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PRACTICES OF BECOMING: WHAT AND HOW DO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS LEARN WHEN TRANSITIONING TO UNIVERSITY?

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the learning experiences of first-generation students in higher education. While existing studies highlight the risks of social exclusion, they tend to overlook what and how first-generation students learn in their transitions to university. By utilising a theoretical framework that integrates biographical and practice-theoretical perspectives on learning, this study addresses a gap in research on how these students navigate their transition to university by learning. The study draws on 24 biographical case studies developed over three years (2019–2022) across universities in Austria and Germany. The findings demonstrate that biographical learning is embedded in concrete practices of becoming: practices of peer support, engagement, and pedagogical accompaniment. These practices of becoming a student simultaneously transform and reproduce social inequalities. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of understanding first-generation students' learning experiences in relation to social inequality, higher education, and societal change.

Keywords: *first-generation students, learning, higher education, biography, social inequality*

PRAKSE POSTAJANJA: KAJ IN KAKO SE ŠTUDENTI PRVE GENERACIJE UČIJO OB PREHODU NA UNIVERZO? – POVZETEK

V članku avtorica raziskuje učne izkušnje študentov prve generacije v visokošolskem izobraževanju. Obstoječe študije s tega področja poudarjajo predvsem tveganje socialne izključenosti, pogosto pa spregledajo, kaj in kako se študenti prve generacije učijo ob prehodu na univerzo. Raziskava na podlagi teoretičnega okvira, ki združuje biografske in praktično-teoretične poglede na učenje, obravnava učenje ob prehodu na univerzo. Temelji na 24 biografskih študijah primerov, ki pokrivajo obdobje treh let (2019–2022) na univerzah v Avstriji in Nemčiji. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je biografsko učenje vpeto v konkretne prakse postajanja: prakse vrstniške podpore, sodelovanja in pedagoškega spremljanja. Te prakse postajanja študent pa hkrati spreminjajo in reproducirajo družbene neenakosti. Avtorica v zaključku poudari pomen razumevanja učnih izkušenj študentov prve generacije v odnosu do družbene neenakosti, visokošolskega izobraževanja in družbenih sprememb.

Ključne besede: *študenti prve generacije, učenje, visokošolsko izobraževanje, biografija, družbena neenakost*

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INTRODUCTION: THE RELATIONALITY OF UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the expansion of educational opportunities and rising student numbers across Europe (Hauschildt et al., 2024), educational pathways remain permeated by considerable social inequalities (Boliver, 2017; Ingram & Tarabini, 2018). The acquisition of educational qualifications, societal positions, and opportunities for participation continues to be largely determined by social class. It has long been acknowledged, particularly since the studies of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), that educational institutions do not passively reflect social inequality but actively contribute to its reproduction. Research across Europe has unravelled how educational institutions, at every stage, perpetuate class-based disparities through their structures and practices, revealing transitions to be particularly critical junctures (Tarabini, 2022). Transitions within educational trajectories become gateways of inequalities, as educational choices are not purely rational or autonomous decisions, but complex processes embedded in the interplay of structures, institutions, discourses, and agency (Stauber & Parreira do Amaral, 2015).

How transitions in the life course *evolve* is closely linked to social change (Elder, 1985). One of the most notable examples is the so-called "educational expansion", a key phenomenon of social change in education since the 1950s (Geißler, 2014). In this context, higher education systems worldwide have expanded substantially over the past half-century, resulting in a much larger group of learners entering higher education (Deem et al., 2022; Marginson, 2016). However, while the educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s increased participation, it has not significantly reduced the relative inequality of educational opportunities (Wakeling & Boliver, 2017). Rather than eliminating social inequalities, educational expansion has merely shifted them to a higher level, introducing new forms of distinction and selection that persist to this day. This "upward shift" in participation has broadened access to education, but it has not led to a socially equitable distribution of educational attainment (Collins, 2019).

The enduring link between social class and education appears relatively unaffected by transformations in higher education, a pattern also visible in Germany and Austria. While the expansion of higher education has improved access for all social classes, it has not eliminated the inequalities rooted in class differences (Geißler, 2014). Despite the claims of meritocratic societies, it is still not "ambition" or "achievement" that determines learners' outcomes, but rather social background, as large-scale standardised studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Internationale Grundschul-Lese-Untersuchung (IGLU) regularly show. Ultimately, social class remains a key determinant of who *benefits* from participation in education.

