance of social emotional learning within schools. I came to see parallels between Shanker's (2014) discussion of social emotional learning and transformative learning theories that seek to evaluate the emotional and social aspects of learning instead of the purely theoretical and academic changes that can occur. In the past two decades, developmental psychologists have been exploring the impact of social and emotional functioning on children, as well as the role of emotional intelligence in learning (Shanker, 2014). These explorations caused a growing concern over how learning experiences could enhance students' social emotional development (Shanker, 2014). In finding five core areas of social emotional development (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal relations, and decision making), arguments began to emerge for the need to incorporate these aspects when evaluating the success and quality of education. When students are taught these five core skills of self-awareness, self-

management, social awareness, interpersonal relations, and decision making, they go on to experience, among other things, high self-esteem and happiness, with the flipside being increased emotional challenges and lower academic outcomes (Shanker, 2014). Shanker (2014) encourages schools to place value on social emotional learning by developing curriculum that focuses as much on social and emotional competencies as more formal or academic ones; and, by actively teaching social and emotional competencies in the same ways they teach more academic ones. Because of that, the role of the teacher is paramount in that an instructor's "passion for the material and for helping students maximize their potential has a profound impact on their self-evaluation, self-monitoring, and self-esteem" (Shanker, 2014, p. 8). The emotional support instructors give to their students can have important consequences on student wellbeing and academic achievement.

Shanker (2014) proposes a number of new evaluation tools to measure social and emotional learning; however, these tools are aimed towards primary and secondary levels. Regardless, his arguments support the need for new measures of quality. Shanker's (2014) work may also enable me to better understand participants' early school experiences, especially considering that most were in school at a time when Shanker (2014) demonstrates social and emotional aspects of learning were not valued. The consequences he lists are dire, which may help me to contextualize participants' experiences. Furthermore, Shanker's (2014) argument about the importance of including social and emotional competencies in curriculum might help to make sense of participants' attitudes towards the different styles of teaching offered at the PCC in comparison to previous schools they attended.

Caring and Support

Noddings (2012; 2013) similarly points to other purposes of education through her ethics of care and discussions about what she calls the caring relation. The caring relation is one in which a carer or one-caring (e.g., a teacher) “is attentive; she or he listens, observes, and is receptive to the expressed needs of the cared-for” (Noddings, 2012, p. 53). The emphasis in the caring relation is on the response of the cared-for (e.g., a student). If the cared-for does not recognize and positively react to the actions of the one-caring, then the caring relation is not complete and the one-caring is left to try new ways to meet the needs of the cared-for, which can put strain on the one-caring and require the support of a caring community (Noddings, 2012). The implications of this perspective for teaching are great in that no matter how much a teacher may care and exhibit caring towards students, the caring relation cannot occur without recognition from the student. This can be emotionally taxing for teachers since caring “depends more fundamentally on emotion for its motivation, on empathy or sympathy that presses us to respond as carers to others” (Noddings, 2012, p. 54). Being attentive is more than just giving someone attention for Noddings (2012); instead, it is to be “open and vulnerable. To learn what the cared-for is going through, we put aside our own projects and listen” (p. 54).

I draw on Noddings’ (2013) arguments that the main focus of education should “be the maintenance and enhancement of caring” (p. 172). She contrasts this with education that seeks to train intelligence, and leave emotional and moral well-being to the home or church. She argues that education that seeks to demonstrate caring, in addition to the instruction of intelligence, is more likely to result in student happiness than education that seeks to train for intelligence alone (Noddings, 2013). She places great importance on teachers working to make sure students understand they are more important than the subject matter (Noddings, 2013). An important part

of a positive learning environment is freedom to pursue dialogue that interests students (Noddings, 2013). Such discussions may provide important insights later in the dissertation when I explore the ways in which participants felt, or not, validated in their classrooms. Noddings' (2012, 2013) ethics of care might also enable me to better understand the relationship participants describe with their instructors in Chapters Five and Six, particularly because students' perceptions of whether their instructors care can have serious impacts on their experiences.

Also relevant to observations I make later in the dissertation, Noddings (2013) links caring to the topic of standardized and formal testing to argue that standardized and formal testing exist in some part due to a lack of trust in the relationship between instructors and students, and not, as it should, for diagnostic purposes to aid instruction. Grading can also create conflict between instructors and students, and take away from the caring relationship teachers might be trying to establish:

The teacher does not grade to inform the student. She has far better, more personal ways to do this. She grades to inform others about the student's progress. Others establish standards, explicitly or implicitly, and they charge her to report faithfully in observance of these standards. Now the teacher is torn between obligation to the employing community and faithfulness to the student. (Noddings, 2013, p. 194)

There is false comfort in knowing that students have been assessed in an objective, distanced way, rather than through the trusting relationship an instructor forms with those students. Noddings' (2013) ideas about evaluation become important in helping me to understand the impact of participants' early education stories, and self-doubts at the PCC.

Summary

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how my exploration of the educational sustainability of the PCC sector in Ontario is foregrounded in the mutual agenda of critical and feminist theories to examine and challenge inequity and oppression in education, and to take into account both my and my participants' subjectivities, as well as the potential risk that comes with my privilege both as an academic researcher and an administrator and stakeholder within the sector explored in this study. Indeed, many feminist theorists (e.g., Alcoff & Potter 1993; Harding, 1993; Lather, 1991) argue that just because the goals of inquiry may be political in nature does not mean the work being done is not truthful. In the latter half of the chapter, I shared theories I use later to contextualize and analyze participant data, as well as to draw on in the discussion in Chapter Seven.

In the next chapter, I explore how my choice to frame my research in critical and feminist traditions informs my decision to conduct critical narrative research (CNR), an embodied form of research that seeks to challenge social forms of oppression while highlighting and privileging participant perspectives through the use of story (Iannacci, 2007). Critical narrative research honours both the critical and feminist goal of helping participants to better understand their experiences (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983/2009; Kincheloe et al., 2011; Lather, 1986), and a feminist standpoint and epistemology approach of going directly to the margins to explore what participants have to say about their experiences (Bar On, 1993; Harding, 1993; hooks, 1984, 1993), in this case their educational experiences and postsecondary choices.

Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings.

— Charlotte Bronte (published under Currer Bell), *Villette*, 1853

All meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation.

— George Eliot (pen name of Mary Ann Evans), *Daniel Deronda*, 1876

Chapter Four: Methodology

Overview

In this chapter, I share the methodological design of the study, including its theoretical underpinnings and the methods and tools I use to collect and analyze data. I also attend to issues of trustworthiness, and propose a mixed set of criteria for the evaluation of quality in critical narrative research. I then discuss how my methodology guided me towards ethical inquiry, including how I remained critical of the power imbalances that stem from my personal stake in the PCC, the danger in making assumptions about participant marginality, and the need to avoid reinforcing stereotypes prevalent in the literature. Finally, I discuss logistical details related to incentives, harm, and confidentiality, and the unique ethical issues related to critical narrative representation.

Developing a Methodology

From Me to Methodology

I have acknowledged more than once so far that my interest in this research stems from personal experiences and the questions and wonder that arose from them. The methodology for this study was shaped in large part by those personal experiences and many readings that led me to reconsider the stories of my own that I had long left unexamined. In trying to answer key methodological questions — e.g., Who am I as a researcher? How do I define truth and knowledge? What role do participants have in the shaping of truth and knowledge? What is the

purpose and value of research? What makes research findings credible or valid? What does it mean for research to be rigorous? — I found myself turning inward to reexamine elements I had hitherto found irrelevant to who I was as a researcher. For example, I recalled my days as a literature student, able now to see the usefulness in the many hours I spent learning to analyze stories of the past, to tease out meaning that could be useful and relevant. I recalled my interest in voice during my Master's degree, particularly of nineteenth-century female authors who were fighting to be recognized as credible writers and knowers. I thought, too, about the stories I used to spend hours writing as a child and teenager, the stories that I fictionalized in order to cope, to grieve, to dream, to survive. I thought about how thrilling writing had been for me, and how I had always had an urge to put pen to paper, and later, fingers to keyboard, to create stories in my quest for meaning and understanding. Stories enchanted me; they even saved me at times. Two years ago, thinking about my days as an amateur writer and literature student would have meant nothing to me aside from being the long lost interests of a girl who was in constant search of greater meaning. Now, I see that I have long been a believer in the value of story, that I always knew it could come to mean something important in my life.

Something I view as a pivotal moment in my life happened to me recently. I can see it in my mind like a series of snapshots, capturing expressions that I will never forget. I cannot say why the visual image of her face is so clear when her words were what changed me. To begin somewhere in the middle, her face was pensive and interested yet puzzled. I was used to her elusive expressions, as though she always felt deeply many things at once. That day she seemed both amused and serious, like she cared enough to find the irony in my situation and the potential in

my heart. Finally, she stopped thinking and opened her mouth to tell me what would significantly change my path. But allow me to backtrack.

Already a student in the PhD program, I was navigating my way through my first residency period on campus, questioning everything I said, felt, or did, but trying to at least appear as though I knew what I was saying, feeling, or doing. One day in class, as we sat in a small rectangle of desks in a small room full of windows, our two professors threw away their intentions and gave us fifteen minutes of one-on-one time with them to present our research questions and how our theoretical framework and methodology would allow us to explore those questions. We had been working on them for at least three intensive weeks of class and self-doubt, and were preparing to present our ideas the following week. To express how much my opinions and perspectives changed in those short weeks would seem a bit like falsehood or hyperbole. Yet, I must explain that I was different, changed somehow in a way that would eventually be important.

I walked into my fifteen minutes feeling confident that my question was well-structured and concise, but nervous of the vast knowledge that sat in human form before me, relaxed and seemingly approachable. Appropriately, this room had no windows, one we had abandoned after the first day of class for its suffocating feel. The door closed behind me with a thud, sealing in the silence. I set my laptop down on the table that formally and awkwardly divided me from them, and turned the screen so they could see my question as I prepared to speak. And that is when the interesting part happened: when I began to talk. I watched as their faces changed. One of my professors remained fairly static in her range of expression, oscillating between her serious and contemplative faces. The other, of whom I wrote above, made me wonder what she was thinking. When I finished, the latter professor said the most remarkable thing to me: “Your

question is fine, but when I read it I don't see any of the passion I hear when you speak." She let that marinate.

As I sat before them, eager to take criticism, I got lost in confusion. Was the style what hid my passion? Should I rewrite my question? I tried hard not to feel deflated as I tried to navigate through her meaning. My thoughts must have betrayed me for she began to elaborate. She explained that she often heard me talk in the way I did in those fifteen minutes — about the conversations I had with students and about how I wanted to be able to give back somehow. She restoried my stories as she pulled themes from what she had heard me share and told them back to me. In that moment, her part in restorying my experiences taught me something about myself that I might have failed to see, something that I now cannot imagine living without. I was trying to hold true to my admissions application and my self-proclaimed interest in asynchronous online discussion forums in vocational programs. In just three short weeks, she was able to see that the background (vocational education and student stories) was where my passion was and that the foreground was a distraction.

And she was absolutely right. How amazing it is to experience your own stories through the eyes and perspectives of someone else.

(Carvalho Harris, February 2015, unpublished journal entry for EDUC 5286)

To date, this has been the most profound methodological lesson I have learned: that a methodology is as much personal as it is political, that choosing a research approach requires looking within to better understand the worldviews you bring with you to your research, and the paradigms that most closely fit your vision of knowledge and truth. In just four weeks of my residency, my classmates and professors taught me to listen to the stories I kept telling time and

again, to realize that they were important. Once I did, I began to see that what I talked about most when speaking about my research was not my research topic as it was then, but the meaning behind the stories that students had shared with me about failure and low self-confidence. I could not shake the feeling I had when the student from the Prologue shared her story with me. It was her fighting spirit and her willingness to tell her story without prompting that really stuck with me, though at the time I did not understand why. Now, I wonder if there was a sort of agency for her in the telling of that story. Did framing her experiences as a student within the challenges of her personal life give her education more meaning?

Shortly after this realization, I came to meet another PCC student who was eager to share her story; however, this time, I listened in a different way as she shared with me how she had recovered from a serious addiction, and had enrolled in our PCC as a way of showing herself that she could make something of her life and give her children the lives they deserved. I allowed for long talks with this student, recognizing that she needed to tell her story to me even though we were meeting for other reasons. Instead of stopping her, I listened, asked questions when she seemed to want them, and got to know her. Before my doctoral studies, I might have stopped her and kept her on task. Instead, I got to understand the meaning she gave to the education that I had come to look at as a series of lesson plans that I had to ensure met the competencies outlined by MAESD. I got to know her stories, and came to see that her telling of them was more than just the reiteration of events she had gone through. Like the previous student, there was a sort of agency in the telling, in making meaning of what she had gone through within the context of what she had managed to achieve in school. There was something in these stories at that time in my life (after discovering the power of narrative and finding a lack of PCC student voice in the research literature) that drew me in, caused me to see her and other students as people who had

full lives outside of school. After that realization, my job was never the same, my focus never just on standards. Story had managed to creep back into my world and make it more meaningful again.

Would I have come to these same conclusions without my classmates or without learning that stories are also important sources of data for research? Unfortunately, perhaps not. However, regardless of how I came to learn this lesson, I cannot think of methodology without thinking of my belief in the value of stories and my personal conversations with students about their life stories. These experiences undoubtedly shaped why I came to ask the questions I ask through this study, as well as how I came to search for some possible answers. In narrative inquiry, I found a home for a long cherished passion for story as a vehicle for meaning making; in critical theory, as was explained in Chapter Three, the tools to leverage my passion for these students and the hardships and discrimination they have shared with me for some good. Both of these influences are discussed in this chapter when I explain why I chose to explore my research questions through critical narrative research (CNR). However, feminist methodology also profoundly shaped the methodological choices I made in designing the study. In feminist theories, I found the methodological justification for combining narrative and critical approaches with my personal experiences. Feminist approaches to research made me realize that to extricate myself from my methodology would be to ignore the profound role I have had in the direction this inquiry has taken. In this sense, I cannot explain the methodology of this study without turning first to feminist theories on research methodology.

Feminist Influences

The road that we women scholars have decided to travel is that of research. Not the kind that men belligerently define as pure. No, our research is joyously impure, is action-

oriented and issue-oriented — our theories include reflections of our life experiences. We live our feminism daily, and our work cannot be separated from it. It is with enthusiasm that we narrow the gap between theory and praxis.

— Marguerite Anderson, 1988, p. 10

Without feminist theories on research, I would perhaps not have the courage to reveal so much of myself in this dissertation or to make myself vulnerable enough to ask the reader to challenge my findings and assumptions. I examined the influence that feminist theory has had on this study in Chapter Three; briefly, however, from a methodological standpoint, feminist approaches to research have taught me that research can suffer as a result of privileged epistemologies that favour objectivity and the idea that so-called *good* research is done only by a distanced, neutral researcher (e.g., see Code, 1988/1992, 1993, 1995; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Lang, 2011; Lather, 1991; Rogers, 1993; Sherwin, 1988; Stone-Mediatore, 2007). Indeed, feminist research demands that experience not be excluded in order to be taken seriously, and that we begin to reframe what it means to do “rigorous and responsible inquiry” (Stone-Mediatore, 2007, p. 65). Code (1995) describes this reframed methodology as one that makes room for the valuing of the personal stories of participants in a way that can give voice to silenced groups rather than researchers speaking *for* participants. Within this type of feminist research, there is room for “experience-sensitive, passion-driven stories” (Stone-Mediatore, 2007, p. 65) that have traditionally been relegated from philosophy or so-called *serious* research (Sherwin, 1988).

Particularly influential to my research design has been Annie Rogers’ (1993) explanation of a poetics of research that was developed by Rogers and a team of researchers from the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development. Rogers’ (1993) poetics of

research is built upon feminist theories of epistemology and methodology that argue that writing in an “artistic, subjective voice” (p. 266) does not limit research or “theory building” (p. 266); instead, artistic and subjective representations of voice enable the researcher to theorize and to use theory to inform educational practice. This poetics of research places value on research that is “voice-centered” (p. 267) and that “listens to girls and women as authorities about their own experiences” (p. 267). For Rogers (1993), voice-centered means that participant and researcher voices are represented verbatim within the research such that readers are able to understand why it is that the researcher interprets participants’ voices in the way s/he does. For this reason, the relationship between researcher and participant is a special one that is not marked by distance and that does not pose a threat to the validity or rigour of the research; instead, Rogers (1993) sees the researcher’s relationship with participants as a tool that leads to meaningful interpretation, even when the two voices and perspectives do not agree with one another.

Considering the difficulty I encountered in trying to find PCC student voices as I searched through existing research literature, it was important that I designed a study that would be in keeping with Rogers’ (1993) commitment to privileging participant voices and stories as forms of authority that are meaningful. Participants have agency in this study, and have been paramount in shaping the interpretations and meaning that I share in subsequent chapters. Given my personal involvement with PCCs, it was also important for me to heed Rogers’ (1993) warning that traditional methodological approaches often serve to make the researcher invulnerable to criticism. By allowing my voice and interpretations to overtly exist in the research text, the reader understands how I arrive at my conclusions and how I work with participants to construct meaning.

Similarly, Lather (1986) writes about research as a “democratized process of inquiry characterized by negotiation, reciprocity, empowerment — research as praxis” (p. 257). Lather’s (1986) research as praxis demands that researchers “consciously use [their] research to help participants understand and change their situations” (p. 263). In this type of praxis, both participants and researcher come to an understanding of her or his experiences through a mutual process of sharing and reflecting on personal experiences (Lather, 1986). With a history of women (and I would add PCC students in Ontario) “having been deprived of the narratives, or the plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over — take control of — their own lives” (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 17), praxis becomes that much more crucial in the goal of respecting the opinions and experiences of PCC students who have yet to be heard in research.

Conducting Critical Narrative Research (CNR)

Choosing critical narrative research for this study was largely informed by Iannacci’s (2007) discussion of the purpose and possible values of critical narrative work. When I came across his article, I was new at the time to research, and, thus, new to the full range of available qualitative approaches and methods. I had already had the aforementioned meeting with my two theory professors, and thus knew that I wanted to conduct research that privileged voice and experience, and that allowed me to use my background with literature to thematically explore meaning. For those reasons, I was leaning towards narrative inquiry; however, I was unsure about the ability of narrative inquiry alone to allow me to fully explore the concerns that were foremost on my mind about knowledge equity and the low reputation of PCCs in the postsecondary hierarchy in Ontario. I remained unable to commit to a research approach until I read Iannacci’s (2007) paper. Suddenly, my philosophical and theoretical sympathies came together with a vehicle to inform the study’s methodology.

I found critical narrative research particularly appropriate for my study for its commitment to exposing the subjectivity of the research process, privileging the participant voice, and challenging dominant forms of oppression and exclusion in society such that social change can be enacted (Iannacci, 2007). Given the lack of PCC student voice in research literature, I became drawn to critical narrative research's commitment to making room for the exploration of topics that otherwise have been deemed undeserving of attention (Iannacci, 2007), as well as for its narrative "focus on storytelling as a *communicative activity*, where the emphasis is on how humans use language to endow experience with meanings" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, pp. 201-202). Critical narrative research is also dependent upon the critical and feminist theories I explained in Chapter Three, which is in keeping with my belief that methodology cannot be separate from theory without the risk of ignoring that power and oppression exist both in method and interpretation.

The Critical in CNR

Critical theory provided me with a natural segue from the feminist theoretical underpinnings of the study and a means through which to examine and contextualize this study within a context of vocational education's history of stigma and ill repute. In turning to critical methodology, the more recent reconceptualizations of the bricolage that I explored in Chapter Three became a roadmap for the design of this study. From a methodological standpoint, researching within the bricolage means utilizing a range of tools and methods, and determining validity through more complex processes based on "the reality-altering impact of the inquiry process" (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 171) that allows participants to "gain self-understanding and self-direction" (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 171). When guided by the bricolage, method is no longer merely a procedure that a researcher must follow uncritically; instead, it is a means

through which researchers can show how and defend why knowledge is produced in the way it is within the given social and historical circumstances (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). It is to adopt a critical standpoint that is “something more than simply fault-finding. It involves understanding the sets of historically contingent circumstances and contradictory power relationships that create the conditions in which we live” (Apple, 2000, p. 5). Subjectivity is not repressed, but rather explored to better understand how it shapes inquiry (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Ultimately, working within the bricolage means remaining committed to “alleviating human suffering and injustice even though [researchers] possess no final blueprint alerting them as to how oppression takes place” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 172).

I also draw on Lather’s (1986) research as praxis, particularly for its attention to reciprocity between participants and researcher. Reciprocity involves ongoing “negotiation of meaning and power” (Lather, 1986, p. 263), and viewing participants as co-researchers who are given opportunities to not only shape the data, but also its analysis (Lather, 1986). Lather (1986) suggests that researchers should conduct interviews that are dialogic, interactive, and require self-disclosure; are sequential and repeated for deeper probing of topics; are built on mutual negotiation of meaning; and that critically explore where participant self-understandings meet researchers’ attempts to foster greater self-reflection and change. Such an approach has great power to prompt participants to “analyze ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of [their] lives” (Lather, 1991, p. 4).

Through this reciprocal process, emancipatory goals are realized by “both the reader and the researcher problematizing that which has been taken for granted” (Hibbert, 2004, p. 74), something that arguably leads to participants better understanding their experiences. When

designing this study, I wondered what students might come to realize about the impact of their educational experiences on their identities. For example, how, if at all, do dominant practices in schools subtly shape their sense of self-worth? How do students interpret their decision to attend a PCC? What meaning do PCC students ascribe to their experiences at this PCC? In what ways, if any, does being a PCC student change how a student feels about her/himself? What impact might their choices and experiences have on their future paths?

Considering these questions and my research goals, I wanted to include a critical component that would better highlight the social critique of the study alongside the narratives of participants, without, of course, drowning out their individual voices and perspectives. Iannacci (2007) explains that critical narrative research draws heavily from critical theories in that it always looks to critique the structures and relationships that lead to power and inequity. This critical component to critical narrative research enables the researcher to remain committed simultaneously to participants and social considerations by aiming to enact social change in the lives of participants, as well as marginalized groups more broadly (Bhavnani et al., 2014; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008; Kincheloe et al., 2011; Lather, 1986). Such a commitment coincides with the goals explored in Chapter Three of feminist standpoint theories that demand that the experiences of marginalized groups be taken seriously, and that they be analyzed within the historical and social context of a given research problem. By doing so, readers are granted access to my assumptions, relevant cultural and/or social beliefs and values, and the historical context that all converge in rich complexity to inform the research (Code, 1995; Harding, 1993; Iannacci, 2007; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Lang, 2011). This approach aims to avoid reductionist portrayals of participants that would prohibit “multivocality” (Iannacci, 2007, p. 57) or lead to reinforcing views of vocational students as less intelligent.

Like feminist research and, more specifically, Rogers' (1993) poetics of research, critical narrative research also requires me to interrogate the assumptions that shape my subjectivities, something that allows me to overtly address how my personal involvement with PCCs undoubtedly influences my passion for this topic, and the research text I present as a result. The advantage of this disclosure is that truth and knowledge are no longer apolitical frames that can be applied to all situations regardless of social or historical context (Harding, 1993); instead, personal experience becomes a valid pathway to knowledge rather than mere "anecdotal information" (Code, 1995, p. 18).

The Narrative in CNR

Narrative Inquiry in Theory. Narrative inquiry also values experience as a starting point of inquiry (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Mishler, 1986, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993, 2012). Though difficult to define succinctly, narrative inquiry is most easily understood as "the study of experience as story" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477), and the act of using a narrative framework to help make meaning of those experiences (Atkinson, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 1993). In other words, by telling stories of our experiences, we access a world that allows us to interpret and make meaningful our personal experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Thus, conducting narrative inquiry requires a view of narrative as the phenomenon under study, as well as a tool or method that is used to structure and make sense of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). By examining the role story has in organizing experiences, narrative inquirers place emphasis on which stories participants choose to tell, as well as the words and manner in which they choose to tell them (Richardson, 2006). Conducting research

that privileges experience as a credible source of data became an important factor in my methodological choices given the privileging in many mainstream schools of technical rationality over knowing through experience (Giroux, 1983/2009; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008; Kincheloe et al., 2011). Certainly, prior to doctoral studies, I might have continued to dismiss the nagging feeling that the stories students were telling me were just as important to learning as the official curriculum. Narrative inquiry provides me with the theory and tools to explore this deeply-felt observation that there is more to discover in the stories PCC students tell about their past and present school experiences.

There is also an important social element to narrative work in that creating meaning of experience is not merely an individual process (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin, Cave, & Berendonk, 2017); instead, stories are a way of sharing memories with the larger culture. Narrative inquiry is socially relevant by virtue of stories being always “negotiated within a community” (Bruner, 1990, p. 11), and that no stories can “make plausible sense without being interpreted in the light of the symbolic world that constitutes human culture” (Bruner, 1990, p. 138). As Clandinin, Caine, and Steeves (2013b) explain,

Narrative inquiry allows for an exploration of the social, cultural, linguistic, familial, and institutional narratives within which each individual’s experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. However, narrative inquiry begins and ends in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquiry, as both a view of the phenomenon and as a methodology, allows us to study an individual’s experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience. (p. 45)

The task of narrative inquirers, therefore, is not simply to share participants’ stories without interpretation; instead, narrative researchers must contextualize those stories, and the meaning

and knowledge that results from an examination of those stories, within the historical and social context of the phenomenon being examined, a goal akin to that of critical research and the bricolage. Indeed, narrative inquiry highlights the constructed nature of meaning, and, further, “puts meaning in its place” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 968) by showing how and why meaning must always be considered within its social and historical context.

Such meaning making has far-reaching rewards that prove that narrative inquiry is not “the mere telling of stories” (Iannacci, 2007, p. 55), or “child’s play” (Bruner, 1990, p. 97). As Richardson (2006) explains, “Stories of experience alone would not constitute research” (p. 94); rather, the act of creating meaning of experience through analysis and rethinking is what transforms those stories into research (Richardson, 2006; Shields, 2005): “Within the realm of narrative inquiry, the stories we tell are, in and of themselves, the raw data; the phenomenon It is the experiencing of experiences that enables us to make meaning in and of our lives” (Richardson, 2006, p. 59). Storytelling becomes a vehicle through which topics that may be viewed as unproblematic can be reconceptualized “through a process of construction, deconstruction, and re-construction” (Iannacci, 2007, p. 57), the intent being to incite critical reflection that can

prompt us to consider overlooked and inchoate phenomena, by destabilizing ossified categories and entrenched narrative paradigms so as to open up new ways of viewing familiar events, and . . . to sensitize us to our place as beings living amongst others. (Stone-Mediatore, 2007, p. 71)

While great value is placed on how storytelling can become an important method of meaning-making, Chase (2017) importantly warns that one must remain cognizant of definitions of narrative inquiry that imply that stories are the *only* means through which meaning can be

made. Without such a reminder, researchers run the risk of marginalizing non-narrative ways of meaning making (Chase, 2017). Instead, this study focuses on the ways in which the use of narrative can lead to meaning making, acknowledging all the while that other methods are possible.

Narrative Inquiry in Method. Because a goal of narrative inquiry is to contextualize stories and meaning within the larger culture, the task of the narrative inquirer is more than that of collecting stories and retelling them verbatim, as Richardson (2006) points out. Instead, a narrative inquirer must “learn to think narratively, to attend to lives as lived narratively” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p. 120). Learning to think narratively involves, firstly, the belief that we all lead storied lives that we use to make meaning, and, secondly, a willingness “to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6). To that end, narrative researchers work within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to construct research texts that honour the complexity of experience while simultaneously contextualizing that experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The result for Clandinin and Connelly (2000) is research texts that situate experience in place (situation), explore how experiences relate back and forth across time (temporality), and consider how experiences are informed by the complex interactions between personal (inward) and social (outward) contexts (personal and social). The goal of this three-dimensional space is to work with participants to endow experience with meaning. This process is always relational, as an ongoing negotiation between researcher, participants, and “larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives” (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 577).

In order to achieve this three-dimensional space, I made efforts through the collection of data, the creation of field texts, and the final transition from field texts to research text (both

interim and final) to consider how place, temporality, and the personal and social interact to create the meaning that I share in subsequent chapters. Specifically, I adopted narrative's focus on the continuity of experience (e.g., Bateson, 1993; Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pals, 2006; Shields, 2005) as a way of exploring how past educational experiences informed the choice participants made to attend the PCC, and how they used those stories to shape their identities. Indeed, participants did not wake up one day wanting to go to a PCC, and narrative inquiry allowed for reflection over how life transitions are characterized by "much more gradual shifts as stories [are] carried forward" (Clandinin et al., 2013a, p. 219). Through the interview questions, we explored these gradual shifts and discussed how the use of narrative could function as a critical tool that could prompt participants towards greater understanding of how dominant discourses of intelligence and marginalization have, or not, impacted their narratives of success and failure, as well as their identity formation. For example, we examined whether participants' experiences in previous educational institutions were positive or negative. How did their experiences there make them feel about themselves? What types of factors did participants consider when trying to choose a postsecondary institution to attend? Did they think they would be capable of attending all types of postsecondary institutions? Did they think they would succeed in postsecondary education? In what ways, if any, was being a PCC student different from their previous experiences as students? What impact has PCC education had on their lives?

In working toward exploring answers to such questions, we mutually interrogated how power and oppression have influenced these participants' lives, with the ultimate goal being emancipatory benefits that result from making meaning of and taking ownership over our stories and experiences (Atkinson, 1995; Bateson, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Dominice, 1990;

Heilbrun, 1999). The future rewards of such a process are great for Riley and Rich (2012) in that “through our self-narratives we might be able to devise alternative plots” (p. 104).

Methods

Participant Recruitment

Because of my position within the PCC I am examining, as well as my initial interest in possible participant marginalization, recruitment required considerable thought and planning. To minimize the possibility of reinforcing stereotypes of marginality, I used a convenience sample by inviting participants initially from one of the PCC’s campus locations, provided they began their program of study after August 2016 to allow sufficient time to complete data collection prior to their graduation. To remove myself from the recruitment process, recruitment was done through the college’s admissions team and through a series of posters that were displayed at the PCC. Beginning in May 2016, admissions recruited students via email, putting out a call for volunteers who would be willing to share stories about their experiences with educational institutions. I provided admissions with email templates that were approved by the Nipissing University Research and Ethics Board (NUREB), both for the initial contact and for responses to any further inquiries (see Appendix A). Admissions also had the option of distributing informational handouts on the study in person to newly enrolled students. These handouts included the participant information letter (PIL) and consent forms, as well contact information for me and my supervisor. The admissions team was trained not to ask students about their intent to participate in order to maximize the confidentiality of potential participants, and to minimize any possible pressure on newly-registered students to participate.

Recruitment was more difficult than I had anticipated. The goal was to recruit approximately five participants with relatively no exclusion criteria, which I assumed would be

easy. However, I did not account for the fact that PCCs generally have very small enrollments spread throughout the calendar year. This is made possible by PCCs' continuous enrollment model. Under this model, new students continually merge with existing students at the beginning of a given block of courses (similar to a semester but much shorter in length of weeks, though possibly not in hours). Each program can have from two to six or more blocks per program, meaning there can be two to six times in each calendar year when new students will join a given program. There are some programs that do not utilize this intake model for various reasons, usually due to regulatory or accreditation requirements.

The continuous intake model presented some implications for participant recruitment. Not only are PCC class sizes already quite small (usually a maximum of 24 per class, with averages much lower), but continuous intake can mean that a given start date might only see as few as two to ten new students per program per start. So, while a given program can have a class of up to 24 students at the time of recruitment, not all students would meet the inclusion criteria of starting the program after August 2016. I initially sought clearance from NUREB to recruit from one campus location only; however, in the first four months of recruitment efforts, I found only one participant. In response to this, I reviewed the email and poster templates, and asked admissions to change the subject line of the email template from "Call for Participants for a Research Study at [the PCC]" to "[PCC] Student? Please help a Nipissing student with her research!" In short, I reframed my call for participants to what I was truly doing: that is, asking for help.

From this approach, I received four email inquiries from students. In response, I sent them (and all inquiring students) the participant information letter (PIL), letter of consent approved by NUREB regardless of whether they had received it already through admissions, and

a brief summary of the PIL and what participation entailed in my own words in the body of the email. I asked students to read the attachment and to write back if they had any questions or to schedule an interview. In order to not be perceived as aggressively encouraging participation, I limited myself to one follow-up email to students who did not respond within one week of their initial contact. Two of the four students who emailed decided to become participants.

With only three participants after five months of recruitment, I requested a protocol change to NUREB to include the PCC's additional five locations. Having secured approval, I first recruited from the other campus located in the same city as the first location. Their student enrollment for September is significantly lower than the other campus; however, I found one additional participant there (out of two student inquiries). I then asked the admissions team from the other city in northern Ontario to send out recruitment emails to their two campuses, from which I found two participants. I chose not to recruit from the remaining PCC campuses because there is some debate over whether they constitute northern Ontario.

Data Collection

One-on-one interviews. With an awareness that interviews are not neutral encounters (Brinkmann, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2005), I conducted three audio-recorded semi-structured interviews for their ability to provide structure without prohibiting the following of new directions raised by participants (Brinkmann, 2014; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Lather, 1986). When conducting narrative inquiry, these new directions are important components of the data and should be encouraged. Riessman (2012) argues that “what may appear at the time to be an unrelated response can become important analytically, telling us a great deal about our interviewing practices and participants’ preferred topics” (p. 376). Furthermore, allowing participants to go in their own direction in response to fixed questions

allows for a shifting of power from researcher to participant (Riessman, 2012), something that was very important to me in ensuring that participants had agency in the research process.

It was also important for me to build rapport with participants and to get below surface meanings of their experiences (as per Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013; Laslett & Rapoport, 1975; Lather, 1986), while keeping in mind the realities of the time constraints set on a doctoral study. I knew I wanted to meet with participants multiple times, but without making the frequency of participation too taxing on participants. I felt the right balance was to conduct three interviews spaced approximately two months apart. Table 5 outlines the interview dates with each participant. Because programs at this PCC run between 26 and 52 weeks in duration, this spacing allowed me to complete my interviews within the duration of even the shortest programs. It also allowed me to use transcripts from the first and second interviews to engage students in critical dialogues about their experiences.

Table 5

Interview Dates by Participant

Participant	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
David	October 6, 2016	January 10, 2017	March 27, 2017
Mary	October 28, 2016	N/A	N/A
Sydney	November 3, 2016	January 23, 2017	March 28, 2017
Shayna	November 17, 2016	February 3, 2017	April 13, 2017
George	January 12, 2017	March 10, 2017	June 2, 2017
Blair	January 19, 2017	April 11, 2017	June 12, 2017

I also designed a series of interviews that allowed me to build reciprocity into the research process, and participants were encouraged to not only member check through the

reviewing of their transcripts from previous interviews, but to engage in conversation during the second and third interviews about what it felt like to read through these transcripts and to see their words on paper. After the second interviews, I drafted and shared interim research texts in the form of participant portraits, and invited participants to comment on and challenge my understanding of the meaning they gave to their experiences. Our discussions about these texts during the third interview became influential in my reinterpretations. Though I initially intended to follow Laslett and Rapoport's (1975) lead in creatively and/or artistically constructing my analysis for participants, I found that showing them early drafts of the portraits would be more beneficial for them in that it might encourage more self-reflection, as well as make me vulnerable to them as a writer. I felt this to best honour our unfolding relationships and importantly to shift the power in their favour by opening myself to critique and showing them a side of myself I consider to be personal (namely, my writing). Participants were eventually given the final portraits and invited to comment on the changes I made. All requested changes were made but one, which I include as a footnote in the portrait in Chapter Five.

The interview questions were submitted to NUREB in advance of the data collection. They were written with the intention of being flexible and following the direction of participants' responses. The interview schedules are shown in Appendix B. Not all questions and prompts on the schedules were used in each interview, and the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that additional questions were asked as follow up questions to the responses given by participants. In keeping with Clandinin et al.'s (2013b) example of designing their first interview to get to know participants and to allow participants to "focus on the whole of their life experiences rather than on their particular school experiences" (p. 48), I designed my first interview to be very general, exploring first what participants wanted to share about themselves

and their interests, and delving into their general school experiences (unrelated to their choices and experiences at the PCC). My goal was to understand how participants described themselves when given open-ended prompts, and to learn what was important to them through a series of questions that would ask them to recall the past and who they see themselves as being. In the second interview, the focus was on PCC choice and experiences, with some revisiting of their experiences with school from the first interview. This interview was designed to be most related to the research topic in its focus specifically on PCC choice and experience. The third interview was designed to focus on the role of narrative in the construction of identity and meaning. This interview was also reserved (again following the example set by Clandinin et al. [2013b]) for discussing the interim research texts. All three interviews included elements that aimed to collect data on identity. Interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. I then went through all transcripts and removed non-lexical utterances such as “ums” and “uhs”, leaving notations of all other verbal and non-verbal information that felt noteworthy, like pauses or laughter. All recordings were stored on an encrypted and data-protected external hard-drive, and stored within a safe at my home office.

In keeping with Lather’s (1986) recommendation to encourage participants to choose the interview location, I initially asked participants if they had a location of preference, with a few guidelines for what the location would need to have. However, I found all participants, aside from one, to be reticent to suggest a location, one writing that he was not familiar with the area, others avoiding the question until I provided some options. For those who did not want to choose a location, I suggested university and public libraries where we could secure a private meeting room where participants would have privacy to share potentially emotional stories. I do note that conducting the interviews in such buildings may have made the participants feel less at ease than

had we chosen a more casual environment; however, I felt the advantages of the private meeting rooms were important when I suggested these locations.

