

Metaphorical Analysis of Academic Challenges among First-Generation College Learners from Darjeeling Tea Gardens

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ABSTRACT

First-Generation College Learners (FGCLs) face distinctive challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education, yet their experiences remain inadequately understood, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study examines how FGCLs from tea garden communities in Darjeeling, India conceptualize their academic experiences through metaphorical expressions. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with 42 second-year students across nine colleges, the study analyzes 11 purposively selected metaphors from 29 identified expressions using Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Bourdieu's capital theory, and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model.

Students described experiences through metaphors including "shedding cocoon layers," "relay races already behind," "self-sculpting statues," "building bridges while crossing," and "climbing uneven steps." These reveal systematic disadvantages: cultural capital deficits, absent parental guidance, and limited institutional recognition. The metaphors also show how students develop navigational and resistant capitals, creating pathways for younger siblings and future students.

Findings reveal that in contexts where FGCLs constitute the majority, lack of corresponding understanding and institutional support creates distinct challenges. The study demonstrates metaphor analysis as an effective tool for understanding marginalized students' lived experiences, moving beyond deficit models. Implications for institutional practice and policy supporting FGCL success are discussed.

Keywords: first-generation, first-generation college learners, metaphor analysis, conceptual metaphor theory, social capital, cultural capital, community cultural wealth, Darjeeling, tea gardens, India

INTRODUCTION

Cradled in the Himalayan region, Darjeeling maintains global prominence for its distinctive geographical terrain and its celebrated tea gardens. Yet, behind the beauty, heritage, and the recognition of the region lies the lived reality of its tea garden communities, where higher education learners continue to face persistent educational disadvantages (Subba & Sherpa, 2018). India's National Education Policy 2020 positions higher education as fundamental to sustainable livelihoods and economic development, establishing targets to increase gross enrollment ratios from 26.3% in 2018 to 50% by 2035 (National Education Policy 2020). Recent years have seen significant expansion of higher education institutions in West Bengal, aiming at greater enrollment and quality higher education. The three subdivisions of Darjeeling District alone namely Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong and Mirik, have nine colleges, providing increased access to higher education. Despite these institutional expansions, critical questions arise regarding educational equity. Is increased access to higher education alone sufficient when the majority of learners from tea garden communities are First-Generation College Learners (FGCLs), the first in their families to pursue higher education? Do these students experience higher education similarly to their peers, Continuing-Generation College Learners (CGCLs), whose families possess intergenerational educational experience and educational attainment?

As an educator in higher education in the Darjeeling Hills, the researcher has observed a striking paradox: FGCLs constitute the majority population, yet their unique challenges remain socially and institutionally invisible. Their needs are treated as routine issues rather than requiring specialized support despite global studies that recognize this cohort as an equity group in policy decisions (Patfield et al., 2022). These observations, combined with direct experience working with FGCLs and their parents and their educational challenges, led the researcher to explore how these students articulate their educational experiences. Traditional research methods often miss the depth of lived realities. When one student described her college experience as *'shedding a cocoon shell not just one layer but many layers,'* the researcher realized that metaphorical expressions provide authentic insights into FGCLs' educational experiences that conventional approaches cannot capture. This study therefore employs metaphor analysis to understand how FGCLs describe their higher education experiences through metaphors, focusing on the academic issues they face and institutional facilities that affect their achievement.