The persistence of these conditions raises the question of how those who transgress the symbolic boundaries of social class manage to do so – and how they experience these transitions. Drawing on a cultural concept of social class in the tradition of Bourdieu (1989), this study explores the relationship between class and education by examining the learning processes of so-called "first-generation students" (Beattie, 2018). Recent research in higher education has provided valuable insights into their transition to university, highlighting the risk of social exclusion faced by those who are the first in their families to attend university (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2020; Romito, 2021). Although first-generation students constitute a heterogeneous group (O'Shea, 2019), they are often united by a class-based distance from the university, rooted in their lack of academic socialisation. Many have grown up in working-class families, with parents in non-academic or precarious occupations. As such, being the first in a family to enter university is not only a formal status but frequently signals disrupted educational trajectories and limited access to dominant cultural capital.

Numerous studies reveal the subtle forms of disadvantage these students encounter in their daily lives. Experiencing themselves as "outsiders" (Lanford, 2019) and struggling to navigate the academic world, its culture, and its unwritten codes, which are rooted in middle-class educational traditions (Reay, 2017), many first-generation students find the transition to university particularly challenging. Increasingly, research is also focusing on the diverse ways these students overcome such challenges, exploring the resources they mobilise in their educational path (O'Shea, 2019) and the transformative processes they undergo (Montes, 2024). Nevertheless, the part played by *learning* in these dynamics between reproduction and transformation has rarely been explored.

In their systematic literature review, Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) found that most studies on first-generation students have conceptualised them primarily as learners through the lens of academic performance (Vuong et al., 2010) and the cultural influences on their learning (Jehangir et al., 2012). However, a limited body of literature places the biographical experiences of first-generation students at the centre of their studies (Castillo-Montoya, 2018; Merrill & Monteagudo, 2010). Learning, understood here from a relational perspective, moves beyond a performance-based understanding and is conceived as a social process. In contrast to psychological or cognitivist theories of learning, relational theories foreground the learner's social conditions and lived experiences. Learning thus emerges as an experiential, social, cultural, and biographical process (Brinkmann, 2017). Following this "interconnected and multi-directional approach to learning" (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020), which situates learning relationally within the context of life history rather than evaluating learning based on success or failure, I pose the following questions: What and how do first-generation students learn when transitioning to university? How are these processes of learning shaped, produced, and experienced? In what ways do they relate to social reproduction or transformation?

BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN AND ACROSS PRACTICES

Adopting a relational perspective on educational transitions requires focusing on the *interplay* of structures, actors, and institutional regulations involved in life course transitions (Walther et al., 2022). This viewpoint emphasises how pedagogical actions, learning processes, and social conditions are intertwined and constitute transitions to higher education in the first place. Consequently, transitions are not merely "social facts"; they are continually shaped by social practices that evolve throughout the life course (Walther et al., 2022). Analysing transitions to higher education through a relational lens requires moving beyond the notion of transitions as isolated, rational decisions or individual steps toward university enrolment. Instead, it highlights the relational nature of educational choices at the nexus of biographical experiences, institutional practices, and habitual horizons (Dausien, 2014).

Transitions become the central arena for biographical learning. Subjects must anticipate moving from one status passage to another, re-assure themselves accordingly, and are simultaneously confronted with the fact that "managing" transitions lies beyond their control. According to Alheit (2022) and Dausien (2008), biographical learning is characterised by temporality, contextuality, and reflexivity: "Unlike most psychological or didactic learning theories, learning from a biographical perspective does not refer to 'small-scale' changing processes, but to time structures in which the formation of meaning is possible" (Alheit, 2022, p. 11). Biographical learning is a complex process of meaning-making that unfolds over time. For instance, the decision to become a university student generates various possible meanings in the course of one's biography, which are not fixed but continually formed and reshaped as experiences evolve.

However, biographical learning is not solely an internal process of an individual, such as purely cognitive activities; rather, it is embedded within the "social space" (Bourdieu, 1989). Learning processes are contextualised interactive practices that arise from the relationship between the individual and society: "They are concrete situations, living environments and structured historical-social spaces" (Alheit, 2022, p. 12). These complex contexts present a significant challenge for students entering higher education, particularly first-generation students. Beyond acquiring discipline-specific skills, they must also develop an understanding of the university's unwritten rules, such as the expected modes of expression, classroom participation norms, and how to appropriately manage relationships with peers and professors. Nevertheless, the contexts of biographical learning (e.g. spaces of higher education) are not static but dynamic (Alheit, 2022, p. 12). The global Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, has demonstrated how unexpected crises can disrupt historical and social structures, impacting learning in profound ways (Sharaievska et al., 2022). Moreover, biographical learning is linked to "the ability of individuals to put themselves in a reflective relationship to their own experience process, to perceive their own learning processes, to (critically) 'observe' them on a higher level, to form and transform experiences" (Alheit, 2022, p. 12). Through biographical learning processes, individuals relate to themselves and their environment in new ways and (re)interpret their past experiences. This not only produces what is called a "biography" from a social-constructivist perspective but also creates the basis for future experiences (Dausien, 2008). Biographical learning is thus socially structured and at the same time structures new experiences.

