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‘Class work’: producing privilege and social mobility in elite US secondary schools

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Drawing upon two ethnographic studies of affluent and elite co-educational secondary schools in the United States, Weis and Cipollone spotlight the explicit ‘class work’ of a now highly insecure middle/upper middle class, as they attempt to maintain advantage via entrance to particularly located post-secondary destinations. Affirming the notion that class position must now be ‘won’ at both the individual and collective level, rather than constituting the ‘manner to which one is born,’ the authors track and theorize intensified preparation for and application to particular kinds of post-secondary destinations in an increasingly segmented national and international marketplace for higher education. Although the US media have taken note of such ‘application frenzy,’ little scholarly work tracks and theorizes this ‘frenzy’ as a distinctly ‘class process,’ one that represents intensified ‘class work’ at one and the same time as class ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ become ever more apparent in the larger global arena.

Keywords: social class; privilege; social stratification; upper middle class; secondary to post-secondary pipeline

Introduction

Since the 1960s there has been a robust research program linked to issues of education and social mobility in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Goldthorpe 1987, 1992; Sewell and Hauser 1975). In the United States, status attainment models have predominated. Using statistical techniques and relying on quantifiable data to determine the relationship between individual socio-economic status of origin (usually measured by father’s occupation and education), measured IQ, educational attainment, and occupational status and income, among other variables, models attempt empirical description of society. As Kerckhoff (1995, 2001) points out, however, such models ignore the relationship between institutional arrangements

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and processes of stratification. As such, they are unable to ‘take into account the structural locations in the social organization that constitute the society’s sorting machine’ (Kerckhoff 1995, 326).¹

Here we take Kerckhoff’s observations seriously, giving specific attention to the extent to which student location within the structure of educational opportunities in secondary schools – both as hierarchically ranked and as providing varied opportunities for later moves and access to various kinds and levels of attainment – empirically limits their possible locations at the next level (Kerckhoff 1995). Long considered a pathway to ensure upward mobility, recent shifts within the higher education system in the United States (Hoxby 2004; Mullen 2010; Thomas and Bell 2008) complicates the ways in which education confers social advantage. In brief, intensified massification of the post-secondary sector, as coupled with a relatively constant number of available slots in the most valued post-secondary destinations, renders the ‘access to what’ question increasingly paramount. In response to the limitations of ‘political arithmetic’ approaches, we highlight the value of developing an institutional dimension to studies of social stratification. In so doing, we provide insights into the ways in which the day-to-day actions by students, parents, and school personnel result in normative practices and subsequently work to pattern inequality.

Access to particularly located post-secondary institutions has become a space of intensified struggle, especially for more socially and economically privileged groups, who are poised to take advantage of their position to maximize opportunity for their offspring. Such struggle is linked to the now globalized knowledge economy, in which competition for jobs has increased while economic security, particularly for the middle/upper middle class, has become less stable (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011; Ehrenreich 1990; Harvey 2005; Reich 2007). Given massification and accompanying intensified stratification of the post-secondary sector in the United States, middle-class and upper-middle-class parents/families work to maximize their advantage via access to particularly located post-secondary destinations (Gamoran 2008; Lucas 2001).

We draw upon data from two ethnographic studies of relatively elite co-educational secondary schools (elite is defined as high ranking with regard to the educational sector of the nation) located in tier-two, ‘non-global’ cities in the northeastern United States. Such cities are marked by substantially less concentration of capital and wealth than tier-one cities, such as New York City, wherein schools draw from a far wealthier clientele. This has clear implications for allowable tuition costs at differentially located schools (‘what the market can bear’), as well as relative endowment levels over time.² Data were collected over a one and one half-year time period at two different types of schools: a secular private co-educational day institution (National Association of Independent Schools); and an affluent, suburban, co-educational State school located in a comparable geographic area.

Data were collected during the 2009/10 academic school year and each researcher was embedded within her respective site for this entire year with some limited engagement before this year.³ At the State school, 37 participants were interviewed and participated in three focus group sessions. Study participants include: students (nine in the top 10% of the class), parents ($n = 11$), school counselors ($n = 8$), counseling support staff ($n = 2$), 11th-grade and 12th-grade core subject teachers ($n = 5$), and administrators ($n = 2$).⁴ All participants were interviewed between one and three times. Additionally, 200 hours were spent in the field observing classes, counselor sessions, college-related presentations, course advisement, parent information meetings, SAT test administration and many other less-formal occurrences (i.e. spending time in the College Center while students researched schools). Relevant school documents were also collected and analyzed.

