

Mirrored Resiliency: Exploring University Student Narratives of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to university student mental health and well-being. In a pandemic research environment, I conducted a narrative inquiry that explored the stories of Canadian undergraduate students who experienced mental distress during the transition from high school to university. In this brief, I aimed to explore an unexpected line of inquiry: the stories of university student resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic. As I explored the experiences of my student participants, I found a space for narrative learning and mirrored resiliency where I could reflect on my own student experience amidst the pandemic. The circumstances brought about by the pandemic emphasize the need to build capacity for adaptability, resiliency, and well-being.

Keywords: mental well-being, higher education, student experience, narrative inquiry, COVID-19 pandemic, resilience

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It was a sunny late-summer morning; the liminal space between summer ending and a new school year starting. This September felt different. I had not been to my university campus in several months. It was bittersweet that I would not be able to experience the high-energy clamour of new student orientation and the changing colours of the many poplar trees on campus this fall. I had settled into the rhythm of working and learning from my own house, but some moments reminded me more than others of the strange and exhausting nature of this routine. Today would be my first interview for my master's thesis research project. I was simultaneously relieved that I had recruited a participant, nervous about meeting someone new, and excited to be reaching a milestone in my research. I clicked on the Zoom link for our interview, and it felt anticlimactic. As I waited for the participant to join, I wondered to myself, "What will this be like? And what could it have been?"

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According to Ungar (2008):

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources. (p. 225)

The COVID-19 pandemic (henceforth, the pandemic) has led to both societal and individual adversity, particularly on university campuses. University students have been challenged in their capacity to navigate emergency and ongoing remote learning contexts. The ripple effects of the pandemic have accelerated concerns about university student mental health and led to a need for greater psychological resiliency (Sahu, 2020). The purpose of this research brief was to explore the narratives of university students during the pandemic and reflexively relate these narratives to the concept of resiliency. I used the concept of mirrored resiliency to capture how resiliency can be reflected—like a mirror—when witnessing the experiences of others. The resiliency I witnessed among my student participants mirrored my own sense of resiliency throughout the pandemic and opened a space for shared learning. University students (graduate and undergraduate), program administrators, and student services practitioners reading this brief may benefit from a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences. Readers may also find their own resiliency throughout the pandemic mirrored in the narrative(s) described here.

Context: Adapting During the Pandemic

The context of this research brief is my master's thesis project, which was a narrative inquiry that explored the stories of Canadian undergraduate students who experienced mental distress during the transition from high school to university. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that explores lived experience through the lens of story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My inquiry was grounded in the increasing attention devoted to student mental health on Canadian university campuses (De Somma et al., 2017; Linden & Stuart, 2020), adult learning approaches that centred the holistic nature of learning (Dirkx, 2008; Yorks & Kasl, 2002), and student transitions theory (Gale & Parker, 2012; Tinto, 2017). While the nature of my inquiry was exploratory, I imagined how and where my data collection would take place and what kinds of stories I might encounter. I pictured myself hanging recruitment posters on the walls of common spaces at my university; meeting students at the library for interviews; and stories that would be familiar to me due to my recent lived experience as an undergraduate student.

Unexpectedly, this project took place amidst the pandemic. As my data collection period neared, it became clear that I would have to adapt my strategies. My recruitment took place entirely online, through an online recruitment board and posters advertised by student associations and faculty offices. During the period between August 2020 – January 2021, I interviewed eight Canadian undergraduate students (described here using pseudonyms). As I completed the online interviews and began my analysis, I realized that the participants could be divided into two subsets. There were four participants who were first-year students at the time of our interviews and four participants who were upper-year students, all of whom had experienced mental distress during their first year of university. These two subsets were distinguished by their temporal positioning to their first-year experience. It was significant that the first-year students all began their undergraduate programs during the pandemic in entirely online learning environments, whereas

the upper-year students completed at least a year of their undergraduate program before the pandemic.

