Barriers, support, and resilience of prospective first-in-family university students: Australian high school educators' perspective

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Abstract
First-in-family (FiF) university students—or first generation students—are recognised to have disadvantages and lack social and cultural capital compared with non-FiF students. The challenges FiF students encounter at university are well understood, however, their journey begins while still in high school. We call this high school cohort prospective FiF (PFiF) students and young people whose parents never attended university. This qualitative study explored the perspectives of 10 high school educators from Melbourne, Australia about the barriers and supports PFiF students encounter as they navigate the path to university. Participants identified that family inexperience, unsupportive attitudes at home and at school, lack of financial capacity and invisibility represented barriers. However, participants also explained that PFiF students can be resilient and motivated, especially when combined with appropriate support from schools, family, and university programmes. The findings highlight the challenges for PFiF and bring much-needed attention to their challenges and needs in the early transition to higher education.

KEYWORDS
barriers to higher education, educational aspirations, first generation students, first-in-family
1 | INTRODUCTION

The path from high school to university might be different for students and depends on factors, like their interests, their social networks, academic success, and most importantly, whether they are the first in their family to attend university. First-in-family (FiF) university students (or first generation students) are students at university that have never had a parent attend university (O'Shea, 2017). Prospective first-in-family students are more likely than continuing generation students to belong to at least one equity group including Indigenous, with many students belonging to more than one group and attending lower socioeconomic status (SES) schools, (Patfield et al., 2021). FiF university students therefore are more likely than continuing generation students to encounter barriers by way of access and participation as early as high school, and educators can provide more information about this experience.

The demand for higher education has increased as professions and promotions require higher qualifications (McKillip et al., 2012). However, not all students have equal access, knowledge, support or capacity to navigate the university transition (Frigo et al., 2007). When deciding pathways, FiF students may lack resources and experiences, and may not have the social networks of their high SES peers (L. Smith, 2011). Other factors could include low educational aspirations, lack of financial resources and low awareness of the benefits of higher education (Chesters & Watson, 2013). Previous research has focused on students who are already at university therefore understanding the barriers and supports that high school students experience, whether or not they ultimately decide to pursue higher education is also very important. Though not all will go on to university, for the purpose of this study, high school students whose parents have not attended university will be referred to as prospective first-in-family (PFiF) students. This study will explore the perspectives of educators who work with PFiF students, to better understand the barriers and supports they have to get to university. Teachers are in a prime position to report on their experiences working with PFiF students and offer insights about how to best support them.

1.1 | FiF student context at university

In Australia, young adults who have at least one university-educated parent are 4.3 times more likely to attend university compared to young people whose parents have less education, and in England the likelihood is 6.3 times and the United States 6.8 times higher (Marginson, 2015). FiF university students struggle in nearly every measurable way throughout their university experience compared with non-FiF, including: less knowledge about university, a lower sense of belonging, have lower academic engagement and achievement, and have lower completion rates (Luzeckyj et al., 2017; O'Shea, 2016; Spengen, 2013). Much of the literature in Australia is with FiF students already at university, and studies of high school students in the US focus predominantly on minority and low SES students.

1.2 | Social capital theory and prospective FiF

Social capital is a concept that assists the understanding of both barriers to higher education and factors that support PFiF. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) first coined this term to address the inequity at different levels of society, and it includes networks of connections, information, and resources that increase the chances of continuing education. Some young people in Australia grow up with the path to university clearly laid out and embedded in their experience, while for PFiF and others going to university is a contingent choice, depending on practical, personal, and situational factors (Patfield et al., 2021). Non-FiF students are more likely to acquire “hot knowledge” about university from social capital, while FiF students are more likely to use “cold knowledge” about university, which comes from websites, recruiters, and lacks context about what university is actually like, how to navigate the
challenges, and manage transitions (King et al., 2015). Therefore, the onus is on the student to adjust to the existing education system, rather than the system accommodating diverse students, highlighting the way the system favours non-FiF students.