Data collection at the private school was conducted similarly. A total of 38 individuals were interviewed, including students (13 in the top 20% of the class), Head of the Upper School, Head of College Counseling (one of two counselors in the school), parents ($n = 18$), and teachers of core junior and senior year subjects ($n = 5$). All participants were interviewed between one and three times. Additionally, a total of 100 hours were spent in the field observing classes, college-related presentations, parent information meetings, and other less formal interactions such as time spent in the senior lounge while students engaged the college process, and so forth. As with the State school, relevant school documents were collected and analyzed.⁵

Engaging the Weis and Fine (2012) method of *critical bifocality* – a dedicated theoretical and methodological commitment to a bifocal design that simultaneously documents the linkages and capillaries of structural arrangements and the discursive practices by which youth and adults make sense of their circumstances – we reveal the ways in which and the extent to which similarly capitalized parents and children in two different types of secondary school position for advantage amidst altered economic context that threatens the stability which once marked the middle-class/upper-middle-class experience (Ehrenreich 1990). Critical bifocality offers a theory of method wherein researchers make visible the linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and institutions, as well as the ways in which such conditions are woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals.⁶

Class productions in new time and space

Reay, Crozier, and James suggest that:

Despite the advent of the ‘age of anxiety’, the emergence of the ‘super rich’, and economic upheavals (Apple 2010), it appears that the white middle

classes continue to thrive, their social position strengthened and consolidated. However, there are also growing signs of unease, the exacerbation of anxiety, and a lack of ontological security, ‘the sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individuals (Giddens 1991, 243). (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011, 2)

‘These insecurities,’ as Reay, Crozier, and James (2011, 2) argue, ‘are particularly evident in their children’s education.’ Anxieties surface in relation to where their children go to school; what they learn in school in contrast to what other people’s children learn in other schools; and, as we argue here, how parents and children linked to specific secondary schools work to position their children for the now global knowledge economy in which access to highly valued post-secondary destinations is scripted as increasingly paramount.⁷

Given charges of impending class dislocation of the relatively privileged, our research is instructive. We pry open critical discussion with regard to the explicit ‘class work’ involved in maintaining advantage under shifting global conditions and attendant rearrangement of the US post-secondary sector by exploring the specifically located and largely unacknowledged reworking of the professional and managerial upper middle class. Simultaneously, we focus on the mechanisms through which observed, macro-level, globally induced phenomena are produced and reproduced at the lived level on a daily basis, whether by explicit design/work, or by virtue of what Bourdieu refers to as “‘habitus” – a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, as cited in Bourdieu 1982, 18). Affirming the notion that class position must now be ‘won’ at both the individual and collective level, rather than constituting the ‘manner to which one is born,’ data enable us to track and theorize the intensified preparation for, and application to, specific post-secondary destinations in relatively privileged secondary schools as parents and children attempt to hold onto social (and economic) advantage.

Our data suggest that there is increasing pressure for children in top curricular tracks (Advanced Placement [AP] and International Baccalaureate) to attend the most selective post-secondary institutions in the United States – in this case, those classified as Most Competitive (including, but not exclusively, Ivy League schools) and Highly Competitive+private institutions.⁸ Marked as ‘distinctive’ by virtue of secondary school curricular track placement, students and parents script themselves as highly competitive in the post-secondary admissions process. However, the intensifying national marketplace for higher education, coupled with relatively stable entering classes at the most selective institutions, renders competition for entrance to these schools increasingly intense (Hoxby 1997). In point of fact, as more

students from a broader range of secondary schools apply to and, to some extent at least, gain admission to the best post-secondary institutions in the United States (Bowen and Bok 1998; Cookson and Persell 1985), the acceptance rate to these institutions plummets, rendering competition for admission ever more fierce while simultaneously raising the status of these schools in the ubiquitous institutional rankings.⁹

Within this context, similarly privileged parents and children in both school sectors work hard to position for continued advantage. Importantly, however, our data suggest that it is the particular *sector* of secondary school – private versus State – that encourages distinct forms of class positioning ‘work,’ which then sets the stage for differential post-secondary attendance patterns, and, perhaps, future class position. We turn to the State secondary school first.

Class/ed practices and the post-secondary process: a State school example

Ball (2003, 28) tells us that ‘classes, and here specifically the middle class, are to a great extent, constituted through their practices.’ In other words, much of what earns a particular person or group the moniker of middle class has as much to do (or more) with the particular day-to-day practices and social and cultural experiences one engages, as it does the types of careers one pursues and the attached income and prestige; or, as Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody put it, ‘the social and psychic practices through which ordinary people live, survive and cope’ (2001, 27).