Field notes and researcher/participant journals. To supplement the interviews, when relevant, I took field notes subsequent to each interview of my observations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Iannacci, 2007). These observations were mostly notes about conversations, body language, and expressions during pauses or hesitations that happened either before the recorder was on or that I knew would not be captured by the recording. These also include some initial thoughts about participants that I knew I might want to further explore later in my reflective journal. Because critical narrative research seeks to highlight the constructed nature of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Iannacci, 2007), these notes were further supplemented with a more reflective and interpretive research journal that allowed me to capture the rich contextual and relational details required to locate and create meaning of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In these research journals, I followed Iannacci's (2007) lead in reflecting through poetry and various forms of prose on memories that arose from the research process, my impressions of participants before and after our interviews, observations that felt important to remember, my ongoing struggles with what it means to do ethical research, my reflections on the relationships I was forming with participants, and my role as a researcher and person, among other similarly reflective topics. I elaborate on the roles of the research journal in Chapter Seven.

I came to see these field texts as embodiments of Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) belief in "*writing as a method of qualitative inquiry*" (p. 967). For Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), "*writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery*" (p. 967). Keeping a research journal allowed me to participate in that analysis and discovery throughout the research process as a field text for data analysis. The prologue of this

dissertation was itself an act of constructing my own autobiography as it relates to this study, something that Iannacci (2007) argues is also a field text that can “further multivocality within CNR” (p. 59). In keeping with Iannacci’s (2007) suggestions, the preface was written prior to conducting my field work such that I would “be aware of and interested in how the personal becomes manifest in research agendas, processes and knowledge formation” (Iannacci, 2007, p. 59). Furthermore, engaging in such acts of inquiry allowed me to reflect on Clandinin and Connelly’s (1994) reminder that “researchers need to imagine themselves in conversation with an audience” (p. 425), and, thus, accordingly choose what kind of voice and signature we intend to adopt, as well as what kind of conversation we want to have with that audience. Furthermore, because “narrative inquiry is marked by its emphasis on relational engagement . . . it is important that narrative inquirers carefully consider who they are, and who they are becoming, in the research puzzle” (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 577).

For those same reasons, participants were also invited to keep and share a written or audio research journal (recording devices provided at my cost), depending on their comfort level with written forms of expression. My choice to include audio journaling as an option was motivated by my desire to honour the different preferences and ways of knowing of potential participants. All participants took journals to write in, and two also took an audio recorder. I gave participants sample writing prompts and questions to guide their reflections towards the research topics (see Appendix C). I was careful to inform participants that there were no consequences for choosing not to keep a journal, or for choosing not to submit the journal (and the recorder/journal) at the end should they wish not to share it. None of the participants submitted these journals, and I got the sense that most did not keep them, though one participant

at least mentioned using it to journal other experiences. As such, participant journals were not a source of data in this study.

Group interview. My request was approved to culminate this study with an optional group interview, as informed by Lather's (1986) argument that group interviews cultivate collaboration and deeper understanding of phenomena. I felt that such a group interview would enable participants to engage in a critical discussion of similarities and differences between their experiences in a way that might benefit them. Participants were informed during the consent process that this group interview was optional, and that there were no consequences should they choose not to attend. However, because of unforeseen conflicts of interest amongst participants, I ultimately felt the group interview posed a greater risk to participants than the possible benefits. As such, a group interview was not a source of data in this study.

Data Analysis

Before I could begin analysis, I first had to come to terms with what it meant to do critical narrative analysis and what is at stake in doing so. Foremost on my mind was my concern over how to draw meaning from participant stories without usurping them for my own purposes. After all, I was first drawn to critical narrative research because it does not aim to minimize participants' words and stories, but instead addresses the problem that narratives cannot always speak for themselves if they are to draw connections and parallels that can reach audiences in meaningful ways (Alghamdi, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Kim, 2016). However, I knew that achieving that important balance would require a deliberate plan.

In working to truly come to terms with this, I found Riessman's (1993) and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) discussions of narrative analysis to be helpful in framing how I came to think about analysis and my role as a co-analyst. Riessman (1993) explains that narrative analysis

“takes as its object of investigation the story itself” (p. 1) and allows for the “systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects” (p. 70). This study of experience is not simply the task of the researcher, and confined to a series of easy steps taken during the latter stages of the research process, however tempting it may be to think of analysis in this way (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead, the overall process of analysis, interpretation, and “negotiation occur from beginning to end” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132) of the inquiry. Participants are actively involved in analysis by way of the choices they make about how and which stories they tell, and the researcher through the decisions made prior to the interview, the interview questions and manner in which they are asked, and the dialogue during the interviews (Riessman, 1993).

By understanding narrative analysis as an ongoing process that is continually negotiated between researcher and participant, I came to be less afraid of what it meant to analyze the stories of others. I saw my role as one that worked in tandem with participants to explore stories and look for meaning. Because I had a personal and academic investment in the study, I came to see my role in the analysis as being a project manager of sorts, investing more time ensuring all the parts of the inquiry came together in a way that was meaningful and ready for presentation, but only one person in a team of collaborators. Viewing myself in this way allowed me to keep the ethics of analysis and representation in the forefront of the study, something I address more explicitly later in this chapter, and again in more depth in Chapter Seven. After all, a project manager does not take the credit for a project alone; s/he ensures all components of a project come together in a timely manner and in a way that achieves the intended goals, and that all players get credit where it is deserved.

With these thoughts in mind, I came to agree with Riessman (1993, 2012) that transcription cannot be easily separated from analysis. Instead, during transcription, a researcher is “seeing how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experiences to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). Language becomes representative of reality rather than merely a tool that is used to express oneself (Riessman, 1993). The task of the researcher is an analytic one, choosing what to include, how to include it, and drawing interpretations through close and repeated listening before the textual and linguistic analysis even begins (Riessman, 1993). As I transcribed interviews, I found myself trying to answer Riessman’s (2012) questions, “Why was the story told *that* way? How did the local context and research relationship shape *this* account? What broader social discourses are taken for granted by the participants?” (Riessman, 2012, p. 368). I wrote research journals about my preliminary thoughts on the structure of the narratives and the manner in which participants chose to tell their stories. I followed Riessman’s (1993) advice to start from the inside, to explore “the meanings encoded in the form of the talk, and expand outward, identifying, for example, underlying propositions that make the talk sensible, including what is taken for granted by speaker and listener” (p. 61). I was particularly drawn to this approach for its privileging of the participants’ experiences through their own modes of communication (Riessman, 1993). Such journal entries allowed me to consider how and why the stories were told to me in the way they were; how those stories were embedded in the larger social environments; the different ways that I could begin to interpret those stories; what questions those stories raised for me; what implications they had on how we provide PCC education. Those journal entries, then, became part of the field texts that I used to do a thematic analysis.

To rigorously contextualize the field texts (interview transcripts, field notes, researcher journals, my autobiography) within the social and cultural contexts of participants' lives and this study, I needed to attend to the more deliberate act of turning field texts into research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Broadly, to do so, a researcher must read and re-read, "asking questions of meaning, social significance, and purpose" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 120). Such re-reading distanced me from the data in a way that allowed me to tease out questions of meaning and significance that contextualize the data within the social and theoretical landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using this approach, I was able to focus on placing participants' experiences within the relevant Canadian social context, something that is equally important to researching within the bricolage. Such contextualization is also crucial to better understanding the complexity behind how students experience PCC education in Ontario.

To do such contextualizing, a researcher must "archive, sort, and re-read" (Iannacci, 2005) field texts in order to "narratively code" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131) them by theme. I began with the process of archiving field texts by reading and rereading them towards the goal of sorting them. I then carefully coded each field text using tables that I used to organize excerpts from the field texts that related to thematic topics I sought through my interview questions, and ones that emerged across the interviews. If a theme emerged from one participant's data, I reread all the other participants' data to see if that theme also emerged as notable, as well as to examine contradictions and tensions between them. I then used the codes to create larger categories that I explore through portraits in Chapter Five and thematically in Chapter Six. I also introduce each of those chapters with a detailed account of the codes that emerged from this process, and how I used those codes to analyze the data and create portraits and themes for discussion. Importantly, this process of reading and rereading, along with coding

and categorizing, distanced me in a way that allowed my relationship with participants to slightly “shift from the intensity of living stories with participants to retelling stories through research texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 129).

With this distance, critical narrative researchers can explore the questions, “Who cares? and So what?” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 120) with the intent of narratively coding the field texts for “patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual’s experience and in the social setting” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132). Importantly, this process is cyclical:

It would be tempting to view this overall process of analysis and interpretation in the move from field texts to research texts as a series of steps. However, this is not how narrative inquiries are lived out. Negotiation occurs from beginning to end. Plotlines are continually revised as consultation takes place over written materials, and as further field texts are composed to develop points of importance in the revised story. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132)

Thus, the analysis process involved reading, rereading, and retelling the stories in new ways. The result of this continual return from field text to research text and back again, is analysis that is complex, layered, and negotiated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The interim research texts mentioned above became another layer of data analysis. They helped me to work through the doubt that goes hand in hand with constructing research texts within a form of research that has “no clear path to follow that works in each inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 134). These interim research texts helped me to avoid the problem that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write about when “participants do not feel the text captures their experiences” (p. 135). Taking participant reactions to these portraits into account, I redrafted

them for concision and to focus meaning towards those areas participants felt best represented them. For the most part, participants had very little to say in opposition to the drafts. One participant seemingly felt as though the portrait brought out a side that perhaps did not highlight her/his self-vision. I rewrote that portrait with more care in order to mend those ruptures.

Data Representation

My goal for representation through individual portraits was to explore the social, institutional, and historical relevance of the topic without losing sight of the details and particulars that make someone's stories unique (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007). In addition to this concern, I learned early in the interview process that participants felt their stories were important and felt that they could be helpful examples for prospective students. Because of this, I dedicate the entirety of Chapter Five to offering complex participant portraits of their individual experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997; see also Hibbert, 2004). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain portraiture as

a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. The relationship between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and becomes the arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of authentic and compelling narrative. (p. xv)

The goal of such portraits is to ensure that knowledge is produced and understood from participants' perspectives, yet within "the larger contexts in which specific meanings are created and transmitted" (Bruner, 1990, pp. 64-65).

In writing these portraits, I had to consider the complex act of "deciding how to retell (represent) stories that you gather" (Kim, 2016, p. 119). This act is a particular challenge because it requires researchers to strike a balance between remaining close to participants while also gaining sufficient distance to see the larger landscapes where the narratives might be situated (Kim, 2016). Remaining close to participants, for me, meant to honour their stories and to ensure they exist individually in the research text. I conceptualized these portraits as abbreviated *Bildungsroman*, which I elaborate on in Chapter Five, in order to focus on the personal growth and identity development they shared with me throughout our time together.

More specifically, I demonstrate how participants' verbatim voices were integral to the analysis by beginning each portrait with an excerpt from the transcripts. These excerpts were chosen by virtue of being memorable from my time with these participants. Though the selection is mine, these opening excerpts allow me to implicitly draw attention to my commitment to following Rogers' (1993) poetics of research that privileges the voices of participants, and to remind readers of the co-construction of the research texts, both through the stories and active participation of the PCC students and through the choices I make in representing our time together. I attempt as often as possible to explicitly address questions of my influence in the representations by raising important questions for the reader to consider, and by contextualizing my representations, interpretations and analyses within Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space. Ultimately, as I discuss further in Chapter Seven, their stories were important

to participants, and my choice to represent the data through two chapters that focus more on individual voices than shared ones was deliberately done to honour them.

Questions of Quality: Reframing Validity

Validity has been a difficult subject to come to terms with throughout this study. Firstly, I was faced with the challenge that all critical narrative researchers face: that is, the challenge that there can be no set criteria for quality in critical narrative research at this time as “the language and criteria for the conduct of narrative inquiry are under development in the research community” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). In the meantime, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) warn about the dangers of trying “to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research” (p. 7). Instead, researchers have what feels like limitless criteria from which to choose, with differing opinions on which criteria are more urgent than others, and the overwhelming reminder that it is the task of the researcher to determine which criteria best fit their study’s context and goals (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

For example, to list a few, Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2000) propose that a narrative researcher choose between apparency, verisimilitude, transferability, and invitational quality as determined through a study’s authenticity, adequacy and plausibility. Writing more generally about qualitative research, Yilmaz (2013) proposes credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, dependability, and auditability as possible criteria. Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) suggest credibility, authenticity, criticality, integrity, explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity, along with their argument that qualitative inquiry be measured according to its ability to be “honest and forthright” (p. 534) and to include “alternative explanations and a self-critical attitude” (p. 534). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) suggest substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, and impact as possible options, with

Riessman (1993) looking to persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic use as marks of quality. Iannacci (2007), who has largely influenced this study, used description, field duration, researcher reflexivity, replication (which he ultimately dismisses as highly problematic), and disparate understanding of data.

The options seemed endless. I was left with resounding doubt over how to choose a set of criteria to guide my conduct throughout the research process, especially when considering that I did not know where the data would take me or what it would be like to work with the participants. Furthermore, before I could answer these questions, I also had to reflect on the nagging fear that my personal history and family ties would cause readers to inevitably question the validity of this study with more criticism than they might otherwise for other studies. I even wondered if I had made my work unnecessarily difficult by not requesting to do this study at a PCC to which I had no connection. Thus, not only had I chosen a form of research that inherently resists prescriptive criteria for assessing validity (e.g., see also Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Iannacci, 2007; Lather, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 1990; Whitemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001; Yilmaz, 2013), but I also chose to conduct research that I believed might not be given a fair chance by readers because of popular conceptions of rigorous inquiry as objective and neutral endeavours. With these worries, validity came to mean much more than just a set of criteria to use for evaluative purposes; it came to feel like an ethical decision that must be made with great care, and shared within the research as explicitly as possible to allow the quality of this work to speak for itself. Most recently, Morse (2017) demonstrates that interest is now shifting toward “comprehensiveness of the topic and domain” (p. 804).

For those reasons, I abandoned the term validity altogether, designing this study instead with the notions of trustworthiness as my guides (e.g., see Iannacci, 2007; Mishler, 1990;

Riessman, 1993). Mishler (1990) succinctly defines trustworthiness as “the degree to which we can rely on the concepts, methods, and inferences of a study, or tradition of inquiry, as the basis of our own theorizing and empirical research” (p. 419). In seeking to achieve trustworthiness, the criteria I came to adopt were chosen for their usefulness in answering the question, how will I give the reader the tools necessary to determine whether or not this study is trustworthy, and worthy of precipitating further study?

In answering that question, I found Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) notion of crystallization to be a useful framework for thinking about what it means to conduct trustworthy research. As an alternative to traditional conceptions of triangulation as a means of validating findings, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) call on the imagery of a crystal for its ability to “combine symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach” (p. 964). By seeking crystallization, “what we see depends on our angle of repose” (p. 963). Indeed, as Riessman (1993) reminds us, “narrativization assumes a point of view” (p. 64). Given my concerns, I found it helpful to view trustworthiness as a process of aspiring to achieve crystallization rather than triangulation for its emphasis on research results as “a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (p. 963). If understanding about a topic can be deep and complex, yet always thoroughly partial, crystallization requires me to explicitly “doubt what [I] know” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) and “know there is always more to know” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) as a means of achieving complex and deep knowledge. Thus, I selected a set of criteria from a variety of sources that could guide me towards a trustworthy study, knowing at once that there would be infinite approaches I could take, and various points of view to explore. Understanding inquiry in this way is freeing; yet, I knew I must be careful to explain how I

ensured I conducted inquiry that was rigorous if inevitably thoroughly partial. The criteria I chose are researcher reflexivity, disparate understanding of data, correspondence or member checking, pragmatic use or replication, description, persuasiveness, field duration, and criticality or catalytic validity. Some criteria were pervasive throughout the study, while others were limited to guiding decisions made during the design of the study. I include both in order to honour Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) urging of researchers to stop thinking about quality in terms of only the final research text, but instead to think about the entire inquiry process.

Researcher Reflexivity (Iannacci, 2007; Lather, 1991; Mishler, 1990; Riessman, 1993). The study's focus on trustworthiness over truth, and on drawing attention to the construction of knowledge led me to use researcher reflexivity as a criterion for trustworthiness. Lather (1991) argues that in the face of so many different available criteria, "our best tactic at present is to construct research designs that demand a vigorous self-reflexivity" (p. 66). To that end, I have made concerted efforts to be forthright about elements of my personal history that I felt might impact a reader's ability to agree or disagree with my findings. Subsequent chapters include close attention to the ethical debates I had throughout the research process regarding the role I had in the interpretations I make, as well as the possible reasons for why I reject some interpretations over others. This effort to disclose my subjectivity and assumptions to the reader "reveals how [my] personal understandings and proclivities toward specific theoretical orientations may shape [my] inquiry" (Iannacci, 2007, p. 68). However, stating or making obvious such understandings and proclivities is not enough to promote validity. Instead, a researcher must "continually locate, name, examine and reflect upon biases and beliefs *throughout* the research to remind the reader that the researcher is very much present within the narratives they are constructing and theory choices they are making" (Iannacci, 2007, p. 68). The

portraits, in particular, were an area where I kept my voice at the forefront in order to continually remind the reader that the portraits are interpretations that are inevitably influenced by my beliefs, worldviews, and general attitudes towards PCC students. I also made sure that my voice was included in the verbatim transcript excerpts, even when I regretted comments later during transcription that I felt might be leading participants, such that the reader could properly interpret the participants' responses.

Disparate Understanding of Data (Iannacci, 2007). The second criterion I used to guide the design and implementation of this study is closely linked to the first. This study has been greatly influenced by Iannacci's (2007) belief that critical narrative researchers should search for alternate interpretations to avoid merely confirming their own assumptions. According to Iannacci (2007), trustworthiness can be furthered in critical narrative research by challenging preliminary themes or findings against a set of conflicting themes or possibilities. The goal of such a process is to encourage researchers to examine whether or not the themes they notice are merely confirming their initial theories or hypothesis or long held beliefs about a phenomenon. By looking through the data for alternate themes, a researcher is able to reflect on the data more critically. Indeed, Kincheloe et al. (2011) argue that researching within the bricolage means to help establish "a comfort with the existence of alternative ways of analyzing and producing knowledge" (p. 169). They argue that the tension between these differing views becomes a site for deeper understanding and awareness of the nature of inquiry (Kincheloe et al., 2011). To do so, I made sure to note all narrative themes found through my examination of the field texts, and to document why some became of greater focus over others. I also searched for alternative storylines that could challenge my themes, and include instances of contradictions and conflicting accounts.

For Riley and Rich (2012), such an act is a great responsibility:

Rather than assuming a morally relativistic stance, we, together with the learners, become responsible for displaying the complexities of any particular piece of knowledge. Thus the relational nature of knowledge is articulated so that inconsistencies can be examined and action taken. (p. 105)

Being transparent about how I arrive at the findings I present in subsequent chapters provides readers with more tools with which they can use to come to their own conclusions about the trustworthiness of those findings (Iannacci, 2007). With my passion for the PCC sector, this criterion became an important one as I teased out themes for analysis that did not fit with my initial assumptions. This process became a springboard for discussion about the nature of knowledge, and helped me to work towards acknowledging the multiple viewpoints required to achieve crystallization.

Correspondence (Riessman, 1993) or Member Checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lather, 1991). While insufficient as the only measure of trustworthiness in a study, it is important that participants recognize their stories and points of view in the research texts that get shared through the dissertation. Riessman (1993) encourages researchers to not only take transcripts back to participants, but to also take results back: “It is important that we find out what participants think of our work, and their responses can often be a source of theoretical insight” (p. 66). With an idea that member checking and other forms of involving participants in the research process can lead to more trustworthy work, I designed the study to involve participants at multiple stages, firstly by engaging in critical discussions with participants about their transcripts after each interview, and secondly by sharing my interpretations and analyses with participants as they were being formed (interim research texts) and again afterwards (final

research texts). However, I did not share the themes chapter with two of the participants because I felt their privacy might be compromised by doing so at a preliminary stage. All participants received the portraits, except Mary as I explain in Chapter Five. Such a criterion is also in keeping with the aforementioned critical goals of the study, and, more particularly, my desire to work within the bricolage.

Pragmatic Use (Riessman, 1993) or Replication (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Iannacci, 2007). Contrary to its name, replication has little to do with being able to replicate or redo a study towards generalizability. Instead, replication means that a study is deemed sufficiently trustworthy in order to use it as a motivator for action: “Validity is achieved when readers use the research as a catalyst for further inquiry or use within their professional life” (Iannacci, 2007, p. 69). Under the label of pragmatic use, Riessman (1993) defines her own version of replication as pragmatic use, or “the extent to which a particular study becomes the basis for others’ work” (p. 68). For Mishler (1990), this criterion is important in that it demonstrates a study’s trustworthiness since acting on someone else’s research findings involves a great deal of time and energy, along with reputation.

Iannacci (2007), however, sees such a goal as problematic in that “research often opposes stances, points of view and positions in which readers are well entrenched” (p. 70), making it possible for trustworthy findings to be dismissed too easily. As a result, replication may never occur because researchers with personal investments in the findings that are being contradicted by the research in question have the power to make it lack replicability in this sense. Consequently, Iannacci (2007) rejects the value of aiming for replication because communities of researchers “can work to compromise the validity of narrative research rather than further develop the understandings within it” (p. 70).

However, though agreeing with Iannacci's (2007) arguments, I found this criterion to be useful as a frame of thinking that allowed me to ensure I thought about the possible audiences for whom I anticipate this study will be meaningful; namely, PCC students and other stakeholders. Such a focus allowed me to work towards making this study socially relevant, and helped me to remain in touch with the future goals of the study (Riessman, 1993).

Description (Iannacci, 2007). A popular criterion for validity of qualitative research is whether or not it provides sufficiently descriptive accounts of the phenomenon in question. The goal within this view is to aim for complete, thick descriptions. However, Iannacci (2007) argues that critical narrative researchers should be more concerned with "questioning whether their thick rich descriptions reproduce status quo understandings" (p. 71). Being able to question how and why we create the descriptions we do enables us as researchers to consider the ethics of representation, and to encourage readers to question representations of others (Iannacci, 2007). I elaborate on this when discussing the ethics of representation later in this chapter, and again in Chapter Seven.

Persuasiveness (Riessman, 1993). The previous criterion of description raises the issue of how participant narratives or voices are represented in the research text, and to what end. Riessman (1993) argues that interpretation must be "reasonable and convincing" (p. 65), something that can be achieved only when "theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts and when alternative interpretations of the data are considered" (p. 65). Indeed, in an interview with Clandinin and Murphy (2007) on the future possibilities of narrative inquiry, Mishler argues that one of the greatest problems with validity in narrative inquiry is when researchers present small bits of a conversation in order to justify an interpretation without "providing other investigators and readers with material that allows them to make their

judgment” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p. 636). For Mishler, such an approach fails to tell the reader why this story or excerpt is being selected for interpretation, or how and why they see this piece as “representing the larger pool of data” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p. 636). This criterion helped me to think about the way that I include participants voices in the research text to support theoretical claims. I used such guidelines as reminders to contextualize the excerpts as much as possible, as well as to include sufficient text, including my voice and the appropriate context, from the interviews to give readers the appropriate information to judge my theoretical claims.

Field duration (Iannacci, 2007). Iannacci (2007) uses field duration as a criterion to ensure that narrative inquirers collect sufficient quality observations and interpretations that get below surface level descriptions of phenomena. Important about field duration is that participants become comfortable enough with the researcher to disclose information. Though my study did not lend itself to an ethnographic approach like Iannacci’s (2005) doctoral study, I still found field duration to be an important consideration for conducting ethical and quality research within the scope of my study. It led me to design three interviews, each spaced at least two months apart, to enable me to establish rapport with participants and to gather background information that would give me a frame of reference for future conversations. Truthfully, I was told that seven months minimum of data collection was not ideal for the scope of a doctoral study; however, it was important to me to achieve sufficient depth with the interview process such that the trustworthiness of the findings might be increased, as well as the benefits to participants. Having completed the data collection, I do not feel I would have been able to have the same rich relationships with participants in only one interview, nor to see the patterns I demonstrate in the subsequent chapters that resulted from the spacing between interviews and across their programs.

Criticality (Kincheloe et al., 2011; Whittemore et al., 2001) or Catalytic Validity (Lather, 1991). Because I am conducting critical narrative research, attention must be paid to whether or not I have achieved “the reality-altering impact of the inquiry process” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 171) that allows participants to “gain self-understanding and self-direction” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 171). Lather (1991) describes her version of catalytic validity as “the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it” (p. 68). This criterion has guided the entire design of the study, though it is difficult to measure. In this sense, this criterion served more as a reminder to build reciprocity into the research process, and to design the study with the intention of encouraging self-reflection and personal benefit on the part of participants.

Importantly, no one set of criteria comes without problems (Iannacci, 2007). Part of conducting critical narrative research is to be increasingly aware of such problems such that researchers become more critical of which criteria we use, and more explicit about how we fail or succeed in determining validity (Iannacci, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Minimizing Risk or Harm to Participants

Power Differential. My unique position as VPA and shareholder at the PCC requires me to address how my personal role influences my agenda and interactions with participants and data, something further compounded by being a White, Anglo-American researcher seeking to work with participants with a possible history of marginalization and/or exclusion from postsecondary education (Brennan, 2014). Though I did not have any decision-making power over how students were evaluated — even more so because being granted a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) doctoral award allowed me to take a leave of absence

from work during the entire year of data collection — I knew there were still power issues that needed to be addressed that extended past the evaluation of student work. To address the power imbalance, I set out to conduct interviews in an “interactive, dialogic manner, that required self-disclosure on the part of the researcher” (Lather, 1986, p. 266). I explained to students what my role was at the college, and how I worked with all campuses on academics-related issues. I also responded to their comments and experiences with genuine interest. I would even sometimes tell them about myself when the opportunity arose, usually when the tape recorder was off and the formal interview over. However, I struggled with what it meant to fully self-disclose within the scope of a research study. Though I was told time and again that my family background was not important to who I am as a researcher, self-disclosure continued to be on my mind.

I have my first interview tomorrow with my very first participant. I am nervous — more nervous than I thought I would be. It's a mix of nervous excitement and dread, dread that I will somehow say too much or too little, or lead the participant where I want him to go. And what about myself? What if I tell him who I am and he is changed because of it? This idea of Lather's "self-disclosure" has been on my mind all week, so much so that I had a fever this past weekend that I cannot help attributing to the stress of how to proceed ethically. What is more ethical? Allowing him the freedom to share his experiences with me before I self-disclose? Or, should I tell him up front?

Participant, I am the daughter of the owners of the school you attend.

What a statement. How would I feel if I was him? I think that I would be inclined to share only the good — to try my best to like the researcher's school. Certainly, I don't want that. I want the

bad along with the good. I want to know what experiences this student is really having and what meaning he makes for himself—with me, but not because of me. Right now, I feel I am spiraling into the abyss of ethics that I know is at once good and troubling. It is good to ask these questions, good to think critically about the influences we can have on our participants, the data, and the resulting dissertation. But, it seems bad inherently because I am going back and forth on whether to give a piece of my history up front that I see as relevant to who I am. Is it only relevant because of my work experience and how I was always worried it meant I didn't deserve to be in my position? Within the context of research, how important is it? I honestly do not know the answer right now. On the one hand, what is most important about me as I go into this interview is that I am a doctoral student who cares deeply about this topic and about PCC students. On the other hand, I have a family tie to this topic that should be disclosed. Will he become biased against me? Will he feel he cannot tell me negative experiences? Which is the more honest way to go? Perhaps telling him once we have built rapport is the way to go – or will that just make him feel misled? Will that break the trust I so genuinely hope I am able to build? I hope he asks me outright so that this dilemma can be decided by fate.

Oh, the things I never thought to worry about before I became a doctoral student. The things I had no idea about within the compass of research. Research is fact, I used to think. Now, I know that all the small sequences of decisions I take on this day and the next and the next will be used to influence the course of what we (my participants and I) create through this study. To be honest about it within the context of the dissertation is a given. I will disclose my history for the reader to make her/his own conclusions. But, tomorrow what will I do? I can't imagine I will sleep

tonight. And, all the while as I write and think and stew, I am aware that I am writing and thinking and acting for an audience. I am doubly shamed.

(Research Journal, October 5, 2016)

As is most likely made clear through this entry in my research journal, defining what is and is not ethical was and continues to be a constant battle for me, one that I could not resolve without more and more questions. What I decided to do during the first interview with my participants was to not go into my family history. I kept the focus on my professional self, telling participants about my role in the academics department, and how I came to be on a leave of absence. We discussed how I would protect their privacy by not telling anyone at the college which students I was working with, and how I could not influence their grades in any way, neither negatively nor positively. For me, in that first interview, it was more important to create a space where participants felt they were important and where their stories could be theirs. If they had negative reactions to the school, I wanted to hear them. I decided that this honoured their experiences and stories more than if I had disclosed my family ties at that preliminary stage.

I did, however, during the final interview tell them about my family life and how I came to be involved in the college. Essentially, I shared with them my story, and that felt fair. Their reactions were interesting, and made me realize that I had been villainizing my family background for no reason. For one participant, it even became a source of agency in that he felt the suggestions he made throughout the interview would be put to good use and acted upon. Two others did not think it changed anything for them, but encouraged me by saying they felt my decision to pursue a PhD demonstrated how hard I worked and that I was not willing to sit comfortably on hand outs. The other two participants, quite frankly, were not that interested in

my life story at all. They felt their role in the study was cathartic and could help others, and that was the only important focus. I revisit the challenges of self-disclosure in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Despite my removal from student decisions, I acknowledge that my personal history with and partiality towards PCCs undoubtedly informed how I conducted the interviews and analyzed the data that follows. However, by critically and explicitly reflecting on my experiences and viewpoints throughout my research journals and the following chapters, I make clear how meaning is constructed at all stages, something that will give participants and potential readers the information needed to contextualize my interpretations and draw their own conclusions (Rogers, 1993). Indeed, my choice to conduct a critical narrative was largely influenced by its focus on minimizing the harm that could be caused by my background by celebrating the researcher's subjectivity, privileging student voices, making participants co-creators of meaning, and ensuring that dissemination of my research aims to give back to participants.

Challenging Stereotypes. By coming to my research topic broadly in terms of student choice rather than a focus on marginalization, I was able to conduct open-ended research that did not assume that my participants would be marginalized, but, instead, interrogated assumptions and explored how marginality can be a site of resistance rather than dejection and powerlessness (Bar On, 1993; hooks, 1993). Such a reconceptualization of marginality creates space for research to encourage transformative meaning making that gives participants critical agency to see the world and themselves in new ways. Furthermore, such a reconceptualization has the possibility of leading towards more complex (and less reductionist) representations of student experiences that can overturn prevalent, reductionist notions of vocational students as “less bright” (Ryan, 1998, p. 399).

Emotional Harm. Anticipating that the act of recalling and sharing stories of educational experiences at any point in or after the research journey could result in emotional distress to participants, I provided all participants with a handout of counselling resources (local, online, or via telephone). This handout was given to students with the PIL and consent form prior to their first contact with me, and again in my first email. It was also discussed with participants at the first meeting before the recorded interview began. Interestingly, two participants commented that the handout was a good idea, with one participant suggesting that all students at the PCC be given the handout for their use throughout the progress of their programs of study. Another participant joked about how it made the interviews seem more ominous than they were, despite my continued efforts to explain why the handout was important.

While there was a risk of emotional distress by participating in this study, I made efforts to design the study such that participants stand far greater potential benefit that would make such a risk worth taking. Furthermore, all participants were told that they could take breaks at any time without explanation to avoid the risk of students becoming bored, tired, or sore from the interview process, as well as to accommodate any physical, emotional, or mental disabilities that could be aggravated by the interviews.

Managing Incentives. Grant and Sugarman (2004) contend that incentives are unethical when they are so appealing that participants might be convinced to take part in studies that are risky, place the participants in undignified situations, or go against participants' values, beliefs, and preferences. I was torn between my awareness of such dangers and my desire to honour participants' time and stories. In keeping with Polkinghorne's (in an interview shared in Clandinin & Murphy, 2007) belief that all participants of narrative inquiry should receive payment for sharing stories that they own, I initially sought approval from NUREB to offer

participants a minimal incentive of five dollars per half hour of interview, with the scheduled time for the interview (one hour) to be paid via a gift card at the beginning of each interview. Participants would not have been asked to return the gift card if they left or decided to withdraw from the study during or just prior to an interview. However, the risk was deemed too great. As such, the only incentives in this research study were snacks and refreshments at all interviews. I was also approved to reimburse participants for transportation and parking costs incurred by attending interviews.

Continual Consent. In addition to explicitly stating so on the consent letter and at the first meeting, I ensured continual consent throughout the study by reminding participants at each interview that they are able to do any of the following without any consequences: choose not to answer a particular interview question, end an interview early, choose not to keep a written or audio journal, choose not to participate in the optional group forum, withdraw from the study, and/or request that their data be destroyed. My supervisor and NUREB were also listed as alternate contacts for participants to discuss consent, indicate participation or withdrawal intentions, and contact someone regarding any aspect of the study.

Confidentiality and Privacy. More common risks related to confidentiality and data security were prevented by using a filing system whereby participant data was coded with pseudonyms (which are stored on a separate password-protected and encrypted hard-drive), and by storing all data on a hard-drive and backup hard-drive that are also password-protected and data-encrypted. No web-based or cloud storage options were used to avoid ownership issues that could result in security breaches. Furthermore, in allowing participants to choose the locations of the meetings, I gave participants the option to choose locations where they felt safe and where their privacy could be protected. Only one participant, however, selected her own location.

The higher risk of participant stories leading to a loss of confidentiality was discussed in detail with participants at the first meeting, prior to the recording of the first interview. Each page of the PIL was discussed with participants, at the end of which participants initialed each page and signed the consent form. Participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions, and were told that they were able at any stage in the research process to ask for a particular story or detail to be removed without needing to explain why. Participants were warned about the possibility that some details or stories might be so unique that others in their lives would be able to ascertain their identity. We agreed that they would keep this in mind when reviewing the transcripts and my analysis for publication. They were also given the option to select their own pseudonyms; however, all but one chose not to do so because of a seeming discomfort with the act. I used a popular baby name website to randomly select pseudonyms that would not be too similar to the original names. These pseudonyms were then approved by participants at the subsequent interviews. Two participants told classmates and instructors about their participation in the study, despite our conversations about the risks. One participant even shared her interim research text with an instructor because she was proud of how it represented their relationship. She told me this after having shared it. To attempt to protect her privacy, I did not submit the themes chapter to her or any participants at the same campus location.

Ethics of Representation

Critical narrative research also requires special and ongoing consideration to the ethics of representation. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write about the difficult balance narrative researchers have when creating textual representations of the research process. They write,

As we composed our research texts, we needed to be thoughtful of our research participants as our first audience and, indeed, our most important audience, for it is to

them that we owe our care to compose a text that does not rupture life stories that sustain them. But as researchers, we also owe our care and responsibility to a larger audience, to the conversation of a scholarly discourse, and our research texts need also to speak of how we lived and told our stories within the particular field of inquiry. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 173-174)

How we come to represent our participants and their stories matters a great deal. We have a responsibility to preserve the “dignity, privacy, and well-being of those who are studied” (Josselson, 2007, p. 538), while simultaneously being held to scholarly expectations for “accuracy, authenticity, and interpretation” (Josselson, 2007, p. 538).

Negotiating the right balance between these two responsibilities posed an ethical dilemma that I had to deal with, particularly because I had more control over the written research texts and interpretations than participants, despite the fact that I designed the study to give participants the ability to influence and change the research texts. I found Josselson’s (2007) advice on this topic to be particularly helpful. She suggests that narrative researchers must strive to be honest and reflexive about the ways in which their subjectivities, goals, and position as knower in the research text impact the representations that are constructed. In this way, though knowledge and meaning are co-created, the researcher becomes responsible for what is written, reminding the reader that no point of view should go unquestioned: “Every narrative contains multiple truths. All selves are multiply voiced. Therefore, whatever narrative emerges in the final report is a construction of the interpreter, and the writer needs to make this plain in the presentation of results” (Josselson, 2007, p. 551). Taking responsibility for the representations offered in the research text also prevents researchers from placing on participants “the burden of representations” (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003). This does not mean I aimed to silence

participants in order for readers to understand that the text is ultimately my responsibility; instead, it encouraged me to be reflexive in the writing while seeking to strike a balance between interpretation and participant voice. This has guided the subsequent chapters, and marks the slight change in tone and writing style that the reader may note moving forward. It also explains why my feelings about participants are so prominent in the portraits in Chapter Five. Lather (1991) encourages critical researchers to disclose the constructed nature of research texts by being reflexive, which she explains is achieved by “bringing the teller of the tale back into the narrative, embodied, desiring, invested in a variety of often contradictory privileges and struggles” (Lather, 1991, p. 129). In following Lather’s (1991) advice, I remind the reader that ultimately these life stories are told through my eyes, and through my reactions to what participants said and did not say in our interviews.

Furthermore, especially when considering that PCC students have yet to be heard in formal research arenas, there is the added responsibility that goes hand in hand with knowing that this study aims to “give voice to those who might not have been heard by the dominant culture” (Block & Weatherford, 2013, p. 503). When trying to change perceptions or stigma against a population, researchers have a grave responsibility to attend to issues of representation, to develop a “critical consciousness around the questions of how to represent responsibly, that is, transform public consciousness and ‘common sense’” (Fine et al., 2003, p. 169). Like Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong’s (2003) worry that their representations might lead to misunderstandings and renderings of the poor from their studies, I, too, worried that my representations of the struggles my participants had in their pasts might contribute to the perpetuation of PCC students as being less capable of academic work. I found these worries to be particularly challenging when thinking about how to represent their stories of personal adversity

and what some of them considered bad choices from earlier times in their lives. I even feared that the way I transcribed the interviews might make participants uncomfortable with the way they chose to share stories. I know that I certainly felt self-conscious seeing how many false starts I had when trying to phrase a follow up question, or how many times I said um and uh without knowing or intending it. I worried that these feelings might be heightened for participants if I did not sensitively consider how they would be represented within the research text.