1.3 | Barriers on the road to university for prospective FiF students

Family background and lack of parental support hinder academic success and the future pathway to higher education for PFiF students. Lack of parental education can limit the amount of guidance FiF university students receive and impact a sense of poor preparedness (O'Shea, 2015a). Families, in some cases, may devalue the importance of education and hamper the higher education aspirations of their children (O'Shea, 2015b; Spengen, 2013). However, more is known about the barriers reported by FiF students already at university than those just starting their university pathway.

The path to higher education starts long before the first day of university. Teachers and educators have tremendous experience and can share more about the barriers and supports available to students transitioning to university long before the end of high school. Even as participation at university has improved and diversified, there now exists an illusion of choice. Patfield et al. (2021) identified two very different patterns at Australian secondary schools: those where the decision to attend university is an embedded choice versus a contingent choice. At embedded schools, with higher SES and more university-educated parents, the path to university is clearly laid out as the default, with university being an expectation and something that one has to do. These students just need to decide exactly which university to go to and what course to pursue. However, the future for students in schools where university is a contingent choice, predominantly low SES areas and low rates of parental education, does not come with certainty. Even high-achieving students are unsure of their exact pathway, and higher education is just one option. University depends on life factors and financial capability, with the decision to pursue higher education left to sometime in the vague future.

Some schools are committed to providing excellent university counselling for students and promote equitable access; other schools have a school climate where providing support is not perceived as a priority and students are not expected to continue to higher education (Hill, 2008; Roderick et al., 2011; Schneider, 2007). Some minority students report outright racism and discouragement from teachers (Howard, 2003). Students who are from schools characterised as contingency choice feel that they lack experience and information about university, and the decision to pursue a higher education is hard (Patfield et al., 2021).

There is the recognition that there are many barriers PFiF and FiF are likely to encounter, including ethnicity, language, structural racism, education and social policy, expense of supporting education, and geography. These are beyond the scope of social and cultural capital and are not within the teacher and educator perspective that is the focus of this study.

1.4 | Overcoming barriers

Successful educational outcomes can be achieved if there are crucial social and capital supports from parents and teachers (Bowen & Brewster, 2004). Students with supportive circles have lower perceptions of barriers as increased social support enhances their confidence in education and their beliefs in overcoming obstacles (Ali et al., 2005). Schools can support the educational aspirations of students and are an important source of counselling and support. In an analysis of a sample of diverse urban American high schools, teachers reported their schools had a range “College-going climates,” measured by educators’ efforts to encourage college attendance, providing information and resources, and helping students navigate the application process (Roderick et al., 2011). Students from high schools with a more supportive college-going climate were more likely to apply and attend university.
Teachers increase the value that PFfF students place on education through social capital, by developing their knowledge, skills and self-belief, students also realise the importance of reaching out and interacting with adults in academic and professional contexts (Schwartz et al., 2016). Mentoring programmes close the gap between school culture and a student’s home culture by transferring social capital through knowledge and information, and cultural capital through behaviours and attitudes fostering academic success (B. Smith, 2007).

Students themselves might have strengths to overcome disadvantage in high school and transition successfully to university. Personal attributes that disadvantaged students have to succeed relate to perseverance, resilience, determination and motivation (Luzeckyj et al., 2017). Motivation, is a large factor in overcoming barriers and studies indicate that despite barriers, intrinsically motivated students are more likely to succeed (Gately et al., 2017; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). PFfF students frequently perform well academically in high school, indicating they possess both the learning skills and the motivation to succeed at university (Spengen, 2013). Consequently, it can be summarised that for PFfF students, their personal motivation and resilience helps alleviate barriers and when combined with supports from teachers, families and community, effective early intervention transition programmes may ensure a successful transition to university.

1.5 | Aim of the study

Literature is available on Australian FiF university students in their first year of university, however, there is limited research on the barriers and supports available to PFfF students in high school, when it comes to the lead-up to enrolling at university. This study explores the valuable perspective of high school teachers and educators with years of experience with diverse students and their families. Ultimately, educators are in an excellent position to be able to make a positive difference for high school students considering further education and face barriers to university and therefore an understanding of their experiences is crucial.