This article presents findings from the qualitative component of a larger mixed-methods investigation examining FGCLs' academic experiences, academic facilities, and achievement outcomes in Darjeeling Hills colleges. While the broader study employs surveys (n=739), interviews (n=42), and institutional data analysis, this article focuses specifically on metaphorical expressions of how FGCLs conceptualize their educational journeys.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining First-Generation College Learners:

First-generation college learners navigate multiple cultural and social identities, making their experiences more complex than the label 'first-generation' suggests (Huynh, 2022). While the conventional definition, college students whose parents have not attained a college degree (Choy, 2001), remains widely cited, scholarly studies and explanations vary. Alternative definitions include students with no family history of college education (Patfield et al., 2022), those whose parents' highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or less (Ishitani, 2006), as the first individuals in their nuclear families to attend a postsecondary institution (Evans et al., 2020) and as students whose parents have never earned a bachelor's degree but may have some postsecondary experience (U.S. Department of Education et al., 1998). For the purposes of this study, FGCLs are defined as students enrolled in higher education whose parents have neither obtained a college degree nor had any experience with higher education (Arch & Gilman, 2019). In contrast, CGCLs are students with at least one parent who has attended college and earned a bachelor's degree or higher. This incorporates both parental degree attainment, exposure and experience of higher education environments.

Profile of First-Generation College Learners:

Breaking the intergenerational cycle is not an easy one to achieve. FGCLs symbolize this disruption, demonstrating that educational mobility leads to social mobility and showing their ability to withstand and rebound from adversities (Gofen, 2007). However, comparative analyses reveal significant disparities between FGCLs and CGCLs, positioning FGCLs at distinct disadvantages across multiple dimensions of the higher education experience (Kim et al., 2020). The transition of FGCLs into higher education presents complex challenges encompassing academic, social, personal, and cultural adjustment processes, which fundamentally influence educational outcomes (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

Research consistently identifies distinctive characteristics of FGCLs across three key domains: demographics, transition challenges, and college success factors. **Demographically**, FGCLs predominantly originate from lower-income families, tend to be older upon enrollment, maintain employment while studying, and frequently belong to racial, ethnic, or linguistic minority groups (Checkoway, 2018; Kim et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education & Choy, 2001). **The transition to higher education** presents significant barriers, as these students often lack adequate academic preparation and college planning experience (Engle et al., 2006; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004), encounter limited access opportunities (O'Shea, 2015), and perceive college experiences differently from their continuing-generation peers (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Once enrolled, their **academic success** is constrained by adjustment difficulties, delayed social and academic integration (Barsegyan & Maas, 2024; Sánchez-Connally, 2018), higher attrition rates (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004), poor time management and self-regulated learning strategies (Antonelli et al., 2020; Collier & Morgan, 2008), and negative faculty interactions (Barsegyan & Maas, 2024; Eveland, 2020). These educational challenges often create unintended consequences for family dynamics and sibling educational trajectories (Wainwright & Watts, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Pierre Bourdieu's capital theory (1986), Tara Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model (2005), and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980) to examine how FGCLs conceptualize their higher education experiences.

Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory

Bourdieu (1986) capital theory identifies economic (money and resources), cultural (knowledge, skills, dispositions, qualifications), social (networks recognized by institutions), and symbolic (prestige and recognition) capitals. The forms of capital individuals inherit through their family environments position them differently within the broader social structure. As they enter new social fields like higher education, both the volume and form of their capital shape not only their likelihood of success but also their sense of belonging (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986). For FGCLs, a mismatch between their habitus and institutional expectations can create significant barriers to academic integration and achievement (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021).

Tara Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model

While Bourdieu's framework highlights systemic inequalities and challenges the inequalities set by the capitals, it also portrays non-dominant cultural practices as deficits. Challenging this limitation, Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model identifies six alternative forms of capital: Aspirational capital (ability to sustain hopes and dreams despite barriers), Linguistic capital (multilingual skills and diverse communication styles), Familial capital (cultural knowledge and support from family networks), Social capital (community networks providing instrumental and emotional support), Navigational capital (skills to maneuver through institutions not designed for marginalized communities), and Resistant capital (knowledge and skills developed through opposing inequality). This framework recognizes learners from marginalized groups as resourceful agents possessing a range of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts rather than leaving these assets unrecognized and unacknowledged (Yosso, 2005).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), based on Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors we live by* (1980), provides a framework for examining how students use figurative expressions to explain abstract academic experiences. Realities are defined through metaphors, and individuals structure their experiences consciously or unconsciously through them to clarify experiences by comparing unfamiliar phenomena to one's familiar domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphorical thinking helps people understand complex emotions and social experiences that cannot be directly seen or felt by connecting them to familiar, concrete ideas (Farias & Cameron, 2023). By mapping the unfamiliar domain of higher education onto the familiar domains of daily life, the metaphors used by first-generation college students offer a way to gain deeper insight into their difficulties in higher education, their strategies in overcoming them, and their determination to succeed (Luzecy et al., 2017).