To negotiate how I would ethically represent these participants, I thought reflectively about Fine et al.'s (2003) "triple representational problem" (p. 189) that challenges researchers to represent our own perspectives and voices, those of our participants, and then also those people who participants choose to discuss through their stories. I have written many reflective journal entries that came to be one of many layers in the complex meaning-making that occurred throughout this inquiry. I have taken great care to consider each representation and the personal, social and academic impact it has on those involved in the study, including the audience. Through these techniques, I aimed to make the subsequent representations ethical. I revisit this topic of representation again in my discussion in Chapter Seven.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explained why and how I came to use critical narrative research to explore why six PCC students chose to pursue postsecondary studies at the PCC. In order to further an ethics of representation that will give readers access to the assumptions and subjectivity that went into the interpretations I present in the next chapters, I have outlined all aspects of the design, data collection, and data analysis phases of the study, including many of the personal motivations and reflections that guided this inquiry. I have also paid special attention to the ethical scope of the study by means of an introduction to important topics related

to conducting critical narrative research and working with a student population that has yet to have much of a voice in the research arena. Ultimately, I have made a case for why my personal experiences with PCC students led me to believe in the power of stories to make experiences meaningful, both personally and socially, and for why I felt that developing a methodology that saw stories as both phenomenon and method would be best suited for this study.

In the next chapter, I begin the analysis phase of the dissertation with portraits of the study's six participants. I foreground these portraits in more detailed explanations of how I leverage the *Bildungsroman* to analyze the data that led to the portraits, including specifics about how I coded the data for this use.

How minutely you remember all she has done and said to you! What a singularly deep impression her injustice seems to have made on your heart!

— Charlotte Bronte (published under Currer Bell), *Jane Eyre*, 1847

Chapter Five: Portraits

Overview

In this chapter, I introduce the six study participants with detailed portraits of their lives, including their previous experiences with educational institutions, their decisions to attend the PCC, some of their experiences as PCC students, as well as the possible impact that these decisions and experiences have had on their identities. In order to guide these representations, I explain how I have leveraged the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative genre to shape the portraits. In doing so, I utilize the concepts of journeying and self-realization to share these abbreviated *Bildungsroman*. These portraits aim to achieve Polkinghorne's (1995) reframing of Bruner's (1985) narrative mode of thought as narrative analysis rather than the analysis of narrative (paradigmatic mode of thought), which I utilize in Chapter Six.

The Dreaded Tension

I have spent more time than I would normally admit thinking about Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) warning that the act of beginning to write research texts is inevitably fraught with tension. They write about the tensions a researcher faces with leaving the field and wondering how to transform the data into something meaningful; with having to consider ourselves, our audiences, our participants, the social relevance of the research, the intricate relationship we have formed with our participants; and, with figuring out how to create representations cognizant of all those considerations while simultaneously situating the inquiry within the three-dimensional space of which I wrote in Chapter Four. Indeed, writing can be a

perilous endeavour that summons the researcher into the ambiguous minefield of ethical and trustworthy representation. At the heart of this tension is the question of how “to select and fit together these field texts into an overall narrative text” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 139). Certainly, the choices we make about how to pull texts apart and back together again have implications that can significantly alter the meaning of the work. For example, I had to deliberately work to stay away from the danger that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain can cause researchers to highlight social inequality at the expense of the individuality of the stories told by their participants. Conversely, I needed to be equally cautious of the risk of “writing a generalizable document, in which the threads constitute generalizations and participants fade into support roles” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 143).

Furthermore, I had to contend with Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’ (1997) urging that researchers reflect on the “dual motivations guiding portraiture: to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart” (p. 243), as well as to answer the question, “How do we create a document that is both authentic and evocative, coded and colorful?” (p. 243). Such warnings required me to consider how form plays an important part in analysis and meaning. Faced with such daunting demands, I turned to literature on form.

My Return to the *Bildungsroman*

As I grappled with what it truly means to do data analysis with the goal of ethical representation, I heard Kim’s (2016) call for narrative researchers to attend to form and genre, and to consider what type of narrative genre they envision representing in the final research text. While Kim (2016) is careful not to encourage researchers to rigidly select and subscribe to any one genre, nor even to label their research according to one genre, she sees value in loosely

selecting one as a means of guiding the choices we make in how to represent and retell the stories we gather.

It was then that the *Bildungsroman* presented itself at the intersection of my academic past in English literature and my present in education as a tool I could leverage to gain Gadamer's (1975) "temporal distance" (p. 295), that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) tell us is required to do data analysis. I dismissed the *Bildungsroman* at first on the premise that it would be too prescriptive, and lead me to construct a research text that was flat and lacked dimension. However, as I read and reread the field texts, I began to reconsider what the data was telling me about the individual stories of growth and development, of participants wanting to create a particular version of themselves that was meaningful to their personal goals. I held their stories up against the narrative I have constructed of my own journey in the doctoral program, one where I came to realize that the journey is more important than the destination. I wrestled with this idea against my fear of the possible harm that could result from guiding my analysis with this idea of the *Bildungsroman*. Was I at risk of romanticizing participants' journeys that were as much stories of tension, doubt, dissatisfaction as ones of growth and personal development or fulfillment?

As I read more about the *Bildungsroman*, I came to answer that question with a resounding no. *Bildungsroman* is a story that centres on the *Bildung*, or the personal growth and identity, of a protagonist. It is a story of education and development, and one that importantly does not turn away from the difficulties or tensions that exist along those journeys (Kim, 2016). Instead, those tensions and the self-reflections of the protagonist about the journey become integral to the reshaping of the self (Kim, 2016). As Kim (2016) writes, "It is a story of developing oneself as part of the journey of becoming" (p. 127). The focus becomes more on the

act of creating and nurturing the self towards a new self that is fulfilled and valuable (Kim, 2016). The point of this journey is self-discovery and not the final destination.

I had already begun to notice the narratives of education as a means of self-discovery through my conversations with participants. I found myself coming back time and again to Kim's (2016) rationale for the use of *Bildungsroman* in education research, and noting the similarities between her experiences and mine conducting this study. She writes about the *Bildungsroman* that,

It fits well in the field of education in which there are many stories of students who have turned their lives around despite challenges, furthering their personal growth. It is a pedagogical story that projects the human being's resilience and persistence as well as his or her vulnerability. Hence, *Bildungsroman* would be a good genre for a story about a participant who developed into maturity despite or because of tribulations that were experienced by the participant while growing up. (Kim, 2016, p. 127)

This described what I felt as I met with participants and reflected on the interviews, and reminded me that one of the reasons I began this inquiry was that I saw the possibility for PCC education to further some sort of *becoming*. Conversations with previous students led me to expect this topic to surface during the study. I developed open-ended interview questions to allow for such discussions without directing them (see Appendix A), but I was unsure if it would indeed arise. It did, however, during my very first interview with David in a moment I explain later in this chapter. At that time, I forced myself to see it as limited to his journey, but as I met with the other five participants, I could no longer ignore that they all shared bits of what I now see as reflective moments in their own *Bildung*.

A Note on Structure

Though I found it helpful to think about the genre of *Bildungsroman*, I chose to use it as an analytical tool to help me construct a coherent whole out of individual participants' stories and experiences rather than as a strict blueprint for writing the research text. For example, though the following participant introductions are centred on the theme of seeking personal development and fulfillment, they are not written in novel or fictional format, except where I explicitly use tools of creative imagination or reflection. Instead, I used Kim's (2016) main features of the *Bildungsroman* (outlined in Table 6) to code the data to explore how the data fit, or not, within the basic structure of the *Bildungsroman*. Categorizing data using these codes was not done with the purpose of developing themes; rather, it allowed me to think about the stories and experiences of students along a greater narrative of a personal journey of development. Importantly, doing so allowed the data to drive the *Bildungsroman*, allowing me to explore the tensions and struggles participants experienced, and to ensure that these portraits were not inevitably happy stories of fulfillment as a direct result of attending a PCC.

Table 6

Features of Bildungsroman (Kim, 2016)

-
- The idea of an inner or spiritual journey of personal growth;
 - The tension between the ideal and the reality;
 - The importance of context in which the protagonist's personal journey takes place;
 - The role of enhancing the *Bildung* of the researcher and the reader;
 - The importance of questioning, dialogue, and doubt in personal journey; and
 - The elements of striving, uncertainty, complexity, and transformation.
-

Furthermore, I used Clandinin and Connelly's (1990) broadening, burrowing and restorying to find access points into these stories of growth and development, as well as to determine how to situate them in ways that were meaningful for the inquiry, the participants, and readers. Doing so required me to situate the individual experiences within the broader context of the stories told by participants (broadening); to pay attention to and consider the particular details of how a participant feels or is influenced by the stories they tell (burrowing); and, to tell and retell the story across time and place in ways that draw out the personal and social meaning of the experiences and stories (restorying).

Ultimately, this chapter focuses on what brought the six participants to the PCC, and how their unique personal histories are relevant and important to the choices they made. To ensure that the portraits were co-constructions rather than one-sided representations of their life stories, I submitted interim drafts of the portraits to each participant (except Mary, which I explain later) prior to our final interview. We then discussed the portraits, which I took into consideration in subsequent drafts. I submitted these revised drafts to participants for further feedback. In this sense, I feel I have arrived at representations that honour their experiences, without eclipsing the fact that my voice and feelings exist prominently in these texts as a reminder that how I approach PCC students and these participants impacted the data. More specifically, the portraits represent our time together throughout this study, which was marked by considerable empathy on my part, something I chose to include as a reminder to the reader that "the researcher's presence and investment is an important feature of narrative inquiry research" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577) wherein "researchers recognize the centrality of relationships" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577). I considered the risk that the resulting portraits may come across as overly-romanticized depictions of participants and their struggles; however, ultimately, I felt it was more important to

demonstrate the centrality of my relationships with participants, which were characterized by a deep respect and admiration for the resilience and perseverance they demonstrated throughout our time together. A key component to honouring those relationships was to leverage my abilities to help participants achieve something that almost all shared as important in their decision to participate in the study; that is, to share stories of resilience to let others know that they are not alone in facing hardships in life, and that if they can do it, others can too.

In the Midst of Becoming: Participant Portraits

The following journeys are shared in the order of the interviews. For that reason I begin with David's journey, before going on to that of Mary, Sydney, Shayna, George, and Blair.

David's Journey

I think that's kind of what gave me the push because a couple of months before [my father] passed, he was perfectly healthy at that point, right, it was kind of random that he got into the hospital and then passed away, but he was basically just talking about what I was doing with my life, right. He said that I could do better, and I knew that, but it was not something I was really focusing on at that point, right. So, significant life change, you know, when you [pause] start to think about who you actually are, who you want to be. So . . . and here I am.

— A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 147-154

I have formed a blurred but powerful image. I imagine David listening quietly, sitting across from his father two months prior to his passing, although he did not say whether they were together when his father spoke. However, I formed a visual of a powerful moment in David's life. It marked the beginning of David's journey in search of a version of himself he had always wanted to become. David, my very first participant, shared this near the beginning of our first interview as he sat across from me at a large table in the glass study room at the university. I was

nervous as I sat there, wondering if my questions would help us to establish rapport. Though I had hoped for meaningful conversations, I was not prepared for what David had to tell me. After a short silence that feels long when I re-listen to the recording, David slowly, and with hesitation to find the right words, began to speak about his father's role in his decision to go back to school: "He was basically just talking about what I was doing with my life, right. He said that I could do better, and I knew that" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 151-152).

The silence that filled the room in that moment felt alive, as though it was reverberating through the room in waves. I was struck by the power of his words, by the way David had shared something so pivotal in a manner that told me so much about his ability to self-reflect on his life and decisions. For the remainder of my time with David, I was ever-aware that he was in the midst of fulfilling an unspoken promise to his father to "do better" (A-1, October 6, 2016, line 152).

Early School Experiences

As I thought about this promise, I wondered what had made David's path one of unfulfilled goals. When I met him, he was in his early thirties, something I guessed from the fact that we were both part of the last cohort to get Ontario's grade 13 or OAC. He had recently moved to the city where the PCC was located. He had chosen this location "randomly" (A-1, October 6, 2016, line 168) when he "really started to evaluate my life and start to think about where I was, what I was doing, where I wanted to be" (A-1, October 6, 2016, lines 166-167).

David was not foreign to random moves. He moved around a lot as a child and came to see himself as an outsider, mostly due to the reluctance of his classmates to befriend the so-called *new kid*. He identifies these moves as the root of his conflicted relationship with educational institutions that spans back to his elementary school days. One move in particular

took him into a small town at a time when friendships were already formed and students were quick to validate their own importance by assigning and upholding outsider statuses. David remembers being “different, and people didn’t like that. [pause] So, finding friends, socializing was hard” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 537-538).

In response, David formed an academic identity to shield himself from the pain of not having relationships with his classmates. He stuck to his school work, and, before long, found that he was “done classes or the work in class long before anyone else was done” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 539). He came to identify as “pretty academic” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 63). However, this academic identity worked against him with his classmates, leaving him to surmise, “That probably had an impact on the social thing because not, I don’t know if I came across that I was better than other people or that I was smarter than other people, but people may have recognized that” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 552-554). In focusing solely on his school work, David found a way to cope; however, it resulted in his classmates further ostracizing him for seeming more intelligent than they were.

David’s relationship with schooling is filled with tension between finding academic work comforting, and being picked on for being an outsider who was more academic than social. He seemed to find comfort in being task-oriented, as though being able to excel at academics justified his lack of social connections. However, there was a more ominous aspect to his experiences that haunted me long after the interview, and that extended past the isolation brought on by his academic identity:

ME: Do you have any stories from school that specifically stand out for you?

DAVID: [pause for thinking] Hmm [pause] It’s hard to say [pause]. I would say grade six to eight was [pause] I don’t really remember much of it, probably because I chose not

to. . . . Like I want to say it was pretty traumatic, right. Constantly being picked on, no one [pause] literally having no friends at school. I might have had like one or two friends out of school, and if they were in the same school, they didn't want to associate within school because they fit in and other people didn't, right. (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 610-620)

He went on to say,

DAVID: I wouldn't say that I was like, I wasn't physically harmed often, right, but, like the verbal abuse was constant, and the, the teachers they might have been trying to help, but it was almost more like you were the cause of it. [pause]

ME: Really?

DAVID: Not the other children.

ME: Wow, I . . . [pause] So what kinds of things did they do? The teachers to make you feel like that?

DAVID: Well [pause] I want to say my mom was a chain smoker. Our house reeked of cigarettes and that might have been one of the reasons and they said well you smell bad, right. So the teachers were taking their sides. Like, yeah I may have smelt like cigarettes but that wasn't my choice or my doing, right. But they're saying that well, the reason they might pick on you is because you smell bad. Well, [pause] right. Right [pause] I don't know. [pause] I know you [pause] you almost wish there was more that was done to the people that were instigating the problems. Like obviously they have, they had problems of their own that maybe weren't recognized. Right, but. (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 629-648)

I quoted from our conversation at length to demonstrate a few points. Firstly, David's story seems to raise questions about the lack of agency he felt as a student in this small elementary school. David longed for support from his teachers for something that was outside of his control. The bullying was so bad that David describes grades six through eight as so "traumatic" that he actively tries to submerge those memories. Yet, when asked an open-ended question about his school memories, David recalled those traumatic years most vividly. I wondered what impact those years had on David's sense of self as a person and learner. He paints a haunting picture of a young boy ostracized by peers for his difference, and without support networks within the school to help him feel safe. He downplays his experience by making clear that the abuse was more verbal and that he "wasn't physically harmed *often* [emphasis added]" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 629-630). He also gives the benefit of the doubt to his teachers by saying that they may have been trying to help in their own way; however, I was left feeling that David not only experienced little support from authorities at the school, but felt further ostracized by their tendency to make him feel like he was "the cause of it" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 631-632). David's use of the word "traumatic" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 617) resonated with me, forcing me to wonder what impact such a traumatic time can have on the life of a young boy.

David's entirely different approach to high school left him estranged from his more academic self. This new approach began when David joined the Sea Cadets where he had his first positive experiences with peers. He recalled fondly how the Sea Cadet enabled him to quench his thirst for learning outside of school:

I wanted to learn, right. Learning was a big part of my childhood and, I wasn't learning enough at school. So, learning more of the military side and the [pause] about sailing, about knots, a lot of different things, I learned structural technique there, I learned marine

engineering. I learned a lot of different stuff through there. (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 565-568)

David also learned how “to connect more with the people there” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 569), and started to care less about what others thought of him. He embraced a social side that he had heretofore never managed. He also realized that school was not the only place that could satisfy his desire to learn.

As a result, David was no longer as focused in school. Instead, he began to partake in activities that would allow him to make and keep friends, and to “fit in” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 575), such as skipping classes and drinking underage. He began to find school increasingly difficult, and noticed that high marks did not come as easily to him. These difficulties eventually led David to abandon his childhood goal of postsecondary education:

DAVID: Planned through high school to go to RMC.

ME: Oh yeah?

DAVID: Right, but that fell through. Everything kind of fell apart the last year. I took OAC. I was the last year to have it.

ME: Me too.

DAVID: Right. But, I discovered alcohol [laughter].

ME: [laughter]

DAVID: And friends, right.

ME: Mmm hmm.

DAVID: Because I was pretty academic, and then just like near the end of high school everything just started falling apart. I didn’t fail, but I didn’t do as well as I should have and I knew that. Right, and . . . maybe it was a learning curve. I realized that what I had

taken all through high school wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do, right. So, I figured there's no point going to college if I'm not going to be happy doing what I'm doing.

Then you start to work, you start to like money, and college becomes less of an importance.

ME: Yeah.

DAVID: Right. But, well I guess too with the old curriculum you're basically taught that as long as you have your grade 12 you could pretty much be comfortable, do anything you wanted to, and be successful, right, where the year after they're telling me you need to have college, you need to have university, right. Now everything they want degrees or certificates or . . . right so further options for jobs or careers became more limited, right. [pause] I, yeah, I just bounced around from job to job. I never really had a problem keeping them, it's just I was never happy with them. (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 46-82)

No longer needing academics to provide solace for the isolation he felt, David is able to step back and realize how uninterested he is in school subjects. He begins drinking to excess to keep the first friends he manages to make in his life, something he alludes to later in our interviews as having led to a dependency. For the first time, David begins to question the ability of further education to provide meaning in his life. He chooses instead to enter the workforce; however, this leads to yet more disappointment when he is confronted with what he felt was a lie told by his school that you could pursue whatever career you wanted with a high school diploma. David is left feeling "stagnant" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 1174).

Doing Something with his Life

After working in various jobs for nearly a decade, David found himself wanting a change. He described a strong desire to *do something with his life*. At the time of the conversation with his father, David was working in the commercial tire field, one of the various jobs he had since graduating from high school. While he enjoyed his job and the training that came with it, he explained that his job was “hard on the body” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, line 91) and that he was often injured, despite the safety training. In a revealing moment, he explains that:

And that’s one of the things I struggled with and why I went back to school, cause I felt like I was stagnant. I was not growing anymore as a human being or [pause] having a purpose. My purpose was to wake up, go to work, make money, support my family, go to bed, right? You’re not [pause] you’re not fulfilling yourself. You’re fulfilling other people’s needs. (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1173-1176)

For David, education is less about finding a new career than it is about seeking self-fulfillment and perpetual growth and development.

Of course, the job is nevertheless important as David sees his job as linked in great part to personal self-fulfillment, which, when achieved, leads to a more authentic self that has important consequences for how he lives his life and raises his family:

Well, [pause] basically I think that the most important thing is [pause] continuing to grow, right, continuing to learn. Like if you [pause] if you get bored, or if you feel like you’re not growing as a person, or there is no change, then you . . . get depressed [laughter]. . . . I was very depressed before I started school, before I figured out what I actually wanted to do, and I think that’s kind of probably what pushed me to figure it out,

right. Because if you're not happy with who you are, then you need to do something about it. (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 308-316)

For David, who you are and what you do are inextricably connected. When he felt a disconnect between who he was and his work in the commercial tire industry, he experienced depression and felt stagnant. Conversely, the act of learning provided a way out of his divided experience, allowing him to reshape his notion of self by working towards a more suitable career.

Moreover, going back to school allows David to provide for his family in new ways; more specifically, by demonstrating the importance of life-long learning and personal growth:

Yeah and you want to, especially with children, you want to encourage them. Right, and have their options limitless . . . and by limiting yourself, what are you really teaching them? It's like well now that I have kids, all I can do is work and spend time with my family. No, you can, you can show them that you can always learn. You can always grow and be a better person. I think it's more important so they may see the struggle; it may be hard for them at times as well as you, but in the end they are going to adopt a better lifestyle for it, I would think. (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1209-1218)

David links life-long learning with the idea of perpetual self-improvement, and actively questioned the relationship between identity and self-fulfillment, linking self-fulfillment to finding a more authentic self.

For that reason, he views his education as “a self-journey” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 347-348) where learning about yourself is as important as learning about your future profession:

DAVID: And, I think you may [pause] be part of a family but you need to have your own independence as well, right. You need to, yeah basically be independent as a person. Like you may identify as professional in whatever job you do, you need to be able to

identify as a father, or a husband, but you're more than that as well. You are your own person.

ME: That's interesting.

DAVID: Right. And, I think in a lot of relationships, especially with mental illnesses, you lose that identity, right. You start to become . . . you're only the father, you're only the husband, you're only the worker [pause] and you lose . . . sight of who you are as a person yourself because you're constantly being pushed to have the views of your work, or your family, or. (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 359-369)

Searching for independence is linked to finding an identity that will allow David to explore his own goals and interests. He summarizes, "Yeah, so I'm learning [pause] more about myself than I am about anyone else through this course I believe, and that was [pause] partly what my goal was through going to school" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, lines 387-388). In coming back to this more academic version of himself, David seems to be finding healing, finding a purpose in life that he can leverage for good and self-fulfillment. His education at the PCC helps him to gain more "self-esteem" (A1-3, March 27, 2017, line 748) by helping him to realize that his instructors' and classmates' "reflections of me and what they think about me is completely different from what I thought people would say" (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 749-750). Instead, they are "very encouraging. They talk about how well I'm doing and some of the other students, even newer students, are recognizing that I'm doing good, so it's the recognition of the hard work and the dedication I've put into it kind of shows, which is, I'm not used to so that's good" (A1-3, March 27, 2016, lines 313-316).

Importance of Tension and Doubt

I did not want to conclude David's portrait without alluding to the tension and doubt

characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* that David experienced in this journey towards personal and intellectual self-fulfillment. In the next chapter, I explore some of David's concerns that, ultimately, lead him to consider pursuing university on a part-time basis after graduating.

Mary's Journey

I think a lot of the women — like I know there's men out there that get abused by women and stuff too, you just don't hear about it as much — like if you can help somebody that's been through more or less things like I've been through and that they know they're not alone and they have somebody they can talk to is going to make them feel better about themselves.

— B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 875-878

I had only one interview with Mary because she left her PCC program early, and I lost contact with her as a result. Yet her story tugs at my heart strings because I wanted so badly for her to succeed. But, life did not give Mary many breaks. She suffered more than her share of hardships. In spite of that, the woman before me on that cool morning in late October was happy, warm, and optimistic. Even more importantly, she was proud of herself.

Mary was no longer a student by Christmas and I am not sure whether she received any of my emails after some correspondence we had in November. I could only guess whether it was because she no longer used that email address or could not bring herself to explain what had happened. I suspect that Mary left her program due to either financial, academic, or personal difficulties, or a combination of the three. Though I lost contact with Mary after November, I felt that I owed it to her to share her story because she felt strongly that sharing it could help others like her by letting them “know that they're not the only ones out there that have had issues and problems like I have” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 860-861).

Getting to Know Mary

Mary was not quite two months into an Addictions and Mental Health program at the PCC, and was struggling with ongoing depression that resulted from a lifetime of being “sexually, mentally, physically abused from a kid up” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 769). For a long time, Mary believed that it was “[her] fault that these things happened” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 711). Unfortunately, school life was not much better. She remembers being “picked on a lot in school” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 326), to which she responded by becoming aggressive and fighting the kids who picked on her. She eventually turned to substance use to cope with the abuse. By the time she finished grade nine, Mary decided she could not handle school anymore and “never went back” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 336).

This cycle of abuse and substance use lasted for most of her life, only stopping “ten years” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 769-770) prior to our interview. In those ten years, Mary’s husband died suddenly from an unexpected heart attack. Mary recalled the night vividly, remembering how she had waited for him with a coffee and a bagel that he would never come to have. The time after his death was “a really hard time” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 882). Financial difficulties were not uncommon to her after his death, making her life even more emotionally difficult.

Going Back to School

After her husband’s death, Mary decided she wanted to do something that would allow her to leverage all of her bad experiences for some good. She had cultivated a strong desire to help others. However, deciding to go back to school after being out of it since 1972 was not easy. She recalls being “really scared the first day. It was [pause] I felt, I was more nervous going in

here on my first day than I was when I went to the regular school for the first day” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 340-341).

Once there, Mary felt briefly intimidated when she found herself the “oldest one in the class” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 346); however, she took comfort in finding another student only a year younger, and in finding an unexpected support network in her classmates. Mary fondly recalled the question and answer period after a presentation she gave for class:

Yes, the only question that was asked me – the gentleman that’s the year younger than I am and the only thing he says is, “I’m just curious, why did you get into this course?” And I said, “Because of the experiences I’ve been through for life, in my life”, and he looked at me and he said, “You’re a smart lady”. And that made me feel good too because like when I went in there I didn’t know how people were going to treat me, and how they were going to act, but it turned out really good. (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 620-625)

She speaks about her classmates as being “so good with me” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 355) and finds that when she struggles with new or foreign tasks, like using computers, classmates are ready and willing to “show me how to do it” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 357-358).

Mary also found support from a recent relationship formed outside of the classroom. She is surprised to find her partner to be supportive of her efforts and suggests that she “never had support for anything before” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 259) and that having support “just makes me feel so good. It really does” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 265). It is not surprising that Mary is so shocked to receive support when considering that others in her life had little faith in her decision to return to school. She recalls one person who “found out I was going to college,

[and] said why do you want to do something stupid like that for?” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 274-275).

Despite her optimism, school was a big adjustment. She found that of all her school tasks, “the most difficult is just if you have to read. I have more problems, I have a hard time reading because I’ve never been good at reading. I’m really slow” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 686-687). Her tests and exams were particularly challenging and she notes that she wasn’t “doing very good at them” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 733). Since she had only passed a few of the smaller tests in her time there as a student, it may be that academic difficulties compelled her to leave her program early. With a minimum passing grade of 70% in her program, even a mark of 69% or lower would result in Mary so-called *failing*. I felt disappointed in the system when Mary told me how many times she had been unsuccessful at tests, but she did not seem discouraged. She focused instead on her successes: “I passed it and I’m so proud of myself at 81%” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 746).

In contrast to her performance in formal testing, Mary was doing well on assignments. She explained that she loved doing class presentations,

because you’re looking up the research on the computer and you make notes and this is how I’ve been learning through the whole class is if we get an assignment like on, like if we have to read a chapter for whatever, for school, I have to make notes, like the most important parts in there, and that’s how I remember is by writing it out. (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 590-593)

She enjoyed that you “get marks for your appearances, how you talk, you know, how you react to things” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 566-567). She proudly shared that she “did a really good job” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 572) on the most recent presentation she had done.

Bigger Life Goals

As I listened, I had to acknowledge to myself that I was rooting for Mary, wanting her to succeed. It was difficult not to become invested in her goals. She saw a return to school as an opportunity to,

help people, women, men, that's been through some of the life experiences I've been through, and let them know that there is help out there for them of any kind that they need, and what alcohol and drugs can do to you and the problems they can cause, and how messed up they can mess your life up, the trouble you can get into by doing it. (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 488-491)

She sees her life experiences as being useful in reaching people, and showing them that "they're not alone and they have somebody they can talk to" (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 877-878). To further her chances at succeeding, she enrolled in a PCC because she "thought it would be easier to go to a smaller school than to go to a [university] or something like that" (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 112-113).

Personal Healing

Though Mary left her program early, at the time of her interview, almost two months into her program, she felt "stronger now than I ever was, especially growing up" (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 768-769). She seemed to have gained a new confidence in working towards her goals. For example, she explained that,

MARY: Growing up and going through my abuse of different kinds, they didn't have anything like this. Cause what they did was swept it under the rug and you don't talk about it . . . So, like I'm learning how to deal with things that happened to me in my past just through doing this course.

ME: That's amazing.

MARY: It is. And it's, it's just [pause] so much information and yeah, it's really amazing. (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 230-239)

Self-learning seems to be an important part of Mary's expectations for being back in school:

Oh, I think that I will learn how to deal with some of my own problems that I had, and to realize that it's not – that what happened is not my fault, that I'm not the reason, that it's not my fault that these things happened. And, and I'm learning how to deal with that, and I'm also learning how to talk to other people, and how to get like if somebody needs to talk like on how to get them to start talking to you and like what questions to ask. (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 709-713)

Of course, Mary may feel differently now that she has left her program of study, but she temporarily (at least) demonstrated a sense of pride and accomplishment in finding the courage to do something she had not done in years.

Reflecting on School Supports

Mary's history is not uncommon for PCC students. Students come in as *mature* students⁵ and, unfortunately, many also have long histories of abuse, past addictions, and/or financial hardship. Having had the opportunity to, firstly, believe so deeply in Mary's reasons for coming back to school and in what she had to offer to others with similar backgrounds, and then, secondly, to see her leave her program early, has changed how I view our responsibility to

⁵ Mature students are students who do not have a high school diploma; these students are eligible to enroll in select PCC programs upon successfully completing a mature student test as determined and approved by the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD).

students. I discuss this further in Chapter Seven; however, for now, I leave you with her story because it was important to her to have it shared with others who face similar challenges.

Sydney's Journey

It's pretty intimidating to me cause [my classmates] all have a lot of life experiences or experiences with school in the past, and it's like I just graduated from high school so I feel like now I have to prove myself more than they do because I don't essentially know as much as them even though they started, some of them started the program when I did.

— C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 143-147

Sydney reminds me of all the times I doubted myself because of my age. She arrived at our first interview ten minutes late, somewhat exasperated over having waited on the wrong floor of the library before realizing she was in the wrong place. She offered warm apologies and a smiling but worried face. She seemed disappointed in herself, like she felt she was always messing up. I was happy she showed up at all, and excited to find her warm and easy to talk to. I was surprised when she later described herself as an “introvert” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 416) who was so shy she sometimes “can’t order [her] own food or anything” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 420). Instead of the desperately shy introvert she saw herself to be, I saw a kind and brave young woman of approximately 18 years of age who had put herself out there to help a complete stranger with her research.

Motivations and Goals

It did not take long for me to learn that Sydney has low self-confidence. She worries that people cannot see past her youth, yet age is the last thing I thought about when I was with her. Sydney presents as deeply caring and altruistic. Almost all of our conversations centred around her desire to help others, particularly children and teenagers who have unacknowledged mental

health challenges. Her decision to attend the PCC to take an Addictions and Mental Health program speaks to this desire to commit herself to helping others. Consider, for example, why Sydney's goals are important to her:

SYDNEY: Those goals are important to me because, I don't, [pause] because it's important to me because I feel like there's not enough help for not only people who suffer from addictions and mental health, because there's so much stigma on that, but my goal is to kind of break down that stigma, and because there's not a lot of help for teenagers or kids who have those problems, so I feel like I'm going to be that type of person that when I get that job and when I go to work and stuff that I'm going to help them and give them what they need because usually it's [pause] they get told a lot that it's like, "Oh you're just a kid, you'll get over that and stuff", but usually it's not the case, so like, like anxiety for example, that's a really big thing.

ME: Mmm hmm.

SYDNEY: And so people will be like, "Oh you're just a kid you'll get over it, you're just a little nervous". And, it's like, well actually they have an anxiety disorder but because they're a child they don't get that help, so I want to kind of help them. (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 329-342)

I felt how strongly Sydney internalized the injustice of viewing children as incapable of having so-called *real* problems. She referred to this idea often during our interviews, and lamented that people with mental health challenges "get a lot of stigma put on them" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1048-1049). I wondered what could have caused her to feel so deeply the injustice of not being taken seriously as a child. Did something from her own past make her more attuned to the hardships many children face growing up with anxiety, mental health struggles, and disabilities?

Schooling

Sydney's school experiences provided some answers. To begin with, Sydney's experience in elementary school and high school was marked by a long period of bullying that prevented her from having any good experiences in school "until like grade eleven, which is really bad" (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 462). Her confidence plummeted further when she almost failed and then failed grade nine and ten math, respectively. She explains that she "never got taught math until high school" (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 463-464) because "the schools I went to were not the best" (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 468). Her time in elementary school "was difficult and I got bullied a lot" (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 474-475).

Sydney's experiences with math, in particular, seem to have impacted her sense of self as a knower. After her lack of previous success with math, managing to pass grade eleven Math was the first positive experience she had in school in eleven or more years:

ME: So do you have any memories about school that stick out the most for you?

SYDNEY: Positive ones? [laughter]

ME: Anything, whatever that makes you think of, positive or negative.

SYDNEY: [pause] Some positive ones were when I passed grade eleven Math and I was super happy cause then, that was kind of like the first thing that was positive of my schooling after I got, stopped getting bullied and stuff, so like after that it was the first positive thing that made me more excited to go to school and stuff cause I was like, "Hey I can do this", and I wasn't so worried about [pause] like different ways to take or stuff, like different how to protect myself kind of. (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 560-572)

Sydney did not explicitly state why she had to protect herself; however, I could not ignore that this was the second reference to bullying already in the first interview. I wondered if her experience could have been shaped by coming out as gay at a young age when the people around her might have been immature and insensitive. Or, could it have had something to do with the anxiety Sydney often referenced during our talks? Was it something else altogether that she did not feel comfortable mentioning? I felt saddened by her experiences, but cognizant that it was not my place to ask her to open up about something she might not want to share. Regardless of the answer, her schooling had been an unsafe, anxiety-producing experience marred by self-doubt and the need to protect herself from something or someone. I wondered how she might have been impacted by only having her first taste of academic success in grade eleven.

Nevertheless, she experienced it, and it changed her attitudes towards school. I cannot overlook that this positive experience came at the hands of a teacher committed to helping students:

SYDNEY: In grade nine, my teacher was very [pause] they weren't open to teaching different ways. It had to be their way or no way basically, and they didn't give me the option of trying to learn a different way so I could understand, so I just kind of did the best I could and I used my friend to help me. [laughter] Cause she was right there so I was like, "Hey", and then she made it easier. Then in grade ten I didn't have her in that class, so it made it more difficult. I had the same teacher so then I failed, and I had a really bad grade before I went into the exam, and then I had to do summer school after that, but it was just hard because they wouldn't give me an option of how to better my grade or like different ways to learn. Then in grade eleven I had a teacher that would write down one way of doing something, and then like four other ways.

ME: Oh wow.

SYDNEY: So that helped me so I would look at it and be like which way would be easier for me, and then I'd write them all down and try each one until I found out which one worked better, so that was good and that helped me a lot. [laughter]

ME: Wow.

SYDNEY: Yeah, he was a really great teacher. I miss him. [laughter]. (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 599-617)

For Sydney, having a teacher who visibly cares is a prerequisite to a learning environment wherein she can succeed. Seeing that there were multiple avenues to the correct answer helped her to stay encouraged, something that allowed her to learn because she was able to see which method fit best with her own concept of how the problem should be solved.

This math teacher remains a profound influence in Sydney's school experiences, and seems to have become a role model for Sydney on how powerful it can be to help others. She admired that he truly cared about his students and went out of his way to help:

SYDNEY: He would always stay like an hour after school ended, and even if no one came, he would just still sit at his desk.

ME: Aw.

SYDNEY: And be like, if someone needs me, I'm going to be here.

ME: Aw.

SYDNEY: So, he was super kind. I loved him. [laughter] . . . Like he was really involved with everything, which I really liked, even if it was a sport he wasn't really into, then he would still help out with them, so he was really involved with all the

students, and he tried to get involved with all the staff, so I really liked that. (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 855-880)

Her grade eleven Math teacher seemed the first teacher who Sydney felt truly cared and gave his time to help support students in a variety of ways, whether that was in the classroom by demonstrating different learning methods, by making himself available for extra help after school, or by volunteering to help with sports, even ones of which he was not fond.

Despite this one positive experience, Sydney still remembers her overall school experiences as overwhelmingly negative, an important factor when considering the postsecondary and career paths she chooses.

Safety and “A New Start” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 491)

Part of why Sydney chooses to attend the PCC has to do with her expectations about what her fellow classmates would be like. She explains,

SYDNEY: I was excited to end high school cause then I'm, cause then I was going to a school where there's like nobody I know, even if I came here [to university] it's a big school so I wouldn't see a lot of people that I know I feel like, and so that like made me really excited because then I knew I could have like a new start type of thing. And then I could do what I want.

ME: Does it feel like you have a new start?

SYDNEY: Yeah.

ME: Yeah?

SYDNEY: And it feels like it's a more mature environment too, like not saying that [university] isn't mature, [laughter] but like.

ME: [laughter]

SYDNEY: I don't know. I feel more comfortable because they're older than I am, but it also makes me nervous cause they're older than I am, but I feel like if I was to come to like a regular university it'd be difficult for me cause everyone would be my age. (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 488-507)

Despite being intimidated by the anticipated experience of her classmates, she finds comfort in being one of the youngest students in her class at the PCC. She describes, "Yeah, I don't know I feel more like [pause] I don't know how to use another word but like safe? I guess cause then I'm not. . . I don't know, I just prefer not to be with people my age [laughter]" (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 536-538). One can surmise that the bullying Sydney experienced in school came at the hands of students her age, something that seems to leave her feeling unsafe when around other young people. Her idea of attending school with older students who she envisions to be mature — something she later finds to not necessarily be true — leads her to choose to attend a PCC rather than a university or college with a presumably younger student body.