The research explores the following questions from the perspective of high school teachers and educators: (1) What are the barriers and challenges on the road to university for PFfF high school students? (2) How do schools, parents, universities, and students’ strengths support navigation of the road to university for PFfF?

2 | METHODOLOGY

The current research uses the social constructionism model of epistemology. This model holds the epistemological view that knowledge and meaningful reality, depend on human practices, and social interactions with others (Crotty, 1998). From the perception of teachers, knowledge depends wholly upon how they understand the reality and the barriers their students face through their social interactions with them. High school teachers through interaction with their students, parents, the school system and their own experiences of university, will also create knowledge about the supports in place to assist PFfF students with successful transition to university.

Social constructionism focuses on the social process of producing or constructing knowledge (Harper, 2012). As the educators reflect on their experiences with young people and families, the researchers search for patterns in their perceptions of barriers and their perception of factors that could successfully assist or hinder a PFfF student’s transition to university. The researchers are very aware that the students’ experiences and perspectives might be different, however educators present different experiences, having worked with a range of young people and having had the university experience themselves. Social constructionism is ideal for understanding how the educators’ experiences involve the cultural, societal, and personal context and their words are not necessarily a window on a phenomenon (Harper, 2012).

By positioning themselves in the research, researchers acknowledge that their own cultural, personal, and historical background shapes their interpretation and therefore interpret findings based on personal experience and
background (Creswell, 2007). Social constructionism enables the researcher to explore from a teacher’s personal perception and the researchers’ own conceptions, the needs of PFIF students through an interpretative process. Again, this situates the research with teachers and acknowledges that students might have a different perspective.

### 2.1 | Participants

Participants were invited to take part in the research based on having current or previous experience with high school education and ten participants were interviewed. All participants had worked with PFIF students in some capacity and many teachers or educators also came from low SES backgrounds. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 65 years ($M = 49$ years). All were born in Australia, except one (Scotland), four had parents born overseas, three participants’ parents were from the UK and one from Ukraine. Teaching experienced ranged from 6 to 25 years ($M = 14.2$ years).

### 2.2 | Procedure

The research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC) (Application ID: HRE20-104). Due to COVID restrictions there was no capacity to recruit directly from schools as the Department of Education (DET) had suspended research in government schools. As the pandemic prevented researchers from approaching teachers directly, multiple individuals within DET who identified as ex teachers and currently working in other education positions were approached to participate. These participants predominantly spent their teaching careers at highly vulnerable, low SES government schools and had at least 5 years of teaching experience. Participants within DET who could not participate in the research forwarded the research information to their teacher contacts within schools and advised them to reach out to the researcher if they were willingness to participate in the research. These new participants in turn forwarded the research to other high school teachers that they thought might be willing to participate. Through snowball sampling five participants who were teachers or educators currently working in the government school system were recruited. These teachers and educators had a range of roles and experiences (including career advisor) were a diverse group with six working in low SES schools and four working in high SES schools.

Participants responded to an introductory email about the research and participant information statements were provided. Interviews were conducted and audio-recorded via zoom with informed consent and participant permission, participants were informed that transcripts would be deidentified to ensure confidentiality. The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 min in duration and were recorded verbatim, they were then transcribed for coding and analysis. The interviews were semi-structured with 10 questions plus some suggested prompts for follow-up.

Some examples of the questions were from your experience with FiF students what do you think are the barriers for PFIF students in achieving their university goals? What are the kinds of family, community, and educator supports available to high school students who would be the first in their family to attend university (should they decide to go)? Though an interview schedule was used, the discussions were open-ended and took direction based on responses to previous questions. The wording and order of some questions were revised after the first two interviews.