Integration and Application

The integration of these frameworks enables a nuanced analysis of FGCLs from Darjeeling tea garden communities. While Bourdieu's theory focuses on structural barriers, Yosso's model highlights the rich forms of capitals that FGCLs bring to higher education, and Conceptual Metaphor Theory offers a methodological lens to explore how these structural realities and cultural assets are expressed through the metaphors that learners use to describe their academic experiences.

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE LEARNERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN DARJEELING HILLS

The subdivisions of Darjeeling District, Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, and Mirik, together host nine colleges affiliated to the University of North Bengal. These predominantly undergraduate colleges exhibit considerable diversity in their character, encompassing urban and rural settings, government and semi-government management, government and minority institutions, co-educational and women's colleges, limited and varied course offerings, as well as aided and self-financing models. For almost a century, these higher education institutions have shaped the academic landscape of the Darjeeling hills. The remarkable progress in education throughout the Darjeeling hills, not just in higher education but across all levels, is due to immense educational expansion and the democratization of educational opportunities (Dewan, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach to understand how FGCLs from Darjeeling tea gardens make sense of their academic experiences through metaphorical expressions. The study was conducted across nine colleges in Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, and Mirik subdivisions of Darjeeling District, representing diverse institutional contexts of urban and rural, and private and public. This metaphor-focused analysis represents a purposively extracted component from a larger mixed-methods research study examining FGCLs' academic experiences, academic facilities, and achievement outcomes. Forty-two second-year students participated, representing diverse backgrounds: 22 female and 20 male students from five academic streams (Arts, Science, Commerce, BBA, BCA), across government (29 students) and private (13 students) colleges in urban (18 students) and rural (24 students) settings.

Participants were chosen based on four criteria: being second-year college students, coming from Darjeeling tea garden communities, identifying as first-generation college learners, and showing willingness to discuss their educational experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on college campuses, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. During these conversations, metaphors appeared in two ways: sometimes participants were directly asked to describe their academic journey using a metaphor, and at other times, metaphors surfaced naturally as they talked about their challenges, successes, and their experiences with institutional resources. Follow-up questions encouraged participants to explain why they chose particular metaphors and what these meant in their own contexts. From 42 interview participants, 29 distinct metaphorical expressions were identified and 11 were chosen for this article based on conceptual richness, analytical depth, thematic relevance, theoretical significance in understanding FGCLs' experiences, and demographic diversity across colleges and academic streams.

The analysis employed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as the analytical lens to examine metaphors shared by learners. Each metaphor was systematically identified and analyzed to understand how FGCLs mapped familiar experiences onto their educational contexts, then examined through Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model for both deficit and resource capitals. The 11 expressions were thematically categorized according to access challenges and achievement difficulties, revealing how FGCLs perceive and live their college experiences, and compared with international FGCL studies. Data credibility was ensured through systematic documentation and analysis. The researcher's position as an educator in Darjeeling Hills facilitated contextual understanding while requiring ongoing reflexivity. The study received institutional permissions, participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality of both participants and institutions was maintained.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The following analysis examines eleven metaphors used by FGCLs to describe their higher education experiences. These metaphors provide insights into the complex world that FGCLs must navigate, showing both their struggles and persistent determination. Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the analysis examines how participants drew from familiar experiences to make sense of unfamiliar academic territories, using concrete imagery to express abstract educational challenges. The analysis follows a systematic approach: presenting participants' original quotes, interpreting metaphorical meanings, identifying specific barriers and capital deficits through Bourdieu's framework, exploring latent capitals via Yosso's community cultural wealth model, and connecting findings to established global research. Each metaphor analysis contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the FGCL experience across different domains of their educational journey.