This idea of safety also seems to extend to the risk involved in succeeding at one form of education over another. In the second interview, Sydney talks about testing her academic stamina through the shorter programs offered at PCCs:

Yeah, I was planning on taking a year off before I started, and then I was like, "Oh maybe I'll just go right to school" and then I had the plan to come [to university] and then I saw that program [at the PCC] and I was like, "Oh maybe I'll do that for a bit" and I saw that it was just a year program, and I was like "I'll do that. I can do that". (C1-1, November 3, 2016, lines 167-170)

While Sydney eventually wants to attend university to obtain a Bachelor's and then Master's degree, she finds safety in starting at a PCC. Certainly, there are parallels between Sydney's

statement that “I can do that” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 170) when she discovers that the program is only one year long, and her earlier statement, “Hey I can do this” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 570) after passing grade eleven Math. With newly-found confidence in academic abilities, Sydney seems to need to test her ability to succeed at postsecondary education in a safe place before moving on to more (and longer) schooling.

Transformations

Though her experiences at the PCC were not all positive (which I explore in the next chapter), there was nevertheless a drastic change in Sydney’s confidence during her time there. Near the beginning of her program, for example, Sydney talked about how her age made her feel unsure of her ability to have anything to offer to class discussions. Being young, for Sydney, means not having enough valuable or relevant life experience:

It’s pretty intimidating to me cause they all have a lot of life experiences or experiences with school in the past, and it’s like I just graduated from high school so I feel like now I have to prove myself more than they do because I don’t like essentially know as much as them even though they started, some of them started the program *when* I did. (C1-1, November 3, 2017, lines 143-147)

As a result, Sydney’s experience in the first half of her program is that of a listener. Her fear that her lack of experience disqualifies her from contributing to class discussions seems to suggest a pervasive lack of self-confidence.

By the time Sydney is midway in her program, she realizes that she has more experience than she previously thought:

ME: You actually in the last interview you mentioned that one thing you were afraid of going into the school is that you don’t have as much experience as them, and you seem

to think experience would help them learn or succeed because they just had other experiences. Do you still feel that way or are you realizing that you do have a lot of experience?

SYDNEY: I don't really feel that way. I feel like that's probably what I just thought because I wasn't exactly sure about what I was exactly going into and everything.

ME: Yeah.

SYDNEY: But as time's gone on since we last had our interview, it was like oh, Sydney, you do have a lot of experiences and I think you will do okay, but I'm still, I'm looking into applying to coming [to university] because I don't think I'm ready. I think that I will be but I still don't want to just go in cause I'll be just 19 when I'm done that so I don't think that I'm going to be ready to just start working my life away at that age [laughter]. (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 852-866)

Sydney even gains the confidence to speak up in class when an older student argues that young people cannot possibly have bad lives because they have not lived through enough. Over time, Sydney realizes that her fears about limited experience were misguided and recognizes that she has experiences relevant to her future profession. She also gains the confidence to contribute to class discussions.

By the final interview, Sydney no longer sees her age as a disadvantage to entering the work force. Instead of going directly to university to pursue more schooling, she considers trying her hand at finding employment first:

SYDNEY: And so I'm just going to see how that goes. I'm still not sure because I'm still going to be younger, but I don't want to work with adults as much so I feel like. . . cause I want to work more with children, right?

ME: Yeah.

SYDNEY: So, I feel like they'll trust me a little more than an adult would, cause if I go to talk to someone who's 47 let's say, they probably won't trust me as much cause I'm young and inexperienced, whereas like a child would be like oh you're older than me, you know things.

ME: They also might be able to relate to you more, too, because you're older than them but you're not too old.

SYDNEY: And I have experience with them, too, so I mean that makes me a little bit more comfortable. That makes me feel better for sure. (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 841-855)

When asked why she felt that her goal had changed, Sydney answered:

Why that goal's changed? Cause I'm not as self-conscious as I was. Like I'm not. . . my esteem on my, how would I say this? . . . On my knowledge. There we go. Like I feel more confident with that. I don't feel as insecure with what I know. I feel more comfortable, so I think that I just want to try and go for it. (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 874-881)

Sydney's reference to her previous work with children as valuable experience that she can use in the workforce represented a drastic change from initial references to her limited life experiences. When I emailed her the final draft of this portrait, Sydney, then in her program placement, told me that the employer at her placement was considering employing her.

Her choice to attend the PCC began as a means of buying time until she was older and more experienced. By the end of her program, however, she developed more confidence and re-evaluated her feeling that she would need as much education as possible before entering the

workforce. Her path to this newfound confidence was certainly not all positive. However, this short year is integral to Sydney's personal journey towards greater confidence.

Shayna's Journey

And, [pause] then, things happened and me and my ex separated, and I came here not knowing where I was going, not knowing what I was doing, just my head was over there, my body was over there, everything was just all over the place. [pause] And we came here and all we had was clothes and toys and that was it. And, immediately coming here because my mom lives here, she kept telling me you can stay with me for as long as you want, and you can do this later and do that later, and I said no. I got my children into counselling. I got them into school. I did everything I needed to do for them, even though there were moments where I felt like I wanted to just fall apart, and I wanted to break down. I just kept telling myself that I didn't come this far to break down now. I was going to keep going. And I did. And I saw a flyer for [the PCC] and then I just picked it up and called them and walked in the office and applied.

— D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 388-398

For me, Shayna epitomizes bravery. I did not know it when Shayna quietly walked through the glass doors of the public library, her head somewhat down with a shy smile on her face. She came directly from school, still in her Esthetics uniform. I found her quiet, so quiet that I often had to remind myself that it is okay to let silences linger, to give her time to work through what she was thinking. The best way I can describe our interviews was to say they felt peaceful and calm, a sharp contrast to the internal anxiety I had in meeting her for the first time. Her voice is one I still hear, low and deliberate and calm, marked with lengthy and meaningful pauses. Sometimes I would think that one of my questions had offended her, until I would realize that

she simply liked to think before answering, almost as if she was searching inside for memories she could hand-pick like apples from a tree.

When I asked her to tell me about herself, she self-identified as a Native American woman in her almost mid-thirties with six children solely dependent on her for their upbringing. When it came to life goals, her children came first:

Well the things that are important for me in my life right now are my children, and because I'm a single parent, I have nobody else to fall back on. It's just me and them, and they rely on me for pretty much everything, so I've got to get my, excuse my language, my shit together in order to take care of them, and that's exactly what I'm doing. (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 232-235)

Shayna was starting over after uprooting her family, with only their clothes and toys, and setting off in search of a fresh start. She described this move as one where she,

SHAYNA: just [pause] packed my van with our clothes, the kids' toys, and that's all we had.

ME: Wow.

SHAYNA: Mmm hmm.

ME: That must have been scary.

SHAYNA: It was, but we're doing it. I check to see if they have a heart-beat every morning, but we're doing it [laughter]. (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 88-97)

As I explain further in Shayna's journey, part of "doing it" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, line 97) was going back to school to pursue a personally rewarding education. However, to understand why this is so brave, I need to explain what brought Shayna to this time in her life where she

found herself in a city over 600 kilometres away, checking daily to see if her children were still breathing, and walking into the admissions office at the PCC, ready to start over.

Trials from the Past

It was many years before Shayna built the resolve to pack up her children in search of something new. Before this, Shayna overcame a great deal of suffering, which, although it does not define her, remains part of her story. Having one of her children “born out of sexual assault” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, line 244) while still a teenager, Shayna was forced to make decisions she never envisioned having to make. She underwent the struggles that go hand-in-hand with such an experience and being part of a justice system that puts your pain in the spotlight. To add to the injury, Shayna explains that “he didn’t really get anything for jail time. I guess two months” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, line 263). Despite what I can only imagine to have been a horrifying experience, Shayna talks about it now with calmness and, ultimately, forgiveness:

Well, as the months and years went on, I did have my opportunity to ask him why, why, and he did explain to me everything that I needed to hear. He did not hold anything back. He did not sugar coat anything. He told me basically the truth and I knew it was. Even though it sounded as horrible as it did, it helped me let go of it, and he did apologize, but he did turn his life around after that, cause he went through hell and back and I was there to watch it. (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 282-286)

Shayna eventually allowed her attacker to have a parental role in their child’s life. I remember sitting in the interview room humbled by Shayna’s ability to accept repentance and believe in the good in people. It was one of the powerful moments I experienced throughout this research process: feeling how sharing stories forms powerful connections that change you forever.

This experience had an impact on Shayna's life thereafter. The self-healing Shayna shared in our interview came years later. In the meantime, Shayna describes her life after having her first child as "hard" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, line 257). In addition to struggling with alcohol dependency, Shayna explains:

SHAYNA: Yeah. [pause] Yeah, after having her, I had my two boys. I was still living on the reserve at the time. I didn't really do much with my life actually. I stayed as a high school dropout, just a stay at home mom. Of course I was single even after having them. Mmm, [pause] I was just a, a young person who really didn't [pause] didn't really know how important my education and all of that stuff was, thinking that, you know, I had all this time left yet to do all those kind of things, and I wasn't really worried about it. All I was worried about was when I got to go out the next weekend.

ME: Mmm.

SHAYNA: And [pause] yeah, I worked right up until I had my first, and from there that's when I met my ex that I left in [city name struck for privacy]. I was with him for about seven years, and then again I didn't really do anything either. I had chose, I actually was looking for a job one day, and he gave me a hard time about it, but I took it anyway, and it was one of those cheesy PC, you know, apply for a credit card jobs.

ME: Mmm hmm.

SHAYNA: So I sat there for a few days, and then finally one day I said, I'm sick and tired of this. I was sick and tired of getting all of the jobs that are left over, I am going back to school. It must have been in, I think it was in March. So, I marched my butt over to the high school and I told them I want to finish my high school, and they said okay, you've only got five credits left to do, do you think you can do it by June? And I

said I think so. And I drove to school every single day with my youngest who was two years old at the time. The school was so accommodating that they actually gave me a room, a classroom by myself where my son can just play in the classroom and I could do my school work.

ME: Aw.

SHAYNA: And I finished by June. (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 327-356)

I held back my urge to tell Shayna that there was no shame in being “just a stay at home mom” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 328-329). By listening, instead, I found that, for Shayna, being unhappy with where she was at that time was not self-deprecation; it was the drive to do something for herself that was not imposed on her. She wanted a job so that she could choose for herself (against her ex’s wishes) to do something that would be personally fulfilling and sustaining. She wanted the freedom to be able to pursue a career that she wanted and that would leave her feeling happy.

Turning Points

Shayna’s choice to finish high school marks a turning point in her life. It was the first of many choices in pursuit of her own dreams. And, certainly, it was not easy for her to go back when considering that her previous school experiences were overwhelmingly negative. She would not speak extensively about them, but what she did share helped me to understand why she left school early in the past: “When I was younger probably in elementary school I used to get bullied a lot in school” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 801-802). The bullying, which she does not specify, was so bad that she cites it as the reason for “why I stayed away from going back to high school for a long time” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 934-935).

High school was just as bad for Shayna. She felt painfully ostracized by her classmates:

Yeah, before that, [pause] I have to say before when I was trying to go to high school and whatever, it was very, very difficult. [pause] I mean, I was very shy, didn't really talk to too many people, and I was like [pause] It's almost like sitting in a, in a room with all particular one person and you're the only one who stands out kind of thing. That's what it was like going to high school back then, and then when I went back to finish, there was other students there but I did not interact with any of them. I didn't bother with any of them. I just went to school, went home, and that was it. (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 1003-1009)

When listening to Shayna describe her classmates as being all of one particular type and her of another, I could almost feel her discomfort. I imagined what it must feel like to not only feel different from your peers, but to feel like that difference put you on display. This is not the description of someone who feels hidden and ignored. This is the description of someone who feels pointed out and noticed as *the other* in a detrimental way.

To add to this, Shayna recalls feeling unable to withstand the pressure of being torn between competing family obligations:

Because of my parents' separation I was always going back and forth from one, from the reserve to the city. . . and because of that I just kept missing school all the time and would, I would always want to go to the city to finish my school, but then when I went there my family would be calling me to come back home. So eventually I just started working. I started working at the age of 16 right up until I had my first child. (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 801-815)

Together, these experiences left Shayna with less than fond memories of being a student.

Given this history, I consider Shayna's decision to go back and finish high school as a turning point in her life, and a testament of her strength and bravery. It required her to put the pain from her past toward a better possible future. It is also for that reason that I do not share in Shayna's disappointment in her decision after graduating to not "really do any, much of anything there, just stayed at home with the kids cause we lived out in the country" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 385-386). Shayna sees her success in graduating from high school as having been eclipsed by her decision to go back to her role as a stay-at-home mom. However, I see it as having been time wherein she built the resolve to make yet another life-altering move.

PCC Choice

Indeed, not much time passes before she finds herself on the other side of the aforementioned move with only her children, their toys, and clothes. With this move came the courage to try more education:

SHAYNA: I came here because of the, the separation and while I was here I decided the hell with this, I'm going to school.

ME: Okay.

SHAYNA: Cause being with my ex-partner, he would never allow that.

ME: Oh wow.

SHAYNA: Mmm hmm. [pause] I was always at home with the kids and alone before coming here.

ME: And so you decided to do something for yourself?

SHAYNA: Mmm hmm, yeah.

ME: I'm getting ahead of myself here, but why esthetics then?

SHAYNA: Why esthetics? [pause] Well, I really took esthetics because I wanted to take it for myself, to make myself look better, to learn to take care of myself better. And, I knew with the, like the dress code and the requirements of the way you're supposed to look professionally everyday at school would force me to look after myself.

ME: Mmm.

SHAYNA: So it would, basically it forced good habits, getting rid of my old bad habits.

ME: It must be tough with six children.

SHAYNA: It can be.

ME: You're always caring for them first, right?

SHAYNA: Yeah, it can be. I mean it's tiring, but I'm pushing myself through it. [pause] And yeah, I just, like I've been sober for about seven years and since then I've always had women come to me and always ask me for, you know, help and supporting them and whatever else, and I thought why not take this program for them too, like if they're coming to me at least I can help them as well. (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 110-146)

My assumption (an example of what I reference in Chapter Four of retrospectively wishing I had not said something during the interviews) that Shayna's challenges came from caring for six children before herself was incorrect. Instead, her desire to kick start good habits through her schooling had more to do with seeking to achieve personal goals. More than a professional journey, Shayna seeks skills she can use to care for herself, her family, and the women who go to her for help, women I imagine could be in similar positions she had once been where they have less freedom than they want.

Interestingly, despite the importance of these goals, Shayna talks about her decision to attend the PCC as spontaneous and not thought through. Yet the more we talked about it, the more Shayna revealed specific expectations about attending a PCC that influenced her decision:

ME: What was your first reaction to the type of school? Like just when you went there for your meeting or when you found out what types of programs they have?

SHAYNA: My first reaction?

ME: Mmm hmm.

SHAYNA: Hmm, [pause] I was actually pretty excited because the, when we started they told us that from the day we started within six weeks we would start working on actual clients and getting like right into it.

ME: Yeah.

SHAYNA: And that we would go right into practice almost like immediately.

ME: And that didn't scare you? That was exciting? [laughter]

SHAYNA: No, it was, it was just exactly what I needed. I needed the hands on experience, cause I work, I work a lot better when it comes to seeing and doing than it is to reading and writing. (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 438-457)

Shayna consciously entered the program expecting to learn through hands on learning, something she looked forward to in contrast to earlier learning experiences that did not work for her; namely, a heavy focus on reading and writing. Shayna explained that when teachers expected her to learn by listening to lectures or just talking, she could “not hear a damn thing they said” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, line 860).

Conversely, learning seemed to be easiest when Shayna was immersed in realistic tasks that did not hinge on one's ability to read and write: she explains that “I think [at the PCC] you

get real life actual experience compared to other schools. Other schools is a lot of theory and book work, and you're not actually getting the experience" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 488-492). This contrast proved important for Shayna. At the PCC, she feels as though her way of knowing (primarily through seeing and doing) is valued and rewarded. This left me thinking that Shayna did not particularly enjoy how theoretical her previous education had been. I wonder now if that meant that she was not able to showcase her talents and ways of knowing in a way that was valued within those schools. Did that impact in any way the negative experiences she had? Could Shayna have been disadvantaged by a system that values reading and writing above all else? Conversely, was it flaws in the system that taught her to think she could not read or write well?

Confidence and Strength

Shayna seems to build confidence through this new approach to learning. She takes comfort in learning in a way that removes "that scary feeling of going from a college or a university and then going into the workforce not knowing what to expect, what to feel or whatever" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 888-889). Instead of learning only from a book, "we're actually thrown into the mix of this is what it's going to be like when you're at your job" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 889-890). By the second interview, she shared that "I'd have to say that my self-esteem has gone up a lot" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 870-871).

This new-found confidence came to encourage her to push on when she was feeling overwhelmed with the long hours and her many responsibilities:

And [pause] yeah it's, it's been hard like for, for myself and my own, my own situation in my life. I mean there have been points where, where some days I just don't feel like doing anything or going anywhere or whatever, just wanting to give up kind of thing

because of how stressed out I feel, but it's like maybe seconds or minutes right after that I just kind of kick my own ass and say, "What the hell are you thinking? Keep going. You didn't make it this far for nothing". And just, like it's giving me the realization that I am actually a whole lot stronger than I think I am. (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 923-929)

Shayna has an incredible resolve to persevere when stress makes her feel like quitting. Even near the end of her program when Shayna is going through a life-threatening family crisis, she pushes herself to go to school to finish her program: "My whole world fell apart that day. I said, I only have three weeks left. I don't feel like going back to school. I don't want to go back. I went anyway. I went on Tuesday" (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 643-645).

It would have been easy for Shayna to give up. Certainly, many people might have given the circumstances. But, she has an admirable resolve that demonstrates the importance she gives to her education. In terms of work, however, her family crisis means that she will "have to put my job on hold" (D1-3, April 13, 2017, line 578) so she can "just concentrate on my family" (D1-3, April 13, 2017, line 582). When I delicately asked her if she regretted learning something she could not pursue at the moment, she answered, "No, it doesn't. Not at all" (D1-3, April 13, 2017, line 1083). Instead, she plans to use her education towards a new goal that can help her family through their crisis. Regardless of whether she is able to pursue a career at the moment, Shayna is happy to realize how strong she is: "People used to always tell me that I was so strong and whatever else. I never knew what the meaning was to that" (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 603-604).

I came to see Shayna's decision to attend the PCC as having as much to do with personal goals of self-fulfillment as it did with "being sick and tired of picking up all those crappy little jobs" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 346-347). She shared that "I wanted to take this program

because I wanted to build my *self* up. . . . I didn't really worry too much about, you know, getting a job in the esthetics field. It was about me" (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 626-631). In the end, Shayna's life drastically changed the nature of her goals; however, she plans to use her PCC education towards a new goal of helping her family through their crisis, as well as to further her original goal of helping other women gain confidence and self-esteem. This may or may not come in the form of a formal job, but I hope the reader leaves with the understanding that a job was the furthest thing from Shayna's mind by the end of her program. Her goals had shifted beneath her and she was happy to have new skills with which to support her family in ways she never knew she would need.

Recent government pushes for the evaluation of PCC education to be based in large part on the employment rates of its graduates provides only one perspective on the value of PCCs. Shayna's story is illustrative of the life-changing value of an education that might not lead to concrete employment, yet changes many lives for the better.

George's Journey

ME: What does it mean to you to do this diploma?

GEORGE: Well, financial security hopefully. It means that I won't have to hopefully hop in and out of loaders and cars and stuff and hurt myself anymore. . . . Yeah, be part of a [pause] it feels good to be part of a professional organization again where I'm amongst people, and I don't want to sound like I'm, you know, better than anybody else, but I think being a paralegal puts you in that extra higher profession. You're not quite a lawyer, but you're not quite a, you know, but it's an elite, and I miss that: being a paramedic and being, so it's going to mean that back to me, give me some sort of an identity again.

— F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1444-1455

I met George for the first time at a public library where we agreed to have our first interview. I quickly found George to be affable and to have a good sense of humour. Even from our earliest correspondence, George used humour to tell me what kind of participant he would be: fun and easy-going, and someone who believes having a sense of humour is “just fun and good-natured” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2071). Indeed, I would leave our interviews with sore cheeks from laughing at the many jokes George would make. But, early on, I sensed that George might also be using humour to mask something. I later learned that I was right.

Despite his happy, fun-loving personality, George has faced many personal and professional obstacles that have left him in search of stability, respect, and belonging. To begin with, George had a difficult and isolating childhood after his dad moved the family up north and away from his cousins and extended family. School life did not replace the community and friendship George lost. He recalls being “ostracized and made fun of” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 413) for being “one of the only redheads in the class” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 412). It was a time when he “wasn’t very popular a lot, so I kind of kept to myself and sometimes I think I was a little bit more of an introvert in the sense that I don’t know if it became me or I became it sometimes” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 425-426). His relationships with his teachers did not alleviate the pain of the isolation. Instead, George’s sense of self and his intelligence were deeply shaken in elementary school when he was told by a school doctor performing IQ tests that his intelligence was “average” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 3215). He experienced “self-doubt” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 3225) thereafter. For George, it “was kind of hard growing up” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 421).

Shortly after this, George's mom left when he was fifteen, leaving him to take on more responsibility of the family than one might have expected of a fifteen year old:

GEORGE: Home life wasn't really all that [pause] I said, high school was kind of hard.

Just my mom left when I was fifteen so I kind of took care of my brother and sister and my dad and, you know, Thursday nights was we'd get the [local newspaper], the community newspaper kind of thing with all the flyers and my dad and I would look through the flyers and pick out specials and stuff, pick out the foods we were going to get for the next week kind of thing. I kind of get a lot of things from my dad now because I helped him out so much when like in my formative years kind of thing.

ME: Mmm hmm. Were you the oldest of your siblings?

GEORGE: Yeah [laughter].

ME: So that – you had more of the burden?

GEORGE: Mmm hmm.

ME: Not the burden, more of the responsibility.

GEORGE: And I took it on too. (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 472-483)

George willingly took on greater responsibility in his household. This new role, he told me, “put me at odds with my sister and my brother because I was kind of technically half raising them” (F1-3, June 2, 2017, lines 3470-3471). I imagined the impact this would have on someone who already had very few friends at school. The result, of course, was that he became isolated in both places.

After high school, George went on to become a paramedic. He especially relates to this time in his life, recalling it time and again during our interviews. His voice is full of joy and nostalgia when he talks about those days and the “adrenaline rush” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line

70) it gave him. He reminisced about being part of a “secret society kind of, of people with dark senses of humour” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 75-76). There was a sense of belonging in “being in the middle of everything, like you know, knowing stuff that’s going on and being part of that” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 74-75). Finally, George had the community he had lacked growing up.

Unfortunately, after fifteen years, George had to leave this fulfilling career due to the psychological stress of working at a time when little, if any, serious attention was given to the effects emergency response workers face after repeated exposure to trauma, or, as George says, a time when “we weren’t as touchy feely as what we are now” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2753-2754). George explains that he “needed to” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 46) get out of that industry because of what his wife dubbed the “pulling the kids out of the ditch syndrome” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 54). He uses humour to make light of that time by referring to “my PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and all my touchy feely ambulance things” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 226); however, I sensed how difficult it was when he describes it as “all those years nobody really cared” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 227).

Worse even than the PTSD, was that George found himself on the other side of a career that was personally and professionally fulfilling, leaving what felt like a hole in his life. He temporarily lost a sense of himself as accomplished and successful, and found himself no longer part of a professional community. To add to the injury, George followed this with two unfulfilling jobs that both ended badly: the first, a job as a bus driver from which George was dismissed due to an incident of self-defence that George himself reported; the second, being a job as a truck driver from which George was laid off after returning from a serious workplace injury.

George does not speak about these jobs with joy, and he is clear to say that they were not “my passion” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 1347); instead, this is a time in his life when he “kind of half-assed and got myself jobs because I could drive” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1342-1343). For George, these years represent a failure:

At two o’clock when you’re in a loader and you’re on your 114th load of something running up a hill and you’re like dropping it off and going back for the next one, you’re kind of thinking about where you can take your life to [laughter] and it’s like you also wonder where you, what you did wrong in your life to get you to the level you’re at.

[laughter] A lot of things happen at 2 o’clock in the morning when you’re in a loader. (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1599-1603)

For George, there is no personal and professional fulfillment without passion for what you are doing, or without the ability to garner respect, and, perhaps most importantly, self-respect.

Recreating a Version of Himself

Dissatisfied with passionless employment opportunities, George decides to return to school and pursue a career that means something to him. It is about more than just a job for George; it is a means of recreating a version of himself he once respected. Once a student, it does not take long for George to gain “some sort of an identity again” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 1455) that took him back to his days as a paramedic:

ME: What does it mean to you to do this diploma?

GEORGE: Well, financial security hopefully. It means that I won’t have to hopefully hop in and out of loaders and cars and stuff and hurt myself anymore Yeah, be part of a [pause] it feels good to be part of a professional organization again where I’m amongst people, and I don’t want to sound like I’m, you know, better than anybody else, but I

think being a paralegal puts you in that extra higher profession. You're not quite a lawyer, but you're not quite a, you know, but it's an elite, and I miss that: being a paramedic and being, so it's going to mean that back to me, give me some sort of an identity again. (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1444-1455)

Without fulfilling work, George feels he lacks an identity. He fulfills himself through being challenged and through being part of an elite, exclusive group. For this reason, he holds his time as a paramedic in high regard and as a time when he was respected and professionally fulfilled, so much so that without it, George experiences a loss of identity.

His decision of what program to take is largely informed by this desire to have a recognizable identity again. He sets out with the goals of "actually doing something that I'll be proud of" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 3683-3684), and being able to use his life experiences for a purpose. He explains that he has,

a lot of life experiences, and I have a lot of certificates and things, but I don't have that one thing that ties everything together, and once I get a paralegal licence, all my other experiences are going to be profound. I can relate to people. (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1390-1391)

George feels confident he will be a good paralegal because he has "all the experiences that I can draw back, that everything I did in the past is kind of leading up to this" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1426-1427). It will allow him to fulfill his need for continuity of experience, and to use past challenges to drive a future career that can satisfy his need to be a respected leader. For example, George initially considers a focus in employment and injury law to help others avoid the unfair termination he experienced simply because he did not know his full rights under the law. Furthermore, George often referenced how his previous work as a paramedic and volunteer

experiences as an auxiliary firefighter and police officer gave him meaningful experiences that contextualize his legal studies now.

I wondered if using the negative experiences in his life towards a fulfilling career would help George to reconcile himself to that time in his life. Certainly, George demonstrated a desire to see all life experiences as meaningful when he talked about the incident on the bus: “At the same time I’m here now. Everything happens for a reason” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 195).

Conflicted Choices: Enrolling at a PCC

George’s journey back to an identity he respects is one that is marred by doubt and fears related to attending a PCC. During our talks, George remained conflicted between his commitment to becoming a paralegal, and his lack of enthusiasm over his choice to pursue that education at a PCC. He is surprised with himself, exclaiming that he “never thought I’d go to [PCC] in a million years [laughter]” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 356) because he “didn’t like career colleges in the sense that I thought they were like the bottom feeders of the academic world [laughter]” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 360-361). George struggled with knowing that in his days as a paramedic, he would never have befriended a PCC student⁶, let alone be one now:

I really didn’t know. We really didn’t have all that much interaction cause like I said, the ambulance people, the [Public College A] people kind of, we all stuck together, the [Public College B] people kind of stuck together. We never really let the [PCC] people in. (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1132-1134)

⁶ When reviewing the final draft of his portrait, George jokingly asked me to add here “unless they were cute”; however, I chose to leave the portrait as is. All other suggested changes to previous drafts were made.

George seemed to be struggling to come to terms with being a PCC student he once had no respect for. When I asked George why he would attend a PCC with such a negative opinion of them, he answered, “Well they’re the only ones around, it’s sort of convenient” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 1257), and that the program is one year as opposed to the two years it would take at a public college that used a semester system with summer breaks. The convenience outweighs his desire to attend a public institution that he sees as “the ivory towers of colleges” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 808-809): “But then I would have been two years and I’m already 51. I’m out of here in September of next year, so theoretically if I hustle and do everything I can write my, my paralegal licencing exam in October” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 813-815).

It was evident that George was impacted by the stigma against PCCs. I worried about how he would feel about his success when he graduated. Would it impact the self-confidence that he had struggled with for most of his life? For example, at times, George worried about how future employers might react to him just because he attended a PCC. He told me that people from the best law firm in his city “don’t like [the PCC] people” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 558). When I asked him if he felt they were a little bit prejudiced towards PCC students, he answered that they were but that he “can understand why from one of the rumours that I’ve heard” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 570) that the PCC’s students do not “learn enough about research” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 574). George is afraid of how he will prove he is “credible in the sense that I can hand a lawyer all the stuff that I got and they would trust me because I went to [a PCC]” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 576-577). I did not ask George where he heard this rumour, but I could see that he was influenced by the way that people talk about the school.

George continued to be conflicted about his choice. At times, however, he is proud of what he was achieving in the program. For example, he shares that he is surprised to realize things about himself during his time there that he had not expected to learn:

That I've, I've actually really done things the right way this time. I've taken the time to learn, I've built the foundation, I've done, I kind of half-assed it before, you know, because I could do it. . . . I never took the time to fully learn something, and I'm reading all the books, I'm doing all the, all the prep, I'm doing everything that I'm supposed to do in order to be successful. Where before, I just would have, and I think that's what's surprised me the most. And I don't know if it's so much because I'm older now and I realize that's what I need to do to be successful. I think that's part of it. And I think part of it is I'm really enjoying the course. I want to learn it. I want to be able to do it. (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 3657-3668)

At other times, George goes back to doubting whether his successes are real or merely the result of PCCs being too easy: "Do you think maybe they're not challenging us?" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 1716). In that way, I saw George as being negatively impacted by the stigma that PCCs are not as rigorous, and as leading him to question the motivation and hard work he was demonstrating as a student. I lamented that George doubted his success because of the reputation of some PCCs; however, his doubt remains integral to his story. I was hopeful to receive a text message from George near the end of his program telling me that he had been placed in a legal office that is "very [PCC] friendly" (Personal Communication, August 04, 2017), which leads him to say that his accomplishments are "not bad for a kid from the wrong side of the tracks" (Personal Communication, August 04, 2017). Later, George told me that the same legal office made him an offer of employment, which he accepted.

Blair's Journey

My own self esteem kind of thing, thinking I can't do this and I'm not going to do it, cause I'm very hard on myself if I fail something, you know, or get a mark that I just, I've, I assume I never know. I mean I never expect perfect. I'm not like that type of person, right? But I am like just happy if I get the passing grade, but if I get under that I'm so hard on myself, and I'm like okay wrong career choice, let's quit now.

— E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 507-518

I arrived early to my interview with Blair. I tried to busy myself with laying out the snacks and coffee and neatly arranging the documents I would need for a first interview. When there was nothing left to do, the butterflies in my stomach forced me to get up and pace the room. Why was I still so nervous to meet a participant after having already worked with five others? I wondered. My thoughts were finally interrupted when Blair walked into the room already in the middle of a conversation I did not know we were having. I was relieved that she started the conversation so easily, and eagerly jumped right in, my nerves gone. That is how I often think of Blair: in the middle of a thought, speech free-flowing in a familiar and warm way.

I initially mistook this comfort conversing with me as a sign of confidence. By the end of our first interview, however, I saw that hidden behind her light and easy conversation was deep self-doubt. She tended to think the worst about herself, to expect failure and rejoice over the unexpected victories that she attributes more to luck than hard work. Blair did not see the version of herself that I saw sitting across from me, the version that was warm, funny, welcoming, and kind-hearted. Instead, she saw someone who had accumulated a series of failures and false starts throughout her life. She defined herself by the side effects of having lived with a psychological disorder she did not understand until she was hospitalized later in life. As a result, she had little

faith in her ability to succeed at anything she started. I learned early to look beyond Blair's version of herself by listening closely to what she was not saying in the stories she told.

Listening for Blair

Without quite knowing it, Blair had a difficult childhood. She suffered early on from what she called "a mental disorder" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 189) that caused adults around her to consider her as "hyper or a bad kid" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 569-570) who acted out "for attention" (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 1181-1182). Instead of getting the help she needed, she was disciplined:

You know, so you did something wrong, it was reprimanded. Because I have a mental disorder they didn't understand it, they always thought it was just me trying to get attention, but it's like no you know and I did everything on my own. I think if they would have got me help way back when, when everything first started, then like puberty, that's when everything started. [pause] And then maybe I would have been able to do better, but I think I'm just hard on myself probably cause of my disorder though, cause I have borderline personality. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 528-533)

Blair paints a picture of a confusing childhood, never quite understanding why she was being reprimanded for her behaviour, or how to avoid such reprimands. She struggled to understand what she was feeling, ever-aware that she was not the same as everybody else and that life events seemed to hit her harder. She explains what it was like to live with her disorder in a chilling summary: "Without medication it's like crazy. You know, it's like you miss the bus, kill yourself, you know [laughter]. You get an A, you live" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 549-550).

School was a place where Blair learnt early on to distrust her abilities and expect failure:

BLAIR: Well elementary I don't know maybe cause of my disorders maybe my hyperness I don't know, but I got teased a lot all the time, and I was never good in school. Never. Like, I mean I was lucky to get a 60.

ME: Mmm hmm.

BLAIR: I was, yes, you know if I got a 60 I was so happy. [laughter] So I didn't expect, if I get an A I'd get a heart attack. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 690-697)

Blair's lack of confidence became second nature to her over the years. Elementary school taught her that she was not good at school and that she was not well liked by her peers, two things that had lasting impacts on her. She began to see herself as a perpetual failure and to distrust that her efforts would lead to success.

To make matters worse, in the third grade, Blair's aunt, with whom she was close, was violently murdered. Blair spoke about the murder in a matter of fact way, as though it was just part of her childhood. She did not tell the story as an excuse. In fact, she did not speak much about how it affected her. She spoke about it because I had asked her how her early school experiences were, which caused her to recall how her mom thought her third grade teacher had been bad. Blair, however, could not recall the year clearly. Despite knowing that her teacher called her class "a bunch of animals" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 1469), she could not remember if she had liked her or not because "I don't really remember much on grade three" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 1498).

This was a pivotal year in Blair's childhood. She and her family received no help in psychologically processing the murder. Blair began to feel that she should repress her emotions because nothing could be as bad as what happened to her aunt. I imagined how traumatic that event had to have been in a young child's life — indeed, in anyone's life — even without the

psychological challenges she already faced on a daily basis. I wondered, though outside of my scope of expertise, if this event had an impact on her psychological state. What would it be like for a small child to learn so early that horrific things can happen? That someone's life can be taken because of selfish impulses?

Nevertheless, Blair went on as she had to. She describes her time in school after that as a series of bad experiences that left her more and more estranged from others. Grade five was particularly bad for Blair because of what she describes as a "strict" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 1244) teacher who did not seem to want to be there and who was always "yelling at us or snapping a ruler on the desk" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 1512-1513). Blair describes that year as "scary all the time" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 1514-1515).

After leaving elementary school, Blair was selected to attend a performing arts school. For a short period, this was a happy time for Blair. She enjoyed the freedom to focus on her passion for music. Along with strong vocal talent, she was an excellent flute player. However, the competitive attitude at the school disheartened Blair:

BLAIR: Well between the school how they treated others and then one other girl in the classroom I had she was another flute player with me and she was better than me and she made sure to point it out.

ME: Oh.

BLAIR: We were in competition all the time cause that was the only thing I was better at than most people, but then she ended up joining and it was just, she was just one of those people that had to be the best and put you down on every little thing and it was just like no it's not fun anymore. It became a job in a way cause then you took a lot of time after school cause you're constantly doing the concerts or practicing with them and

it was just getting too much, so I was like no. And then the way the school treated people, I just couldn't take it anymore. I was argh, you know? I don't know. It's just cause I was in it and all my friends weren't and it's like special privileges. Oh let's go have pizza day cause we're doing that, or we get a field trip just us because we're in the performing arts and they're all like we're stuck here. Plus I'm missing school so I'm missing my good work and I have a hard enough time trying to keep it up, so it was just no I couldn't do it anymore. Even now I think they still have it going but I don't know what they do now. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 1139-1160)

Despite enjoying the music program, Blair left the school due to a strong distaste for the competitive atmosphere and overt favouritism the school displayed towards performing arts students. Furthermore, the demands of being in the performing arts program made it more difficult for Blair to cope with the academic workload.

Blair then transferred to an all girls' school. She enjoyed that there were "no guys to compete with, no worry about oh do I look good today, you know?" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 1126). However, Blair's experience here is no better. Instead, she recalls that "in high school, ugh, well puberty was just hell so high school was hell" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 707-708). She "tried to stay busy as much as I could but I became a hermit. I only would go to school, go home, and stay in my home and never go out, eat in there, do everything in there for years" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 708-710). Blair ended up isolating herself in her room for the majority of high school until she moves out with a boyfriend who ends up being abusive. To this day, she does not quite understand what compelled her to do this: "I don't even know why. I just met some guy and I was an idiot and moved out with him" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 713-714). After a year, she leaves him and finds out she is expecting with a new partner.

Rather than finish high school, Blair was encouraged to drop out because a teachers' strike pushed back the exam period to when her baby was due:

Yeah, so I was pregnant with him and they just said there was not much point being here kind of thing, cause you're going to be missing your last month and then you're going to miss the exam because you're going to, you're due then, so I dropped out then and I didn't go back. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 758-760)

She tried several times after having her baby to finish high school. However, "something always happened. I'd be there for five, six months, do really good and then mentally I'd lose it or my kid would be really sick, or I had another kid" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 778-780).