In the footsteps of Ball and of Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody, among others, we understand that much of what it means to be middle class or upper middle class in Canalside, an affluent, suburban community, is inextricably connected to ways of behaving and acting.¹⁰ While certainly related to income, these ways of acting and being are heavily influenced by other families and their practices, and by schools (Ball 2003; Weis 2008). The acts of preparing for and applying to college, then, are practices that are influenced by ‘classed’ ways of being (and *habitus*) and shaped by what others in this social class category consider to be appropriate choices and actions.

Explicit ‘class moves’ among parents in Canalside begin early, revolving largely around locating a place of residence tied to their already born, or anticipated, children’s attendance at particular State schools. Canalside has been rated as one of ‘100 Best Places to Live’ in the United States and is recognized as having some of the strongest schools in the larger Tech City metropolitan area. The median income places the community squarely in the fourth economic quintile, with the majority of study participants earning enough to place them in the top quintile.¹¹ Median home prices are some of the highest in the area and the majority of Canalside residents (over 70%) own their own homes.¹² Canalside exceeds national averages in all areas in

regards to educational attainment, and approximately 53% of the civilian employed population works in professional and managerial occupations, and about 80% work for private employers.¹³ The community is almost exclusively White (95% of the population is White), and less than 3% of families fall below the poverty line. Given these descriptive statistics, Canalside qualifies as one of the most exclusive communities in the greater Tech City metropolitan area. It also has a reputation as a district with strong schools, which is a major selling point for real-estate agents, further entrenching its reputation as a good place for affluent people to live and send their children to school.

It is not uncommon for parents in the United States to purchase homes in particular neighborhoods in order to gain access to valued State schools. Recent studies by Holme (2002), Brantlinger (2003), Andre-Bechely (2005), Lawrence (2009) and others highlight the ways in which middle-class and upper-middle-class parents make very specific housing choices directly related to school reputations. Similar to Holme's (2002) findings, Canalside parents relied primarily upon their social networks of families, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who are similarly situated (financially), as well as their knowledge of the area, to assess the relative reputation of the educational sector. As parent Allison Gruzina tells it, part of why they opted to purchase a new home (which they needed for their growing family) was because 'people said "Oh, the schools were good and blah, blah, blah," stuff like that.'

Significantly, parents begin to position their children for post-secondary entrance when children are very young. Beyond purchasing a home in what is perceived to be one of the most highly advantageous school catchment areas, parents engage in particular positioning work with an eye toward marking their children with 'distinction' at a very young age. For example, Canalside parents discuss working to ensure placement in gifted and talented programs in elementary school and linked accelerated curriculum in middle school. Given that the US post-secondary selection process is driven by full dossier review (the dossier, at minimum, includes: grade point average; teacher and counselor recommendations; SAT test and subject area scores/ACT¹⁴, as relevant; sport and additional extracurriculars, and volunteer work) rather than a unitary set of secondary school-leaving examination scores and/or university entrance examination scores, the explicit move to mark children as distinctive at a very young age is noteworthy. Parents operate under the assumption that such distinction travels with their children through secondary school, and into the post-secondary entrance process.

Watching, waiting, and deciding when to intervene

In her chapter entitled 'Watching, Waiting, and Deciding when to Intervene', Lareau (2008) – drawing from her study of middle/upper-middle-class and

working-class families' childrearing patterns across class and race in the United States (Lareau 2003) – analyzes the ways in which Black, middle-class parents utilize their class-based resources to ensure advantage for their children *vis-à-vis* the education system.¹⁴ Lareau suggests that parents 'were *selective* in their activation of cultural capital' ((2008, 128), opting to choose their battles rather than intervene constantly on behalf of their children.

Participants from Canalside express and enact similar sentiments, particularly in regard to secondary school experiences and the post-secondary entrance process. Based upon parent and counselor interview data, participants note that while there are a few hyper-involved parents, these so-called 'helicopter' parents are, for the most part, few and far between.¹⁵ Comments made by Nadine, a school counselor, which are representative of the counselors as a whole, suggest that 'some parents are over involved [in the process] but for the most part, parents are pretty actively involved,' mostly, she explains 'by driving the process.' Rather than micro-manage the process at all relevant points, in discursive contrast to the popular rendition (and as will be seen, in contradistinction to Matthews Academy), Nadine indicates that parents prompt their children to make their *own* critical decisions: 'Ok, we are going to visit some colleges over Columbus Day weekend; tell me what campus you want to visit.'