### 2.3 | Data analysis

Thematic analysis aims to investigate how people think about different social experiences (Joffe, 2012; Willig, 2013). Thematic analysis allows for data that is processed to be classified according to differences and
similarities and identifies issues that influence the perceptions of participants that can be coded and categorised into themes (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012). Data were analysed using the phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). Coding and categorising were predominantly done through the NVivo software programme (Version 12, QSR International, 2019). In the first stage, Author 1 took time to familiarise themselves with the transcripts, by re-listening to interviews and rereading transcribed interviews, highlighting quotes or points within the transcript that added value to the research. Then, specific components of the transcripts were coded and categorised generally, based on the answers to the interview questions. Coding and categorising transcripts, permitted the examination and discussion around the teachers’ experiences. Author 2 provided feedback and cross-coded selections of the interview transcripts. Theoretical thematic analysis drives the data analysis and this provided an overall rich description of data with some aspects more detailed. General themes were then identified, and checked and reviewed, to capture data relating to the research question and some level of meaning or a patterned response. Codes were revised and modified numerous times until a final distinct and select set of themes and secondary themes were attained. The authors worked on the themes which were defined and named and specific themes relevant to the research question around supports, barriers and successful transitions to university were created. Throughout the analysis process, the authors discussed their biases and positions in relation to the emerging themes. They documented important points to consider as the thematic analysis continued and the final themes were established. After careful selection of both extracts as well as reviewing the research question, a final draft of the findings was produced. Author 1 wrote the first draft and Author 2 revised and produced the final draft.

2.4 | Credibility and rigour: Establishing trustworthiness

The aim of qualitative research is to highlight subjective actions, social contexts and meanings as it is understood, addressing questions to develop an understanding of these meanings (Fossey et al., 2002). Establishing trustworthiness cannot be done on its own, it involves credibility, being confident of the truth in findings, transferability that findings can be applied in other contexts, dependability that findings have consistency, and confirmability that findings are formed by neutrality and not researcher bias or interest (Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility for this study was obtained by maintaining accurate transcripts, preserving meaning by using quotes in the participants’ own words and accurately transcribing the interview data. Transferability was achieved by the researcher’s commitment to ensure that accounts from the participants can be used in other contexts of research into PFIF students.

Dependability and confirmability of findings in this study was established by having regular meetings with peers and supervisors throughout the duration of the research to maximise consistency and evaluate accuracy of the data. It was also established through the phases of thematic analysis where the process to evaluate and understand data was standardised and consistent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Memos were used to track potential influence of biases and researcher positioning, as well as to help place the current research in the context of existing research.

Reflexivity aims to express contexts that shape the research processes and considers the researcher’s perspective around the way that identities and positions impacting the research process (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). By using reflexivity, the researchers were provided with an opportunity to recognise how their experiences and understanding of the world affect the research process (Morrow, 2005). Ongoing reflection regarding the researchers’ associations with participants, the research, the data, the findings and regular discussions allowed for an understanding of values, preconceived expectations, perceptions and beliefs.
3 | FINDINGS

Data analysis identified five primary themes and several secondary relating to perceptions that participants had around barriers, supports and effective transitions for PFiF students. The themes are outlined in Table 1.

3.1 | Barriers

Findings suggest that educators see the disadvantages PFiF students encounter were mostly due to lack of support. Several secondary themes specify the areas they discussed.

3.1.1 | Family inexperience, expectations and value

First, participants perceived that lack of support from families was due to the low value they placed on university, perhaps due to lack of experience and low educational expectations. As Participant 3 explained, "If that experience and exposure to tertiary education is foreign, I suspect it probably does weigh on decision making of students and families. I think a lot of that is the experience."

Participants expressed that in their interactions, most parents believed that a university education was not necessary for success because many parents had the attitude, "hey its ok for me, it'll be ok for them" (Participant 7). Participant 5 noted, "there's this perception from some parents that, 'I didn't need a degree', some of them want the kids to head towards a trade because that's what they did." Many participants reported that parents felt they were being supportive by giving children opportunities to work in their business because, "a lot of them [parents] do really well for themselves but they themselves haven't been there [to university] so they don't understand what else is out there" (Participant 6).

