

**THIS NARRATIVE INQUIRY UNFOLDED ALONGSIDE THREE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS** at a large, research-intensive, western Canadian university to understand how echoes of systemic childhood poverty reverberate through their experiences as they compose lives on the university landscape. While countries such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and to a much lesser extent Canada, are adopting “widening access” and equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) policies, researchers often ignore the very poor, instead focusing on the experiences of working-class students (Ivana, 2017; Lehman, 2013). Research that does exist assumes a uniform effect of poverty and uniform experiences on higher educational (HE) landscapes (Aries & Seider, 2005; Krause & Armitage, 2014), which reduces students’ lives to a single story (Adichie, 2009). The varied needs of students whose lives have been shaped by abject childhood poverty are not being adequately addressed or reflected in current educational policies (Nesbit, 2006).

**I ENGAGED IN IN-DEPTH RESEARCH CONVERSATIONS** with Sarah, Margaret Rose, and Mildred over a nine-month period, seeking to understand their lived experiences narratively; that is, over time, social relations, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants self-identified with their subjective definitions of poverty. Narrative accounts were negotiated between participants and the researcher.

**THIS INQUIRY MAKES VISIBLE** how profoundly silenced “poverty-class” students’ lived experiences are on the university landscape and within *widening access* and *widening participation* to university. Administrators’, advisors’, and professors’ *belief in* participants (Elbow, 2008) was a game changer and crucial for their survival in university. Second, while poverty is *seen in a box*, systemic childhood poverty cannot be erased from participants’ embodied selves; that is, childhood poverty shapes an entire life (Adair, 2003). Third, participants lived in the shadows and margins of university landscapes because of a fear being *outed* and *ousted* if their origins become visible. Yet, participation in this research was an act of resistance to being Othered. As universities grapple with creating sustainable EDI policies and pedagogies, “poverty-class” students must become a key source of knowledge in shaping socially just policies and pedagogies. These students need to become part of the discussion rather than the object of discussion (Adair, 2003).

# echoes of poverty

composing lives  
in higher education



[the research  
project]

exploring how growing up in  
persistent childhood poverty  
shapes experiences in university

## LET'S TALK

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