In point of fact, parent and counselor accounts indicate that direct intervention by parents on behalf of students drops off in high school rather than intensifies at the point of post-secondary entrance, suggesting that parents are much more directly involved at the elementary and middle school levels, a finding supported by Lareau (2003), Brantlinger (2003) and others. Canalside focal parents, like Sandra Whitcombe, for example, recount stories of approaching the principal of her son Brad's elementary school after she felt his second-grade teacher passed him over for the gifted and talented program. Requesting that he be *formally* tested for admission rather than simply relying upon the teacher's (perceived to be incorrect) subjective judgment, the gifted designation was ultimately granted. Placement in the gifted program set in motion an educational trajectory that traveled with Brad into middle and secondary school, ultimately positioning him in particular ways *vis-à-vis* the post-secondary search process. Mrs Penn, in similar fashion, intentionally sought a teaching position in the district when her children were young – in fact she went back to school to become a teacher explicitly to teach in Canalside – so that she could 'have [her] hands in everything,' thereby attempting to ensure her children's future rather than leave it entirely up to the school.

Abby, a Canalside school counselor who has spent some time working at the middle school level in the district, shares her perspective on parental involvement in relation to positioning work at the middle school:

Well, they have this accelerated and twice exceptional [label] and they label them in elementary school, whether they are advanced or not, and that kind of sticks with them.¹⁶ And the parents are constantly [knocks on table to simulate knocking on a door] ‘My kid has been labeled twice exceptional’ and it’s constantly like ‘What can I do to get my kid ahead?’ And, it’s constant, you know, ‘What can I do?’ You see it in the Honor-thing in middle school, it’s like math and science are the only places where they are going to be able to get ahead high school-wise, so parents are always wanting to, you know, ‘I want my kid in honors, I want my kid in honors!’ There is a lot of that pressure from parents.

Jamie, another school counselor, affirms Abby’s comments, indicating that parents push for their children to be classified as exceptional and/or gifted early on and placed in Honors-level classes in middle school because they are interested in ‘what’s going to make their kid competitive when they apply to college.’ Parents intervene, particularly in the younger grades, to ensure academic advantage for their children by way of positioning for presumed access to high-level, gatekeeping courses in secondary school. By secondary school, however, direct intervention of this type becomes far less frequent, and parents trust the school to work in the best interest of those positioned at the top of the academic hierarchy (and/or work directly with the students) so as to obtain entrance into the most valued and prestigious post-secondary institutions in the nation.

Course selection

Once in secondary school, while parents certainly appear to encourage children to build upon their already marked ‘distinction,’ students themselves drive the push for high-level courses, wherein admission to a highly selective four-year post-secondary institution becomes an integral part of student identity among those students in the top 10% of the class. Building on prior schooling experiences, and parental advocacy in regards to earlier placement in gifted and talented programs and accelerated curriculum in middle school, as well as the normalization of parental (and community) expectation about college attendance, secondary school students come to take ownership of their *own* academic careers, making choices that continue the positioning work that was once the exclusive domain of parents:

Kristin (interviewer): And Kelly took a number of APs, right?

Sue (parent): She took a few, yes.

Kristin: Is that something that you and your husband encouraged?

Sue: Well, yeah, we did encourage her, just because of her ability. You know, we’d rather see her struggle a little bit than coast through.

Sue states that she and her husband encouraged Kelly to enroll in advanced coursework, including several AP classes during her junior and senior year. Kelly attests that while she took a number of advanced courses, this is something she might not have done had she not aspired to attend a highly selective college. Due to Kelly's initial designation as gifted and talented, as accompanied by logical subsequent enrollment in high level courses in middle and secondary school, Kelly is now in a position to *choose* to take APs and do well in them, clearly not an option open to all students. While Kelly is certainly intelligent and hard working, this sheds light on the ways in which schools, as middle-class and/or upper-middle-class institutions, praise and reward family practices that are in line with their values (Hochschild and Scovronick 2003).

Further, as Canalside, like virtually all secondary schools in the United States, employs a system of academic tracking, we can see how Kelly, who was placed in the gifted program in elementary school, is able to convert such placement into later academic advantage with regard to course selection. While other students may work equally hard or even harder than Kelly, because she had been previously placed in the accelerated track she now has access to higher-level courses, and is now deemed to have greater 'ability' than most of her peers at Canalside. Importantly, and in addition to Kelly's intelligence, such ultimate advantage often rests on parental intervention at an early age. This, coupled with the available opportunity structure, such as gifted and talented programs in given districts, serves to shape school outcomes, both offering more to certain students while designating them as more 'accomplished' by the end of secondary school.

Most notably, by the time Canalside students reach secondary school, parents exert a somewhat 'hands off policy' with regard to the highly intensified post-secondary admissions process. Canalside parents tend to engage a very distinct form of 'up front class work,' as they take great care to purchase homes in particular catchment areas and subsequently work to position their children for accelerated/gifted and talented programs at the elementary and middle school levels. Such 'up front' work is engaged under the assumption that, once marked 'distinction' is accomplished, schools themselves, and particularly the secondary school, will work to position their now appropriately designated children (the top 10% of the class; those taking the AP and/or International Baccalaureate courses) for entrance to the most highly valued post-secondary institutions in the nation.