On the other hand, some participants said that some families put unrealistic pressure on students, for instance encouraging university but restricting them to areas of study and the universities they could attend. For example,

| TABLE 1 | Primary and secondary themes |
|---|---|
| **Primary themes** | **Secondary themes** |
| 1. Barriers | a. Family inexperience, expectations and value |
|  | b. Financial constraints and misconceptions |
|  | c. Not worthy of opportunity |
|  | d. Limited visibility—lack of awareness |
| 2. Social and cultural support (family, school, and community) | |
| 3. Perception of students’ individual strengths | |
| 4. A window to university possibilities | a. University programmes and open days |
|  | b. Passive information—set and forget |
| 5. University connections: enhancing the journey | a. Supportive partnerships |
|  | b. Building resilience through mentoring and conversations |
|  | c. Starting early |
Participant 2 said: "It's their mum or their dad that say 'one of you has to be a doctor and if you really, really can't be a doctor you have to be a lawyer.'"

3.1.2 | Financial constraints and misconceptions

Participants perceived that students and their families might be concerned about financial costs associated with university attendance (i.e., transportation, supplies, and less time to work). In Melbourne, there are multiple universities, and nearly all students with family in the metro area would live at home and commute to campus, so other living costs were not mentioned.

In addition to legitimate financial constraints, participants reported that PFIF students and their families had misconceptions around the cost of university. In Australia, domestic students' fees are subsidised by the government and students can easily apply for a low-interest government loan (repayment begins when the individual reaches a certain income threshold following graduation). There was a lack of awareness around these government programmes, scholarships, social welfare (i.e., Centrelink), as most of them "had never heard of the support government gives" and "a lot of them will also think that it was expensive so they couldn't possibly afford to go" (Participant 6).

3.1.3 | Not worthy of opportunity

The third barrier related to participants' perception of the opportunity of university. Participants reported that PFIF students were sometimes viewed as academically incompetent because teachers didn't understand, "where these kids have come from, why some of them can be so negative towards just even being at high school, let alone going on to do anything else" (Participant 6). Participants explained that teachers could be judgemental about a student's ability based on their social class, and unwittingly discouraged students' aspirations. This was exemplified by Participant 8 who said that messages from teachers or schools might make students feel like, "they [are] not worthy of that opportunity or they're not quite academic enough." Teachers "can be a little judgemental sometimes in regard to who they think should and shouldn't apply for uni" (Participant 8).

Some participants reported that some families found it difficult to move higher and lacked the willingness to push their children up the social scale. Parental discouragement was strongly reported by participants as a factor of disadvantage for PFIF students, and some parents might even feel threatened by their children's ambition. For example, Participant 7 explained, "some of our parents they were very possessive of their kids, and they saw them as a possession, and they did not want them to get any higher than they [the parents] did in life."

3.1.4 | Limited visibility—Lack of awareness

Most participants reported a lack of awareness of PFIF students in high schools, and teachers reported being unaware of which of their students came from families without university-educated parents and Participant 2 explained, "so that was for me a little bit embarrassing when I thought about it. I actually don't know which of my kids is in that category." This means teachers lacked an understanding around the needs of PFIF students. However, being aware of the disadvantage they had was relevant as Participant 2 explained:

.... their disadvantage in that they haven't seen anyone in the house go to like a formal education at university and I think, I didn't realise how disadvantaging that would be, but it really is. It's not the norm so therefore their kind of mindset about it is different but also, they don't have realistic expectations of it because they haven't seen it.
Though recognising PFiF was important, there was a fear of stigmatising students. Participant 5 exemplified this by saying, "I'm not going to say to them 'hey, did your mum and dad go to uni?'" but went on to say that if they were identified, "it was going to provide more support, first of all it is that gentle way of working out who these kids are, not making it look like we're just honing in on them and making them look awkward."

### 3.2 Social and cultural support

Participants reported that despite disadvantages, support from families and schools would make an impact on PFiF students. Participants described the perceived instrumental, informational, and emotional support that PFiF students received from family, school and community, as well as building aspirations.

Most families wanted the best for their children, participants said, however, the form of support might be different for parents of PFiF students. As previously discussed, some parents saw little value in university; but naturally other parents see significant value. Families provided encouragement by using the knowledge they had and using their personal networks, for example: "They've got higher-educated family or friends, so they can get encouragement, in family discussions, they'll get information from their friend's mum who said they did this or whatever" (Participant 10). As Participant 9 summarised:

> If it's a first-generation immigrant family, children might have been born here, highly aspirational families, that see the value of education and support their children even though they may not always be able to support their children with, the school work and the language, they impress on the children the value of education.