Initially, I was wary of the pandemic becoming central to my inquiry. I knew that student mental health concerns were not a unique concern of the pandemic, and I wanted to show how well-being was important before the pandemic and would continue to be so in a post-pandemic world. As the narratives of my participants emerged through our interviews, the story of the pandemic became a part of the story of my inquiry. My original purpose and research question did not change. My secondary realization was that my inquiry opened doors for exploring student resiliency while growing and learning about my own resiliency. Without at first being aware of it happening, I had engaged in a process of narrative learning, a theory in which learning occurs through story-telling and story-listening (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). By exploring the narratives of eight undergraduate students, I could reflect on my story of my student experience of the pandemic.

Student Participant Narratives

The four upper-year students I interviewed all began their first year of university in-person. Most of them had a more positive perception of the impact of the new remote learning environment on their well-being. Kara Kay had taken almost a year off from university, but the pandemic allowed her to enroll in online classes during the summer, even though she was living in a city different than her university. She performed well in her summer courses, which encouraged her to return to her program full time. The other three upper-year students experienced the pandemic during their first years of university. May found that she was over-worked and exhausted from her long commute to in-person classes at her university. But, during the pandemic, she reflected: “My mental health did improve greatly just because we were staying at home and doing everything online.” Zahra lived in a “rural area” and had previously spent hours each day commuting to campus in the city. She felt relieved that she no longer had to travel to attend classes, allowing more time for studying, asking professors questions, and “taking care” of herself. Antonia found that she had been hesitant to ask her professors and peers for help during in-person classes, but online learning made it easier to reach out: “That’s when I started utilizing resources, because I felt less intimidated by the whole thing.”

In contrast, the four current first-year students I interviewed struggled with the transition from high school to university amidst the pandemic. Like many other grade 12 students, Jacklyn’s high school switched to online classes partway through her grade 12 year due to the pandemic. As her first semester of university began, Jacklyn found it difficult to make new friends, although she remained close with some of her high school friends. Kamila looked forward to starting her first year of university. Especially after she “didn’t do much” during the first months of the pandemic, she “was excited just to learn and do something.” When classes began, she found her coursework challenging and perceived that her professors were difficult to contact. Rose was “excited to study in the libraries” at her new university, but, when her classes were entirely online, she continued to live in her town with her family. Joe resented that he had to “miss out on campus life” due to the pandemic, instead being “stuck in the house 24/7.” He wondered if his coursework would be more manageable if he could study with friends. However, Joe and Rose both appreciated that they could live with their families, who were a source of support.

Learning Mirrored Resiliency

The pandemic has created environments where university students are all faced with some kind of adversity. The findings from my inquiry show that the degree to which students perceive the pandemic as an adversity varies. The pandemic has opened opportunities for building resiliency, amplifying conversations about student well-being, resiliency, and shared challenges (Hellemans et al., 2020). This time can be a space for (narrative) learning and reflection while acknowledging “the collective trauma of the society” (Maseiro et al., 2020, p. 516) that may hinder the ability to find moments of learning.

While the pandemic was only one of the many factors in the participants’ experiences (and a small part of my wider findings), it became evident that narratives of the pandemic were an important common thread. In the words of May, when she read the narrative portrait I had written about her experiences, a narrative can be “like looking in a mirror.” In a similar way, I saw my own experiences reflected back when I explored my participants’ narratives. I, too, felt moments of relief, frustration, loneliness, positivity, and grief as I learned, researched, and worked during the pandemic. Exploring these stories allowed me and the participants to understand our experiences and imagine possibilities for well-being, resiliency, and hope. This is the power of narrative learning and of mirrored resiliency.

Conclusions

Throughout the pandemic, I often asked myself, “What could have been?” I mourned the loss of normalcy and craved a student experience without constant disruption. Yet, I savoured the surprises and successes of learning from the storied reflection of my research participants, who acknowledged the possibilities for resiliency and challenges that the pandemic posed for their well-being. This research brief illuminates the importance of understanding the uniqueness of students’ transitional and educational journeys in a pandemic learning environment. There is no universal student transition experience during the pandemic. I encourage practitioners, scholars, and students to listen carefully to the stories around them and try to find moments for reflection and (mirrored) resiliency in a post-pandemic world.

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