At the point of secondary school entrance, then, parents in this State secondary school largely abdicated *explicit* and constant intervention with regard to driving towards the post-secondary admissions process, instead placing this task in the hands of the school and, ultimately, the students themselves. In contrast to explicit and direct intervention as evidenced in earlier grades, parents adopt more of a 'lead from behind' approach once children enter secondary school. Parents spend a great deal of 'up front'

effort laying a foundation for their children that emphasizes academic achievement, high expectations, and selective college admissions. Additionally, they put a tremendous amount of effort into cultivating particular identities and skill sets early on (often before children were even born; i.e. housing choices), which results in the normalization of these values and identities, and, ultimately, the adoption of selective college-oriented identities that students embrace *as their own*. This, along with the organizational *habitus* of the school (McDonough 1997), which ensures the privileged status of the participant students by isolating them in advanced tracks with students like themselves, and thereby insulating them in a selective college-going culture, allows parents to take a step back.¹⁷ This is in contrast to the shape and form of positioning work engaged in the elite private sector, a sector to which we now turn.

Fractures in the middle/upper middle class: the case of Matthews Academy

Like parents in elite State schools, parents who send their children to elite private schools similarly invest ‘up front’ in their children’s future class position. Attending a private school reflects parental work involved in accessing such schools, as well as the underlying work and accompanying sacrifices of having enough disposable income to pay for them. However, two points are relevant here with regard to the sites under consideration. To begin with, the class circumstances of the parents in these two schools are, by and large, quite similar, comprised of families with largely equivalent tertiary-level educational backgrounds, levels of disposable income, and occupational locations. Rather than upper class in the sense of being able to live off investments, families at both the private and State schools under study are largely professional and/or upper managerial, constituting the top 20% of the US class structure, with enough disposable income to invest in their children’s future.

At both Canalside and Matthews Academy, families and children are comparably *highly privileged* in relation to the larger metropolitan context in which they are located. So too, they are comparably *less privileged* in relation to comparably located families in cities (such as New York City) of far greater concentrations of capital and wealth. Canalside and Matthews residents and school children, then, are *relatively and objectively both more and less privileged* in the same kinds of ways, depending on the reference point; the most meaningful difference between the two populations lies with the schools their children attend, a point that has critical implications for the nature of class positioning and likely future relative class location in new national and global context.

In similar fashion, although gaining entrance into particularly located private nursery, elementary, and secondary schools in wealthier cities has

become hyper competitive, this is not the case in tier-two cities of far less concentration of wealth, where far fewer people can afford the price of attendance. For this reason, competition for entrance into private institutions in the geographic area under consideration is not particularly intense. Rather than turn large numbers of prospective applicants away by virtue of a rigorous admissions process, private schools in tier-two cities work hard to *entice* residents to send their children to their respective institutions. For this reason, students in the top academic tracks at elite private and State schools, such as those under consideration here, are largely similar with regard to academic ability.

There are, however, differences in the nature of the ‘class’ work in the two institutional sectors, in spite of the fact that they serve comparably capitalized students and parents.¹⁸ What is not starkly revealed in terms of background characteristics is exposed clearly with regard to forms and duration of class positioning, wherein private school parents *intensify* their efforts at class positioning at one and the same time as parents in the privileged State sector largely *retract/redirect* their direct involvement in the process. Our data below suggest the extent to which parents in privileged privates markedly expand their involvement at the point of the post-secondary admissions processes, a response that is shaped by the *organizational habitus* of the school.

Leaving nothing to chance: micromanaging the college process

The post-secondary search and application process begins in junior year when initial lists of prospective institutions are drawn up, quickly followed by on-site college visits in spring semester and into the summer, and then intensifies in the early fall of senior year. This is, by and large, the same *formal* process followed at Canalside. Although college counselors warn parents at Matthews Academy that ‘your child must drive the process, not you,’ parents remain integrally connected to each stage of the process, often micromanaging the process as if they were their children’s personal college counselor.

At the most basic level, privileged parents across both sites pay for and facilitate college visits, and ultimately pay, in most cases, for the cost of attendance, which is exceptionally steep, even at State institutions in the United States. Parents prod, strategize, remind their children to meet deadlines, stay on top of their college essays, and get feedback on their essays, study for the SAT/ACT and SAT subject tests, as relevant, and so forth. Perhaps most importantly, they support their children emotionally as they go through the increasingly long and arduous admissions process that spans approximately two years, culminating in decision letters from the myriad colleges to which they apply.¹⁹ As many parents note, ‘breakdowns’ are common, and it is a rare student, male or female, that goes through the process emotionally unscathed.