While this perspective on lifelong learning is compelling, it remains focused primarily on individual agency. Although it acknowledges the socio-historical context of learning, this dimension is not fully developed theoretically. To better capture the social aspects of biographical learning, incorporating practical theoretical perspectives offers a valuable expansion. Following the ideas of Alkemeyer and Buschmann (2017), learning can be understood as the acquisition of "play-ability" – the ability to participate in practices, for example, practices in higher education. Play-ability is not a given for everyone; it depends on specific prerequisites and must be cultivated. Acquiring play-ability is especially challenging for learners with a cultural distance from the university and its norms, such as first-generation students. The concept of being "enabled to participate in practice" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 22) underscores that learners are produced as legitimate subjects through their participation in specific social practices: "people (trans)form themselves via their engagement as recognisable subjects and cultivate their play-ability by learning to comply with the normative standards unfolding in praxis" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 9). In light of these considerations, biographical learning in higher education presents itself as a bundle of subjectivating processes of becoming a student.

RESEARCHING EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To explore what and how first-generation students learn during their transition to university, I draw on data produced for my PhD project: "Doing Class Transitions: First-Generation Students in Austria and Germany" (2019–2025). This qualitative research project aimed to analyse transitions to higher education from the subjective perspective of first-generation students.

Study Design, Sampling, and Case Selection

The sample was initially constructed through purposive sampling, targeting students whose parents had not attended university. This approach ensured that all participants were first-generation students. At the same time, the sample was developed step by step in accordance with the principles of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), allowing for increasing heterogeneity in age, gender, social backgrounds, and educational trajectories as data collection progressed. These dimensions were not predetermined but rather emerged as relevant through ongoing analysis and were integrated through theoretical sampling. The initial call for participation was disseminated via social media, through colleagues' university courses, and in my own teaching.

The final sample included 24 study participants, aged between 19 and 50. They were enrolled in Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral programs in the humanities or social sciences (e.g., Sociology, Education Studies, Musicology, English Studies). In view of this focus on specific disciplines, the study acknowledges that some fields are culturally more distant from working-class backgrounds than others (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Data production took place at four different universities in Austria and Germany. The inclusion of institutions from two countries with distinct local contexts was not intended to enable systematic cross-national comparison. Rather, it aimed to capture the diversity of first-generation students' experiences and to highlight how their learning trajectories – despite varying institutional and national settings – reveal commonalities that point to structurally similar patterns across borders. The four selected universities together represent a broad spectrum of academic traditions, student populations, and regional dynamics within the German-speaking higher education landscape.

Biographical Methods and Analytical Procedures

Guided by the premise that exploring life histories can provide valuable insights into social conditions (Bron & Thunborg, 2017), 17 biographical-narrative interviews were conducted, and 7 autobiographical written accounts were produced. While biographical interviews have been widely recognised as a sustainable method for understanding student experiences in higher education (West et al., 2014), written narratives offer another valuable means of gaining access to students' lived experiences. Both methods focus on the generation of narratives and are oriented towards the relevance of the study participants.

The interviews began with the prompt, "Please share your life story". As the interviewer, I intervened as little as possible; further themes (such as starting university, memories of peer or teacher interactions) were not prompted by a fixed questionnaire but followed what the participants had already shared. The duration of the interviews varied from one to three hours and they were transcribed verbatim.

The participants who chose to write about their educational experiences or contribute diary-like entries were given the flexibility to structure their writing according to their preferences. The autobiographical written accounts ranged from 5 to 20 pages.

In line with the sampling strategy and the logic of data collection, the analysis followed the principles of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), drawing on empirically grounded coding procedures to identify emerging themes and develop conceptual categories.

To ensure compliance with ethical standards, all institutions and places are anonymised, and all participating students as well as mentioned third parties are assigned pseudonyms in the presentation of findings.