School support was identified as a significant source of instrumental support. Most schools had career programmes and connected students to financial advice. Some participants reported being mentors to PFiF students and assisted them in understanding what they needed to do. Participants who had grown up low-SES and were FiF students themselves, facilitated students' aspirations by sharing information and their past university experiences. As Participant 2 explained:

> At the start of the year I offer them the fact that I did go to university and I was the first person to do that in my family and I am from a low SES background too, so I kind of talk about that stuff as far as having good aspirations.

Participants said that the best emotional support they could offer was ensuring students knew that they would always be supportive and give advice even after high school. "I think that's where probably our system falls down a bit" explained Participant 10 when describing the sense of frustration that the education system was structured as such that there was no opportunity to track past students.

### 3.3 Perception of student strengths

Despite setbacks PFiF students have an inner strength, participants reported. Even with limited support, participants knew students who were aspirational, hardworking, resilient, and motivated. "I think they're different because they don't assume that they're just going to go to university, that they really do have to work hard for it all or they do recognise that's something" (Participant 8). Participants reported that these students got up and pushed forward repeatedly and navigated the barriers:
...a number of first in family kids have experienced a lot, a number of them are traumatised, they have the resilience to fight through, so when something gets really hard, they don't give up necessarily the first time, they persist because that's what they've done all their lives, its engrained within them. (Participant 9)

Participants also said that the driving force in wanting to achieve a higher education for PFiF students was being able to give back to their communities and families. They explained that these students had the aspiration to make a difference in their own lives and inspire others.

3.4 | A window to university possibilities

Going to university was unfamiliar for students, so gaining experience with university was important. Participants thought these opportunities gave students ideas of what university was all about, allowing for a smoother transition when it did happen.

3.4.1 | University programmes and open days

Programmes facilitated by high schools that linked students with universities were seen to be the most successful and effective, as they enabled connections and allowed for support groups and individual attention. "They don't know what they don't know, so having those chances to experience it are huge, I think that's the thing that makes the biggest difference" (Participant 7).

Once a year, every university in Melbourne hosts an Open Day on campus. There are campus tours, information booths and presentations about every course of study, and opportunities to talk to staff and students. High school students and parent starting in year 10 are encouraged to attend different Open Days. Participants felt that Open Days provided a firm understanding of what was available and a plethora of information about different pathways, a chance to explore the campus, and feel the community atmosphere. As Participant 6 explained, "it was a whole world in their eyes you know almost as big as their home-town, is just the little community that is within the actual university campus."

3.4.2 | Passive information—Set and forget

However, the participants also explained passive information from university programmes was not helpful. Participant 2 recalled one particularly poor university presentation: "[It] was like an office building, they [the students] got sat down on the floor and people just spoke at them for ages, it didn't give them an idea of what uni life was actually like, it wasn't very interactive." Participants felt FiF university students were left to fend for themselves without any support and guidance. As Participant 4 noted:

What doesn't work is the set forget you know, wave your [diploma] ..., goodbye, good luck, I mean I think we have got plenty of evidence where that's doesn't work as well as it could have worked.

3.5 | University connections—Enhancing the journey

PFiF need more than just a window to university, and developing authentic connections is valuable, as well as starting early.
3.5.1 Supportive partnerships

Partnerships between students, parents, teachers, and schools can provide important support for students. Participants explained that students built supportive partnerships by learning with consistent groups of students. Careers education in schools, where information around community support, welfare groups, and financial assistance were provided to students, would aid successful transition to university. Most participants agreed that transition programmes needed to be long-term and involve partnerships with the family to be effective.