While these practices are largely the same across the two schools, the extent to which parents actively direct this process differs. While Canalside parents typically took a ‘lead from behind approach,’ granting their children greater autonomy in putting together an initial list of colleges to which they might apply, arranging college visits, assembling application materials, and making application decisions, Matthews parents (in most cases) did not leave these decisions to their children or the college counselors, in spite of the fact that the in-school college counseling process at Matthews was more intense than at Canalside. For example, each Matthews child is expected to meet with the counselor and their parents at the end of junior year. From that point on, children are expected to meet with the counselor on their own, as necessary. However, it was not at all uncommon for Matthews’ parents to schedule additional and not infrequent one-on-one meetings with the school counselor, and from there to take over the process.²⁰

In line with what Matthews students are themselves expected to do, Matthews parents often meticulously monitor and assess their children’s strengths and weaknesses, with an eye towards their chances of acceptance at particular institutions based on grades, course load and the like. Such vigilance extends beyond those parents in the private sector who are themselves highly educated. Ron Tomlinson, a White working-class parent who has no prior connection with private schools, is, according to Head of Counseling Dave Henderson, ‘hunting big game’ (most specifically Harvard, Yale, Princeton), after which comment Dave notes: ‘He is not going to get it.’ The struggle between son and parent is palpable, as Matt wants to go to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, as this is where he personally sees his strengths, and Ron wants him to apply to the Ivies, Harvard in particular.²¹

The desire of Mr Tomlinson to situate his child in an Ivy League school is understandable, especially in light of the sacrifices that Mr Tomlinson had to make in order to send his son to Matthews, but Matt wants to no part of this scenario, making it clear that he wants to go to Rensselaer Tech. In response, Mr Tomlinson drives even harder towards college visits, a push that is largely ignored by Matt who has already made up his mind that he was interested in Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute:

Ron: Take your pick [of colleges to visit]. Here’s my schedule. And I offered it before the application process. I said, you know, when he was at Harvard over the summer, he really didn’t get to see the school. You know, cuz at first he’s like, ‘I’m not sure [why I didn’t look at the school]. I was at practices [soccer].’ Why don’t I take you back there in the regular school year? ... Nothing ever, you know, and I was trying not to pressure him too much, and there were times where I as like, pulling my hair out! ... One of the reasons why I told him I was hoping he would apply to Harvard was income-wise, it’s free for me to send him there [tuition pricing is tied to income levels and Matt, by his father’s calculation, would attend tuition-free].

Thinking, plotting, planning

As mentioned earlier, for highly ranked students at relatively elite schools, there is a great deal of pressure to gain admission to the most highly selective colleges and universities. Students (and their parents) perceive themselves as the ‘best of the best’ and strive to gain entry to the most prestigious post-secondary institutions that will confer this status (Gatzam-bide-Fernandez 2009; Stevens 2007). In response, parents at Matthews, in collaboration with their children, work to intensify their strategizing. Susan and Robert Larkin cast their ‘outsider’ eye on the process, as they experienced their own schooling in Europe and their two older children attended higher education there:

Susan: [...] So I would say the last 8–10 years that I’ve heard parents talking about it [college application process and entry]. Parents of the older children, I would say, maybe even into middle school, parents are contriving or conniving.

Robert: From my point of view, in a real sense, it [the conniving and contriving] started in sophomore year.

Susan: It intensified certainly.

Robert: Became much more apparent. So we had heard, Susan probably more than I had. We’d heard the noise, some of the sure things, but it didn’t have anything to do with us, things that we had to do. And I think it was at that level, we began to realize that it was competitive, and ... maybe you could’ve started sending your child to this place [a specific institution] to do extracurriculars and you would tell your colleagues [other parents of children in the class] afterwards, to show how good you are, but you wouldn’t actually bring them all up and say, ‘Why don’t we all send our children to [the local cancer research facility] to do cancer research ... because everyone wanted to get a step ahead with their children, was my impression. ... So I think that sophomore year onwards, we began to realize it was a game, and that we were perhaps a bit late in the game, and that we’re still a bit late in the game and we’re realizing that. Even if you put down your name for mock trial and you don’t even appear or do anything, at least you can put on the form ... I did mock trial at sophomore level, even if you had only turned up to one meeting, and we go ‘shoot’, we didn’t do that because we thought honor was pure ... It’s just a bit unfair, you know, that sort of, well most people probably behaving entirely honorably, but there’s some sense of competition and do anything to get your child well positioned, and I think we’ve been swept up in it because at the end of the day, the person who loses if we stand our ground is Stephanie.