1) COCOON OF MANY LAYERS

"As an FGCL, I feel like a cocoon with many layers to open before I can come out."

An FGCL expressed her academic journey through a biological metaphor, comparing it to a cocoon's metamorphosis process. Just as a caterpillar breaks through its cocoon to emerge into a new, unfamiliar environment, an FGCL also emerges by breaking through layers. However, the distinction is that it involves not just one layer of the cocoon, but multiple layers.

The **biological metaphor** reveals the complex nature of FGCLs' academic experiences. In this process, they must break through multiple layers, each distinct yet interconnected. Transitioning into college is a new layer but completing formal schooling alone is another important first and a major achievement for many FGCLs (Patfield et al., 2020). Other layers include preparation for college education, financial burdens, family and societal expectations, performance pressure, and the institutional environment of higher education (Engle et al., 2006; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Once in college, the disadvantage continues and gets dovetailed into other areas (Pascarella et al., 2004) for these most vulnerable individuals (Wadhwa, 2018). This process also creates strained relationships at home, as FGCLs navigate two vastly different worlds simultaneously (Engle et al., 2006). While CGCLs may need to navigate just one layer, FGCLs undergo repeated adaptations, confronting new challenges individually or in sequence. Just as a caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly represents significant change, the FGCL's educational transformation demonstrates their capacity to develop navigational and resistant capitals.

2) RELAY RACE

"Comparing myself to students whose parents are graduates, I feel like we are in a relay race, and they are one lap ahead, with the baton already passed to them by their parents."

An FGCL analyzes how they begin a lap behind CGCLs, who already possess the knowledge and experience (baton) transmitted by their parents and in contrast, FGCLs have just begun the race.

In this **sports metaphor**, the structural inequalities experienced by FGCLs become apparent through issues of access, preparation, performance, adjustments, and other challenges. The academic support from parents or

guardians, transmitted as cultural, social and economic capitals, provides these students with an advantage in the educational process (Pascarella et al., 2004), demonstrating existing inequalities. The delayed start for one group against the head-start of the other creates an uneven competitive environment in education. *'Get ready, get in and get through'* is not an easy linear process as colleges cannot change the lineage of FGCLs (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Admission alone may not guarantee academic success as the risk period and its magnitude increase over time (Ishitani, 2003). Capital deficits and the lack of academic environment at home represent starting disadvantages for FGCLs. Despite these challenges, FGCLs eventually overcome their struggles and complete their educational journey successfully.

3) STATUE SCULPTING ITSELF

"I came across this image of a 'self-sculpting' statue on social media, and that explains me."

An FGCL compares himself to a self-sculpting statue where he serves as both the sculptor and the statue, having to shape himself without an external artist.

This **construction metaphor** reveals the complexity of FGCLs' academic experiences and challenges. In a conventional statue-making process, the statue plays no active role in its creation but is shaped by an external artist with his/her own vision and tools, as in the case of CGCLs where parents function as the sculptor. In contrast, for FGCLs, the entire process depends on themselves, the vision, the tools, the process, the sculptor, and the final outcome. These complex identities represent the lived realities of FGCLs: they must choose a field of study upon arrival, select study fields that align with the labor market (Ayalon & Mcdossi, 2016) and manage fear, anxiety, low confidence, and limited academic and life skills (Williams, 2016). In total, FGCLs face a steeper learning curve in adjusting to college life (Ayalon & Mcdossi, 2016). Through sculpting all these elements themselves in this process of self-transformation and self-authorship, FGCLs are enabled to break the intergenerational cycle and succeed.