SITES OF EXPLORATION: EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN AUSTRIA AND GERMANY

In Germany and Austria, after completing primary school at around age 10, students are typically tracked into different secondary school types based on academic performance and teacher recommendations: the general secondary school (*Mittelschule*) and the academic track (*Gymnasium*). While attending a *Gymnasium* leads to a school-leaving certificate qualifying for university (*Abitur* in Germany or *Matura* in Austria), *Mittelschulen* offer a mix of vocational and academic orientations. As previous research has shown, this early tracking contributes significantly to the reproduction of social inequality (Becker & Lauterbach, 2008).

Higher education in Austria and Germany is characterised by the absence of tuition fees at public universities. Despite the low-threshold financial access compared to other countries, first-generation students remain underrepresented at universities in both countries (Hauschildt et al., 2024), suggesting that factors beyond cost – such as social and cultural dynamics – continue to shape university participation and influence who pursues and stays in higher education (Lessky et al., 2021; Müller & Klein, 2023). These disparities indicate that financial accessibility alone does not guarantee educational equity and call for a more nuanced exploration of educational transitions in relation to social justice.

TWO CASE STUDIES: MARIE AND CHIARA'S UNLIKELY PATHS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

The in-depth analysis presented in this article draws on two case studies; however, the findings were discussed and validated in dialogue with the broader sample. In line with the methodological approach, the selection of these two cases was guided by theoretical considerations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They represent maximally contrasting cases within the overall sample, enabling a nuanced exploration of the range and variation within first-generation students' biographical learning. The comparison of their experiences reveals structural dimensions and points to generalisable patterns in the learning trajectories of first-generation students. Before turning to the analysis of their narratives, the educational pathways of both protagonists will be briefly outlined.

Marie Schmidt

Marie Schmidt grew up with her younger sister in a medium-sized town in southern Germany. At the time of the interview, she was 26 years old and nearing the completion of her bachelor's degree in education studies at an Austrian university. Her mother completed an apprenticeship and now works as a foreign language correspondent. During her childhood, Marie had limited contact with her late father, whose life was marked by frequent job changes, long periods of unemployment, and alcoholism.

As the first in her family to attend university, Marie's transition to higher education was challenging. Her educational journey was burdened not only with feelings of insecurity and being overwhelmed, but also with a lack of familial support. Rather than receiving encouragement, Marie found herself having to defend her career choices against her mother's expectations of what a "right" or "appropriate" life course should look like (such as focusing on finding a husband).

Marie attended a *Gymnasium* with a focus on social sciences, placing her on the academic track toward university. Despite this formal positioning, she experienced a mixture of feeling overwhelmed yet also of being in the right place. Her enthusiasm for the education and psychology courses grew, as both the subject matter and the teachers' recognition conveyed a sense of belonging and academic fit. This ultimately led to her decision to pursue the *Abitur*, a qualification granted at the end of secondary education comparable to A-levels or a Baccalaureate Diploma, with the intention of studying something related to education. After a longer stay abroad doing voluntary work, she initially applied for social work programs in Germany but reconsidered her choice when she wasn't accepted. Instead, she moved to an Austrian city to live with a relative, partly as a way to distance herself from her hometown ("I just didn't want to go back home").

Upon arriving in Austria, Marie explored various degree programmes and universities that aligned with her interest in education. Studying at a teacher training college was not an option for her, both because she had no interest in becoming a teacher and because she was deterred by the entrance exams. Her choice of study is thus shaped by a mix of social, local, and institutional conditions as well as specific hopes tied to the idea of studying, for example, a longing for self-determination.

Chiara Russo

Chiara Russo is 22 years old and in the 7th semester of her bachelor's degree in educational studies at a university in a large German city. She was born in Germany to Italian parents, who had migrated as young adults for economic reasons (*Gastarbeiter*). Both parents completed their secondary education in Germany and later pursued apprenticeships. Chiara's mother, who initially worked as a waitress, is now a fitness trainer, while her father is a hotel manager. Her parents separated when she was young, leaving her relationship with her father tenuous – he is largely absent from her narrative. Chiara was primarily raised by her mother, alongside her brother, who is 11 years older.

Chiara's educational biography is marked by constant negotiation between her mother's expectations, institutional pressures, and her own aspirations. These competing forces become especially clear in a critical moment in the German education system: after primary school, Chiara was recommended for a non-academic track, but her mother insisted she follow an academic track and attend a *Gymnasium*. Once enrolled, Chiara was left with the burden of navigating the path chosen for her, a challenge she describes as "fighting her way through". The pressure to succeed weighs heavily on her. Chiara perceives herself as responsible for securing her family's social mobility, making her educational success more of a collective mission than a personal journey.