Once her three children were born, she tried to get her diploma again. This time, however, she had to contend with her increasingly serious mental health challenges:

I kept trying to go back to school, and then I was doing really good, almost there I think I had three months, I registered for pre-health for September, and then I ended up in the hospital. That's when I was there for two months, so then I just couldn't get back into it. You know, it was just ugh, and my psychiatrist said there's no way you can do the course, and I was like, I was so blown and I remember just having a panic attack in the middle of her office cause she had said no, and that's what I've wanted for 20 years, you know? So it's like, Are you kidding me? You're telling me that? So, but yeah, so then, I never really did school after that. Couldn't. [laughter] I was just so mad. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 798-805)

With these unfinished attempts haunting her, Blair put her dream of getting her high school diploma and a postsecondary education on hold. The cycle of starting and stopping different programs made the idea of going back to school all the more daunting.

From Stability to PCC

Blair's long hospital stay resulted in a diagnosis that enabled her doctors to create a suitable treatment plan, after which Blair finally begins to find some stability that allows her to achieve things she had never thought possible:

BLAIR: But then mentally I started getting better and I stayed at this job for three years, so and usually I couldn't even last a year in a job neither cause something would happen mentally and I'd have to leave again.

ME: Good for you.

BLAIR: Yeah, and so I was like three years, maybe now I can get to school. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 809-822)

Blair's motivation to go to school is rejuvenated when she is able to keep a job for longer than she ever had.

Yet again, Blair is willing to try something new, this time at a PCC rather than continuing previous upgrading efforts. With work experience in a legal office, she is initially intrigued by the Paralegal program; however, she seems convinced when she learns about the mature student testing option available at the PCC:

I came in just to look for the Paralegal course, and then I asked them like cause I didn't have my grade 12 and she said, "Well we can do a mature student test", and you know it was very simple. I was surprised how easy that was. I don't know if that's just cause it's private career college or what, but it was so easy. (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 809-822)

The test is Wonderlic's Scholastic Level Exam (SLE), an entrance exam approved by MAESD for postsecondary mature student testing. The minimum cut scores are pre-determined and approved by MAESD. For Blair to have been successful, she had to have done well. However,

she downplays her success in a way that shows me she still did not believe in her academic abilities. Blair was simply not used to succeeding.

Nevertheless, Blair passed and enrolled in the program. She is attracted to the “condensed” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 1972) format and minimal breaks: “That summer break might have killed me and not made me want to go back” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 2020-2021). For Blair, breaks bring back bad memories of the times she struggled to return to school after school breaks or extended absences. For example, she did not return to finish high school after she had her first baby. Later, she did not continue with her upgrading program after having to stop multiple times due to illnesses or having more children. Another time, her lengthy hospital stay caused her not to return and start a pre-health program in the fall. It is very difficult for Blair to return to school when she loses momentum. She fears that anything can happen at any moment to prevent her from finishing a program, so, in her eyes, one year with only a few days off at a time is easier than two or three. Any break, no matter how short, poses a risk.

Influences from the Past

For this reason, despite her persistence to succeed this time around, by the second interview, Blair feared that the newfound stability she has is, at best, fragile and tentative. She explains it as “a breaking point and it took years to get back and I’m like some days I feel myself going back to that way again, or I’m going to need to go back in the hospital again” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 1565-1566). She goes on to say that she is not sure “if I can handle this. It’s just too much, and I thought I could but maybe I can’t handle this kind of job. I don’t know. I don’t know if mentally I can” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 1571-1573). Blair’s worries have to do with the stress of having to be at school every day, and wondering if she is capable of being a full-time paralegal one day. She concludes that she thinks she would be able to handle part-time, but

it was evident that her motivation was at an all time low. She was tired and overwhelmed with how difficult the program was. She shared that “before, I loved it and I was like excited to finally, you know, be doing something. Now I wish I could get back to that thought. I don’t know why but [sigh]. I should still be here by the next interview I’m hoping [laughter]” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 1354-1361). At the time of our conversation, Blair had just finished a mock trial for a course. She described the assignment as one that was rife with tension between her classmates, resulting in more time demands than were normally required. On top of this, Blair was required to temporarily take on more responsibility at work. Together, these demands left her feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and unsure of her ability to continue her program.

Blair explains that her relationships with her instructors sustained her through this difficult time. She shared that her instructors are “not like when you were in high school when you get asshole teachers you just don’t want to talk to” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 499-500). Instead, she describes her relationships with her instructors as,

Good cause they’re really nice. Like they don’t, they don’t look down on you with any question you have. None of them are stupid for them. They don’t make you feel like you’re failing or whatever. Like the one girl, like I said I wanted to quit, and she was just really really adamant about me coming back [laughter]. Made me promise her, she’s like, when I’m gone a week promise me you’ll be here when I come back, and just trying to bring up my spirits, I guess. She was just like oh you’re good at this, she goes I see what you can do, I mark your work, I know what’s written. Yeah, so she was really uplifting. (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 1057-1063)

I wondered if this was the first time that Blair had experienced a teacher or an authority figure having faith in her abilities. I sensed how important it was for Blair to have someone finally believe in her and what she can achieve, as well as to coach her to believe in herself.

The impact was instrumental in Blair's success in her program. During the final interview, Blair even said, "To be honest if it wasn't for [my instructor], I probably would not have come back" (E1-3, June 12, 2017, line 37). She stays because her instructor is "constantly giving me help and motivation and positive thoughts on everything. It's helped all the time. Like she's still someone I talk to all the time, right?" (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 38-40). This encouragement helps her to go on when she otherwise might not have. Blair is now near the end of her program with a newfound pride I had yet to see prior to our last interview. In an email update, Blair shared that she did not think she,

Was going to make it. But here I am now and I am just shocked. I don't realize how much of an accomplishment this is. I never thought I would ever graduate from anything but Grade 8. So to get in here and go through all of these classes and pass. I am just overwhelmed with joy. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2017)

Blair's life has certainly not been easy, nor have her experiences with educational institutions in general. She struggled daily to muster up the energy and courage to continue on in her program towards her goal of stability and being able to support herself and her family.

Narratives of Resilience

As can be seen from the portraits, these participants all experienced a history of negative experiences with schooling, including the surprising fact that they all mentioned bullying as being a prevailing memory from their time there. To some degree or another, they have all also had troubled or difficult pasts that extended past only their school experiences. As such, I see

their journeys to this PCC as ones that have required them to overcome difficult obstacles, causing them all, ultimately, to demonstrate incredible resilience and perseverance. In the next chapter, I link these narratives of resilience to literature on vocational education in the United Kingdom.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the six study participants with somewhat lengthy portraits of their lives. In doing so, I kept my voice at the forefront of the portraits to remind the reader that, ultimately, I must take responsibility for representation, though I worked with participants to ensure these portraits were reviewed and approved.

I follow these portraits in the next chapter with a more detailed examination of the experiences these participants had while at the PCC by using Polkinghorne's (1995) reframing of Bruner's (1985) analysis of narrative (paradigmatic mode of thought). I urge the reader to keep these portraits in mind as they consider the findings shared in the next chapter.

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

— George Eliot (Pseudonym for Mary Ann Eliot), *Middlemarch*, 1871

Chapter Six: A Mosaic of PCC Experiences

Overview

In this chapter, I examine participant experiences at the PCC. I begin with an exploration of student choice, before exploring how student perceptions of differences between PCCs and public institutions framed how they thought about their choices. I follow this with an examination of how the stigma towards PCCs impacted participant goals. The latter half of the chapter explores student conceptions of success, and the factors that led to or detracted from it. Finally, I explore how participants spoke about experience and confidence. Overall, in this chapter, I explore the themes raised by the interviews, and prompt questions I explore in the next chapter when I return to the research questions.

The World of Coding and Categorizing

This chapter is the result of hours spent pouring over almost 700 pages of interview transcripts and another hundred or so of my research journal and field notes, deciding what was most important to share within the context of this study. These transcripts and journals contained stories, memories, laughs, tears, revelations, confessions, doubts, and a range of other things that left me emotionally attached. I was moved by participants, and saddened, incensed, inspired, proud. It felt daunting to turn something so close to my heart into a chapter that I knew would require me to be concise and effective at relaying the importance of those moments. I found

myself in need of a new way of gaining that “temporal distance” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 295) I struggled to achieve before writing the previous chapter.

Fortunately, coding enabled me to step back and gain the perspective I needed to leave behind, if only temporarily, the emotions of “living stories with participants” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 129). To that purpose, I used codes to label the data by topic. I then sorted the codes using three tables: the first with Kim’s (2016) features of *Bildungsroman* as stated in the previous chapter; the second with pre-determined headings of topics I expected to find as a result of the interview questions (outlined in Table 7); and the third, with topics that emerged across the interviews as significant either because of how important it felt to one or more participants, or because of the number of times the topic surfaced across interviews (outlined in Table 7). When a topic emerged from one participant’s interviews, I added it to that third table and reread the other interviews to see if that topic resonated with their experiences as well.

By the end of the process, I had approximately 450 pages of tables that I whittled down to what felt most representative of their perspectives. From these reduced tables, I grouped the codes into larger categories that I used to compare and differentiate participants’ experiences.

Table 7

Topic Headings Used to Create Thematic Categories

Topic Headings	
Elicited from interview questions	Raised by participants
PCC Choice	Requirement of a credential for a job
Student Self Descriptions	History of being bullied
Stigma, and PCCs versus Public Schools	Value of experience
PCC Experiences	Fear of value of PCC qualification
Previous Schooling	Desire to help others
Learning and Success	Personal fulfillment and self-learning as main
Life Obstacles	motivators
Ambition/Goals	Lack of confidence
Motivation	Impact of classroom dynamics and instability
Impact of Narrative on Participant	Impact of instructor relationships
Expectations versus Reality	

I then developed larger categories for discussion that I share in this chapter. I am reticent to call these categories themes because a theme gives the illusion of an overarching collective experience. I do not want to eclipse the individuality of the participants' experiences or to cause them "to fade into support roles" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 143), so I use the term theme loosely to mean common clusters of topics participants raised as important, albeit not always in the same ways, that I have pieced together in this chapter to create a mosaic of PCC experience. Like a mosaic, the individual pieces are used to create a larger picture, but are still apparent in their original form within the larger work. In other words, I used the imagery of a mosaic to

guide representation that would not sacrifice the individual experiences and voices of participants to achieve a collective whole.

Creating a Mosaic of PCC Experience

A Self-Conscious Apologia: PCC Choice in Contrast

Although I address the question of student choice in some of the participant portraits, it is worthwhile to revisit this subject more fully to see what can be gleaned from considering participants' choices simultaneously in order to answer the main research question.

Some participants felt they had more postsecondary options than others, and some had mixed reactions to their choices. I felt an undertone to our discussions that was implicitly defensive, as though discussions of PCC choice required justification for why public schools were not chosen instead. George, for example, begins by making clear that he never thought he would end up in a PCC because he believes them to be “the bottom feeders of the academic world” (F1-1, January 12, 2016, line 361). He consequently frames his decision to attend one as being against his desires and the result of a lack of options in his current city. Yet, he is particularly attracted to the program length and the fact that he will be able to write his paralegal licencing exam much sooner than if he attended a public college. This led me to wonder whether, if presented with the real option to attend a public college in his home town, George would nevertheless have chosen the PCC out of his desire to finish his schooling as quickly as possible, despite being somewhat self-conscious about his choice. Furthermore, George is happy to find the PCC's admissions staff more responsive to helping him secure funding than the public college was. He shared that the PCC admissions counsellors “were like, this is who you see, this is what you do, this is, they led me by the hand and they got it all done. Within a week I was

accepted” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1567-1569), while the public counsellors asked him to wait another two or so weeks to increase his eligibility for the funding opportunity.

Sydney and David weighed their options carefully, choosing the PCC from a full complement of postsecondary options for its smaller class sizes and shorter programs. Sydney, for example, considers attending university, but postpones it to attend the PCC because she assumes the PCC will have an older, more mature student body. Because of this, she expects PCCs to be a “safe” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 537) learning environment compared to her high school experience, and with “faster pace work” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 18) that would “jump right into all the subjects that pertain around the subject” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 895-896). She thinks this is a better choice for her first attempt at postsecondary education because she imagines PCC courses will be “easier for me to study” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 908) because she only has to take one course at a time. A PCC education is not Sydney’s end goal, knowing early on that she wants to pursue university at some point. The program length at the PCC, however, makes her feel more confident in her ability to succeed there first. Rather than take a year off, she decides, “I can do that” (C1-1, November 3, 2016, line 170).

Sydney was the only participant to indicate she received help in making her decision. Knowing she has “trouble making decisions” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1107-1108), Sydney’s mom convinced her to look at the PCC, believing that it could be the right fit for her goals. When they got to the admissions appointment, Sydney’s counsellor was someone she already knew from her work experiences. Trusting his opinion, she shared that “he basically kind of convinced me cause I was unsure, but then he kept saying such great things about it and I was like okay maybe I’ll give that a try” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 962-964). Whether this was aggressive admissions tactics or the result of a confidence based on a previous relationship, I

don't know, though Sydney claims it is the latter: "So that was good cause I already knew him so it made me feel like he wasn't just trying to get me to sign up to go to his college. He was like yeah this is a good school. If it wasn't, I would tell you" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1246-1248).

David too explored public institutions. He did not even know about the PCC in this particular town because he says the public institutions in the area "take up such a focal point" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 1339). It was not until "an old friend" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 1334) recommended the PCC that David found out there was one in the city. Initially, David was attracted to the fact that "it was only one year and that it had a placement option" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1343-1344). Like Sydney, David also has aspirations to attend university, but is attracted to the potential of a one year program to "test what you're capable of, what your motivation and your commitment is" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1315-1316). He thinks the chances of succeeding are higher at a PCC versus an 18 or 24-month program "where you really cannot handle the stress of it after the first year and you drop out" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1314-1315). He seems to think it less risky to have to complete only one year to get a credential, versus a longer program you may not finish.

David's choice may also have been impacted by the pain he felt in high school because of teachers who did not "identify each student's needs closer" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 789-800). He adds, "Again, another reason I like the private career colleges — there's less students" (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 789-800). David seems to associate what he now sees as bad choices made in and shortly after high school as a result of a lack of close relationships with school authorities. His desire to have that close relationship now with his instructors seems to have impacted his choice to attend a PCC: "If I want to go up to the instructor at any point and

talk to her — I am able to do so and there’s not a hundred other students wanting to talk to her” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 804-805).

In contrast, Shayna sees “a flyer one day” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 377) that motivates her to make an admissions appointment. Rather than looking to others for help in this decision, she simply shared her resolve with her mom, who at one time tells her she can always go back and do it later, and another time tells her, “Good go for it” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 414). Shayna recalls that her first impression was that the PCC was “exactly what I needed. I needed the hands on experience” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 456). Happy with the school and its Esthetics program, she enrolls at the PCC and does not look back.

Similarly, Blair happens to see a Law and Justice sign outside of the school on her daily walk to work. Intrigued by the Paralegal program, she decides to talk to someone in admissions. There she found comfort in discovering that she is eligible to apply to the program as a mature student⁷. Finding the entrance test easy, she enrolls, happy to be able to bypass her academic upgrading attempts because “you can’t just live off a high school education anymore. Like one day you used to but not now” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, line 1343). Blair too “likes the idea of it being only a year” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 2016) because she fears she would not be able to finish a longer program. Blair speaks more about her choice as being due to the mature student option and the lower risk of failure than a lack of available options. She too did not receive help from family or friends in making her decision.

Mary chooses the PCC because it “had the course that I wanted to take — the addiction and mental health — and I thought it would be easier to go to a smaller school than to go to [a

⁷ A mature student is someone who applies to a postsecondary institution without a high school diploma, and not to be confused with someone who is mature in age or personality.

university] or something like that” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 112-113). Mary is attracted to the PCC’s “smaller classes” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 117) that provide more opportunities to have “one on one” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 657-658) time with instructors. For Mary, that “just makes it that much easier than if you go into like one of the other ones where they have these big classrooms with 30 people in them” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 657-659).

The reasons participants give for choosing the PCC are consistent with existing literature on PCC choice in Ontario that demonstrates that the most common reasons respondents choose a specific PCC over public options are program length, program offerings, class size, convenience, and location. Table 8 summarizes the most relevant Ontario studies to show the similarities in order of most popular reason. However, though participant reasons are consistent with recent studies, most participants spoke about multiple motivations and complex sets of circumstances that made those reasons important in their lives. Some motivations, as I explore later in the chapter when I look at low self-esteem and confidence, were not options on the surveys, but may have significantly impacted the choices they made.

Furthermore, recall the finding from Martin and MacLaine’s (2016) study that 58% of respondents choose to pursue a PCC education in general to train for a particular job, with only 10% pursuing it for general interest or personal development. Within this study, all participants spoke about the importance of going back to school to do something personally fulfilling with their lives, and something more aligned with who they wanted to be as people and professionals. Certainly, its importance felt more significant than the 10% seems to suggest. I can presume that if asked to take a survey on choice, they might too have initially selected employment because, as Hardiman (2014) suggests, speaking about vocational motivations is more culturally acceptable. However, personal development was equally important, leading, for example, to

Shayna being happy with her program even when she finds out that she will not be able to use it for employment for at least the near future. This is similar to participants in Hardiman's (2014) study who still found their vocational education to be worthwhile even if it did not lead to a profession, despite the fact that most participants cited employment as their reason for being there.

The way participants came to choose the PCC is also consistent with Fuller and Macfadyen's (2012) study in the United Kingdom. Both Blair and Shayna seem to encounter the PCC by chance, and Sydney is the only participant to get help from family or friends in making her decision. I wondered if this could be because Sydney is the only participant directly out of high school and who is under the age of 30. The others were mature students (Blair), or had been out of school for at least a decade (Mary, David, Shayna, and George). However, that she is guided by her mom, with all other participants making their choice independently, fit with Fuller and Macfadyen's (2012) finding that many students made the choice on their own, even more by chance, and a few with the help of their mothers.

Table 8

Reasons for Enrolling in PCCs

Malatest and Associates (2008)	Larocque (2015)	Martin and MacLaine (2016)	EnviroNics Research (2017)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific program (45%) • Program length (37%) • Institution reputation or quality (37%) • Class size (22%) • Location (20%) • Recommendation (20%) • Availability of courses not offered in public institutions (16%) • Hours of classes or instruction (13%) • Employment/ placement record (12%) • Frequent start dates (11%) • Located in a city I want to live in (8%) • Cost (7%) • Entrance requirements (6%) • Size of institution (6%) • Financial assistance (4%) • Special needs services (2%) • Other (3%) 	(n=275) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program length (210) • Class size (85) • Specific program (78) • Institution near home (50) • Hours of classes or instruction (50) • Frequent start dates (48) • Recommendation (41) • Course not offered at a public institution (32) • Institution reputation or quality (32) • Employment/ placement record (27) • Entrance requirements (26) • Other (22) • Cost of the program (14) • In a city I wanted to live in (12) • Offered financial assistance (9) • Size of institution (9) • Special needs services (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More convenient hours and location (62%) • Shorter program durations (61%) • Better-quality training (34%) • Program offerings (24%) • More affordable programs (17%) • Not being able to gain admission to a public institution (13%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered the program I wanted (52%) • Small class sizes (37%) • Work placement opportunity (37%) • Convenient location (36%) • Could start the program without long delay (33%) • Flexible start dates (31%) • Shorter/more intense program (29%) • Recommended by others (25%) • Flexible timetables/class hours (25%) • Reputation of the program (23%) • Personal environment (19%) • No summer break in classes (10%) • Cost of tuition (9%) • Availability of online courses (2%) • Other (8%) • No particular reason (1%)

Conceptualizing PCCs: The Private Versus Public Debate

The way participants compared PCCs to public institutions is important in understanding their choices and experiences, particularly because all strongly felt PCCs to be very different from their public counterparts. The following points of difference emerged: program/course length and depth; size of school; instructor quality and experience; and, the stigma against PCCs.

Shorter Programs, Shorter Courses, Less Depth?

Although I reference the topic of program length above, I kept it as a heading because program length stands out as perhaps the most notable difference participants saw between PCCs and public institutions, as well as perhaps the most influential factor in many of the participants' decisions to attend the PCC, albeit for different reasons. These reasons include family obligations (David), subject matter concentration (Sydney), mental health challenges (Blair), and age (George). However, for Shayna and Mary, program length was not as significant as hands on experience and class size.

What can be misleading about statistics that show program length to be a popular reason for attending a PCC is that, though some participants chose the PCC mainly for its more condensed programs, some worried that shorter programs with shorter courses could mean less depth of content than at its public counterparts. David, for example, worries that,

We're learning a lot but at the same time you almost wish it was longer because you want to go more in depth and you want to learn more about it . . . Right which I understand like at [local public college] something like that would probably offer that because it's a longer course. (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 220-227)

He understands that the program needs to be condensed to be taught in a year, but that “it’s almost like a tease. You just want to learn so much more about it, right” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 346-347). The implications of this are serious for David. He worries because,

I’ve known people who have gone to private career colleges — not [this PCC], but other ones — and they said they haven’t been able to find a job in the field that they’ve studied because they’ve — they don’t have proper certificates or they didn’t have proper training or, so that’s always a worry, right. (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 232-236)

There is a fear that shorter classes inevitably means less depth of content, which, in turn, leads to the perception of PCC diplomas as less credible. For David, the consequence is most impactful when it comes to finding a job.

Sydney shared similar criticisms that “some of the courses are too short” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, 462-463). She wants to “elaborate on a lot of things” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, line 467) instead of “summarizing a course, trying to give us the main points about what we need to know specifically” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 468-469). Despite wanting more depth of content, she prefers the PCC model of having one course at a time: she finds it to be “an interesting way of like structuring it” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 723-724) that is “good cause I don’t have to remember a lot of things at once” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 738). However, because courses are so condensed and short, “It’s also harder because I work most nights and then I don’t get a lot of sleep cause I’m studying” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 738-739).

Blair does not differentiate PCCs from public institutions based on the nature of course depth or length, but she does compare their schedules. When I asked her what she wished was different about being a student at the PCC, she answered with a laugh:

Time in the afternoon maybe. Courses in the morning or afternoon. But I mean you don't get that choice even in [local public college] or [local university]. It's whatever time it is.

(E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 1585-1588)

Blair believes there to be little choice in class times at any postsecondary institution; however, what Blair dislikes is unique to PCCs in that programs run at the same time from Monday to Friday, either in the mornings, afternoons, or evenings. For David, this was easier to schedule around. However, Blair finds herself growing tired of her program's morning classes, even though when she first started she was "glad that it's, like the hours that they have here. I like them in the morning" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 484-485).

In terms of depth of content, Blair found the program to be difficult. She did not wish that subjects would go more in depth. Instead, she talks about how difficult it was to keep up with having two simultaneous courses that are taught in a condensed nature: "It's stressful. Lawyers have seven years to learn this crap, we've got a year. Well part of it anyway, but still" (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 256-257). Part of her stress comes from the fact that students spend half the week learning one course, and the other half another course. It is a requirement as set by the Law Society of Upper Canada for two courses to be taught concurrently throughout the program.

George, conversely, wishes there was more depth to the courses but in a different way. He often finds assignments to not be broad enough in scope, causing him to often do more work than is required because he feels that the assignments are not representative of what he would have to do in the workforce. When George is asked "to do three forms," he does "the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth forms and present a whole package, even though I'm only getting marked on the three of them" (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 634-636). George fears that he is not being asked to do enough and that "we're not given everything that we need to do to be able to do the

job” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 669). He compares this to his previous experiences as a paramedic student at a public institution where “we had every piece of equipment you could find in that ambulance, and we got to play with it, we got to use it, we got to learn how to use it, and we don’t have that at [the PCC], and I don’t know if it’s a cost thing or if it’s a time constraint thing” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 689-692). George takes this to mean that the PCC does not care as much as the public college about going in depth into the tasks required in the workforce.

Size Matters

Consistent with the aforementioned studies, class size mattered to participants, and was a key difference between PCCs and public institutions. Recall how Mary chose the PCC because she imagined she would have far smaller classes than she imagined in a university. David too “likes the small class sizes” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 162) of around 17 or 18 because when “you wanted something put into different words, or you’re having difficulty understanding, it’s easier to approach the instructor versus I imagine like in university or wherever you got 2-300 people in a lecture room” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 170-173). He imagines learning in a lecture hall to be less suitable to his needs because “in a lecture hall when you have 100 students listening, taking notes, [pause] there isn’t as much time to [pause] have group discussions or communicate with the teacher, have your own views or opinions or questions answered, right” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 822-825). He believes that “in a smaller setting of private career colleges you’re able to identify and get those questions answered” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 829-830), whereas in university “you’re not really learning and you may be memorizing it” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 832-833). David’s conceptualization of public versus private postsecondary education influenced his choice since he believed that a larger class would hinder his ability to actively learn and discuss course content.

Campus size was important for Blair and George as well, but in other ways. For Blair, the smaller size of the PCC led to a “more personal” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, line 1793) experience when contrasted with public institutions that are “aren’t as personal because it’s so big and they got a lot more students” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 1793-1794). She enjoyed knowing most of the teachers, administrative staff, and even some other students from other programs at the PCC. Blair attributes the fact that she knows so many people on a first name basis to the small size of the campus. She enjoys this community; it allows her to fill a need for the “social part” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 1604) that she misses from being a student in elementary and high school.

Conversely, George saw the size of the campus as a disadvantage against public institutions. He argued that facilities set the tone for student perceptions of quality:

I was thinking about this the other day. You’re right off the bat from what we perceive is a college. You’re behind the eight ball already, because it’s not a traditional brick and mortar place. I was at [local public college] yesterday and that reminded me of a higher learning, and it wasn’t anything, I’m probably getting just as good an education as I would at [local public college], but that perception is a lot of it. (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 2764-2768)

He continues,

I don’t necessarily think that it’s right because you can’t judge a book by its cover, but I think a lot of times people do, and especially in northern Ontario, they have this pre-conceived notion of this is a university, this is a college, and this is something else. (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 2787-2790)

These differences in campus size had a big impact on George’s perception of PCC quality. He argues that “big sprawling places with many different buildings, a nice piece of property” (F1-3,

June 02, 2017, lines 2772-2773) feel more reputable than the “more condensed” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 2773) grounds of PCCs.

Instructor Quality and Experience

Like in Fuller and Macfadyen’s (2012) study, participants differentiated PCC instructors from those at public colleges and universities on the basis of what they perceived to be *real life* experience. Sydney likes most about her program that “all my teachers have worked in the field in some way, so whether it be in like detox or they were an actual counsellor” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 358-359). The benefit of this is that “they can give you like an inside, it’s not just them talking about things they haven’t done. . . . So it can give you like stories of how they encountered, or like who they encountered and how they dealt with it and stuff” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 358-365). Sydney values this experience, and believes her instructors have more to offer her than someone who knows the subjects on a theoretical level only.

David too puts value in having instructors with “experience in the field” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 643), believing that “it’s more important to have somebody that’s relevant to what you’re learning than to somebody that’s not and that has teaching experience” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 656-657). David prefers work experience even to someone who “may have taught for twenty years but they taught math, right” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 651-652).

George echoed David’s comments when he argued that “having actual paralegals teaching us the program is better than you know just picking somebody up off the street” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1160-1161). George contrasts this with what he imagines he would get at a public university where “you get a professor that never actually did it, but they know about it. They’re teaching you but it doesn’t mean the same as somebody that actually has done it or *is* doing it” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2524-2526). George is happy to have professionals

teaching him rather than the academes he imagines would teach at public institutions who, in his eyes, would inevitably lack job experience.

While most participants were happy to have instructors with relevant work experience, they also noted some downsides. For example, at times, having instructors with relevant working experience caused staffing issues that impacted participants' experiences. Sydney, David, George, and Blair spoke about how their classes had suffered as a result of difficulty finding replacement instructors when one would leave unexpectedly. David imagined that this had to do with the majority of qualified staff members choosing to work in their fields of study instead of teaching. George surmised that the PCC cannot "afford to pay them because they would be, their time would be worth so much more compared to what they could make in the private sector" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 2592-2593).

Though George explains that the staffing issues ultimately are resolved in a manner that results in "more of a balance overall effect" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 2311), the instability and lack of teaching experience of the new hire leads him to compare PCCs to public institutions in a telling way:

[New instructor is] asking us about how things are done cause she wants to make sure that they're done right and stuff and I just keep reassuring her that everything's going good, you're doing good, don't stop [laughter]. . . . It's, it's my nature, but at the same time like I don't know if they do that at [Public College 1]. It's okay, Miss, don't cry.

You know, the students bolstering, making sure that their teacher's okay [laughter]. (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 3025-3039)

George imagines this would only happen at a PCC and that he would never be put in a position to have to build up the confidence of an instructor at a public institution. It seems that though

George sees value in having instructors with work experience, that public schools have instructors with teaching experience makes George imagine differences in confidence that he would never have to deal with at a public institution.

David feels that PCC students come to rely too heavily on having only one instructor, something that George and Sydney demonstrate when they worry that new instructors will put their marks in jeopardy because of unknown marking styles. David contrasts this from public colleges where you often “have different instructors for different courses, right. . . . So, you’re constantly having to deal with that change, so this might actually improve the quality of learning versus hindering it like what everyone [in his class] thinks it might actually do” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 113-114). David accepts change, arguing that with only one instructor “you’re not getting a very diverse view of different people like supervisors, bosses, managers” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 128-129), something he believes may set PCC graduates up for failure in the workforce.

Let’s Talk Stigma

As the portraits demonstrated, George most echoes sentiments I encountered in the literature shared in Chapter Two towards PCCs. He came to the study with a long history of “preconceived notions . . . based on ambulance” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 758-762) that the PCC’s paramedics were not as good as those who graduated from public colleges. He explains that “back then it was, they could have had a scarlet letter on them” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 787). Though George tells me that this prejudice was not based on any real deficiency, he nevertheless internalized the belief that PCC graduates were less capable. Near the midway point in his program, he believed that students go to PCCs as “kind of their last ditch” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 3264) because of what he feels are non-existent admissions criteria: “It sometimes

appears like a cash grab because anyone can apply to [the PCC]” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1509-1511). His perspective offers another take on Malatest and Associate’s (2008) finding that 72% of their respondents stated that their PCC was their first choice for postsecondary education, and Larocque’s (2015) smaller study that showed that 75% of respondents indicated their PCC was their first choice. George, however, feels that if you cannot get into a public institution that “you can pony up the dollars and you can go to [the PCC] . . . whether or not that’s the right fit for you” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 1513; 1525-1526). He believes that anyone who can afford to attend the PCC is admitted, a criticism I have seen in existing literature as well (see Chapter Two). When he finds his class is divided into “two groups of people: the ones that are doing well and the ones that aren’t” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1490-1491), he takes this as proof of the PCC’s shady admissions procedures.

Once in the program, George feels his preconceived feelings about PCC are confirmed by how the PCC handles things like textbooks and replacing classroom equipment: “That’s what cheapens the, that puts the private in, you know that puts the dollar value in on, . . . cause a lot of people think that private colleges are money, like that’s the first thing they think of and then they nickel and dime you for things like books” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 1838-1844). George is referring to a particular occasion when students purchased the third edition of a textbook from the front office, only to have it taken back and replaced with an older second edition. George’s instructor explains to the class “that basically the two books are the same” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 868), but George is nevertheless frustrated because “you want the biggest and best and the newest of texts and it seems like [the PCC] is just getting rid of old stuff” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 1813). George takes this to mean the PCC cares more about not losing money on old editions than they do about students. Similarly, he is upset when a projector bulb is not quickly

replaced because he sees it as proof of “a problem with the administration” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 2029) in that they will not spend money to improve student experiences. He concludes, “The money end outweighs the student end” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 2038).

At other times, George is happy to share how much he is learning at the PCC, and to rationalize that money is a reality of operating a school. He knows that “there has to be money” (F1-3, June 02, lines 2677-2678) and that “everyone keeps thinking about how much money private colleges are, but that’s because you don’t have the money of the government subsidizing you” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 3291-3293). However, long-held negative opinions of PCCs ultimately interfere with his desire to believe in his PCC education, at least prior to graduation. For example, recall from his portrait that he doubts if his marks are only high because he is studying at a PCC, or that he worries about his reputation after graduation because people from the best law firm in his city “don’t like [the PCC] people” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 558). George is afraid that his PCC education will hurt his credibility. I was happy to find out that he eventually is placed in a legal office that is “very [PCC] friendly” (Personal Communication, August 04, 2017), and who come to offer him a position of employment, which he accepts. I wondered if this perhaps helped to change his opinion and to give him more confidence. Certainly, he says, “I think I made the right choice 97 overall average” (Personal Communication, August 04, 2017).

David’s classmates were similarly impacted by their notions of a PCC:

Oh there is that stigma at the school, like a lot of people go about it, they don’t like something that happens and that’s one of the first things they hear, “Well they’re making so much money off me and there’s this many students in the classrooms and they can’t

even do this.” And it’s like, right so again just that judgement and that stigma about well it’s just for profit. (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 1118-1124)

In contrast to George, David feels that the stigma exists independently of what is happening at the PCC. When things happen that students do not like, the stigma gets called into play as a reason for why things should be better. There seems to be a shared belief amongst many PCC students that their money should be more directly allocated to their individual satisfaction than at public colleges, at least in George’s and David’s classes. David adds:

I think that’s part of the stigma around career colleges is that they’re just in it for the money. They want your money, they want to get paid, but you’re telling me that [public colleges and universities] are any different? Right. It’s a company that is there to make a profit. (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1618-1637)

David is aware of the need of all educational institutions to make enough money to continue operating, and feels that a great part of the stigma stems from what he perceives to be a misunderstanding of the way postsecondary institutions work in Ontario.

David is nevertheless impacted by conversations about the reputation of PCCs. Despite the optimism David displayed during our first interview, he came to the second visibly less enthusiastic. He explained, “The excitement level of being at school has probably dropped a bit” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 65). David was feeling tension between being happy to be on the path towards a goal that was important to him, and concern over whether his PCC education would be enough for him to realize that goal: “It’s just part of the fear I have with going to a career college because there’s a stigma that it’s, that you’re not going to have the, the proper qualifications or you’re not going to be able to get a job in the field” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1098-1100). He is worried over hearing that “with the addiction and mental health, a lot of

places want you to have a Bachelor's or a Master's" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1107-1107). As a result, David is "contemplating going to [local university] directly out of this course" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1118-1119) because of doubts that his chosen path will enable him to achieve his goals. He is not sure what he would take in university, only that he "would have to look and see what courses are offered" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 1155-1156). On the one hand, I saw more education as fitting David's very academic identity and his desire for lifelong learning. On the other, however, I worried that his goals were influenced by what he had "been hearing the last couple of months" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 1111) about how employers hire only those with Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

David regrets existing attitudes toward PCC credentials. He wishes employers would place more value on individual skills rather than where their credential comes from:

You can learn all the theory in the world, a person can have honour roll at a university and not be able to apply a single thing of that in the real world, right whereas somebody that was barely passing the class can outperform them in the real world any day right so it's, it's a matter of [pause] each individual person right. Employers should be looking at that. (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 2023-2027)

I see David's opinion on this to be reflective of the credentialism apparent in Ontario at the moment. David sees a credential as failing to demonstrate key skills and attitudes that lead to more capable employees, like work ethic and the ability to apply what you are learning to something practical. I could see him struggling with the fact that, ultimately, credentials do not reflect a person's capabilities, yet without them one is severely disadvantaged, at least in the labour market. Ultimately, the realities of having to find work from employers who do not believe in PCC credentials poses a real obstacle for him that impacts the goals he sets.

David and George's references to the stigma were not the only time this topic surfaced. Sydney, for example, was faced with multiple negative opinions about her choice to attend a PCC. Her grandma is "very old-fashioned and stuff so she would have rather me come to [the local university]" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1014-1015). Others in her life do not even know what a PCC is when she tells them. She finds herself often answering the question, "What's that?" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1157), or "What the heck is that?" (C1-3, March 28, 2017, line 1192). One friend even asked her, "Wait, if it's a private college, do you have to wear a uniform or can you wear normal clothes?" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1162-1163). Others in her life, like "some of my family and some of my friends . . . don't think that it's a good place to be type of thing cause it's not like a, like a popular postsecondary place, right?" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1334-1336). One friend even goes as far as telling her she "should not have chose that school cause it's not a real school" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1350). Sydney responded to him, "I'm still learning!" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1354), but I could see that these opinions were planting seeds of doubt in her mind. She is forced to explain to friends on more than one occasion that "it's a real school" (C1-3, March 28, 2017, line 1193). When I asked her how these opinions made her feel, Sydney shared that the criticisms came at a time when she was overwhelmed with the program and was considering leaving. Consequently, these opinions were "kind of pushing me more towards leaving" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1360). However, her mom forces Sydney to think about, "Well are you going to choose to leave just because of what your friend said or are you going to leave because of what you like personally feel and stuff? And so she got me thinking and I was like, You're right" (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1364-1366). In the end, Sydney chooses to stay. Nevertheless, I could see her grappling with what it

means to attend a school that others consider to be less “popular” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1336) or “not a real school” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1350).

Blair did not speak about the stigma as overtly as the previous participants; however, the topic did surface in small ways. For example, when Blair writes the mature student entrance test, she doubts her success instead of feeling proud for passing: “I was surprised how easy that was. I don’t know if that’s just cause it’s private career college or what, but it was so easy” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 821-822). Blair also had to contend with people “telling me no don’t do it. You’re wasting your money, you’re wasting your time” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 1703-1704). She has to work to “stick to it and just put it on the back burner what they’re saying, cause it’s constantly like that” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 1705-1706).

Mary and Shayna do not speak about the stigma at all, and I got the sense that neither questioned the quality of the school nor put much stock in the opinions of others in this regard. Instead, Shayna was proud of what she had achieved and did not question the quality of the education she was getting, at least in our interviews. Mary was not a student for long enough to ascertain how she would have felt later in the program; however, she similarly did not speak about doubting the quality of the PCC or worrying about what others would think of her as a result. Both indicated that being in school was an achievement.