4) BRIDGE BUILDING ITSELF

"As an FGCL, I see no bridge across the river. I need to build one as I journey ahead and at each step."

An FGCL sees his academic journey as the complex task of building bridges while navigating the challenges of higher education to reach his destination.

This **construction metaphor** offers insight into the academic challenges of FGCLs. Established bridges are already built for CGCLs' journeys, and these existing structures carry them across without additional burden. FGCLs, on the other hand, must construct their own bridges and cross them simultaneously, or continue building bridges as they progress. They have little knowledge about the crossing and stand at the threshold of academic uncertainty (Checkoway, 2018) as they struggle in this happenstance event and a turning point in their lives (Wadhwa, 2018). Once they reach college, they find themselves isolated, alienated, and less prepared, requiring remedial courses and lacking time and study management skills, awareness of the bureaucratic aspects of higher education, and access to support services (Engle et al., 2006). The absence of inherited infrastructures represents a significant challenge in FGCLs' academic journeys, but the bridges they build remain for others to use, creating pathways for their siblings and the next generation.

5) ANCHOR

"What I miss the most as an FGCL is that I don't have someone to hold on to in my struggles, an anchor"

The FGCL reflects on her experience and recognizes that when she needs someone, especially during critical times, to serve as her anchor in familial support, she finds none available.

This **navigation metaphor** identifies the lack of anchoring support in FGCLs' academic lives which is very crucial. Arriving, surviving and succeeding in higher education is a radical departure and the FGCL family has little understanding of what is in store and are not able to provide advice or support (O'Shea, 2015). Parents leave the education up to the institutions, teachers and to the FGCLs themselves (Torres, 2019). Because of this parental lack of support in their educational experiences and in periods of academic difficulty, distractions, failures, moments requiring direction, course completion challenges, self-doubt, and latent attrition, FGCLs look for stable reference points and struggle to remain steady being swayed by the academic waves of education. The continued contact with identified role models helps them succeed (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). They must develop their own navigation skills in this journey with this limited support. With no inherited stability, self-reliance becomes the essential navigation skill for FGCLs. Through the resilience they develop, they eventually become anchors for the next generation and their own siblings.

6) LIGHT HOUSE

"In the family and in the society, I want a role model, a light house, someone I look up to and imitate and someone who has achieved well in life"

An FGCL identifies the crucial gap in guidance that this cohort group lacks through the metaphor of a lighthouse, where she must navigate her academic experiences without reference points.

The **navigation metaphor** represents what FGCLs lack in their educational journey—navigational information, location confirmation, safe harbor directions, and hazard warnings. Due to parents' limited involvement in their educational experiences, FGCLs feel the absence of this support (Torres, 2019). They need guidance from those who understand the specific academic terrain, role models who can function as lighthouses to show the path in the absence of immediate family members with college experience. When choosing academic courses or institutions, making decisions about financial aid, preparing for college life, managing academic difficulties, and planning career paths, they lack role models who would guide their navigation (Antonelli et al., 2020; Pascarella et al., 2004). College counselors should not assume all college-bound youth are the same, as some may need specific skills, information, and direction that others may already possess (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). In the absence of inherited guidance and external lighthouse figures as role models, academic pursuit may change direction, potentially resulting in college departure or increased attrition rates (Ishitani, 2003). However, successful FGCLs create a 'slip stream effect' by becoming educational role models, developing a sense of responsibility for their siblings' futures, and serving as agents of transformation with significant intragenerational impact (Wainwright & Watts, 2021).

7) TEAM GAME

"In college when I mix with other students, I realize that I am an amateur player in the football team which is competing with the professional team"

An FGCL through this metaphor reflects that the skills and capitals he has acquired are at times insufficient in the college education environment.