After graduating from high school, Chiara initially opted against university, despite her mother's objections. She completed a voluntary social year in a nursery to gain direction, followed by an internship in a daycare centre. After a few months, however, she decided to take a degree in education instead of the vocational training to become a nursery school-teacher she had originally planned. She justifies her choice of study logically: since both an apprenticeship and a bachelor's degree take three years, it made more sense to invest that time in a degree, which would offer broader career options beyond becoming an early childhood educator.

In both Maria's and Chiara's cases, the transition to university is far from linear. Statistically, neither was likely to pursue higher education, and each faced distinct challenges. The two narratives reflect different trajectories of social mobility: Marie exemplifies a form of upward mobility that diverges from her family's generational path, as she must push back against her mother's expectation to enter the workforce and start a family immediately after school. In contrast, Chiara's educational journey builds on her family's prior social advancements, with university attendance being an anticipated step. Although both students navigate expectations imposed by others, the nature of these expectations differs fundamentally. Their different pathways to university reveal how becoming a student involves navigating classed norms and inherited expectations.

RESULTS: PRACTICES OF BECOMING

Marie's and Chiara's processes of becoming a student are not only embedded in a generational context[1] but can also be decoded as a specific social practice. The analysis points to biographical learning being situated in the following concrete practices of becoming a student: (1) practices of peer support, (2) practices of engagement, and (3) practices of pedagogical accompaniment.

Practices of Peer Support

The process of becoming a student is not an isolated journey but one deeply embedded in networks of relationships and carried out collectively. Biographical learning unfolds within these social practices of transitioning to university *together*. Particularly peers – fellow students – who are also navigating access to higher education play a key role in these practices. The transition to university also marks the entry into the collective subject of a first-year student. Through Chiara's biographical narrative, we can reconstruct how peer interactions contribute to her becoming a student, highlighting the collective nature of biographical learning during the transition to university. When I asked Chiara in the interview about her first day at university, she responded with a memory of the orientation week for first-year students:

> I met other people that evening, and then we went on to another place. We had never spoken before, but all of a sudden, we connected and formed friendships right away. I associate that with my first days, my first day, and my first week, yes. (Chiara)

Chiara extends the timeframe from her first day at university to encompass the entire first week, which symbolises the beginning of her academic journey. For her, what holds subjective significance is not merely the specific courses or initial content of her studies, but rather

1 While a detailed discussion of these findings lies beyond the scope of this article, they are explored further in Petrik (2025). The results highlight the contradictory negotiations of educational, career, and study choices within generational relations of class, migration, and gender.

the intense development of social relationships during this critical transition. This social web unfolds, at least peripherally, within the framework of the orientation week, an event designed to facilitate entry into the university community. By building social networks, she establishes connections that provide a sense of security and stability during her transition to university. These emerging relationships play a crucial role in her biographical learning, as participating in collective peer practices, such as going out for drinks, enables her to become a student. The specific constellations of these social arrangements can be explored through Chiara's response when asked about other memories of the start of her studies:

> The campus in the [district] is so huge, and at first, it was all about figuring out how everything worked. Where are the buildings? Getting to know the people. Also, the lectures! I still remember making plans with others for lectures, like, 'Where are you sitting?' 'I'm here.' And 'Oh, I'm running a bit late, could you save me a seat?' – things like that. (Chiara)

Building relationships with fellow students emerges as the primary mode of organisation during Chiara's transition into university life. This supportive environment not only helps her integrate into a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008) but also enables her to become a student. Chiara learns by adopting the perspectives of fellow students, as they collectively navigate the spheres of higher education, identifying room to manoeuvre, and both adapt and bend the rules of the field. Her biographical learning process is situated within the interplay of socialising acts; it is "located in interactions of praxis that bring novices to possess collectively shared knowledge that is created in these very same interactions" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 12). By participating in these practices of becoming a collective subject, students mutually exchange "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1966) about university and therefore teach each other how to be a student. As first-year students, they participate in one another's becoming, forming a shared social practice of biographical learning.

Marie's narrative shifts the focus from institutional settings to everyday contexts that shape the transition to university. Peer collectives beyond campus play a key role, as seen in her student flatshare, where one flatmate also studies education. "The flat" becomes a meaningful space in her process of becoming:

> On the one hand, it was a kind of safety net, like a real anchor for me. On the other hand, I also felt a bit insecure, like ... that they were somehow ahead of me. That they were just better at certain things than I was, especially academic things or university-related stuff. They were much quicker with things, things were much clearer to them – like how to approach assignments, how to handle coursework ... and they also helped me. (Marie)

Over time, Marie's roommates become a biographically meaningful "anchor", offering emotional support and a sense of belonging. Yet her narrative also reveals the ambivalence of peer relations: while her flatmates help her navigate university life, she often feels academically inferior, relying on their guidance to manage assignments they seem to handle with ease.