Participants explained that having to navigate the university journey alone could be daunting for a PFiF student, so connections with peers would also provide support. Sometimes participants said that the needs of PFiF students were ignored, and students felt a lack of concern from social, community, or family networks, about the pressures they faced. Therefore, a supportive network of PFiF students within their high school could provide support and advice, as Participant 2 recollected:

To almost be as part of a little network supportive network, I didn't know in high school [as a student] who else was in the same boat as me, and thinking about it now it wasn't something to be ashamed of and I probably would have liked to have kind of known who, just have that little support kind of a group.

3.5.2 Building resilience through mentoring and conversations

The participants also saw the important role of teachers, who have the dual role of mentor. Teachers are in a position to build resilience and contribute to the university aspirations. Having continuous conversations around the barriers students face and the mentoring provided through career conversations helped capture information about students that normally would not be obtained. Participant 9 said: "Those that have the most powerful influence on PFiF kids are those teachers that demonstrate they care, that they also know the individual and that they attend to that relationship, that's the context." This individualised support and mentoring is important because, "the cookie cutter stuff does not work, particularly in low socioeconomic areas", all students were different and, "by tailoring the learning into what the kid needed, capitalising on their strengths but addressing their challenges" (Participant 7) the student builds knowledge and competency.

3.5.3 Starting early

Finally, the participants felt that discussions about pathways to university needed to start early, as early as year 7. There was the underlying urgency within the interviews that indicated by year 11 or 12 it was too late. Participant 2 said that, "identifying them and identifying them early," was imperative to any programme that would help students "explore options and various pathways for the pursuit of post schooling options" (Participant 4). Participant 4 went on to explain that, "if we can get kids exposed early and ingrained in, and comfortable within those tertiary settings and the expectations of those settings and manage the expectations, I think that lends itself to a better outcome."

4 DISCUSSION

The current study provides excellent evidence of what PFiF students experience and indicates both challenges and sources of resilience from the perspective of high school educators. Findings indicate that participants perceived PFiF students as a highly disadvantaged cohort, concluding that the barriers related to low social capital could
hinder a successful transition into university. However, it was also found that PFiF students frequently compensate with other forms of social capital, persevere and successfully transition to university with the right supports, and their own intrinsic motivation. Figure 1 shows the relationship between barriers and supports along the road to being an FiF university student.

4.1 Barriers to higher education

Participants identified lack of family experience, low expectations from parents and teachers, low value that families placed on higher education, financial constraints, and limited visibility were disadvantages for PFiF students. These barriers relate to low social and cultural capital, which extends the crucial body of research about FiF students who are already in university.

Previous research has found university students who are FiF do tend to lack financial support, knowledge of university, and parental experience and expectation (Barry et al., 2008; O’Shea, 2015a; Spengen, 2013). (O’Shea, 2015b) found that Australian FiF university students from working-class backgrounds were raised in environments that have low value of higher education, which corresponds to the participants who had experience with families who felt their high school children did not need university education.

Financial constraints were described by participants as a major factor of disadvantage. Due to limited access to financial and social capital that supports success, Australian FiF university students from low SES backgrounds have lower intergenerational success and educational outcomes (O’Shea, 2016). In high school, students and families are worrying about the potential future costs. This finding was consistent with research that found financial stress, coupled with academic pressures are concerns that FiF university students face (O’Shea, 2015b). However, participants also described financial misconceptions due to a lack of understanding around government supports, PFiF students and families perceived university as unattainable. The cost of education has been found to be a restriction for low-SES university students as they are more likely to believe that costs are prohibitively high, making the pathway unattainable (James, 2002). This current research highlights the lack of awareness PFiF students and families have around financial supports and that there might be many students who then decide not to attend university.

Participants believed students from particular backgrounds were often judged negatively by teachers. This is linked with previous studies that found teacher expectations influenced academic achievement and negative expectations, leading to students from low SES backgrounds having poor academic self-fulfilling prophecies (Hauser-Cram et al., 2003).
A unique finding from this study was the perception that the invisibility of PFiF students was a barrier, as this means that were not given any additional supports. In the Australian system, FiF is not considered a higher education equity group (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2020), however, some important Australian organisations do include data and research for FiF, though the focus remains on university students and not high school (i.e., National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education). Overall, many PFiF students, who might be motivated to attend university, never overcome the social capital barriers, helping to explain why Australian students with at least one university-educated parent are 4.3 times more likely to attend university (Marginson, 2015).