This **sports metaphor** exposes the social inequality where FGCLs feel there is a deficit without any mistake of their own and have developed a competence which is not sufficient. CGCLs come with greater capitals with their parents playing the role of trained coaches and as a team whereas FGCLs are novices who lack generation guidance and collaborative strategies. For CGCLs, transition into college represents normal continuity, but for FGCLs it constitutes a disjunction (Engle et al., 2006). FGCLs are less engaged in overall academic activities, less likely to integrate diverse college experiences, possess less tactical knowledge, find college less supportive, and make less progress in learning (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Due to parents' limited involvement in their educational experiences and the absence of this support (Torres, 2019), FGCLs must learn new sets of rules, understand the hidden curriculum (Gable, 2021), and develop additional skills and competencies as resistant capital.

8) BUTTON START VS. KICK START

"In comparison with others, I find myself like a two-wheeler, I am one with kick-start and they have button-start"

An FGCL creatively employs a daily life metaphor from his academic experience, drawing from imagery common in rural hill households where motorcycles start only after multiple kicks.

This **mechanical metaphor** offers multiple meanings that express the effort differentials in FGCLs' experiences. The academic initiation of an FGCL is not straightforward one but involves many starting difficulties. While the button-start mode (CGCL) begins immediately, the kick-start mode (FGCL) requires significant physical effort, proper timing, and repeated attempts to achieve ignition alone. While both represent forward movements, different energy levels are required. The impact of this difficult ignition extends throughout their academic experience, as FGCLs significantly feel handicapped, are less selective of the institutions, and are academically, socially and economically left behind (Pascarella et al., 2004). Lower levels of preparation, lower aspirations, less support, less planning for college, lack of access to college knowledge, geographical proximity, and their unawareness of available options make their academic entry difficult (Engle et al., 2006). Despite resource disadvantages, FGCLs learn fundamental skills and develop technical knowledge to avoid initial and navigation difficulties and build resilience in adversity.

9) SOLO VS. ORCHESTRA

"It is like a musical performance between a solo performer and an orchestra, only the solo performer knows the struggle"

While both solo and group performances result from hard work and commitment, the FGCL views this differently, highlighting the collaborative disparities and differences in mentorship.

This **musical metaphor** emphasizes the disparities FGCLs experience in their academic journeys. While musicians in an orchestra (CGCLs) benefit from conductor guidance (family as mentors), collective practice (working as a team), sectional support (peers from similar backgrounds), shared responsibility (family capital investment), and enhanced performance quality (success in higher education), solo performers (FGCLs), lack all these advantages. They are often the only ones in their families to pursue higher education and thus find themselves isolated. For overall development, FGCLs need comprehensive support programmes (Farrell-Felici & Panesar-Aguilar, 2021). They demonstrate lower levels of involvement in extracurricular activities (Pascarella et al., 2004) and receive less social support from campus-based activities (Eveland, 2020). ‘Active learning methods’ prove more anxiety-inducing for this population (Hood et al., 2020), and ‘Self-regulated learning’ cannot develop organically based on enrollment alone (Antonelli et al., 2020). This demonstrates both the absence of collaborative support and the isolation in academic work, requiring them to rely on individual capacities. While they may perform well academically later, the initial struggle remains significant.

10) NETWORK IN PHONE

“I can compare it to looking for a network in my phone, searching for it from one place to another”

This FGCL employs a metaphor from the rural context, where network connectivity is problematic, to explain the process of moving from one place to another in search of support.

The **search metaphor** captures the constant and deliberate efforts FGCLs undertake in seeking support systems. They must identify available networks of support and select the most effective ones to facilitate their academic, social, and institutional integration within a new institutional environment. Similar to how poor network connectivity creates barriers to communication and access, FGCLs face institutional connectivity challenges that hinder their academic progress. The adjustment experiences vary among the FGCLs and are classified as outsiders, strangers or adjusters depending on their adaptation habitus and capitals they bring (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). In their college experience, FGCLs have to work on their self-efficacy and confidence while building navigational capitals (O’Shea, 2015). They face multiple challenges including lower internet skills, contributing to the digital divide (Zhang et al., 2022), difficulty interpreting faculty expectations, issues in understanding assignments, time management as a priority concern, and additional home commitments to further their complications (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The absence of inherited support is reflected in this metaphor, and this absence must be compensated through external resources, leading to reliance on institutional support systems to promote their development.