For first-generation students, the sense of community developed in collective practices acts as a vital system of care. Their habitual distance from academia heightens their reliance on relationship-building practices. Consequently, those who have ascended the educational ladder must work together to cultivate and leverage social capital, compensating for any lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Practices of Engagement

Practices of engagement – defined as taking action within the context of studying – emerge as a second meaningful social practice in which biographical learning takes place. The biographical phase of studying opens up new avenues for exploration, manifesting in specific study practices.

When asked about her early memories of studying during the interview, Marie provided a detailed and evaluative account of her various impressions of the academic world. She views the university as a space that offers her both security and structure while simultaneously fostering opportunities for self-efficacy and experimentation. In this context, she frequently talked about her "interpretation group", referring to a specific practice of research commonly employed in qualitative social research, which emphasises cooperative engagement with empirical material in an ideally egalitarian setting in order to analyse data. Under the banner of the "interpretation group", Marie meets regularly with her peers to discuss interviews or observation protocols they conducted for their student projects. The starting point for the group was a course in which students worked in small groups to collect and analyse data, but as time went by, the group became independent. For her, the interpretation group is the "coolest" and "most exciting" part of studying. Marie's narrative reveals that it is not a specific subject or method that fuels her enthusiasm for her studies, but rather a particular form of collective action:

> So, in terms of the activity, where I said: 'Okay, THIS is research work,' it was our data interpretation group. Like: 'Oh yeah, that's how it can be.' Research can also be like this. You're not always just ... sitting alone in front of the laptop feeling overwhelmed [laughs], but it can also be REALLY exciting, and it can also be really ... playful and light ... that feeling of ease. Discovering something new, exchanging ideas about things. It can be something social, not just lonely research. [...] That's what it's like to really work as a researcher. And that is something 'official,' so to speak. […] People latch onto what you say and develop it further, like 'Ah okay, what you're saying now triggers a thought for me' or 'Now I see it.' (Marie)

The "real research" conducted within the interpretation group contrasts sharply with the abstract and lonesome experiences of academic work Marie had encountered thus far, which shaped a particular image of research. This preconception is now challenged and refined through the experience within the interpretation group. Her use of the term "official" highlights that the interpretation group is not just a casual circle of friends – it carries an institutional connection that is crucial to its significance as a "niche" at university. Their research practice is "real" because Marie actively participates; she does not simply observe others conducting research but engages in it herself, moving beyond mere "practicing" to "doing". The shift from *learning about* research to *actively engaging* in it marks a transition from passivity to activity, illustrating a process of biographical learning where new forms of meaning are reflexively created over time. Two key aspects are central to this learning process: its pleasurable nature and its collective dimension. Both elements enable Marie to derive personal meaning and experience empowerment through her engagement in these practices.

The interpretation group can be understood as a situated, affective practice, where Marie gains recognition and can experience herself as part of a collective. Her interpretations, analyses, and academic contributions are acknowledged and valued, fostering a sense of belonging to the university. For Marie, this group becomes a biographical space of possibilities, where she develops "play-ability" and progresses in her process of becoming a student. Through her "engagement as a recognizable subject", she not only learns the rules of the field "unfolding in praxis" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 9), but these experiences also shape her future learning within the university context:

> That was the moment when I thought: 'Okay, maybe it wouldn't be so far-fetched to go into research.' Before that, I was like: 'Yeah, no.' It just felt too lonely for me, and I didn't think I had enough interaction with people. I didn't see myself as someone who analyses a lot and … I just didn't think I was a researcher [laughter]. It sounds silly, but that's how I felt. So, that was a really cool experience for me. (Marie)

In the interpretation group, Marie can experiment and cautiously envision new possibilities for her future. Her learning process seems tied to a specific social context: her biographical self-construction shifts from someone who felt disconnected from research to someone who now sees it as not "so far-fetched to go into research". This shift is deeply rooted in the practice of engagement, which forms and transforms both Marie's past and future experiences. Through this process, she gains confidence in her abilities, reflects on her experiences, and redefines her relationship with academic work. The interpretation group provides a space where her self-perception evolves, emphasising that biographical learning is a socially embedded process shaped by collective practices of becoming active. Trying her hand at being a researcher takes on special significance in light of Marie's social background. As a first-generation student, she does not have a script to follow – no "blueprint" for an academic trajectory. She must carve out her own path, developing a biographical "template" as she navigates this unfamiliar terrain.

