The nature of student persistence following failure: hero's journey, surviving failure and stuck in the system

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Introduction. Academic failure is common and is a necessary part of learning. The stories we construct determine whether failure is taken up as an opportunity to act and develop or one of passivity and victimhood. Deficit discourses of failure, and its associated stigma and shame, can be perceived as a threat to student agency.

Aims. We sought to understand how students construct their identities and agency when persisting following failure.

Methods. We conducted in-depth interviews with 14 undergraduate students who failed and persisted with their studies and conducted narrative analyses using figured worlds theory (Holland et al., 1998). Figured worlds theory positions identity and agency in the dialectic between the individual and the social world; as emergent and dynamic.

Results. We identified three characteristic ways in which students constructed their personal stories of persistence, and in the process their agency, or lack of it. In the first two narratives students adopt an agentic position, either in the case of *the hero's journey* taking control to build their path to success, regardless of what the university does; or, in the case of *surviving failure*, negotiating the system and their individual challenges as best they can and holding on to their vocational goals as beacons of hope. In the third *stuck in the system* narrative, students adopt less agentic position, as a victim either of a system that is inflexible and uncaring, from which they could emerge successfully if only they could overcome the unreasonable barriers placed in their way by others; or their own inability to mobilise their personal resources to make real progress towards their degree.

Discussion. The positions students adopted in relation to other actors within their narratives ranged from active to passive, highlighting different agentic responses of students. Our findings highlight how students in the first two patterns responded to the crisis point of failing a unit by creating new figured worlds of possibility. Being in this new figured world created the possibility for different forms of action. Therefore, before a student can take an action that leads to change, it has to appear on their 'radar' as a possibility, an action that makes sense. Implications for supporting students to recover from failure will be presented.

Holland, D. C., Lachicotte Jr, W. S., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. London: Harvard University Press.