11) CLIMBING UNEVEN STEPS

“As an FGCL, I realize I have to climb uneven steps”

The FGCL draws from her life experiences in this metaphor of uneven steps on stairs. Due to the topography of the hills in rural areas and tea gardens, one encounters uneven steps, whether constructed or cut into hillsides, sometimes differing by as much as a foot in height.

Through this **architectural metaphor**, FGCLs describe how their upward academic journey is uneven. Irregular steps, different from traditional staircases with equidistant spacing, present structural barriers requiring greater effort and constant recalibration of strength and energy. In rural settings, FGCLs face a double disadvantage: inadequate school education and insufficient academic preparation for higher education (Patfield et al., 2020; Wadhwa, 2018). With more uneven steps to climb, they are more likely to depart from their college than their counterparts with the risk being high in the first year, and are less likely to complete graduation in a timely manner (Ishitani, 2003, 2006) and they are not just alienated in the new environment but feel threatened (O’Shea, 2015). Their lack of linguistic confidence (Sánchez-Connally, 2018) represents another steep step in the climb. This non-linear progression reflects the constant adjustments and adaptations FGCLs must make, sometimes needing additional support and at other times requiring more time. Despite uneven structures and irregular terrain, FGCLs ascend their academic ladder of progression in an upward trajectory.

The analysis of the above eleven metaphors reveals significant patterns in how FGCLs experience and make sense of their higher education. These metaphors collectively illustrate how FGCLs conceptualize their educational experiences, as each metaphor captures different dimensions while revealing common threads of struggle, adaptation, and transformation. The analysis demonstrates how personal narratives align with broader research findings, revealing both access challenges and achievement difficulties that characterize the unique FGCL educational journey.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This summary integrates the findings from the metaphorical analysis across three interconnected dimensions. First, it highlights overarching patterns in the metaphors, revealing common themes and shared experiences that characterize FGCLs' educational journeys. Second, it considers the implications for educational practice, showing how insights from these metaphors can be translated into actionable strategies for institutions, faculty, and support services. Finally, it examines policy implications, emphasizing the broader structural changes needed to support FGCL success. Taken together, these dimensions provide a deeper understanding of how students' metaphorical narratives can guide everyday educational practices while also shaping long-term systemic change in higher education.

Overarching Patterns Across Metaphors

- i. *Structural Inequalities and Capital Deficits:* The 'relay race' and 'button vs. kick start' metaphors highlight systematic disadvantages, showing that FGCLs must exert greater effort to achieve outcomes that CGCLs often access seamlessly through inherited forms of capital (Pascarella et al., 2004).
- ii. *Individual Initiative and Self-Direction:* The 'statue sculpting itself' and 'bridge building itself' metaphors illustrate how FGCLs must simultaneously design and navigate their educational pathways (Engle et al., 2006). These metaphors demonstrate remarkable individual initiatives while highlighting the absence of inherited support systems.
- iii. *Non-Linear Progression and Adaptation:* The 'cocoon of many layers' and 'climbing uneven steps' metaphors reveal FGCLs' experiences as ongoing processes of adaptation, requiring constant recalibration of effort and strategy (Ishitani, 2003).
- iv. *Transformative Potential and Community Impact:* The 'cocoon' transformation and constructed 'bridge, anchor, and lighthouse' metaphors reflect FGCLs' capacity for growth and their potential to serve as resources for future generations (Wainwright & Watts, 2021). Through Yosso's framework, these metaphors also emphasize community cultural wealth and latent capitals.