For the others, I could see that the stigma was negatively impacting their experiences, albeit to different degrees. Like participants in Atkins and Flint’s (2015) study on vocational education in England, George, David, Sydney, and, to a much lesser degree, Blair are aware that PCC education still holds lower esteem in Ontario, leading at least David, Sydney, and George to fear that they might receive less advantage than students who attend forms of education that are perceived to be more academic. Blair and George doubted their success at times, having

internalized the idea that PCCs are easier because they are inevitably lower quality education. I reflected on the reality that PCC students in Ontario are still often precluded from benefits that students from public institutions receive (e.g., mobility through credit transfers, credential recognition, equal access to funding opportunities [OACC, 2013, para. 8]), and regretted that these participants might actually be held back by popular beliefs of PCCs as lower education.

Experiencing the PCC

In beginning this inquiry, I was curious about how participants would speak about their experiences at the PCC, as well as what impact those experiences would have on their sense of self as knowers. I designed the bulk of the interview questions to probe into this topic at three separate points in their programs (see Appendix A). As such, the data was extensive. As I grappled with how to present this data in a meaningful way, I found it particularly illuminating to explore the data with the goal of answering, how do these participants define success, and to what extent did the learning environment enable them to meet those particular versions of success? In trying to answer these questions, I discovered important insights for how we offer PCC education, as well as what improvements might most positively impact student experience.

Timing of the Interviews

Before I explore participant conceptions of success, it is worth noting that an interesting pattern emerged from my analysis of participants' experiences at the PCC relative to what stage of the program participants were in at the time of the interviews. I met with participants within the first two to four months of their program, the mid-way point, and one to four months prior to their graduation dates. Not only were participants' attitudes significantly altered by what stage they were at in their programs at the time of our interviews, but they all followed a similar pattern. I do not pretend that all reactions were exactly the same. However, all participants began

their first interview mostly eager to be pursuing education, even if they had some negative opinions about the PCC. By the second interview, spirits were low and students were tired and overwhelmed, with some even debating if they should or could finish their programs. By the last interview, I found participants upbeat and more positive again, all citing an increase in self-esteem or confidence in some form as a result of their time there.

For example, David went from being “happy with my decision” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 859) because “it’s very structured, so it’s easy to schedule around” (A1-1, October 6, 2016, line 859) at the beginning of his program, to sharing by the mid-way point that “the excitement level of being at school has probably dropped a bit” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 65). He compares, “Whereas as much as you were eager to go to school before, now it’s like, well what’s going to happen next, right?” (A1-1, January 10, 2017, lines 82-83). By the third interview, he was positive again about this time at the PCC:

Going to school here like at a private career college has really motivated me, so again they’ve accommodated my schedule as much as they could. . . . Right, so it’s definitely increased that spark of wanting to grow and learn versus like maybe not. It wouldn’t have encouraged it as much I don’t think in a different college. (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 288-290; 293-295)

Sydney optimistically shared during our first interview that being at the PCC had “given me like a lot of information of techniques and stuff to help me. So, I feel like I’m expecting it to keep going like that and probably not like get boring or like die off” (C1-1, November 03, 2016, lines 922-927). By the mid-way point in her program, she is “not as big of a fan of it as I was in the beginning” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 11-13) because of “the dynamics of the group” (C1-2, January 23, 2017 line 162). Sydney is so stressed at this stage that she considers leaving

her program early. She does not, however, and by the final interview, she happily explained that “I like it a lot more. I think cause I really liked it in the beginning and then I went kind of down to, I don’t know if I like this place anymore [laughter], but I’m back up [laughter]” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 420-421).

Shayna enters her program feeling happy to be in class with a supportive group of women she feels “are there to help each other out. Like even myself compared to going to high school and whatever else, I am like just floored by how great this class is” (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 873-880). Having such a wonderful class keeps Shayna optimistic about her time at the PCC. By the mid-way point, however, Shayna is so stressed that “some days I just don’t feel like doing anything or going anywhere or whatever, just wanting to give up kind of thing because of how stressed out I feel” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 923-929). Despite her strong desire to give in to the stress, she continues to attend her program. By our final interview, just three weeks prior to her graduation, Shayna happily shared with me that,

After being alone for one year with my kids, and going to school every day, I guess I just didn’t realize how actually, like people used to always tell me that I was so strong and whatever else. I never knew what the meaning was to that was. (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 602-604).

Shayna’s perseverance enables her to acknowledge for the first time in her life, despite the many personal obstacles she had already previously overcome, that she is strong and can achieve what she sets out to achieve.

George is very happy when he first begins his program, telling me that he enjoys having an instructor who is “trying to help us and motivate us” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1427-1428) and who “gives us a lot of practical experience. You can kind of put together a thought in

your head that you can actually do it because she's doing it, so that helps." (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1431-1432). By the mid-way point in his program, George is disillusioned with the school and with his instructor's failure to follow through on a promise he feels she made to him and his class:

[Our instructor] basically said don't worry, I'll take care of it, we'll figure out a time in class and we'll make sure that we do it right and everything else, and then she said afterwards she apologized for it but . . . said it's not in my job description to tell you about it anyway. And I'm thinking yeah it is if you offered up to tell us when to do it. . . . that's kind of dropping the ball. So, the last couple of weeks have been kind of soul-searching. (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 215-227)

George's disappointment over what he sees as a loss of trust is so great that he finds himself "soul-searching" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 227) and wondering if he made the right decision. By the final interview, however, George, like the other participants, is happy to have stayed in his program and be near the end. He is encouraged again when a new cohort of students enter the program, making him feeling "a sense of accomplishment because there's now people underneath me and I'm that much further. It reinforces the fact that I'm almost done" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 2460-2462).

Blair, too, followed this pattern. She entered her program feeling "always happy I find lately, so I'm always getting giddy" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, lines 2127-2134), so much so that her friends and family start to notice and comment on her enthusiasm. By the mid-way point in her program, her enthusiasm wanes and she "wanted to quit . . . I was just tired and stressed out and work and home and everything else, I was just trying to keep up and I couldn't" (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 20-39). Blair faces academic obstacles in her program, heightening her stress

even further. With a laugh, Blair joked at the end of our second interview, “I should still be here by the next interview I’m hoping” (April 11, 2017, lines 1361-1362) in reference to her fear that she might so-called *fail* other courses. Blair was, however, still in her program by the third interview, telling me with a big smile on her face and laughter in her voice that,

[My teacher was] saying she can’t wait for grad to see us all grad, and I just told her I said I don’t get excited when you talk about that cause I don’t see it, right. And she’s like, Oh it’s going to happen, Blair, it’s going to happen. Now well I know the next few courses are too easy, so I’m like, Yeah it’s going to happen [laughter]. (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 612-616)

Certainly, my sample size is very small, and this pattern could be mere coincidence. However, it certainly suggests that there could be important differences in student attitudes and responses depending on what stage of a program they are in. It at the very least supports the need to take into account the contextual details under which an interview or data collection occurs, something that could have implications for government collection of PCC KPIs, which happens to coincide with the very month that graduates are expected to begin paying back their student loans (Martin & MacLaine, 2016). Furthermore, this pattern could be important when examining the increased confidence of participants later in the chapter, and could have important implications for how PCC education is offered.

Imagining and Defining Success

For participants, school was intimately tied to success, even if success was difficult to explicitly define. Sydney, particularly, believes success to be tied to how much education one has. She explains, “My grandmother drilled this into my head” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 993) that “if I don’t continue my schooling, then I won’t be very successful and that stresses me

out because I need to be successful” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 997-998). Sydney seems to define success in terms of her future career. She will be successful if she can “do the best I can with my job” (C1-1, November 03, 2016, line 274) and become a high-ranking counsellor who is “able to handle all different groups” (C1-1, November 03, 2016, line 280). Education is key in achieving that goal because “the better I’ll be prepared and everything for life [laughter]” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1007-1008). I could understand why, then, Sydney chose to take a one year program at the PCC instead of taking a year off like she initially had wanted.

David also ties education to success, something he learned a bit late for his liking. Recall how he feels his high school instructors falsely led him to believe that “as long as you have your grade 12, you could pretty much be comfortable, do anything you wanted to, and be successful” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 76-78). His version of success is to have as few limitations as possible, and to be able to choose a profession that will fulfill him rather than the jobs he was forced for the last decade to take out of necessity. Success, then, at the very least is being free from having to take jobs for financial security over personal satisfaction.

For George, above all else, success is tied to feeling proud of what he does for a living. Of course, he lists “financial security” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 1446) as another marker of success, but most important to him is to “actually do something that I’ll be proud of” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 3684-3685). This provides one explanation for why George felt so fulfilled when he was a paramedic versus a truck driver. He considered his years after being a paramedic as a period of time that caused him to question “what you did wrong in your life to get you to the level you’re at” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1602-1603). Going back to school to become a paralegal is tied to his idea that being successful means being part of an “extra higher profession.

You're not quite a lawyer, but you're not quite a, you know, but it's an elite, and I miss that" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 1453-1455).

Blair views success as career and financial stability more than anything else. Success would mean finding "a stable career" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 388) that would allow her to not "have to live paycheque to paycheque" (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 402). Not living paycheque to paycheque would also mean she would be able to have her children with her more often, something she has long wished for. Having a postsecondary education makes Blair feel her goal is more possible because she would then have the professional skills to be able to more easily find work and gain financial stability. Like David, Blair also sees a high school diploma as not being enough to be successful, causing her to abandon her previous attempts at academic upgrading at the local public college in favour of taking a postsecondary diploma instead.

Blair also conceptualizes success in terms of personal goals, more particularly, being able to finish something she starts. She told me that getting an education means,

A lot actually, just cause I've not accomplished much for, like I never graduated high school. I've always wanted to so this is just like, I don't know. I look at my family and a lot of people on my dad's side are all non-educated. None of them are, have graduated college or high school or anything. Even my mum's side, I think only one did. My mum did eventually, like I think around my age maybe. . . . So it's nice to actually finally just say I've done something, you know? (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 2344-2352)

It would seem that graduating, in and of itself, is a form of success for Blair. It proves to her and her family that she can do something she sets out to do.

More than for any other participant, success is about more than a job for Shayna. Initially, she defines success as achieving "some kind of security for the future as well, knowing that

when I'm done I will secure, probably secure a good, a good job, or even a business, and I'd be set for life basically for me and my children" (D1-1, November 17, 2017, lines 897-899). By the final interview, however, success means having accomplished a goal she set for herself, in the face of difficult challenges, as well as having developed the skills to help her family through an unexpected crisis.

How do we Learn? The Infamous Theory/Practice Divide

Because of the feminist epistemology literature I share in Chapter Three that seeks to challenge binary thinking, discussions about the theory/practice binary can be contentious. How I represent participant preferences in this regard can open up the doors for further criticism like Wheelehan's (2015) argument that vocational programs sacrifice theory at the expense of practical, work-focused education. Furthermore, it runs the risk of falsely representing participants as capable only of learning by doing (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016). What this study demonstrates, instead, is that this binary is not as neatly divided as may be suspected, with participant definitions of hands on or practical learning varying greatly from one to the other, some completely outside of what I would myself define as practical. Despite differences in what hands on means, how students were expected to learn in their programs significantly impacted how successful participants felt they could be. More specifically, all aside from Blair and George felt that the practical nature of the program as they defined it was contributing to their success.

For example, David finds learning at the PCC to be similar to "professional training" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 964) he has had. He thinks this to be "an easier way of learning" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 974-975) for most people because it is "really applied and it's really [pause] to the point" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 983) versus the approach of a university that "is more about theory" (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 982-983). David is critical

of theoretical approaches because “there’s so many university students that can’t find jobs because they don’t have any applied knowledge. Like they have all this theory behind them, but they can’t, they don’t have any experience or applied knowledge to that skill set” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 987-990). PCCs, on the other hand, are,

Very much job-oriented versus theory and I think that’s, especially, that’s the whole point of a career college is, is to get into a career. So, to, to apply it that way, the same way that organizations or companies would train you . . . it’s just fostering success. (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 998-1006)

One of the reasons David feels his education is so practical is that it mirrors workplace learning where the goal is to be able to *apply* learning towards practical tasks. Importantly, this does not suggest that theory has no place within learning, but that the focus should be on learning how to apply the theory in meaningful ways.

When I asked David to elaborate on what they do in class that is hands on, he contrasts it with previous school experiences when he was asked to learn by “reading through a textbook or giving, giving me a lecture” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, line 843). At the PCC, class activities include lectures, student presentations, class time for assignments, TEDtalks videos, “a lot of group work” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 698) and “mock sessions, like for therapy or counselling” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 702). Most of all, he enjoys learning through,

hands on experience, or the discussion, or like actively engaging your mind to, to problem solve or figure out the problems on your own, or guided discovery where you may ask a question, and slowly people are discussing it and developing and then they come to the solution at the end of it, right. . . rather than just being told this is how it is and this is how you get there, right. (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 844-851)

David defines hands-on learning as active engagement with the content rather than listening to a lecture or reading a textbook. He enjoys discussing solutions to problems with his classmates, something I found reminiscent of problem-based learning. He feels he is gaining the most “knowledge” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, line 635) through “the practical, like the applying, the role playing” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 638-639).

Mary too sees practical learning as being able to actively engage with content. She considers student presentations to be hands-on because “they cover a lot of stuff and that way you get to do things on your computer and you learn” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 547-548). She also adds about PowerPoint presentations that, “I like doing hands on stuff like that because, like I said, that’s how I learn faster” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 759). For Mary, this feels hands-on “because you’re looking up the research on the computer and you make notes . . . and that’s how I remember is by writing it out” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 590-593). Mary seems to want to be active in her learning, to do something instead of passively reading and listening. Her difficulty with reading caused me to consider this within the context of Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1970/1990) discussions of linguistic capital and how some students are seriously disadvantaged by a lack of it. I do not find it surprising that Mary felt she could not learn by reading when she explains, “The way those textbooks are written too, it’s not easy language” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 690). Not having a dictionary at home, she has to jot down words she does not understand and go in early to school to use the online dictionary, making her learning difficult.

Sydney is “glad I went to [the PCC] because it’s a different learning experience” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 1023) with lots of class discussions. Listening is at the opposite end of hands-on for Sydney. She enjoys taking notes and reworking material in her own way because it

feels hands on, and, thus, easier to learn. She dislikes being expected to learn by “just hearing the theory of something and not being able to put a practical to it” (C1-1, November 03, 2016, lines 1055-1056). Hands on seems to be learning what is “applicable to what we’re going to be doing and how I can use some of the techniques and everything that they’re teaching us” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 1433-1434). Sydney has recorded mock sessions, client interviews, and silent counselling sessions. She explained that for some recorded sessions, students have to “respond” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 498) and “critique ourselves” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 499) for a grade. They also “do a lot of group work” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 563). She importantly talks about theory as an important part of her learning, but that she needs to practically apply it in order to feel she is learning.

Shayna is relieved to find she is able to learn through “the hands on experience, cause I work, I work a lot better when it comes to seeing and doing than it is to reading and writing” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 456-457). Undeniably, Shayna’s is the most hands on or practical program of the six participants in the traditional sense of hands on (i.e., kinesthetic). Her Esthetics program has a significant practical component, both in skills labs where students are taught practical application of theoretical concepts learned in didactic classes, and in a clinic where students perform services practiced in the skills lab on actual clients.

Shayna’s view of hands-on learning is most traditional in that it is actually doing the tasks she will do when working, and being taught skills by demonstration and example rather than through lectures only. She explains,

I like the fact that they will choose one of the students to demo on and actually show us how to properly do things. So you’re seeing it right in front of you instead of looking at

pictures in a book and trying to figure out okay how does this hand look and how did they move this way or that way [laughter]. (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 665-669)

I asked Shayna if this was similar or different to her previous experiences with learning, to which she replied:

Very different because I mean previous school I've gone to with things like that you'd have to look at pictures or they would be telling you how to do this or how to do that and kind of like using their hands in the air, and you're just looking at them like I don't know what the hell you're talking about [laughter]. (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 677-680)

Shayna's comment about not knowing "what the hell" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 680) her instructors were talking about led me to wonder if this could have played a role in her decision to leave high school early. She seems to have felt alienated by the way she was expected to learn, so much so that I compare her experience to the female student in Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) *Women's Ways of Knowing* who is given a demonstration by a professor on the first day of an introductory science course to show the class that knowledge is "accessible only through scientific method and scientific instruments" (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 191). The student shared, "I remember feeling small and scared . . . and I did the only thing I could do. I dropped the course that afternoon, and I haven't gone near science since" (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p.191). Belenky et al. (1986/1997) argue that her professor "was taking away her only tool for knowing and providing her with no substitute" (p.191).

Shayna contrasted this with other postsecondary institutions that she imagined would rely heavily on theory: "I think [at the PCC] you get real life actual experience compared to other schools. Other schools is a lot of theory and book work, and you're not actually getting the experience" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 491-492). That her program enables her to gain

realistic experience gives Shayna the confidence to abandon her initial goal of doing an apprenticeship after graduation because “it’s not that scary feeling of going from a college or a university and then going into the workforce not knowing what to expect” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 888-889). Gaining this type of experience acted as a security net wherein Shayna could test her abilities with the support of her teachers and classmates.

Blair feels that her program is hands on, but, unlike the previous participants, prefers to learn in a more passive manner. When she first started her program, she was happy to be learning through what she felt were more academic tasks like how to “fill out the forms, do the paperwork on the computer” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 838), though what she struggles with most of all is writing. She dislikes that the program becomes increasingly more hands on, though, interestingly, what she defined as theoretical tasks (e.g., filling out forms, doing realistic paperwork on a computer) might be described by Sydney, David, and Mary as hands on. Blair describes hands on tasks as those consisting of role playing and “a lot more interaction” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 828-829). She provides examples of realistic scenarios students are asked to do in the classroom. Instead of just “filling out the forms” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 827-828) like in the beginning, they now also have to “stand up and plead the forms” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, line 828) and do mock trials and activities. Blair does not enjoy this as it makes for a higher stress learning environment where she has to take herself out of her comfort zone to perform in front of others.

In contrast, George describes his program as “strictly academic” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2944-2945). He contrasts it with his paramedic education where “I used to have labs” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2944-2945). Despite being *strictly academic*, George notes that his instructor “gives us a lot of practical experience” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 1431) that makes

him feel more confident he can be a paralegal one day, and that they are asked in class to do practical activities like “public speaking and the mock trials and things” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2959). Despite this, he is happy that his program is “more of a mental thing than a physical thing” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2945-2946). In this sense, I saw George as defining hands on as involving physical tasks rather than the practical application of theory or law. He does refer to the public speaking and mock trials as hands on; however, because the practical activities in his paralegal program require more of a mental exertion, he sees this as more academic.

Rather than supporting binary thinking, participant discussions of the theory/practice divide demonstrate, at least for Mary, Shayna, David, and Sydney, that they were happy to have opportunities to learn in ways that were different from their early school experiences. Though Wheelahan (2015) argues students are disadvantaged by practical programs because they are not taught how to access theoretical knowledge required to participate in societal and professional debates, these participants at least felt that it helped them to succeed when they might otherwise have not. It would seem, then, that if we are to discuss how education can become “a key way in which social inequality is mediated and reproduced” (Wheelahan, 2015, p. 3), then it is important to remember that the same is possible when students take highly theoretical programs that favour one dominant mode of learning that might leave some students feeling alienated or unable to succeed. Understanding how participants accessed knowledge at the PCC supports feminist epistemology literature that argues when multiple modes of accessing knowledge are accepted within an institution, more students will feel they have something to say that will be considered worthwhile. Consider, for example, how for the first time in her life, Blair says she does not feel she will be made to look stupid for asking questions in class; or, Shayna’s surprise that her instructors treat her with respect and do not insist that she learn only from reading and writing.

Indeed, all participants shared stories of alienation in one form or another in schools. I compared this to Riley and Rich's (2012) warning that how knowledge is evaluated and valued within schools can "systematically silence the voices of those whose knowledge is not represented within the assessment and the curriculum" (p. 106). It is important to be clear that I in no way argue that Shayna, David, Mary, and Sydney are "capable of learning only by doing" (p. 230), as Brockmann and Laurie (2016) warn researchers to avoid. Instead, I suggest, as Belenky et al. (1986/1997) argue that valuing multiple modes of learning in the classroom has provided learning experiences that were more validating and less oppressive.

Reframing the Binary: Let's get Professional

In exploring participant attitudes towards successful methods of learning, I found many participants spoke about the importance of their learning being in some way relevant to knowledge and skills they would require in the workforce. I have already demonstrated that David preferred his learning to mimic workplace training and for concepts he learns in class to be applicable in some useful way. I also wrote about how Shayna is happy to have a practical program that simulates the workplace because she feels she cannot learn if she is learning only from a book or listening to an instructor. Recall that George too wants his learning to mimic the workforce in realistic assignments (e.g., six forms instead of three). Furthermore, I noted that George was more and more professionally attired with each interview. "I'm playing the part and I'm trying to do this more and more" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 2508), he told me. George compares this to paramedic education that requires students to "wear their uniform every day" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2283-2284) and to "eat, drink, sleep paramedic" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2288), something he believes will make them "succeed as a paramedic because they're already thinking paramedic" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2288-2289). Believing professionalism

to be a key component to learning and succeeding, George adheres to the program's requirement that students come to class in "business casual" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2324) so that they are "dressed and ready to go to court" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2327) at any time. Sydney finds her program to provide realistic training, but wishes that she and her classmates would be required to practice professional behaviour by demonstrating attitudes required to work as addictions and mental health counsellors. Sydney regrets that the class does not behave more in line with professional practice. Unable to control how her classmates act, Sydney works at least on building her own professional skills in dealing with painful subjects raised in class, something that early in her program would cause her to "leave the room" (C1-3, March 28, 2017, line 434): "Now when she talks about things that kind of hit home for me, I try to sit through there and I try to not tune her out. . . because I can't really tune out when I'm with a client in the future" (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 435-440). Sydney sees her time in school as an opportunity to develop professional skills and behaviours she will need in the workforce, something that will make her more successful.

To Experience, To Know?

Given the critical feminist lens I adopted for this study, I took particular note of the importance participants gave to experience. Sydney, for example, initially fears she would not be as successful in her program as her peers because she lacks the "life experiences or experiences with school in the past" (C1-1, November 03, 2016, lines 143-144). She equates feeling less experienced with not "essentially knowing as much as them even though they started, some of them started the program *when* I did" (C1-1, November 03, 2016, lines 145-147). This fear also leads her initially to postpone pursuing a career after graduation until she can gain more life experience. By the second interview, however, Sydney realizes, "Oh Sydney, you do have a lot

of experiences and I think you will do okay” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 862-863). By the third interview, she accepts that she has relevant experience with children that will help her in the workforce, enough so that she even decides she will try to find employment after graduation and pursue a university degree at a later time. How Sydney thinks about her experience seems to impact the educational choices she makes.

George’s educational choices too are influenced by his experiences, but in a different way. He takes his program because he sees it as an opportunity for “all my past experiences kind of [to] come into one” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 126). His profound experiences not only lead him to go back to school to pursue this particular profession, but he feels they are also what makes him successful in the program: “I think I’m doing as well as I am in Paralegal because I have so many personal experiences” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 130-131). George believes that those experiences will help him to be a better paralegal because his firsthand experiences will give him empathy he can use to relate to clients: “I got so many of these experiences that I should be able to relate to just about anybody” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 4005-4006), something that he already experienced when a paramedic in that he was a better responder after having been in his own car accident and having his own baby. George puts a lot of stock in first-hand experience. It even leads him, at times, to think he has more knowledge than his lead instructor because “I’ve seen more than her. I’m older than she is. I’ve done more things” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 2408).

Mary similarly wanted to be able to use her lifetime of experience with abuse and pain towards some good. She thinks she will be a better counsellor because of “my experiences through life and stuff” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 77). Mary believes her bad experiences “can help people, women, men, that’s been through some of the life experiences I’ve been

through, and let them know that there is help out there for them of any kind that they need” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 488-490). She talks fondly about a guest presenter, and about how she was impressed that “he gave us his own experiences as examples” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 222-223). This made the learning more relevant for Mary. I saw this in a way as linking back to her own desire to use her own experiences for a purpose. When a classmate tells her that she is “a smart lady” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 623) for choosing her program based on “the experiences I’ve been through for life” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 622), she shares that it “made me feel good too because like when I went in there I didn’t know how people were going to treat me” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 623-624). Mary seems to feel validated that others can see that her life experiences justify her decision to pursue this particular career.

David also often calls on his past experience as meaningful in his life, particularly his professional experiences and his ability to use them to adapt to challenges and conflict at school. For example, David knows from the decade of work experience he accumulated after high school that “in any job you have to be able to deal with pressure and change, right. So, to me it was just like this is something you’re going to have to overcome in the work force, so what, what difference does it make in school or not?” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 106-108). Similarly, when his class is upset over suddenly having a new instructor, he likens it to his experience being evaluated by many people in his time working, something that enables him to focus on continuing to learn rather than on the stress of change. He also feels that he needs to experience parts of the profession in order to be successful: “Right, so the fact that you’re not just sitting at a desk, reading out of textbook, or off of a whiteboard, and you’re actually experiencing it, so, I think yeah material and [pause] experiences, and people. I think you need all those things to succeed” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 416-418).

Blair does not seem to value experience as much as the other participants. She says of her experience working in a legal office that it only helps “a little bit for some stuff” (E1-1, January 19, 2017, line 81). She similarly does not put much value in the experiences of her classmates. In fact, she sometimes resents when they bring experience into the classroom when she really wants to focus on what she is learning. On those days she says, “Not during that cause I’m trying to remember the exam review. You bring up personal experience and I’m like, what does this have to do with this part?” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 951-953). Blair reveals here that she does not see personal experiences as important to her learning; instead, she thinks it is more important to memorize legal concepts on which she will be tested. This is perhaps because Blair is worried about avoiding further course failures, which would result in her removal from the program. However, I see this as telling of what Blair might have implicitly been taught about what type of learning leads to academic success, something I argue eventually led to her distrusting experience as a valid source of knowledge.

In contrast, I have already demonstrated the great value Shayna places on experience. She feels her program has prepared her for her future goals by giving her “actual experience, like hands on experience, as to where I’m not going to be going into something not knowing what to expect, not knowing what to feel or not knowing what a client’s going to be like” (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 226-228). Without experience, Shayna doubts her ability to deal with the many variables that will arise in the workforce. Experiencing realistic work tasks in a safe school environment with instructors there to help makes her feel more confident.

I compare this reliance on experience to feminist epistemology studies that argue for a need to recognize multiple modes of inquiry and knowing. Belenky et al. (1986/1997) found that when experience is considered to be a valid form of knowing, some women felt they had

something worth saying in an academic setting (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). Aside from Blair, participants seem validated by being able to use their experience towards learning. I wonder if their valuing of experience might have influenced them to want to attend a PCC where they imagined the education, as I previously established, would mimic the workplace where experience too is valued. Recall the woman in *Women's Ways of Knowing* who felt encouraged to know “she could use her own firsthand experience as a source of truth” (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 191). I found many parallels between her experience and those of participants in this study.

Impacting Success: Relationships with Instructors and Classmates

Participants spoke often about the impact their instructors and classmates had on their attitudes and motivation to be in school, so much so that I noted how profound these relationships were on their journeys at the PCC.

Instructors. More than with anyone else, the relationships students had with their instructors impacted participant success. PCC students spend a significant amount of time with one main instructor, usually the program coordinator, with other instructors teaching only occasionally. Though participants felt differently about their relationships, the thread that seemed to weave them together was that all participants felt profoundly impacted by their instructors, so much so that, often, the instructor was synonymous with the PCC, and how the instructor acted in the classroom came to reflect how much the school values, or not, its students.

Shayna's relationship with her three main instructors is one that encourages her. What she enjoys most about her instructors is that “if you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, you can talk to them, you can explain to them how you're feeling and they will, you know, acknowledge that. They won't just ignore you and just kind of blow you off kind of thing” (D1-2, February 03,

2017, lines 582-584). That Shayna would think it was a possibility that her instructors might blow her off is suggestive of what her previous relationships with school officials might have been. Now, however, she is surprised to find her instructors treat her as an equal: “My interactions with my teachers is actually pretty great. [pause] There is no high or low kind of thing. It’s just like we’re both on middle ground. We get along great, we’re able to, you know, talk and joke” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 787-790). Later, she remarks:

Like with myself, I can sit there and talk with them and have an adult conversation and be like just two people walking in the park or whatever, but then when it comes to them being the instructor and me being the student, they still treat me as though I’m an adult but still as a student, but with respect. (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 498-501)

I wondered if this meant that Shayna assumed being a teacher means you do not have to treat students with respect. She is surprised to be treated so well, something that she says motivated her to continue: “It makes going to school easier” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 825), she told me. Ultimately, she sees her success at the school in large part due to their supporting relationship.

Blair similarly feels that having approachable and accessible instructors is instrumental in her success. As her portrait demonstrates, Blair feels she would not have finished her program had it not been for the support of her main instructor, and her encouragement by “constantly telling me, You’re doing so good and you know, you’re almost done. You’ve got a month to go” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 44-45). Like Shayna, Blair is surprised to find her instructors “don’t look down on you with any question you have. None of them are stupid for them. They don’t make you feel like you’re failing or whatever” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 1058-1060). Her

relationship with her instructors had a profound impact on the success she went on to attain in the program, being perhaps the first time she really had support from school authorities.

David too enjoys that “if I want to go up to the instructor at any point and talk to her — I am able to do so and there’s not a hundred other students wanting to talk to her” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, lines 804-805). However, he seems most impacted by a new instructor’s lack of classroom management skills. This new instructor, David shares, often allows classroom arguments to go on longer than they should, something he wishes his instructor would better manage by telling students who persist in arguments or irrelevant topics to “come see me afterwards, we’ll deal with this then” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 762-763). The impact of the new instructor’s methods of handling class conflict has a negative effect on his enthusiasm to be back at school. With a sigh, David mused that “whereas as much as you were eager to go to school before, now it’s like, well what’s going to happen next, right?” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 82-83). He adds, “The back thought in your head is, Is this course going to go smoothly or not or is there something that’s going to happen in the middle of it, or, right?” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 87-89). By our final interview, David gives up hoping the arguments will stop: “I don’t have time to, to stress about it really. It’s just like I said with being so busy right. You don’t have time to sit there and dwell over like is the class going to be like this tonight? You just go in expecting to learn and hopefully that’s the way it goes” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 233-235). I could see that David’s enthusiasm for the program was decreased significantly by outbursts and classroom dynamics he felt could have been better managed by his instructor.

Sydney is similarly most impacted by her instructor’s inability to manage disruptive tension between students. Her class being very opinionated, they do not respond well when a new instructor comes in to teach a two-week course. They felt strongly that “he basically didn’t

teach us what we were supposed to know. He more or less talked about himself the whole time” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 220). One of her classmates decided to “call him out on it” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 224), which resulted in the school “getting rid of him cause he wasn’t doing his job” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 229). Despite this resolution, the tension in the classroom remained when some students felt he was unfairly treated by the rest of the class. This precipitated a series of arguments during class discussions. I asked Sydney if this was being dealt with and she answered, “No. It’s more like if you have a problem you can go talk to someone in the office type thing” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 252). When her previous instructor had been there, “It was definitely more structured and everything cause if someone were to say have an outburst, she’d be like um excuse me that’s not appropriate, like you can leave and then you can come back when you calm down type of thing” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 269-272). The stress significantly impacted her experience. She even considers quitting the program.

On another level, Sydney also feels validated by her instructors when they understand her when she expects that others would not. She is happy that “someone actually understands what I’m trying to say” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 618). She is similarly pleased to find her instructors always willing to help by “staying with you after class” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, line 620) or “if you message them or email them or tell them like the day before they’ll show up early so that you can work with them, which I think is really nice cause it’s like that extra thing that they’re, they don’t need to do” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 626-628). Sydney is appeased by the fact that her instructors are always willing to spend extra time with students. I could not help but think back to the instructor she admired in high school who often would stay after class, whether students showed up or not, to help.

George's relationship with his instructors changes from interview to interview because of an incident that causes him to lose trust in his instructor. In the first interview, George was happy with his instructors, sharing that his lead instructor Karen works hard "to help us and motivate us" (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1427-1428). He is encouraged by her work experience and that she "gives us a lot of practical experience. You can kind of put together a thought in your head that you can actually do it because she's doing it, so that helps" (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 1431-1432). At this stage, George is happy to have an instructor who is an "actual paralegal" (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 1160). By the second interview, however, George is disappointed in Karen over what he sees to be a broken promise when she forgets to tell students to pre-register with the Law Society of Upper Canada, and they consequently get hit with a late fee. He is upset that they "all relied on Karen" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 185) and that "she apologized for it but . . . then she said it's not in my job description to tell you about it anyway. And I'm thinking yeah it is if you offered up to tell us when to do it" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 220-222). He is evidently so upset by Karen's failure to take ownership for the late fee that he sees the whole school as not caring about them: George talks about Karen's blunder as "one of the things I don't like about [the PCC]. It proved me right" (F1-2, March 10, 2017, line 155). Though George comes to like Karen again by the final interview, stating that "she really cares about us" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 2924), this loss of trust is something he returned to a few times, and seems to have had a lasting effect on his attitudes towards his time at the PCC.

It is difficult to know what influence Mary's instructors had on her overall experiences at the PCC because the second interview probed more deeply into participants' interactions with their instructors and she had already left her program by that time. However, Mary did have some opinions about her instructors: "The instructor is just awesome because she's been doing

this for years this person, and she is just a great teacher” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 117-118). She later adds that her instructor is approachable and more accessible because of the smaller class size: “The way that they teach is just amazing and with the smaller classes, the instructor has more time if we need one on one with her, you know” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 656-658).

That instructors respected and treated students as equals also surprised participants in Fuller and Macfadyen’s (2012) study. I found this to be relevant when thinking about the increased confidence participants cited near the end of their programs. I discuss confidence later in the chapter; however, I could not help attribute at least part of the increase in confidence to the close relationships participants were able to have with their instructors. Even David and George, who felt negatively influenced by their instructors at times, cited instances when they felt validated by them for recognizing their intellectual ability. I saw this as demonstrating how important relationships with instructors can be for student success and confidence. I compare these experiences to Noddings’ (2012; 2013) ethics of care wherein she warns that the degree to which students perceive their instructors to care, or not, can have serious impacts on their experiences.

Classmates. Because PCC students spend significant amounts of time with the same peers, how they perceive their classmates also impacted how motivated they felt to remain in the program. Sometimes, this impact was positive and classmates acted as a support network. Other times, the class caused drama that detracted from the learning environment. I have already discussed how worn down Sydney and David felt from the tension in their respective classrooms. Because of this tension, Sydney did not look to her classmates for support, apart from one classmate who encourages and supports her through periods of low self-esteem. Sydney feels

negatively impacted by her classmates: “I’m still enjoying how fast-paced it is and everything, and how it’s structured. It’s just the tension in the classroom just kind of throws you off a little bit” (C1-2, January 23, 2017, lines 293-294). She eventually even considers leaving the program because of this tension, disappointed that her classmates were not as mature as she expected they would be.

David does not contemplate leaving his program because of the tension, but he also laments that his classmates’ behaviours have “taken up class time” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, line 749). He explains, “That definitely had a negative impact and ongoing too. Like it’s, it’s stopped relatively now because just the time span, but for a long time like you would still hear about it, or people would bring it up and my, like myself, I paid a lot of money to go there and learn and that’s what I want to do” (A1-2, January 10, 2017, lines 785-788). As aforementioned, David is left to cope on his own and to hope to go to class to learn, but to be resigned to the fact that sometimes his classmates will get in the way of that. David raises an interesting point that along with the ability to have more in depth conversations in a smaller class, also comes the downside that certain students will choose to “argue between back and forth for twenty minutes on the same thing” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 176-177).

What David does enjoy about his interactions with his classmates is the ability to learn through peer teaching. David is initially not fond of the PCC’s continuous intake model (explained in Chapter Four) because it was difficult to be put into a class with more advanced students who were “throwing terminology and stuff that they’ve learned before into” (A1-1, October 06, 2016, line 877) discussions. On the one hand, David acknowledges that “you’re really pushed to learn [pause] not only the course material, but what they’re talking about, which is good, but at the same part it’s very hard to focus on the actual course itself” (A1-1, October

06, 2016, lines 878-880). By the third interview, however, David enjoyed “the constant rotation of new students coming into the class” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 303-304) because he found it to be yet another way to learn in a “hands on or applied” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 304-305) manner by teaching the newer students what you have already learned: “I almost find myself trying to help the newer students more if they don’t understand something or trying to really show them, . . . which again just helps me to learn better I think” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 308-313). David comes to see value in the opportunities created by the continuous intake model to learn through mentoring and peer-teaching. As an added benefit, his confidence is boosted when his new peers recognize how well he is doing in the program and accept him as a mentor: “Some of the other students, even newer students, are recognizing that I’m doing good, so it’s the recognition of the hard work and the dedication I’ve put into it kind of shows which is, I’m not used to so that’s good” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 314-316).

George has a conflicted relationship with his classmates that, at times, leaves him feeling motivated, and, at others, questioning how successful he will be. On the one hand, George is motivated by being the best in the class. He is very competitive with two other students, with whom he is “pretty well neck and neck” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, line 599). He is happy to have competition in this sense, saying, “Good competition sometimes keeps you honest, and keeps you motivated and wanting to do more” (F1-1, January 12, 2017, lines 607-608). By the second interview, however, George finds the class divided by their academic success, saying that “there’s people in the class that aren’t doing as well that aren’t, that nobody really wants to be stuck with [laughter]” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2189-2190). This is stressful for him because he fears his grades will be negatively impacted, and the upper half, including himself, “want to make sure that they’re on the winning team kind of thing” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2195-

2196). George begins to doubt whether his diploma will mean as much to him in the end if he gets the same credential as those classmates he does not respect. He dislikes being expected to help those students by sharing his notes. He wonders if “there’s a point where they appreciate it or is there a point where they’re expecting it” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 4055-4056).