Chiara's narrative shows that practices of engagement can also unfold beyond academic skill acquisition. She reflects on the end of her first semester, offering a glimpse behind the scenes of everyday student life:

> Most of the time we were busier with each other than actually listening to the lecture – but that's also something I remember quite fondly. And I remember at the end of the semester, I planned a weekend trip with a fellow student I'd met on the very first day – we'd become instant friends. We actually booked it during a lecture – train, Airbnb, everything within 45 minutes. It felt a bit rebellious to do that – but also very cool. So, lectures in the first semester were definitely an exciting experience. (Chiara)

Chiara's narrative illustrates how becoming active as a student can also unfold through informal practices of engagement: learning how to play along with – and occasionally bend – the unspoken rules of the university setting. Her story of planning a spontaneous trip during a lecture with a peer she bonded with on the very first day underscores how learning to inhabit the social world of the university is not limited to academic skill acquisition. It also involves creating moments of belonging, which serve as subtle yet meaningful practices of becoming. However, the scene also opens the door to *dis*engagement and highlights the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory experiences of first-generation students.

Practices of Pedagogical Accompaniment

Practices of pedagogical accompaniment, such as support or mentoring, constitute another site for biographical learning. Students not only learn by incorporating the perspectives of established members of the field – such as professors, teachers, or instructors – but also learn by engaging in social practices of recognition. These interactions serve as an "act of self-assurance" (Alheit, 2022, p. 11), shaping their paths as legitimate members of the field. For instance, Marie's biographical learning is anchored in the mentoring provided by her lecturer "Daniel". By supervising her research report, he plays a crucial role in shaping her process of becoming a student. Unlike the stereotypical professor image she had before, he doesn't present himself with that traditional, formal "professor" attitude, as she describes it in the interview. Instead, he comes across as open and approachable. In the interview, Marie recounts:

> I found it really overwhelming, but I talked to Daniel, the seminar leader, about it a lot. He gave me a lot of feedback and took away many of my insecurities. Somehow, I got the feeling like … OK, he's an insider; he knows how these processes work. Talking to him gave me a bit of orientation. (Marie)

Similar to the collective practices with peers, the social interactions with Daniel ease Marie's feelings of insecurity. Not only does she receive explicit feedback and acquires propositional academic knowledge about research, but by "talking to him", she learns practical knowledge as well, for example, how to navigate university in a more secure way. In the shared social practice of working on her research report, she gradually adopts the perspective of her lecturer and supervisor. In a process of biographical learning, she "corrects" her perspective on herself and her academic work through his eyes and starts "to abide by the shared conventions of the practice" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 14), for example, by learning that uncertainty, challenge, and even failure are not uncommon when doing research. More than just formal teaching, such practices of pedagogical accompaniment[2] describe an ongoing, relational process in which senior members of the field (e.g., professors, but also experienced peers) lay the foundation for appropriating both academic content and the unwritten rules of the university, thus contributing to becoming a student. Marie's account of her experiences with Daniel also give insight into how her perception of research undergoes transformation in these interactions:

> From my conversations with him, when he shared his experiences with research, it changed my understanding. I realised, 'Oh, no, it doesn't have to be done this way or that way.' And somehow … it changed my image a bit of what it means to do research. (Marie)

Marie's preconceived notion of what research "should" look like is challenged through her interactions and guidance from a knowledgeable authority at the university. Similar to her experience in the interpretation group, this process exemplifies learning that extends beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge. In a reflexive way, Marie relates differently to the world around her, reshaping not only her understanding of research but also her role within it.

Daniel, who the student familiarly refers to by his first name, acts as a mentor who legitimises her belonging within the academic field, affirming Marie's status as a member of the university. His attitude seems relevant in this context, because he deviates from the typical professorial habitus, sharing his own vulnerabilities and insecurities, which disrupts the *illusio* of the academic field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By appearing to be an unconventional university teacher and allowing her to creatively combine methods and theories, Daniel may offer Marie alternative ways of relating to the university, outside the traditional norms of the institutional habitus. This is particularly crucial for Marie, whose habitus was not shaped in a formally educated, middle-class milieu.

Another dimension of pedagogical accompaniment emerges in Chiara Russo's account. Although she speaks appreciatively of inspiring lecturers, her narrative contains no concrete example of direct interaction with teaching staff. Even when explicitly prompted by the interviewer, she is unable to recall a single such encounter:

2 The term "accompaniment" (rather than "mentoring") has been chosen to emphasise that not all shared social practices with senior members of the field can be considered supportive. Nonetheless, these interactions still significantly shape learning processes (see, e.g., Petrik, in press).