Implications for Educational Practice

- i. *Institutional Support Systems:* The 'anchor' and 'lighthouse' metaphors indicate the need for continual mentorship and robust support networks, rather than assuming students on their own will access existing resources (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Colleges must recognize that FGCLs require fundamentally different support structures than CGCLs.
- ii. *Pedagogical Adaptations:* The 'solo vs. orchestra' metaphor suggests that standard pedagogical methods may unintentionally disadvantage FGCLs (Hood et al., 2020), requiring modified approaches in pedagogy and curriculum.
- iii. *Early Intervention Strategies:* The 'relay race' metaphor highlights importance of pre-college preparation focusing on capital building and navigation skill development rather than remedial approaches (Pike & Kuh, 2005).
- iv. *Comprehensive Programming:* The isolation evident across metaphors indicates the need for holistic support addressing academic, social, and institutional integration (Eveland, 2020; Farrell-Felici & Panesar-Aguilar, 2021).

Policy and Systemic Implications

- i. *Resource Allocation:* The metaphors provide evidence for targeted resource allocation addressing specific FGCLs' challenges rather than generic student support services.
- ii. *Institutional Accountability:* The systematic disadvantages suggest the need for institutional deliberations and accountability in tracking FGCLs' specific outcomes and interventions beyond general initiatives.
- iii. *Professional Development:* The metaphors highlight the need for faculty and staff training in understanding FGCLs' experiences beyond deficit models toward recognition of unique strengths and challenges.

The metaphorical analysis identifies the key patterns: structural inequalities, individual initiative, non-linear progression, and transformative potential. The findings also support Yosso's community cultural wealth model moving beyond traditional deficit models. FGCLs' metaphorical expressions provide insights for creating more equitable and supportive higher education environments that recognize both their challenges and strengths.

LIMITATIONS

This metaphorical analysis, while providing depth of insight into FGCLs' experiences, has certain limitations that warrant acknowledgment and suggest directions for future research.

- i. **Scope and Design:** This article examines one component of a larger mixed-methods study. While metaphor analysis provides depth, it does not represent the complete data range.
- ii. **Selection and Sampling:** 11 metaphors were purposively selected from 29 identified expressions based on conceptual richness and diversity. Other metaphors may offer additional insights. The study included only second-year students from selected nine colleges in Darjeeling district, limiting transferability to other cohorts, regions, or FGCL populations from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- iii. **Theoretical and Cultural Considerations:** Western theoretical frameworks (Bourdieu and Yosso), while analytically productive, may not fully capture Indian contextual realities. Alternative frameworks or India-specific models might yield different insights. Cultural translation of locally-grounded metaphors for international audiences may lose some nuanced meanings.

Despite these limitations, the metaphorical expressions provide authentic, culturally-grounded insights into FGCLs' experiences that conventional approaches often miss, contributing both theoretical understanding and practical guidance.

CONCLUSION

Despite estimates suggesting that around half of India's higher-education student population are first-generation learners, research at the higher-education level remains scarce (Sinha & Raj, 2025; Wadhwa, 2018), and many stakeholders tend to dismiss FGCLs as a minority population or consider their distinct needs a myth. This study challenges such misconceptions as preliminary data from an ongoing mixed-methods study in the Darjeeling hills suggest FGCLs form a substantial share of the student body, underscoring the urgent need for recognition and targeted support. Using metaphorical analysis, the study demonstrates how familiar imagery can capture the complex realities of FGCLs' academic journeys. Through eleven carefully examined metaphors, students described their experiences as processes of both construction and navigation, transformation and struggle, isolation and empowerment. If first-generation status is to serve as a meaningful equity category for enhancing access and success, a more nuanced understanding is required. 'First-generation' is a term that falls short of capturing the complexity and range of what it means to 'be first' in a family or generation (Patfield et al., 2022). The metaphors documented in this study reveal this complexity vividly. Ultimately, this study highlights the responsibility of higher education institutions not only to support FGCLs' transition into college, but also to nurture their transition into a new academic generation.

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