Succumbing to the US normative private school processes around post-secondary admissions, Susan and Robert begin to encourage Stephanie to maximize her international roots, thereby distinguishing herself from others in the college competition:

Susan: I did say to Stephanie, it's all well to say you've traveled, but further down the line, this may be mistaken for colleges thinking here's a rich kid, driving around in expensive cars, you know, [staying at] the Best Western overseas. I said maybe you have to demonstrate you can do more than that. I mean, I knew she could. So I put it to her to volunteer at this home in Bogotá. And it was started and run by a former colleague of mine from [the firm] because otherwise it might have been hard for us to get there because of her age. But there were 170 boys of all ages and just under 20 girls. She spent two weeks with them and was a little tearful when she left. And she did say that if she should take a job here that she might well go back and volunteer. And I thought again that if one wanted to demonstrate her adaptability that it was the perfect testing ground for her.

As the above example demonstrates, parents actively encourage and facilitate the building of a dossier through targeted extracurricular activities. Even when parents do not fully support such 'game playing,' they ultimately 'connive and contrive' to ensure that their children seek out activities that will mark them as 'distinctive.' In Susan's case, she activates her social capital so as to enable Stephanie to work in a children's home in Bogotá, with an eye towards helping her daughter stand out in the college admissions process.

Like Canalside parents, Matthews parents encourage their children to search for relevant college and university information on the Internet and write their essays, and advise them to seek additional feedback from their teachers and the college counselor. Some parents are more active than others, of course, but for the most part parents are *highly* engaged in the post-secondary search process – for example, reading and revising their children's essays – in contrast to parents in the relatively elite State school sector, who were generally more laid back. Rather than adhering to Mr Henderson's advice to let students 'drive the process,' Matthews parents tend to do the opposite:

Donna Kenney, for example, states the following:

I don't know how many other parents feel this way, or who you already talked to, but it was really hard to get the kids to focus and to get off of their rear ends and pay attention to it. So I was doing all the stuff on the Internet, and before we would plan a trip we would figure out which schools and which we could handle on a [college visiting] trip. And there were schools we had to eliminate because we couldn't get to all of them. And then, I do sheets with getting the most important information. I get language about their Anthropology Department, whether they have them, whether there is squash. At some point, she seemed interested in sororities. We wrote down whether they had them and what percentage [joins], so that we could see at a glance as she was going through. Then we would have information on how to find the admissions offices at each school and directions, and then Jeremy (husband) would take it and MapQuest ... you know ...

The Larkins, the Kenneys, and Mr Tomlinson are all engaged heavily in the post-secondary preparation and application process. In Mr Tomlinson's case, he is a class outsider; in the case of the Larkins, they were outsiders to the US post-secondary admissions process, having only had experience with continental European institutions prior to moving to the United States 12 years ago. In the case of Donna Kenney, two aspects appear to drive her intense management of Briana's process. On the one hand, she is not entirely happy with the level of assistance provided by the Matthews college counselor, and works to 'own' the process herself. On the other, her own college choices had been quite limited, and she wants to ensure that her daughter's experience is different.

While the parents discussed in the previous examples exhibit different motivations, they similarly feel the necessity to take a *very* strong hand in positioning their children for the post-secondary entrance process. Despite the counselor's edict to be more 'hands off,' parents in this sector are in fact involved every step of the way, from helping their children to conceptualize and carve out 'distinction' *as an applicant*, to proofing college essays, planning and executing road and/or plane trips to visit potential colleges, and weighing in and facilitating final decisions once accept, reject and waitlist letters are received. The receipt of such final dispensations from the colleges/universities involves a *second* full round of college visits, where students generally spend several days at each college, with parents inevitably hovering in range of the school, preparing to 'grill' them as to pluses, minuses, and generalized thoughts with regard to 'their decision.'²²

The above scenario is predicated upon a certain level of parental privilege – which, at a place such as Matthews, is exacerbated by the normalization of certain college positioning strategies within the given space – and an ability to actualize social and cultural capital in relation to the post-secondary linking process. It is certainly the case that such privileged capital is linked to educational attainment of the parents in the first place, as parents who are not highly educated would be less likely to be able to engage this process at the normative level in this particular sector of schools. Importantly, however, the space itself presses towards particular kinds of moves with regard to 'class positioning,' and what *comes to be seen as normative parental engagement* in fact differs by sector.

For example, the planning and execution of college visits rests on parental time and money, wherein they can devote both time and money to accompany their children on expensive visits. The simple possession of such capital is not enough, however, as capital must be conceptualized and 'activated' (Lareau 2000) as an investment in their children's post-secondary options, and the activation of such capital in particular kinds of ways becomes more or less normative in particularly located secondary schools. As we see here, parents in private and State schools individually and collectively head in distinct directions in this regard, wherein the

State-linked parents put in more work ‘up front,’ and ultimately hand over the reins at a key moment when parents in the private school intensify their efforts.