> Interviewer: Were there moments when you actually spoke with any of them?
>
> Chiara: During the course or outside of it?
>
> Interviewer: Either – outside as well.
>
> Chiara: Mh, nothing specific comes to mind right now.

This absence is revealing. It highlights how many first-generation students may never find themselves in a position to establish pedagogical relationships with lecturers or other academic staff – not only due to their own habitual dispositions, but also as a result of the structural conditions of the mass university, which seldom fosters or permits such interactions.

CONCLUSIONS: LEARNING AS BECOMING

The analysis shows that learning in transitions is situated in a network of social practices, shaping relations of belonging and opening the space for habitual transformations. These include practices of peer support, engagement, and pedagogical accompaniment. But *what* exactly do first-generation students learn when transitioning to university?

First-generation students primarily learn the "feel for" and "rules of the game" (Lareau et al., 2016) within the academic context. They acquire what Alkemeyer & Buschmann (2017) call "play-ability" (p. 121), which they cannot inherit from their family but rather develop by creating new experiences within collective social practices shared with peers, pedagogues, or other actors within the university context. This learning extends beyond academic skills or research techniques to include norms, images, and conventions specific to university life. While the practices identified in this study are not exclusive to first-generation students, they take on particular significance in their biographical learning processes. The recognition they receive is more precarious, and the risks of failure more present, making socially mediated practices of authorisation and legitimation within the academic field crucial for navigating their transitions and sustaining their "becoming" within it.

As students embody the ability to "play along", they undergo biographical transformations that also release empowering forces. By recognising the interconnectedness of biographical learning and academic content (e.g., research practices or theoretical concepts), these findings align with Ives and Castillo-Montoya's (2020) conclusion that such integration can contribute to "self-growth" and "community development" (p. 168). The potential for these transformations within learning also relates to the higher education context: its "niches" (such as self-organised research groups or peer events) allow for reflexive spaces and new constructions of meanings to be developed.

Notably, it is less the influence of individual pedagogues than the space and time the university offers that enables new experiences, shifting roles, and the building of communities and relationships. The availability of "niches" both within and beyond the institution proves vital in this regard. Silva et al. (2024) reached similar conclusions on the relevance of extra-class spaces and interactive peer-learning in their study of a youth and adult education course in Brazil, underscoring the broader relevance of these findings across different contexts.

But *how* do first-generation students learn in transitions to higher education? Through shared practices of recognition at university – whether with peers, pedagogues, or through engagement with theories and research practices – they come to experience themselves in relation to the academic field and gradually as legitimate participants in higher education (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008). Therefore, first-generation students learn by becoming part of the university field in ways that involve being seen, acknowledged, and recognised (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017). When transitioning to university, all students are impelled to position themselves within the academic field. For first-generation students, however, this process involves overcoming additional barriers, as their place is neither assumed nor inherited but marked by struggle and uncertainty (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay, 2017). Biographical learning carries the potential of transforming doubts, insecurities, and a sense of alienation rooted in one's social class background (Phillips et al., 2020; Romito, 2020).

Nevertheless, there are aspects that have not been fully addressed in this study. First, the paper focused on experiences within higher education contexts. It would be worthwhile, in future studies, to focus more on biographical learning in everyday life contexts, such as political organising, communities or places of upbringing. Secondly, the focus on transformation, as presented in the theoretical framework of this study, carries the risk of overlooking struggle and neglecting mechanisms of exclusion. Lastly, the article draws on the fine-grained analysis of only two selected cases, emphasising depth over representativeness.

Despite these limitations, the biographical perspective adopted in this study has proven fruitful for understanding the complexity of learning processes in educational transitions. Biographical approaches allow us to trace how students actively make sense of their trajectories – often in tension with inherited dispositions or structural constraints – and thus offer valuable insights into the lived realities of first-generation students. By attending to the relational and situated nature of learning, such methodological perspectives help move beyond simplified narratives of success, failure, or adaptation that still dominate much of the existing research. The latter often conceptualises learning through a cognitive or achievement-oriented lens (Jehangir et al., 2012; Vuong et al., 2010), focusing on individual performance or quantifiable notions of development.

This study, by contrast, suggests an alternative perspective: the empowerment described by first-generation students is not tied to conventional notions of study success, but rather emerges through biographical and reflexive learning processes that are relational, situated, and grounded in everyday practices.

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