4.2 | Connections through strengths and supports

Connections were the best way to overcome barriers to university, participants reported, and findings indicated that armed with the right supports and their own strengths PFiF students are more likely to transition to university. School, teachers, and families were perceived to be the best supports and previous literature supported this perception by indicating activities that produce capital are those that facilitate interaction between teachers, administrators, families, and students (Plagens, 2011). Connections and peer networks might be vital in building on supports available and providing for a successful transition to university (Chapin, 2014). A supportive university-going atmosphere at high schools is crucial, with all teachers having high expectations for all students to continue their education, providing high-quality information, and building relationships with parents (Schneider, 2007).

Findings indicated that PFiF families are diverse, with some being unsupportive of university while others provide important emotional support even when parents lack knowledge about higher education. Encouragement or discouragement from families can be a key factor, pushing the children in opposite directions. Research indicates that some immigrant parents have high educational aspirations for their children (Roubeni et al., 2015) and support their children in gaining a higher education, to avoid the hardship they experienced not having a higher education (Langenkamp, 2019). Longitudinal research has found parents’ educational aspirations for their children in Grades 7–11 are a key predictor of college graduation years later (Chapin, 2019).

A PFIF student’s own strengths of resilience, motivation, and intrinsic drive enabled them to power through and achieve a higher education, participants reported. Others have found FiF students have strengths because of the challenges and experiences they face and they possess strong personal traits of determination, motivation, and perseverance (Chapin, 2014; Luzeckyj et al., 2017). When connected to the support of families and schools the strengths of PFIF students could ultimately help them push through barriers and enable successful entry and transition to university.

4.3 | University connections and possibilities

Early intervention, supportive partnerships, and networks that connect with school, family, and university were considered most likely to be helpful for PFIF. Supportive systems enable adaptation and socialisation, and systems that involve orientation tours, course clarity, careers information, and staff availability are also positive examples of university induction (Briggs et al., 2012).

Participants reported that teachers were well-positioned to discuss students’ aspirations and increase their knowledge and confidence. Building aspirations early was vital according to the findings, supported by research that early experiences at high school provide opportunities to develop confidence, knowledge, and skills to prepare for university early enough in schooling so that students are influenced to attain their university goals (Patfield et al., 2021).
4.4 | Implications

Unfortunately, current educational systems do advantage young people from certain family backgrounds (Patfied, Gore, & Weaver, 2021). Building awareness of PFiF students helps normalise the status and also sheds light on the inherent inequity of higher education (O’Shea, 2017). The importance of identifying PFiF students and their barriers will assist schools and universities to build their social capital and increase access to further education. Negative perceptions of PFiF students by teachers needs to be recognised and challenged. Early interventions where students are supported in their aspirations and education journey as early as year 9 were overwhelmingly reported by participants as needed. Building early on a PFiF student’s strengths, allowing for effective early university experiences, being surrounded by supportive networks and school climate related to university and starting supports early would improve the chances of PFiF students successfully transitioning and completing a university education.

4.5 | Strengths, limitations, and future directions for research

Currently, there is little or no research from the perspective of high school teachers who work with PFiF students, so this study is fairly unique in the sense that the focus was on teacher perception of PFiF students and their perception of barriers, supports, and successful university transition. There are however limitations to this study in the small sample size and participants who predominantly identified as Australian-born with few identifying as FIF or low SES.

Future research from the perspective of PFiF high school students around barriers they have in high school, the social and capital supports they receive and how their entry aspirations and transition to university are affected might also provide valuable insight and a fuller picture. The current study was also had a broad focus, so PFiF who also belong to other equity groups might have additional barriers.

5 | CONCLUSION

Academic success and successful transition to university is important for students whose intentions are to pursue a higher education, especially so for PFiF students. Teachers and educators can play an important role in supporting PFiF students and there is a strong indication that positive social and cultural capital support combined with effective transition programmes can mitigate disadvantages.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and privacy.

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