On the other hand, George seems to crave a leadership role with his peers that does not materialize, causing him to respect them even less because he assumes that they erroneously “don’t think they need the help and support” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 1284). Instead, he finds joy in mentoring the new students, or “the kids” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 1422) as he calls them. He explains, “Being a senior person doesn’t mean as much if you have nobody underneath you, . . . you’ve moved up that ladder a little bit more and your seniority is bolstered because now there’s people underneath you” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 2454-2460). Moving up the ladder gives George “a sense of accomplishment because there’s now people underneath me and I’m that much further. It reinforces the fact that I’m almost done” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 2461-2463). Mentoring the newer students gives George a sense of his own accomplishment.

Conversely, in the short time she is a student, Mary feels supported by her group. In addition to helping her with technology and learning new things, as I mentioned in her portrait, Mary finds her classmates to be supportive in even more important ways:

This one girl, I had a problem and I went to her and I asked her advice and she was really good. She really helped. And they know when I’m going into depression, like they can tell, so they do something, they all I don’t know, they all say things different to me and it just sort of perks me up, because you know there’s people that are there that does really care and not just act like they care. (B1-1, October 28, 2016, lines 781-786)

For Mary, “You’ve got to have what they call a buddy system” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 790) or else you cannot succeed as a student. She receives emotional support from her classmates that she has never received before in her life.

Blair for the most part enjoys her class; that is, until tension erupts over a mock trial. Blair’s distress over the arising tension is enough to make her almost quit the program because she is so “tired and stressed out” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 34-35) because “the whole class made [the mock trial] a mess” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, line 39) by “trying to be competitive with each other” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, line 44). The fighting is so bad that her instructor “actually had to talk to us twice about it” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 976) because she was “disgusted and angry just cause of how we were treating each other” (E1-2, April 11, 2017, lines 989-990). When the class is not getting along, Blair gets so stressed that she almost cannot make it through.

However, normally, Blair is very happy with her class and finds them to be a source of encouragement. By the third interview, once all of the tension from the mock trial had settled, Blair was positive again about her classmates, saying that “our class is really good” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, line 1603) and that she loves that her group is “the same since we started last year” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, line 1619) because it means that “we know everybody and I love that” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, line 1620). Two students, in particular, give her “a lot of encouragement” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, line 1857) by being there for her when she’s having a hard time, or by encouraging her to keep coming to school when things feel overwhelming. She laughs that “I got a few students that are really on my case to get to school. You know, if I’m not there, it’s like why aren’t you here? I’m not feeling good. Okay good excuse. Rest and we’ll see you next day” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 1899-1901). Blair feels supported knowing that someone expects her to be there. Getting to be with the same group the whole year helps her form closer bonds.

Shayna's discussions about her classmates were perhaps the most illuminating on the impact of peer relationships. In our first interview, Shayna raved about how supportive her group was, and how lucky she felt that they were helping her through the theory component of the program that she "was struggling with" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, line 868). She explains, "My classmates actually help me a lot Like they'll help explain things better and we're always trying to work together and we, we got, we got lucky with this class actually" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 868-874). At this early point in her program, she is happy that "compared to going to high school and whatever else, I am like just floored by how great this class is" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 879-880). When I asked her what she thinks makes someone successful in school, she even stated that "honestly I think it would be support, especially from your classmates . . . cause I've seen many of my classmates you know break down, cry, and want to give up and all of us are there to just pick them back up, and try to keep them going" (D1-1, November 17, 2016, lines 1002-1007).

I was surprised, then, to find that by the second interview, Shayna felt completely different about her classmates. Instead of feeling supported by them, they "remind me of being at home with my 13 year old" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 19). They are unwilling "to listen. They think they're above authority kind of thing" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 37-38). She dislikes that "when the authority comes in and you know kind of puts their foot down, it's oh my god she's, she's hurting me" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 42-43). For the most part, Shayna is able to stay out of the drama by keeping to herself and three close friends from her class, though she says the drama is "kind of agitating and a little bit stressful I guess you could say" (D1-2, February 03, 2017, line 56). When Shayna feels these younger classmates are trying to destroy the livelihood of instructors she has come to deeply respect, she feels compelled to step in and

defend her instructor, only adding to her stress however. Seeing the difference in Shayna's stress levels between the first interview when she felt supported by her classmates and the second when there are only three other students she talks to impacted how I came to see this topic of peer support. I saw it being profound in her experiences, and, when grouped with the experiences of the other participants, I began to think about the implications this has on how we provide education at PCCs, something I discuss in the next chapter.

Other Sources of Support. I was surprised that participants did not speak much about other sources of support for their programs, except briefly or in passing. For example, participants briefly and sporadically spoke about support (or lack of) from family and friends. A few participants mention relationships with school administration and support staff, but only, again, very briefly and in passing. This challenged my perceived idea that students interact frequently with support staff and that those relationships impact their satisfaction as students. Surprisingly, administration seemed to be very removed from student experiences, with participants only mentioning them briefly as part of larger stories. Admissions similarly did not come up often, apart from the stories I shared above about Blair's experience with her mature student test, Sydney's familiarity with her admissions counsellor, and George's positive impressions that the admissions team was more willing to help him secure funding than those at the local public college. I was left to wonder if this topic did not surface because it was not important to their experiences or if it was the nature of my questions.

“I can do that”: Thoughts on Self-Confidence

The portraits demonstrated the importance participants placed on self-learning and personal fulfillment in their postsecondary journeys, at the end of which most cited an increase in confidence or self-esteem. Even David, who initially presented as confident and sure of himself,

revealed that the feedback he received from his classmates and instructors and the open dialogue that was encouraged in class helped him to gain self-esteem that had secretly been lacking. He attributes this increase of success to the unique environment of PCCs:

After being out of school for so long, I want to say that I wasn't sure and if maybe I went to [public college] and the course load was a lot different and the way they taught you was a lot different, I might have not turned out the same way. Right, so it's definitely increased that spark of wanting to grow and learn versus like maybe not. It wouldn't have encouraged it as much I don't think in a different college. (A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 288-295)

Of course, David cannot be certain he would not have felt motivated at a different college, but he feels that the unique features of the PCC — like teaching styles and course loads — gave him the confidence to know he can succeed in an academic setting after being out of school for so long.

Sydney also gains self-confidence, but by realizing that she has more experience and is more capable than she initially thought. During our final interview, she was proud to tell me that she achieved things in her program she thought would be “hard to learn, but I’m already starting to learn it, so I picked up on it quicker than I anticipated” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 449-450). “You seem happier” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, line 452), I told her, to which she responded with a laugh, “A little proud of myself” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, line 454). This newfound confidence is enough to convince Sydney to try entering the workforce instead of going directly to university because “I’m not as self-conscious as I was . . . I don’t feel as insecure with what I know” (C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 874-881). This is a drastic departure from the girl I met at our first interview who feared she had no relevant experience.

Blair probably doubted her abilities more than any other participant. With a history of not finishing the educational programs she starts, she is convinced before almost every test that “I’ll fail it” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 1097). To make matters worse, Blair does fail a couple of courses, causing her confidence to plummet even lower. With the help of one instructor in particular and her classmates, Blair manages to overcome this self-doubt, and is surprised by the end of her program to find that “when people ask me questions, I’m knowing it, and I’m like, I didn’t think I knew that” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 1107-1108). She is proud to see that she has managed to succeed at getting an education. Recall the email Blair sent me close to her graduation date: “I never thought I would ever graduate from anything but Grade 8. So to get in here and go through all of these classes and pass. I am just overwhelmed with joy” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2017). She happily shared that “my kids, they’re so thrilled and proud over me on that” (E1-3, June 12, 2017, line 2455).

Shayna too is proud of herself for succeeding, and, finally, learns how strong she is: “I think after being alone for one year with my kids, and going to school every day, I guess I just didn’t realize how actually, like people used to always tell me that I was so strong and whatever else. I never knew what the meaning was to that was” (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 598-604). Juggling her education with raising six children on her own enables her to accept her own strength. She sets out to accomplish something, and, with hard work, she succeeds. Happily, she shared, “It’s taught me definitely confidence that’s for sure. I’d have to say that my self-esteem has gone up a lot” (D1-2, February 03, 2017, lines 870-871).

Mary did not finish her program. However, in the few months she was there, much to my surprise, she already talked about feeling proud of herself and her accomplishments. It is impossible to say how she would have felt by the third interview, but she nevertheless already

showed signs of feeling proud of herself: She says, “I’m so proud of myself at 81%” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 746) when she passed her test, or “it makes me feel so good” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 318) to have others in her life feel proud of her. Similarly, she is happy to be so well-received by her peers despite her initial fears that she would not be accepted. I remember the smile on her face when she told me about the classmate who called her a “smart lady” (B1-1, October 28, 2016, line 623).

George appeared to enter his program more confident than other participants. However, even he is happy to find that he has “done things the right way this time” (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 3657). George is surprised in his ability to really stick to the program and learn without shortcuts. Recall how, near the end of his program, he is proud to say that what he accomplished was “not bad for a kid from the wrong side of the tracks” (Personal Communication, August 04, 2017). Like David, George presented as very confident; however, he similarly reveals that he too had to overcome his “fear and trepidation of whether or not I could do it” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2603-2604), and is proud to find “my marks and things have been better than I ever would have expected” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2602-2603). As George said, “Not only am I doing it, but I’m doing well at it” (F1-2, March 10, 2017, lines 2604-2605). These revelations gave me another perspective on George’s choice to attend a PCC despite his hesitations that it was perceived as lower quality.

Similar to studies shared in Chapter Three (e.g., Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Hardiman, 2014; Herrera et al., 2015), participants in this study came to their programs with low self-esteem and confidence, something that may have impacted their choices to attend the PCC. Recall David and Sydney’s belief that a one year program is a safer way of testing one’s ability to succeed in an academic setting before going to university; or, Blair’s worry that a longer program with

breaks would inevitably lead to failure; or, George's acknowledgement that he was worried he would not succeed or do as well as he did; or, Shayna's worry that she could not succeed in a program that was theoretical or relied heavily on reading and writing; or, Mary's similar fear that she would fail if she had a class bigger than 20 or where she was expected to learn by reading and writing only. In Hardiman's (2014) study, in particular, students doubted their ability to succeed due to previous experiences with school, and had to overcome this fear in order to build their confidence. Support from instructors was cited as integral in Hardiman's (2014) study in helping students negotiate periods of stress and uncertainty, something that was mostly true within this study as well. The result of the transition to capable student in Hardiman's (2014) study led many participants to reinvent a new self-identity, something I see with Shayna, Sydney, David, George, and Blair who now see themselves as confident learners. There are also parallels between Hardiman's (2014) belief that overcoming the crises and stresses of being students enables transitions and new identities, and the pattern I shared earlier in student attitudes across interviews where the halfway points in their programs were times of incredible stress, anxiety, and self-doubt, without which I now wonder if the increase in confidence would have been as pronounced. Ultimately, however, when asked about what value participants gave to their time at the PCC, they all cited an increase in confidence and personal development, a finding also found by Herrera et al. (2015) in their study on vocational education. Shayna, Blair, and David added to these benefits that they could provide a good example for their children that it is never too late to learn, something Hardiman's (2014) study also demonstrates.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored participants' detailed experiences at the PCC. I outlined how preconceived notions about PCCs as compared to public postsecondary institutions impacted

their time as students as well as their goals. I also examined success, learning styles, the value of experience, and relationships with instructors and classmates. Finally, I explored how participants spoke about their confidence levels as a result of having taken their programs.

In the next chapter, I take a critical feminist approach to explore my research questions and the implications of the data shared in this and the previous chapter. I also contribute to methodological discussions on conducting critical narrative inquiry, particularly with regards to participant perspectives on the benefits of being part of a narrative study, the relationship between researcher and participant, and the ethical challenges of being a critical narrative researcher.

I have all these thoughts in the back of my head that constantly go and not too many people that I could actually discuss them with. And especially the way that this has been done, it's driven me to answer certain questions, right, it really pushes you to bring those out and talk about them. And it's good.

— David, A1-3, March 27, 2017, lines 777-781

Some . . . research papers are more based on facts and like no opinions get considered, but yours is different cause you're asking for people's perspectives and then you're letting them . . . give you advice or criticism on what you've wrote, so that's kind of cool. I like that.

— Sydney, C1-3, March 28, 2017, lines 1170-1173

All I can say is that it feels good to be contributing to a study like this and then one day hopefully somebody else will gain some confidence from reading mine.

— Shayna, D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 1194-1195

[Being in this study] felt liberating. . . . and I think I got a lot off my chest and I think it put a lot of things into perspective from my point of view. It kind of made this whole experience, the, when I didn't feel like anybody else was listening.

— George, F1-3, June 02, 2017, lines 3744-3751

I was just really shocked by [the portrait]. I read it a few times. I was like, holy. First time, I couldn't read it. I read the paragraph and I was just crying. . . . and I was like wow, somebody knew that about me in just, what two, three hours together I think?

— Blair, E1-3, June 12, 2017, lines 2670-2677

Chapter Seven: Discussion

Overview

In this chapter, I conclude the dissertation by exploring the study's relevance and implications. I begin by revisiting the research questions and exploring tentative and contextual possible answers. In doing so, I make recommendations for the consideration of PCCs in northern Ontario, and encourage policy makers to reflect on how PCC quality is evaluated. Because answers to these research questions are deeply embedded in the research process itself, I came to identify tentative answers through an analysis of the process. For that reason, I engage in a methodological discussion about the challenges and benefits of conducting critical narrative research that informed data analysis, including participant perspectives on the value of sharing stories for research. Through this discussion, I share the particular challenges I faced in working with participants who previously felt unheard, and justify the choices I made in structuring and representing the data as a result. Finally, I discuss limitations, and make suggestions for further study.

Contextually Revisiting the Research Questions

Through this study, I sought to answer, how did a small group of students come to attend the PCC where I work, and what impact do their stories and choices have on how they define their identities? As sub-questions for inquiry, I wondered:

1. In what ways, if any, do previous and current educational experiences contribute to how students conceptualize their identities and “ways of knowing” (Belenky et al., 1986/1997)?
2. What meaning do students draw from their experiences at this PCC?
3. What might PCCs glean from students' educational experiences and stories that can lead to the enhancement of learning environments?

4. In what ways, if any, might the use of critical narrative construction during the research process contribute to student empowerment or transformation?

I returned to these questions with mixed emotions. On the one hand, doing so helped me regain focus on what the study initially aimed to do. On the other, I worried that the complexity of participants' voices and experiences might be reduced by seemingly conclusive discussions. However, like most critical narrative researchers, I offer no definitive answers. Instead, I explore contextual possibilities within the scope of this study to, first, draw each question to a temporary close within the dissertation, and, second, to open them back up to prompt thinking for further studies.

Impact of Early School Experiences

1. In what ways, if any, do previous and current educational experiences contribute to how students conceptualize their identities and “ways of knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997)?

My questions about early school experiences invited participants to recall any outstanding school memories (see Appendix A). Responses were overwhelmingly negative, and involved, in some way, memories of being bullied. The pain participants shared as a result of their early school experiences was considerable. Though I anticipated negative experiences to surface, I was nevertheless surprised by the intensity of the pain they shared, and the impact it left on their senses of self. David was bullied by classmates so badly that he did not have one single friend in elementary school, which he saw later in high school as leading to alcohol dependency in his efforts to keep the friends he finally manages to make; Shayna recalled leaving school early because she was often singled out in class for being the other, and did not understand lessons that relied on reading and writing; Mary remembers school as being

something she left early because of the difficulties of being bullied and not understanding the content; Sydney was bullied for so many years that her first positive experience as a student did not happen until grade eleven, something that left her unsure of herself and how others would perceive her; George was bullied for having red hair, and was lonely and isolated, something I link now to his need for community; Blair was bullied by classmates over her fluctuating weight, and felt as though she never fit in, and received no support from the school in dealing with the traumatic event of her aunt's murder or with her psychological disorder.

In contrast, participants spoke about an increase in self-confidence, albeit to varying degrees, as a result of being at the PCC. Something about the way education was provided there at that time in their lives seemed to enable them to reconceptualize their identities. I found myself thinking about Noddings' (2013) theories about the role of care in the classroom, and the People for Education project and Shanker's (2014) discussions about how a failure to allow for social emotional learning in the classroom "has a profound impact on their self-evaluation, self-monitoring, and self-esteem" (p. 8). Noddings (2012) reminds us of how important it is within the classroom "to learn what the cared-for is going through" (p. 54) and to "put aside our projects and listen" (p. 54). One possible way of viewing participants' overwhelmingly negative early school experiences is to view them within the context of educational models that might not have placed value on social emotional learning or "the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 172) that Noddings (2012) believes is integral to positive learning environments.

These differences between their early school and PCC experiences might be better understood by reflecting on the differences between pedagogy and andragogy. Certainly, Chapter Six demonstrates that the PCC is modeled on the principles of adult learning theories. For example, participants describe a classroom organized in a way aligned with theories by

MacKeracher (2004), Cranton (2012), and Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) where students' previous experiences are given credit and encouraged within the classroom as a means of furthering new learning, and where learning is mostly experiential, problem-based and relevant to learners' immediate goals. Learning activities often occur in groups or pairs through discussion, problem-solving exercises, role-playing, and field experiences, with a focus on sharing experiences between learners. Some participants were surprised to find that their PCC instructors treated them with respect. Most were also surprised that they had direct access to instructors who were willing to help them outside of class hours, and to teach in ways that did not only rely on reading and writing. I wonder whether a strength of PCCs can be seen in their adherence to an adult learning model that privileges learner voices and experiences, and that aims to make learning relevant to learners' goals.

To return to the research question, school experiences had a profound impact on how participants came to think about themselves and their identities, as well as their abilities as learners. However, this discussion would be incomplete without looking at how participants came to draw meaning from these school experiences. For that, I turn to a discussion of narrative identity and the role of critical narrative throughout their time as PCC students.

Narrative Construction of Identity

By applying a narrative framework to their school experiences, participants reconstructed their notions of self, albeit in varying degrees. For many, that took them from insecure knowers to confident ones, though, of course, any change must be viewed as tentative and fluid. Even David and George, who initially presented as confident, revealed by their final interviews that they were more self-conscious than they initially let on, and that their time at the PCC was helping them to overcome those insecurities. These reconceptualizations were spurred for the

most part by relationships with instructors and classmates; however, the interviews themselves contributed to these changes by giving participants space to reflect on topics they otherwise might not have. To understand how the interviews might have contributed to these identity shifts, I drew on narrative literature (e.g., Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013; Clandinin, Caine, & Steeves, 2013a, 2013b; Josselson, 1995; McAdams, 2008; McAdams et al., 2006; Pals, 2006). When identity is situated within the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry, it becomes the culmination, albeit ever-evolving and fluid, of the meaning-making efforts of storying our lives. Participants actively selected and structured stories from their past school experiences to share with me in a way that allowed them to impose unity on their life experiences. McAdams et al. (2006) explain that constructing narrative identities can be a key way that individuals give coherence and unity to what may otherwise appear as fragmented lives. George actively chose to see his painful childhood and the years after leaving his fulfilling career as a paramedic as something that made him strong and that prepared him to enter another fulfilling career; Shayna similarly believed that the things in her life happened for a reason and that her path enabled her to deal with a family crisis in a new way as a result of her learning; Blair chose to view her mental health challenges as having led to her present situation, and felt validated to have them acknowledged as important parts of her larger narrative; Sydney drew from her painful and isolating school experiences to better solidify her conception of herself as a caring person who puts others first; David recalled his early academic identity in a way of tracing how his life got away from him, and how his return to school now and to a helping profession was a way back to that early identity of which he was proud. I reflected a great deal on Pals' (2006) argument that there is much to be understood about identity by examining how individuals make meaning of

their lives through the stories they privilege over others. It is an interpretive and meaningful act to form “connections between past experiences and the self” (Pals, 2006, p. 177).

Reflecting on how identity is constructed narratively also allowed me to explore the role of crisis in participants’ school experiences. Around the midway point in their PCC programs, in particular, most participants shared that they were debating whether or not they should or could continue. Before I saw a pattern to this discontent, I tended to think that their experiences were caused only by the reality of the negative experiences they were encountering. Now, however, I reflect on other possibilities by exploring the role and importance of crisis in identity reconstruction. For example, Josselson (1995) discusses how “moments of crisis represent nodes of change in which the individual becomes other than he or she was” (p. 37). The crisis may have arisen from participants putting their self-understanding to Josselson’s (1995) “self-imposed test” (p. 37); in other words, as participants worked through the internal contradictions that may have arisen from being in the midst of self-doubt over whether or not they could succeed at their programs, they inevitably had to confront their conceptions of self and who they wanted to be. This process may have enabled them to reconstruct new versions of self.

The career-focused nature of their PCC programs seemed to also have an impact on these identity reconstructions in that most participants strongly associated with their future careers, and felt that going into those professions said something about who they are and want to be. I recalled Maree’s (2015) discussions about how an increasingly instable and fragmented labour market can lead to a loss of self-worth or notions of self, and thought about how George, David, Shayna, and Blair entered the PCC in part out of disillusionment with their previous career prospects. I came to wonder how this impacted their identities and low self-esteem, and, conversely, wondered if gaining “a crystallized sense of identity [would] facilitate the transition

into the labor force and engagement in worker roles” (Domene et al., 2015, p. 482). Regardless, it was evident that participants (including Sydney) wanted careers that better fit their notions of self and who they wanted to be: David wanted a career that would better reflect his academic side and his desire to help others gain control of their lives after addiction; Sydney wanted a career that would enable her to help destigmatize mental health challenges, and that would privilege her self-image of being selfless and caring; Shayna desired skills that would enable her to form connections with other women through the act of helping them feel better about themselves; George wanted a career that would give him an identity again of being respected, and part of a professional community; Blair sought the skills to independently ensure her financial and emotional stability in the face of upcoming uncertain employment opportunities. Career counselling theories (e.g., Brown & Bimrose, 2015; Domene et al., 2015; Maree, 2015; Savickas, 2011) that recommend that narrative identity and meaning making be taken into account as important in career decisions gave me a lens through which to see these career aspirations as part of the identities they were choosing to construct. They also support my argument that PCC choice is more complex than simply getting a job, particularly in that jobs can be intimately tied to one’s sense of self.

Narrative identity work seems to have been encouraged by the fact that participants’ time at the PCC marks a period of transition: David was transitioning from feeling like someone who just went to work, made money, and went home without an identity or purpose of his own; Shayna had just left an emotionally unhealthy relationship and moved to a new city with her children, becoming a sole provider for the first time in her life; George had been laid off after a series of unfulfilling jobs after having to leave his career as a paramedic; Sydney was negotiating her transition into adulthood as she reflected on whether or not she was ready for the so called

real world, or if more school would be better; Blair was preparing for possible unemployment in the face of her employer's upcoming retirement, and was beginning a weight loss journey she was excited about. Their time at the PCC seemed to mark a space between their old lives and the lives to which they aspired, which I came to understand as a possible state of liminality within which "there is no prescribed story to live out in" (Clandinin et al., 2013a, p. 221). There may be some agency in knowing they are trying to take their lives in a new direction that enabled participants to confront aspects of their pasts and possible selves that are inconsistent with who they want to be. For example, all participants told me about times in their lives that they seemed ashamed of, yet were able now as PCC students to make clear that they were no longer those versions of themselves. Like in Clandinin et al.'s (2013) study, I listened as participants recreated themselves out of these spaces of liminality and being temporarily in between their pasts and hoped-for futures. Hardiman (2014) similarly found that the vocational school in his study served as "an 'in-between' space, a safe place for the latent self to develop and emerge" (p. 38). Hardiman (2014) explains that this is often not a straightforward or easy process, but one that involves crisis and eventual resolution.

Drawing Meaning from Experiences

2. What meaning do students draw from their experiences at this PCC?

The reader has already seen the ways in which each participant made meaning of their PCC experiences, both through the previous sections and Chapters Five and Six. Ultimately, while we can understand how narrative contributed to the meaning participants made of their experiences, the meanings are inevitably individual and it seems that the best thing the PCC (or any school system) can do is acknowledge that meaning is made differently. Participants shared how much it meant to them to be listened to. Perhaps the most important lesson I take with me

from this study into my professional role will be the need to take the time to truly listen to students and validate them as having something important to say. Certainly, their voices told me so much more about them than that they wanted better jobs.

Recommendations for PCCs

3. What might PCCs glean from students' educational experiences and stories that can lead to the enhancement of learning environments?

Though participants felt validated at the PCC, there were areas of improvement that, if addressed, might help students feel even more valued, and eliminate possible learning barriers. In making these recommendations, I considered the areas of concern that seemed to have the greatest impact on participants. Though they specifically stem from the experiences of six PCC students from one multi-campus PCC in northern Ontario, there may be value in considering them within other PCC contexts, if only to prompt thinking about how student experiences should inform decisions about how to offer and evaluate PCC education. Studies on Ontario PCCs have yet to extensively feature student voices, which is something we must address if we wish to enhance their learning environments and meet their learning needs.

Nurturing and Supporting Instructors

This study demonstrates that how instructors were perceived by students had a direct impact on their feelings about the PCC, and how instructors spoke to students about their ability to succeed within the program impacted their motivation and self-confidence. Conversely, how instructors managed difficult situations or class dynamics caused some to even consider leaving their programs. I found myself reflecting on how many PCC instructors have little or no teaching experience, yet are expected to handle difficult classroom management challenges simply by virtue of having work experience in the program area. I wondered to what extent instructors

might feel unequipped to deal with these day to day challenges that advanced teachers can struggle with after years of formal education and teaching experience. Do we provide enough support and education opportunities for instructors? I wondered. What kinds of supports would have helped to avoid the classroom issues participants shared in this study? For example, participants talked about the need to quickly replace instructors who were injured or who resigned, about new instructors being unsure of what they should be doing in the classroom, about new instructors not managing classroom conflict. It would seem that the PCC might benefit from implementing (or reinforcing) instructor supports that can take into account the limitations of time constraints on new instructor orientation and training. Furthermore, instructor mentoring programs or co-teaching/co-planning opportunities might help ease some of the classroom management issues Sydney, David, Blair, and George shared, while accounting for possible time constraints on new instructor orientation and training. At the very least, I encourage PCCs to evaluate the training and support opportunities available to instructors that could supplement the professional knowledge they bring to their positions. As Noddings (2013) demonstrates, being the carer in the caring relation can be emotionally exhausting and require strong supports to avoid emotional burn out. Providing opportunities for such support would be a benefit, as would further study into the experiences of PCC instructors that could inform those supports.

Fostering Peer Learning

I demonstrate in Chapter Six how impactful peer relationships were on participants' PCC experiences. While participants demonstrated the many possible benefits that resulted from these relationships, like peer learning, encouragement during stressful times, and validation of their skills and abilities, they also at other times felt so overwhelmed by disruptive tension amongst

classmates that it left them doubting whether they made the right decision to attend the PCC. Perhaps because of the small class sizes, it seems that how PCC students interact with each other should be of importance to PCCs, and one possible intervention towards improving peer relations in the classroom could be to foster mentoring opportunities that could guide students towards cultivating good relationships with classmates. To that same end, I see value in improving how students are introduced into programs with continuous intakes. David, for example, who eventually enjoyed the continuous intake model, initially felt negatively impacted by a lack of direction on how advanced students could work with new students to leverage peer learning. David suggested that PCCs would benefit from adding an introductory course to each program to teach new students key terms more advanced students might use that left him feeling alienated and unsure of his ability to succeed. I would add to this that there may be value in providing overt direction to students in such an introductory course about how peer learning and mentoring can be used for the advantage of both sets of students. Further study would be a benefit.

Narrative Supports for Students: Academic and Career Counselling

Seeing the value participants assigned to the study's use of narrative prompted reflection on the types of narrative-inspired supports PCCs could offer. Mary's experience, in particular, stuck with me in this regard. I could not help feeling as though we failed Mary, not because of some overt neglect or a lack of effort on the part of her instructors (which she demonstrates was not the case), but in terms of the supports available that could help her. Mary was a student with a long history of abuse and addiction, who had been out of school for decades, and who had difficulties reading and writing. Though she felt she excelled at self-directed work, she struggled with deciding what and how to study, and often found that despite her efforts, she was unsuccessful at formal testing. This set of factors was too complex to be managed within the

classroom. I found myself wishing that Mary had someone to talk to at the PCC who knew her story the way she told it to me that morning at our interview. At the very least, I imagine Mary could have been directed to useful supports that would help her through her transition to student again.

As the demographics demonstrate in Chapter Two, and my own experience confirms, Mary might not be alone in needing additional support outside of the classroom. For that reason, I see value in adding academic and career counselling as a service for students, but in a way that mimics the career counselling approaches I share previously that use narrative techniques to help participants better understand their notions of self and their worlds. Doing so could open spaces for students to reconstruct their identities in ways that might be useful (similar to how Domene, Landine, and Stewart [2015] argue a crystallized sense of identity can help individuals better transition into the labour force) in addition to focusing on career preparation. Such a service could also address the problem I noted during interviews that participants were often confused and unsure about program requirements, particularly with regards to placements. Though I encouraged participants to speak to their instructors, there was nevertheless a general reluctance to ask for clarification. Having academic and career counsellors would provide an outlet for program questions that created, for some participants, serious doubts about the quality of their education. Such a counsellor would also be able to provide guidance to participants on how to find fulfilling employment. Perhaps alleviating practical concerns could allow for more space for PCC students to focus on their self-journeys. Such counsellors would also be able to refer students to the appropriate community supports as needed, such as mental health counselling, tutoring services, etc.

Rethinking Evaluation at PCCs

My time working at a PCC tells me that what I write here may be viewed as controversial. However, I risk ruffling some feathers because I feel strongly that there is a need to critically think about the types of evaluation we use at PCCs, and to answer the question, why is so much emphasis placed on one type of formal testing, when arguably a goal of PCC education is to provide alternative forms of learning? Consider the following journal entry:

Something just happened that is weighing on me. I emailed Mary to thank her for the meeting and to write that I hope she did well on her exam on Friday. She felt confident going into it. Today, however, she told me she failed. I've only had one meeting so far with Mary but my heart sank for her. She shared some of her struggles with the book part of the program, that she could learn better when she was asked to do work herself— to prepare and present a PowerPoint presentation on a topic. How, then, does it seem fair that the biggest weighting in a course is a final exam that requires one type of knowledge that is becoming obsolete?

This makes me upset because I could have had a say on that. I am often advocating for lower final exam marks at our meetings, and often told back that a final exam needs to carry some weight. In concept, I understand that. The Ministry has expectations that exams be worth more, and having an exam be worth more gives some students an opportunity to pull their marks up with hard work. But, what about those students who do not test well because the mode is not relevant? Or because the mode is detached?

I find myself thinking about the ethics of being a researcher and the types of relationships I am allowed to have with participants. Mary has a lot to offer. Mary knows that life experiences are the most valuable tool a person can have in their profession. Mary knows that life

experiences can be used to help others, to encourage, to guide. Mary knows all of this. But, Mary failed an exam that probably had more to do with regurgitating definitions and key terms.

(Research Journal, November 01, 2016)

I cannot with good conscience argue that formal testing should be eliminated altogether.

However, I do propose that we rethink the weighting of such testing, and the forms of knowledge that we ask participants to demonstrate on those tests. Out of six participants, five shared stories of struggling with school at a young age, so much so that their academic confidence was practically void. In contrast, teaching methods at the PCC were represented by participants as less traditional than in their previous schooling experiences. Participants (excluding Blair to some extent) spoke fondly about the ability to have engaging class discussions, to use guided learning, to do hands-on practical tasks. Yet, they all spoke of formal tests and exams where they were tested on their ability to reproduce technical or theoretical knowledge in response to direct questions. I saw this to represent a disconnect between the PCC's adherence to an adult learning model of teaching, and a more formal, technical approach for evaluation. I wondered if the issue stemmed in part from regulatory matters that force PCCs to follow narrow program approval guidelines of what is and is not acceptable curriculum and evaluation methods.

This discussion has roots in critical and feminist theories, adult learning principles, as well as in the work being done by the People for Education through their Measuring What Matters project. For example, the Measuring What Matters project argues that traditional models of evaluation may not be assessing students on relevant skills and knowledge they need to be successful and fulfilled people (People for Education, 2017). Adult learning theories (e.g., Cranton, 2012; Knowles et al., 2011; MacKeracher, 2004) and discussions by Noddings (2012) similarly point to the need to evaluate students on different elements of their learning, as well as

to give them more freedom for self-evaluation that can spur real development rather than evaluation that merely (and punitively) assesses. I believe PCCs would benefit from expanding the ways it measures success. To be clear, I am not suggesting that a general studies policy be implemented. Participants demonstrated a general satisfaction that their learning at the PCC was specific to their goals. Instead, I argue that PCCs continue to use the adult learning principles they seem to be following as a guide towards allowing students to demonstrate learning in other ways, like self-directed or practical ways that enable them to use a range of skills. It is true that some PCC programs prepare students for national and provincial certifications, which require a certain level of competence at writing standardized exams. Such a focus is important as PCCs have a responsibility to prepare its students; however, it must also prepare those students for the realities of work and life after certification, where success most likely will not be determined through one's ability to memorize or regurgitate. Further study into evaluation at PCCs would be helpful.

Managing Perceptions of Money and Resources

This study demonstrates that how much and how quickly PCCs invest in resources, including instructional staff, sends important messages to students about how valued they are, as well as about the quality of the education they are receiving. This reaction seemed partly due to participants' general awareness of popular opinions of PCCs being lower quality institutions that care more about making profits than about their students. However, the reality exists that the choices this PCC made about resources led some participants to confirm these opinions. I tend to think that the problem is not that PCCs care more about money than students, though I acknowledge that PCCs may be more economical because, often, they are owned and operated by business-minded people who do not receive direct public funding. I also believe the smaller

size of PCCs could make financial decisions more visible than at larger public institutions.

However, what is important is that some participants felt that the perception of how the PCC handles money and resources says a lot about the quality of the education they are getting, something that PCC administration should seriously consider.

Policy Changes

I keep wondering what David's stories would have been reduced to on a survey. I think he would have selected that he is back in school to get a meaningful career, which is true. But, what would have happened to the story of his dad passing, and the heartfelt conversation he shared with him just months prior about his belief that David could do more in life? And to David's resolution to do just that? My heart aches at this. This is what I meant all those times I told stories about PCC students I get to speak with — about all those times they shared with me what their education meant to them. David's talk with his dad is not specific to the PCC, but it was still crucial in this decision and all his stories need to be known and understood if we are ever to treat quality at PCCs as more than just about meeting labour-related objectives. Even David himself said he was a bit fearful he would not get a job in his field afterwards because of what some employers think of PCC credentials. Oh how Bourdieu's "racism of intelligence" runs rampant.

— Research Journal, October 6, 2017

The value that participants gave to their PCC education may surprise some readers. At the very least, I argue it should prompt discussions about the ways in which we evaluate PCCs. With the recent implementation of KPIs (explained in Chapter Two), there has been a greater push than ever to evaluate PCCs according to labour-related criteria. Another measure is through

default rates provided by OSAP that indicate, by institution, what percentage of students with OSAP funding default on their loans. I do not propose the elimination of such measures. I understand that a sector must be accountable to its students and must seek to meet the objectives set out by governments. However, what I propose is for qualitative data collection to be added to such KPIs that might provide useful information about student experiences that PCCs could use to improve the quality of their education, as well as to give credit to a sector that has been criticized for years based on human capital approaches. This study demonstrates that PCC students can be harmed as a result of such public perceptions. The government could go a long way in helping to change such perceptions, or, at the very least, towards gathering the information necessary for the sector itself to change those perceptions, or to work to avoid confirming them.

I leave with the reader an excerpt from my last interview with Shayna that I think does more justice to this topic than I could ever do:

ME: Is there anything you learned or came to realize while being a student that was surprising to you?

SHAYNA: Mmm, [long pause] I don't know. I think I didn't realize [pause] I think after being alone for one year with my kids, and going to school every day, I guess I just didn't realize how actually, like people used to always tell me that I was so strong and whatever else. I never knew what the meaning was to that was.

ME: Cause you've really tested yourself this year?

SHAYNA: Oh yeah, definitely.

ME: So, you didn't see that before this year?

SHAYNA: No, I didn't because, I don't know. I know when I came here after separating from my partner, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to take this program because I wanted to build my *self* up. . . . I didn't really worry too much about, you know, getting a job in the esthetics field. It was about me. (D1-3, April 13, 2017, lines 598-631)

Participant Benefit and Suturing Ruptured Life Stories

4. In what ways, if any, might the use of critical narrative construction during the research process contribute to student empowerment or transformation?

ME: Do you think about your educational experiences any differently now because you were part of this, or no?

DAVID: [pause] hmm, I want to say yes. [pause] It's hard to explain. Like just being part of the interviewing process and all this and this case study, it shows again a different view or a different side of things I might normally not have looked at. Right, again you mentioned that I take things as more from a professional view instead of a student view, and maybe that's helped to facilitate that or to facilitate seeing it from a management point of view or administration point of view as well, just to see all the different aspects of it cause we've discussed it. . . . Especially after the last interview I went into class being able to discuss it I was able to understand all the stuff I talked about with you so much more. I was able to be so much more aware of it in class, which probably helped me to be able to cope better with the problems that were going on in class.

— Final interview with David, March 27, 2017, lines 846-863

ME: Do you think about your experiences any differently because you were part of the study? Like has this forced you to think about anything you might not have?

SYDNEY: [pause] It's made me think about everything in a different way. So, like I know what I've been learning or what I've been experiencing, but talking about it makes me realize like actually what is going on. I don't know if that makes sense, but it's kind of like when I go through it, it's kind of like a small spectrum. . . and then talking about it makes it seem a lot bigger cause it's more elaborative, and like, oh wow I don't even remember that but when I talk about it, it's like, Okay yeah I can see where that came from, or I can see where I put that together type thing.

— Final interview with Sydney, March 28, 2017, lines 1214-1225

ME: Has your change, or has your thinking changed at all throughout this process?

SHAYNA: Has my thinking changed? Um, hmm. [pause] I think more taking in the, the lessons of everything. I mean the instruction of learning the esthetics program but not only that, but taking in the lessons of life as well.

— Final interview with Shayna, April 13, 2017, lines 993-998

ME: Has your thinking changed at all as a result of being in here? Like have you realized anything that you might not have if you didn't say it out loud? About what you were feeling?

GEORGE: Yeah, cause I don't think I would have expressed it and maybe I would have turned it inward or maybe I would have been self-destructive towards my learning.

— Final interview with George, June 02, 2017, lines 3764-3768

BLAIR: I realized a lot more when I read [the interim research text] but...

ME: Yeah you said in the email that you realized some things [from reading the portrait].

What was surprising to you?

BLAIR: Well, not believing in myself. Like you seen that without me telling you. . . . [story omitted for participant privacy]. So yeah, so anyway. [laughter] That's more than I usually tell people but [laughter]. Yeah so. But yeah, so just that and the other thing. Well my teacher too, I was like yeah. Yeah, lack of confidence. I know I don't have that at all. Yeah cause I know it was near the end [flipping through portrait] when you were talking about the [grade three] teacher there and how much influence she had on me and I was like, Yeah you know what? I never really thought about it.

— Final interview with Blair, June 12, 2017, lines 1174-1180; 1362-1384

I initially conceptualized empowerment and transformation in terms of participant benefit. In addition to discussions of increased confidence in Chapter Six, the lengthy excerpts with which I began this section support my claim that participants experienced “the reality-altering impact of the inquiry process” (p. 171) that Kincheloe et al. (2011) argue is so important to critical inquiry, and the “self-understanding and self-direction” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 171) that is an intended outcome of researching within the bricolage. David gained more awareness of his feelings that he used in the classroom to foster greater learning and to accept his instructor and classmates’ views of him as capable; Sydney realized how much she doubts herself, and began working on overcoming this lack of confidence; Shayna gained confidence and finally accepted her strength; Blair gained confidence in seeing herself through the eyes of others and in feeling validated that someone else understood the realities of how difficult her life and mental

health challenges have been; George reflected on his beliefs and feelings in a way that helped him to avoid self-destructive behaviours that historically got in the way of his learning.

Participants exemplify what Connelly and Clandinin (2006) argue is one of the goals of narrative inquiry; that is, that by telling stories of our experiences, we access a world that allows us to interpret and make meaningful our personal experiences. The act itself of constructing narratives is one that became empowering for participants for its ability to guide them to make meaning of and take ownership over their own experiences (Atkinson, 1995; Bateson, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Dominice, 1990; Lieblich's interview in Clandinin & Murphy, 2007). George even characterized his participation in the study as "liberating" (F1-3, June 02, 2017, line 3744).

The path to this result was not direct, however. There were times during the process when I clearly heard Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) warning that "we owe our care to compose a text that does not rupture life stories that sustain them" (pp. 173-174). There were times when my questions or comments asked participants to consider a version of themselves they had not previously considered. The interim portraits, in particular, were jarring for some. I was careful to work to mend those ruptures through discussions and revised drafts of the portraits as much as possible if I felt they were unwelcome. To honour the privacy of my participants, I do not provide detailed examples. However, I state for future novice researchers the dilemma I faced in this because it is not an easy aspect of interviewing to navigate. At times, I felt these ruptures could be useful, but then felt smacked in the face with guilt over what right I had to impose my own meanings on participants or to encourage them to explore parts of themselves they had not yet been open to just because I wanted them to experience benefits of being in a study. Like Josselson (1996), who argues that imposing meaning on participants' stories always involves an element of intrusiveness, I found a fine line between wanting to help participants with the

“reality-altering” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 171) goal of critical narrative research and honouring their current realities that were often comforting and familiar. I came to characterize this process as suturing life experiences back together, ultimately with the hope that the scar left behind might later be a useful stepping stone for further reflection if participants wanted it to be.

It would be misleading to argue outright that participants experienced transformative learning as a result of their time at the PCC or their participation in the study; however, there is some evidence that some transformative learning occurred, albeit perhaps not complete in terms of the theoretical conceptions of it. For transformative learning to occur, many agree (e.g., Arends, 2014; Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2009, 2017; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; West, 2014) that learners must undergo a process of reflection that leads to the overturning of long-held beliefs acquired in childhood or the past, and that those new belief systems generally help one to expose and challenge oppressive forces in their lives. The reason I argue that participants’ transformations may not be complete within this study is because I cannot reasonably argue that participants reevaluated their entire belief systems and worldviews as a result of being at the PCC or in the study; however, participants in this study challenged views of themselves as less than and reframed them in terms of the emotional journeys of overcoming self-doubt and proving to themselves that they can succeed in an academic environment. In that sense, participants underwent emotional transformations that led to reconceptualized notions of self. I compare their transformations most closely to the personal examples provided by MacKeracher (2012) in her article on how experience factors into transformative learning. Certainly, participants underwent a disconfirming experience that challenged their notions of self as they struggled with self-doubt over whether they would be able to succeed as students, they reflected on these challenges on their own, and then aloud as participants during our interviews, and finally, as the fourth phase,

they actively worked towards shifting their perspectives and integrating those new beliefs with existing ones (some by even changing their goals to reflect their reconceptualized notions of self as capable).

Entering the Discussion: Challenges of Conducting CNR

Navigating the Role of Researcher

Conducting this inquiry has been a challenging, often emotionally debilitating, experience that involved a great deal of anxiety. At times my anxiety to do right by participants reached such high peaks that I felt physically ill. However, it has caused me to reflect critically as to the ethical implications of conducting research. As can be seen from the journal entry below, I have come to believe that the personal side of ethics in critical narrative inquiry needs to be at the forefront of discussions. Secondly, it opens a discussion about what it means to use Lather's (1986) concept of "self-disclosure" (p. 266) in qualitative interviews, and, finally, this entry initiates questions considered later about the impact of researcher identity and credibility.

I haven't heard from David since I emailed him to schedule our next interview. Did I make a mistake in wanting three interviews spread apart so far? Did I make a mistake in how I acted at the first one for David not to answer me? He did tell me he doesn't check his emails often. Could he have not seen it yet? Could that be possible? He also gave me his phone number on the contact sheet so that will have to be my final attempt — a text message that I won't even know he receives or not. This research journey is so different from what I thought it would be. In many ways, it is so much more rewarding than I ever anticipated. I now see the value in the journey and in Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) writing yourself into knowing idea. I value that. But, there are other sides to this that I used to see as logistical details that would be easy,

like recruitment, scheduling interviews, dealing with the emotions and nerves of having to meet someone you've never met before and asking them for their stories like they are vendors at a street market ready to negotiate which stories they will sell and for what price. Interviewing is by far the most uncomfortable part of this process. There were so many silences, silences between words, between sentences, in the middle, at the beginning, at the end, silences I did not know if I should honour with silence or further questioning. Is it a silence that needs encouragement to continue on? I find myself wondering. Or, is it silence that speaks of too much pain to go on? Unsure, I distance myself by drawing attention to the fact that I am asking a question that is written on a sheet that NUREB approved, as though, It's not my fault, Participant. It's right here on the sheet. I have to ask. I had each and every question memorized when I went into those interviews but pretending my questions were coming naturally did not feel fair or honest. So, I looked down at my paper and chose a question. Something about that made me think participants would be more comfortable than had I simply looked like I was talking with them, greedy for their answers. And, we did do that as well. Talked, followed leads that came up. But, this feeling has been on my mind for days now so I had to put it down as significant for reflection.

The question that has been plaguing me is, why does it feel easier to hide behind the formality of questions that are written down and approved? Why do I think participants will find me wrong for being genuinely interested in their lives rather than someone who has to ask a set of questions for fairness? Why do you really only come to learn what it means to do ethical research when confronted with sleepless nights over what you might or might not have said to make participants feel uncomfortable, used, subjects?

Reassurance: *I told them that I was thankful for their help.*

Doubt: *But what if they thought you only cared about their answers to the questions and not them?*

Reassurance: *The whole first interview was designed to get to know them.*

Doubt: *Yes, but for research purposes.*

Reassurance: *I stayed with them afterwards and chatted. I was interested in knowing who they were when the recorder was off, too.*

Doubt: *That's interesting. Tell me more.*

Reassurance: *Stop that. I genuinely care.*

Doubt: *Yes, yes, go on.*

Reassurance: *I give up.*

(Research Journal, November 29, 2016)

In our third interviews, I asked participants how it felt to be part of the study and to have their stories considered as valuable sources of data. Their answers alleviated many of my concerns. But, feeling like a greedy voyeur raised questions about some of the more subtle ethical dangers I might otherwise have neglected. Specifically within this example, I worried about how caring about participants' stories could put pressure on them to share details they might not want to share, despite the explicit conversations we had at the beginning of each interview that they can choose not to answer any questions without reason or penalty. I was particularly worried to seem too eager for more details about past pain or difficult, sometimes traumatic, life events. At other times, I felt the danger of not being eager enough and possibly disappointing participants who might want to be further prompted about topics they raised. After all, I thought, they raised the topic in response to open-ended questions; there was a chance talking about it could be cathartic as Josselson (1996) believes research participation can be. This

double-edged sword became a looming force during my interviews, requiring me to negotiate how the words I used during interviews could hold incredible weight. On my ethics application, I felt certain that I had accounted for these challenges in stating that I would make participants aware they had complete freedom in choosing which questions they would and would not answer. However, in the face of participants who were, at times, seemingly experiencing healing through sharing their stories, this matter was so much more complex than I envisioned.

This anxiety only worsened when I began writing. Josselson (1996) admits similar anxieties throughout her extensive work as a researcher, particularly with regard to how participants feel about how we write about them. I worried most about how the portraits would make participants feel. To ensure the portraits were fair, I shared my interim research texts with participants, modified them after our discussions, and sent the revised versions back to participants for review. More than this, though, I wrote myself into the portraits in a way that would honour participants more than their own self-representations might have. I have been told I might have gone too far in romanticizing participants, but that effect came out of my genuine feelings about participants, and my efforts to give back to and honour participants by sharing how much I respect them. Not doing so carried incredible dangers in my eyes, particularly when considering that Josselson (1995) reminds us that “language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person's life is inevitably a violation” (p. 62). Because, as narrative researchers, we must acknowledge our role in such violations and intrusions, I wrote myself into the research text partly as an admission of guilt, and partly to demonstrate that I inevitably had an influence during the interviews and the inquiry as a whole. The resulting representations are genuine, though the reader must decide for her/himself if I suitably balanced issues of violation and participant benefit with trustworthiness.

Limitations of Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure was often on my mind as I conducted this study. I worked with participants who shared feelings of having very few people interested in their opinions, and for whom being in this study provided an opportunity to share what is important to them. At times, I shifted from researcher to pseudo-psychologist. David even joked that our interviews felt like “a free therapy session” (A1-3, March 27, 2017, line 768) and George, Blair, and Sydney spoke about how they shared details they do not often, if ever, tell others. Blair joked that I must be a psychologist because I understood her better in her portrait than any of her psychologists. All of these considerations made me reflect on my understandings of Lather’s (1986) discussions of self-disclosure. I initially understood self-disclosure to mean avoiding becoming a distanced asker of questions. Because of this, I responded to participants with experiences of my own to show I was involved in the interviews. However, it came to feel unethical to make my voice and my stories so prominent in our time together, particularly when considering that participants expressed a need to be heard. My status as a doctoral student and as someone who worked in upper management at the PCC (albeit on a leave of absence during the interviews) made my voice feel overpowering.

As I grew more comfortable with interviewing, I increasingly waited for participants to ask me questions before inserting my experiences into our conversations. In doing so, I resisted the strong urge to bond over shared or similar experiences. More than anything, I was ever-aware of the nagging feeling that my interest could be misinterpreted as befriending participants to get better data, as Lather (1986) warns is a dangerous game to play. The consequences of not properly negotiating the ethics of research relationships felt dire: on the one hand, participants might feel I did not care enough about them, but on the other, they might feel I was

overpowering their voices or prying into topics for better data. My desire to not overpower the interviews led to a new problem, however; that is, my worry that I was withholding too much from participants. What did they need to know about me aside from what we covered when we reviewed the consent forms to understand who I was as a researcher? Which parts of my background might negatively impact their ability to freely share their opinions with me? I feared that my background would hurt participants, and came to dread the topic of self-disclosure altogether. I even worried that in minimizing my own voice to respect those of my participants I had become the distanced researcher who takes without giving: I asked myself in a research journal, *“Am I really even conducting a critical narrative if I am so reserved that I am still just the observer? The distant knower? How can I negotiate that role of not swaying my participants too much but also being part of the inquiry? Will I ever know? Is this uncertainty the point?”* (Excerpt from Research Journal, October 17, 2016).

These doubts took me back to Lather’s (1986) writing on self-disclosure, where I found that my inexperience with interviewing led me to misunderstand her concept in a way that I fear other novice researchers might as well. I read self-disclosure to mean almost confession of everything we are; instead, I now see that Lather (1986) meant that self-disclosing is to embrace genuine interactions or direct questions from participants about who you are or what you think about something. It encompasses those small moments when I shared genuine emotion with participants, or reacted in a genuine way to what they were telling me. I shared jokes with participants and answered questions they asked about me. I asked questions that inevitably inserted my views into the conversations, but in a way that prompted further thinking. I made sure to validate their perspectives above all else, and, when engaging in debate, I was careful to allow their feelings to exist without needing to be in contrast to mine.

In an interview with Clandinin and Murphy (2007), Amia Lieblich argues that engaging in narrative inquiry by listening to participants' life stories demonstrates that "we respect them a great deal. We honor them. We show them our interest and our concern and we legitimize them. We empower them" (p. 646). Lieblich shares in her interview (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007) that narrative research is inherently an ethical act that seeks to not only do no harm to participants, but, perhaps even more importantly, to respect and benefit them. In this study, I found it ethical to not insert my voice too overtly in the interviews because of the particular intersection of my various forms of privilege compared to theirs. I do not recommend that researchers remain silent observers, but rather that they carefully negotiate the power of their voices in their interactions with participants. One only has to listen to the auto-recordings to know I actively participated, prompted participants to reflect on topics they might not otherwise, answered questions about myself. This dissertation includes examples of my influence through the excerpts I share, even examples of when I wish I would have asked a question in a more neutral way, or not let my assumptions creep into my questions. Where I restrained myself was in choosing ultimately not to speak too much about my own experiences compared to theirs to avoid the possibility that they would think they are important only in contrast.

Meaning Making in CNR: The Cause and Effect Trap

Another challenge I faced in doing narrative work is that I wanted to believe in the "illusion of causality" (Crites, 1986, p. 168) that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warn narrative inquirers against. I had to work to be "wakeful" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and to reflect on how narrative coherence "arises from sitting with stories, with each other, as we seek to compose ourselves in relation" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 579). Such reflections led me to reframe causality as a strategy to understand how participants make meaning of their lives (Pals, 2006). For example,

the portraits support Fuller and Macfadyen's (2012) claim that the messages schools send to students can contribute to their postsecondary decisions, particularly in regard to choosing less traditional forms of postsecondary education. However, rather than being the result of true cause and effect phenomenon where participants' early school experiences directly led to their decision to attend the PCC, the portraits represent instead how participants selected and structured their experiences in a way that allowed them at that time to think about their lives as coherent. Pals (2006) argues that without looking at life experiences as connected in some way, life becomes "a collection of seemingly random, disconnected, or completely contradictory pieces of information about the past" (p. 177), from which a meaningful sense of identity cannot emerge. Cause and effect, then, becomes a strategy for understanding how meaning is made by imposing structure and coherence on life experiences (Pals, 2006).

Reflections on the Roles of a Research Journal

There are so many ideas racing through my mind The interview is playing out like a movie with many layers: the layer of us sitting in the library talking, the layer in my mind of visual images of David talking to his father before he died, or of him at home with his four girls and wife, or of him breaking his nose or crushing his hand in workplace accidents. And then there is the layer of where I am now in my home thinking back on those moments, all tied together by this strange little journal I am writing, already moving backward and forward and through and across time like Clandinin and Connelly write.

— Research Journal, October 6, 2017

I learned early that I would need to keep a research journal. However, it was difficult to navigate how to write it in a way that would help to create meaning later when I would need it,

despite having read extensively on the purpose of research journals (e.g., see Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I took various approaches, sometimes using stream of consciousness to work through emotions and anxieties from the interviews, other times writing for an intended audience, thinking I might include them in the dissertation. Later, I read Carole Richardson's (2006) doctoral dissertation where she urges narrative researchers to try storying their own lives within their journals. In trying this, I found that selecting stories from my past and structuring them for a journal helped me to explore my motivations for this study, and to find a connection with participants and their stories about their early school experiences. I too had worried about my ability and was influenced by a fear of failure. My journal became a battleground for ethical dilemmas that I needed to work out if I was going to truly do justice to participants. It also helped me realize there were many other possible narratives to the meaning I co-constructed through the previous two chapters. For example, I reflected on how my own experiences with self-doubt and low self-confidence might have led me to listen more closely when participants shared similar feelings. My journal taught me to listen for how my voice was impacting this study, which is one of the reasons I share excerpts in this chapter to provide the reader with yet more access to my assumptions and thoughts.

More positively, my journals also helped me contextualize the interviews within the broader context of the inquiry. They reminded me of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) discussion about the ambiguity of working within the three-dimensional inquiry space of narrative research, and to be "aware of where we and our participants are placed at any particular moment — temporally, spatially, and in terms of the personal and the social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 89). As a novice researcher, it took me time to accept that telling my own stories was a valid topic for these journals, and to realize that without exploring our own stories and assumptions as

researchers, it is difficult to fully explore how participants' experiences within the three-dimensional inquiry space importantly intersect with our own.

Study Limitations

The Recorder Effect

Though seemingly obvious, the study could be limited by the presence of an audio-recorder during the interviews:

When Sydney stuck around to chat after the interview, I was surprised honestly because of her self-description of being shy. We chatted about normal things: doctors visits, our home towns, breakfast foods, how we like our coffee. Sydney likes to drink her coffee either really hot, or really cold. Luke warm doesn't do it for her. This was the Sydney when the recorder was off. It's a strange feeling but when the recorder is off, I feel more like myself too, able to tell them all the things I wouldn't say while being recorded, things that don't feel relevant to research but that are relevant to being human, to making connections. When the recorder was on, however, Sydney was very careful to keep her answers related to the topic she felt I thought was important: that is, school. When I asked her to tell me about herself, she asked if I meant to tell me about her decision to attend the PCC. When the recorder was on, it was easier for Sydney to share those details of her life than it was to really share herself.

(Research Journal, November 4, 2016)

I noticed the recorder's impact in all my interviews, in one way or another. David's pauses told me he felt the need to carefully choose his words; George rephrased things often for the recorder and spoke to it directly at times as though it was a third person in the room; Shayna was quieter when the recorder was on, and hesitated before telling stories; Mary transitioned from speaking

freely and easily with me before the recorder was on to being nervously shy and unsure of herself and her word choice; Blair did not change when the recorder turned on, but she was the only participant to take up my offer of altering the transcripts. I believe audio-recorders may be a necessary limitation, though it felt important to acknowledge the possible influences it had on the data. I see some similarities between the finality and permanence of audio-recordings and the written text that Josselson (1996) argues can be intrusive and disorienting for participants.

Limited Literature

Due to the lack of Canadian literature, I entered this inquiry broadly. As such, I offer less depth on more perspectives than I would have wanted to explore. The study may also be limited by my choice to, for the most part, exclude American literature on vocational schools. While Canadian PCCs are often compared to American for-profit schools, I find there to be vast differences that might further misrepresent what Canadian PCCs are doing. As one example, tuition prices alone can differ as much as \$20,000 for the same programs, making the impact of education incomparable in my eyes. Such a limitation could be addressed in further studies. Furthermore, my reliance on literature from the United Kingdom, though more relevant to this study, could be limited by age differences between participants in that the British studies were conducted with participants who are significantly younger in age than those in this study, and in education systems that are significantly different.

Semi-Structured Versus Narrative Interviewing

This study may have been limited by the use of semi-structured interviews instead of narrative interviews that Clandinin and Murphy (2007) argue narrative researchers should use. It was difficult to know what would be important to ask until I was in front of participants who were telling me stories I did not anticipate hearing. While the semi-structured nature of my

interviews allowed for some follow up on topics that were raised by participants, I was ever-aware of the need to ask the questions I had submitted for approval, which ultimately left less time to pursue other leads. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews run the risk of reducing the relational aspect of narrative inquiry to merely the collecting of stories that are “waiting to be told” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 583).

Suggestions for Future Research

In addition to the future research already recommended in this chapter, there is a need for further qualitative research with PCC students about their experiences. This study demonstrates how issues such as student choice and satisfaction are much more complex than existing research currently suggests. Furthermore, participants seemed to place value on hearing comparable stories of other PCC students as a means of motivating them towards success.

There is also a need for research that explores perspectives on the “reputational issues” (Martin & MacLaine, 2016, p. 72) PCCs still face in Canada, particularly of employers who may disadvantage PCC graduates because of the stigma, or the general public to understand how pervasive these challenges are within Ontario. Research with high school level students on postsecondary choice could also help by exploring how institutional messages students receive about suitable postsecondary options perpetuate, or not, such reputational issues. Certainly, research in the United Kingdom has demonstrated such a link (e.g., see Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Brockman & Laurie, 2016; Fuller, 2009, 2014; Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Hardiman, 2014). Further research might also shed light on why participants in this study felt their PCC education to be more practical and hands-on, despite differences in their definitions.

Summary: Returning to the Critical

The mosaic of PCC experience pieced together throughout this dissertation is reflective of my efforts to research within the bricolage by highlighting possible social inequalities alongside participant narratives. In working to critique the structures and relationships that can lead to power and inequality, I cannot ignore how the “reputational issues” (p. 72) that Martin and MacLaine (2016) argue still exist today in Canada were prominent within this study as well. In being committed to “alleviating human suffering and injustice” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 172), I argue now that the problem is serious and that it can impact PCC students in their searches for fulfillment and self-worth. Further critical narrative research is needed to continue to uncover the complex layers of what it means to be a PCC student in Ontario.

I conclude with an admission that I have aimed to do “‘one’s best’ under the circumstances, knowing all the while that other possibilities, other interpretations, other ways of explaining things are possible” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 31). I tried to explicitly show how I have taken seriously the goals of feminist standpoint theories to explore the experiences of a potentially marginalized group. I gave the reader access to my assumptions, relevant cultural and social beliefs and values, and the historical context that deeply impacted how I view this topic. In doing so, I have attempted to keep participant voices and perspectives at the forefront of conversations. Above all else, this dissertation provides a more complex depiction of PCC students than currently exists, towards the greater goal of moving away from views of PCC students as less capable, or less worthy of equal opportunity in Ontario.

“In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed.”

— Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813

Epilogue: From Private to Personal

So, how have you been? How's work?

I'm actually on a leave of absence at the moment.

Oh why so?

I'm working on a PhD in Education.

Oh wow, a PhD. That's great. How long does that take?

About four years hopefully.

Whoa, so what are you going to do with that?

Go back to work.

At a new place?

No, same place.

In a new position?

No, same position.

So why spend all that time if nothing is going to change?

This is just a version of a conversation I have grown familiar with since I began my doctoral journey. The conversation varies slightly, but the point is always the same: Why would anyone commit four years of their life to going back to school if there was no hope of it leading to a promotion or increased remuneration? If the reader were to measure the success of my doctoral journey using the same criteria used to evaluate the PCC industry, s/he could surmise that this program has failed to provide me with a better life. It has not and will not lead to a new job. It will not lead to a pay increase. It will not even lead to a change of position.

But, to say that my journey has not been a success would be to disregard the personal growth and epiphanies I have had along the way. It would be to disregard the many times I barely made it home after an interview before I burst into tears at the injustices some people face; or, the times when I owned up to my privilege and acknowledged how I have not always put people or students first in my job; or, the times when I realized that we cannot provide meaningful education without understanding students' needs and motivations; or, the times that I thought to myself or told my supervisor and spouse that I would never be the same as a result.

But, I did not get a better job.

You may think I am overlooking that PhD programs do not have as a main objective to train its students for gainful (or better) employment. Perhaps this is true. However, there are striking similarities between why I pursued a PhD and why my participants chose to go to a PCC; that is, to seek education that would help us grow professionally while simultaneously enabling us to further deeply personal goals. Yet, because PCCs train for employment, the most important measure of their so-called success is whether or not their students become employed in their field of study. I argue one last time in this epilogue that employment is not the only important criterion in measuring the value education can have in a student's life. One only has to recall Shayna's haunting story to know there is more at stake here than whether or not PCC students feel the jobs they find after graduation are in their specific field of study, and whether their employers are satisfied with their performance.

I close this dissertation with a reminder of how important it was for the participants to have their stories told so that others could understand that out of incredible hardship and disadvantage can come success and self-worth, no matter how many times life tells you it cannot, and no matter how many people may not believe that what you achieved was worth much.

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Appendix A

Admissions Training Handout and Email Templates

Please use the following procedures for inviting students to participate in this research study. To protect the rights of students and future participants, it is important that you do not deviate from these procedures.

In person:

1. Do not discuss the research study while a prospective student is still in the enrollment stage, unless s/he asks about a posted Recruitment Notice.
2. After the student enrolls, direct the student's attention to the Recruitment Notice. This can be posted in or outside of your office.
3. Provide the student with a participant information letter and an informed consent form if s/he is interested in more information.
4. **Do not** ask the student about her/his intent to participate.
5. Point the student to the statement on the Recruitment Notice about their right to privacy, and about how they do not need to share their intent to participate with others.
6. Let the student know that all contact information is on the participant information letter.

Via email:

1. You may opt to inform students enrolled for the September 2016 start via email by sending out the recruitment notice, participant information letter, and informed consent form.
2. When emailing students, use the email templates below for all correspondence with students.
3. If you are emailing students for the first time about the study, use email template #1. Remember to attach the recruitment notice, participant information letter, and informed consent form documents as PDFs.
4. Do not answer any direct questions about the study. Instead, refer students to the proper contact information. Use email template #2 for responding to this type of inquiry.

IMPORTANT!

Do not at any time ask any students of their intent to participate. All research participants have a right to privacy and confidentiality. **Do** remind students about these rights when applicable or appropriate.

Email Templates for Admissions

Outgoing Email

Email Subject: Call for Participants for a Research Study at [the PCC]

Dear [STUDENT NAME],

A research study is being conducted at [the PCC] on the past and current educational experiences and choices of its students. The researcher is looking for any interested students starting in September 2016 to take part in the study. Please see the attached recruitment notice, participant information letter, and informed consent form for more information on what the study entails, what participants receive, how privacy will be protected, and how to contact the PhD researcher or her supervisor for more information.

For your privacy, please do not respond to this email with questions or replies that are meant for the researchers. Their contact information is included in the participant information letter.

Best regards,
[ADMISSIONS STAFF NAME]

Response to Student Inquiries

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you for [QUESTION/REPLY]. For your privacy, it is best to direct all questions to either of the contacts on the participant information letter. For ease, they are as follows:

PhD Researcher: Amanda Carvalho (acarvalho294@community.nipissingu.ca; 705-493-1481)
Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Dr. Sharon Rich (sharonr@nipissingu.ca; 226-663-2675)

Best regards,
[ADMISSIONS STAFF NAME]

Appendix B Interview Schedule

Interview 1: In first two months of program

The goal of the first interview is to get to know the participant. Not all questions or prompts must be asked.

Section 1A — Background and Self-Descriptions (Identity)

Tell participant you want to get to know a little about them first. Remind them again that they can opt not to answer any questions they choose. Let them know they can ask any questions they want along the way.

A1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. Where are you from?
- b. Where did you grow up? What was that like?
- c. How did you come to be in [this city]? What is it like being here for you?
- d. What are some of your interests?

A2. Tell me about things that have been important to you in your life.

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. How have those things changed over time?
- b. What led to the changes?

Section 1B — Goals, Ambitions

B1. Tell me about your life goals. What do you want to be/do?

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. In what ways, if any, are those goals important to you?
- b. How and when do you see yourself achieving those goals?
- c. What would help you to reach your goals?
- d. What would prevent you from reaching your goals?

Section 1C — Previous Educational Experiences and Identity

C1. Tell me about what school has been like for you.

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. Where did you go to school?
- b. What kinds of activities were you asked to do in school?
- c. Which activities did you most enjoy/dislike?
- d. What was it like for you to be a student in school?
- e. What kinds of experiences have you had with educational institutions that stand out most for you?
- f. Tell me about the experiences you have had with teachers or staff in schools. Do you have any memories that stick out, or general feelings about interacting with school staff?

C2. What does getting an education mean to you?

- C3. In your opinion, what makes someone successful in school?
- C4. In your opinion, what is the easiest way to learn? What is the most difficult way?

Section 1D — PCC Choice

Explain to participant that at the next interview, you will explore what brought them to attend this PCC, and what kinds of supports they had, but before you end, you would like to briefly discuss:

- D1. What are the main reasons for why you chose to attend this school?
- D2. What expectations do you have for your program and this school?

Section 1E — Conclusion

Thank participant and let them know you have one more question before wrapping up the interview.

- E1. Is there anything else that you want to share about this topic that has not come up?

Interview 2: Two months after first interview

The following questions are divided by topic, and include probing prompts. Not all questions or prompts must be asked.

Section 2A — Transcripts

Greet participant and after small talk, begin by discussing the transcripts that they were sent prior to the interview. If the student read the transcripts, use the following questions as discussion guides. If the student did not read the transcripts, inform her/him that s/he can make changes via email or phone call at any time, and proceed to Section 2B.

- A1. Are there any changes you would like to make to the transcripts?
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. If yes, do you feel comfortable sharing why you want to make those changes?
- A2. Tell me about how it felt to read the transcripts.
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. How does it feel to see your words on paper?
 - b. Have you thought of anything you wished you had (or not) said?
 - c. Has your thinking about any of the topics changed since?
- A3. In the first interview, you described yourself. Would you still describe yourself in that same way? What has changed since then?
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. How do you think other people see you?
 - b. What do you wish others could know about you?

Section 2B — Choice and PCCs

Tell participants you would like to ask some questions about their choice to attend [the PCC], and their experiences there.

- B1. Tell me about how and when you came to decide to pursue postsecondary education.
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. What are some reasons for why you wanted to pursue postsecondary education?
 - b. What does it mean to you to attend postsecondary education?
 - c. What do you think you will get out of postsecondary education?
- B2. Which kinds of institutions did you look into? How did you decide which one to attend?
- B3. How did you come to choose which program to take?
- B4. Who helped you to explore your options for postsecondary education?
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. What reactions did your friends and family have when you shared your interest in attending school at the postsecondary level?
 - b. What advice did you get about where to apply? How did this influence you?
- B5. How and when did you learn about PCCs as postsecondary options?
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. What was your first reaction to PCCs? What did you think about them?
 - b. If someone else told them: How did that person describe PCCs?
 - c. How did you go about getting more information about PCCs?
- B6. How would you describe PCCs compared to other forms of postsecondary education?

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. What makes PCCs the same or different?
 - b. What kinds of programs do PCCs offer compared to other postsecondary schools?
- B7. Describe the types of conversations you have had with others about PCCs or your choice to attend one.

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. What kinds of reactions to PCCs stand out for you?
- b. How do these reactions make you feel?

Section 2C — Experiences at PCC

D1. Tell me about what it is like to be a student at [the PCC].

D2. Tell me a little bit about your program so far.

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. What do you enjoy/dislike about the program so far?
- b. Is the program what you thought it would be? Explain.

D3. What do you do in your classes?

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. What kinds of activities do you do in class?
- b. How much choice do you have in what you do?
- c. Do you mostly work alone or in pairs/groups?
- d. What kind of interactions do you have with your classmates/teachers?
- e. What is expected of you as a student?
- f. What kinds of responsibilities are you given as a student?

D4. How would you describe your interactions with your teachers?

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. What are your instructors like?
- b. When and how often do you speak to your instructors?
- c. What kinds of conversations do you have with your instructors?
- d. How do your relationships with your instructors make you feel?

D5. What have you learned so far?

Prompts (select as needed):

- a. How did you learn it?
- b. Did you expect to learn this?
- c. Is this learning relevant to your future goals?
- d. Is this learning relevant to your personal growth?

D6. How do your experiences at [the PCC] compare to your expectations when you started?

D7. How do your experiences at [the PCC] compare to your previous school experiences?

Section 2D — Conclusion

Thank participant and let them know you have one more question before wrapping up the interview.

F1. Is there anything you want to share about this topic that I didn't ask about?

Interview 3: Two months after second interview

The following questions are divided by topic, and include probing prompts. Not all prompts will be asked.

Section 3A — Transcripts and Analysis

Greet participant and after small talk, begin by discussing the transcripts that they were sent prior to the interview. If the student read the transcripts, use the following questions as discussion guides. If the student did not read the transcripts, proceed to Section 2B.

- A1. Are there any changes you would like to make to the transcripts?
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. If they want to change: Do you feel comfortable sharing why you want to make those changes? If yes, ask them to explain.
- A2. Share your analysis and allow participants to comment on their reactions to it.

Section 3B — Research Journals

Ask participant if s/he chose to keep a journal. If yes, ask the following questions. If not, skip to Section 3C.

- B1. Are you comfortable in sharing anything from your journal with me?
- B2. Did you discover anything about yourself from keeping a journal?
Prompts:
 - a. Are there any stories that stand out for you? Do you want to share any?
 - b. Have your ideas or feelings changed throughout the process of keeping a journal?

Section 3C — PCC Experiences Continued

Tell participants that you want to ask some more questions about their experiences as PCC students to see if they feel any differently now than they did during the last interview (due to having more experiences now).

- C1. Have there been any changes in your experiences since our last interview that you would like to discuss?
- C2. In what ways is your program preparing you (or not) to achieve the goals you shared during our first interview?
- C3. How does it feel to be a student here now that you are further along in your program?
Prompts (select as needed):
 - a. What are you getting out of being a student here?
 - b. What do you wish was different about being a student here?
- C4. Tell me about the kinds of classes you have had since our last interview. What do you like and dislike about them?
- C5. How do you feel students are treated here?

Section 3D — Return to Goals, Expectations

In our first interview, we talked about goals. Show transcript again and give participant time to review highlighted sections about goals. I would like to ask you to consider a few questions about those goals.

- D1. How have your goals changed, or not, since our first interview? If they have changed, why do you think they have changed?
- D2. How likely do you think it is that you will achieve your goals?
- D3. In what ways is your program helping you (or not) to achieve your goals?
- D4. Is there anything you learned or came to realize while being a student here that was surprising to you? Why does this stand out for you?

Section 3E — Role of Narrative in Research

- E1. Tell me about how it felt to share your experiences and stories with me throughout this study.
 - a. Did you have positive or negative reactions to sharing or telling your stories?
 - b. What does it feel like to think about your experiences and stories as important data for a research study?
- E2. How, if at all, have you or your thinking changed throughout this process?
- E3. Do you think about your educational experiences any differently now that you have been part of this study? If yes, how?

Section 3F — Conclusion

Thank participant and let them know you have one more question before wrapping up the interview.

- F1. Is there anything you want to share about this topic that I didn't ask about?

Optional Group Interview: 2-4 weeks after third interview

Tell participants you would like to invite them to share their school experiences, both past and present, with each other. Tell participants they do not have to participate, and that they do not have to share any details or information that they do not feel is important to share.

The following prompts will be used to guide discussion and the sharing of stories:

Prompts:

- What kinds of experiences did you have in school? Were they positive, negative, or both?
- What makes someone successful/unsuccessful in school? How did this make you feel when you were a student?
- What does being a student mean to you now?
- Why did you choose to attend postsecondary education? Why [the PCC]?
- What expectations did you have when you first enrolled in this school? How are your experiences measuring up so far?
- What does getting a diploma mean to you? for your life? for your career?

After sharing:

- Do you think about your educational experiences any differently now that you have been part of this study?
- Has the way you think about yourself changed at all throughout this process?

Appendix C

Audio or Written Journal

This research journal is optional. If you choose to keep one, the following questions and prompts are available to help guide your journals. You can choose to use all, some, or none of these as you write/record your journal. There are no expectations or requirements regarding length, specific content, or how much time you put into the journal. Simply journal what feels comfortable to you and what comes to mind about your past or current educational experiences and goals, your choice to attend postsecondary education at [the PCC], and anything that seems relevant to this topic or our discussions during interviews. The decision will be yours if you want to share your journal with me.

1. What educational experiences stand out most for you? What was important about this experience for it to stand out? Was it a positive or negative experience? How did you feel in the experience? Do you think any differently about the experience now than you did when it happened?
2. What does being a student mean to you, either now or before? How have your feelings about being a student changed over time? Were these changes positive or negative?
3. How did you come to be a student at [the PCC]? What led to your choice to attend this school?
4. What made you decide to attend postsecondary education? When did you make this decision?
5. Describe a time when you really felt that you learned something. What did you learn? How did you learn it? How did learning that make you feel?
6. Which school relationships are important to you? Why are they important and what impact do they have on your life?
7. Where do you think the most learning happens in life? Can you think of examples of all of the different way you learn?
8. What makes you feel valuable to others? How do they show that they think you are valuable?
9. What makes you feel intelligent/unintelligent? Write or talk about a memory that stands out for you as important about this.
10. Describe a time when you felt that you really accomplished something. Why was this important to you? Did you set out to accomplish it or did it happen by accident?