In so arguing, we do not mean to suggest that parents in the State secondary school are not tied to the post-secondary process, as this is most certainly not the case. What we do suggest, however, is that parents in the State sector largely invest in class positioning ‘up front’ so as to position their children for secondary school, under the assumption that the school and their children will do the rest. Parents in the private sector do no such thing – in fact, they dramatically intensify their efforts at class positioning at one and the same time as those in the State sector leave it up to the institution to do the work. In the final analysis, despite the fact that both groups are similarly capitalized, occupying largely comparable occupational, economic, geographic, and cultural space, data from the two sites differ in fundamental ways. Confident that they have selected a strong school and that students are well positioned within that school, State parents take a step back in a way that the private school parents do not. In this way, the school itself (and its organization *habitus*) appears to play a critical role in shaping the class practices of each group.

Conclusion

In this article we track the fundamental ‘class work’ embedded in two secondary schools – one private and one State – as parents, students and schools work to position children for access to the most highly valued post-secondary destinations in the nation as a hedge against ‘losing class ground’ in the now global knowledge economy. As noted throughout, although both groups mobilize their social, cultural, and economic capital to position the next generation for advantage, they engage this ‘class work’ in perceptively different ways and to different extents. In spite of largely equivalent backgrounds in the geographic context in which the two schools are located, parents mobilize their cultural and economic capital differently in the two sectors, with those in the private sector actively ‘pushing and prodding’ their children up until the very end of the race for post-secondary admissions, in contrast to those in the State sector who invest ‘up front’ and then grant their children greater autonomy in driving the process.

Notably, although the motivation *within* sector may vary to some extent, dependent on parental connection to valued cultural, economic, and academic capital (for example, the case of Mr Tomlinson), the class practices (Ball 2003; McDonough 1997) coalesce *within the space itself*, ultimately becoming normative. At Matthews, for example, there is more explicit focus on the role of the college counseling office with regard to post-secondary admissions. Such focus enables and encourages parents to center on college counseling as a valued good, thereby latching onto it in a markedly different

way than parents at the State school. Although they are continually instructed by the counselor that ‘college is a match to be made, not a prize to be won,’ Matthews parents bulldoze through this statement in an attempt to situate their children at the very top of available post-secondary options. This distinct class practice is forged within the private school itself, as the organizational *habitus* works toward encouraging this particular class form in spite of attempts on the part of teachers, counselors and even students to interrupt what is seen to be parental over-involvement. Largely ignoring the dictums of the on-site college counseling staff to ‘let the students drive the process,’ parents respond in their own way to the broadened marketplace for US higher education and accompanying swelling applications to the most valued institutions.

Although we cannot conclude on the basis of our study that the strategies of one group versus the other necessarily renders students in the two sites more or less successful in the college admissions process, the post-secondary entrance outcomes differ in notable ways. Focal students at both Canalside and Matthews overwhelmingly apply to the most selective colleges and universities in the United States, and are strategic in their approaches, yet acceptance patterns vary such that Matthews students have higher acceptance rates at the most prestigious institutions – a finding that holds, given that participants from Canalside were drawn from the top 10% of the class while participants at Matthews were selected from the top 20%.²³ Canalside students, accustomed to being the ‘best of the best,’ often feel burned by the process once acceptance outcomes are known. For example, none of the focal students were accepted to Ivy League institutions (four applied). Of the nine focal students, five opted to attend schools ranked as ‘Most Competitive,’ two enrolled at ‘Highly Competitive+’ institutions, one matriculated in a ‘Very Competitive’ college, and one other attended a non-ranked, local school. While such outcomes are laudable, and considered quite impressive when considered in relation to the greater population of college-going students in the United States, these outcomes do not map neatly onto Canalside’s expectations nor do they match the outcomes at Matthews.

Focal students at Matthews overwhelmingly applied to the most selective schools in the country, applying to elite Ivy League and elite liberal arts institutions in greater numbers than students from Canalside (11 out of 13 focal students applied to Ivy League schools). Matthews students engage the process in a highly strategic manner, with continued counselor and parental prodding as to the range of colleges they should target, including ‘reaches,’ ‘probable admits,’ and ‘safeties.’ Like their children, Matthews parents continually assess their child’s chances of being accepted at particularly located institutions, and they are involved in the application process every step of the way as students prepare upwards of 10 full application packets to strategically chosen destinations.

Although parents at Canalside are involved in the process as well, they are not involved to the degree that Matthews parents are, where such involvement *becomes* normative practice within the site itself. In the final analysis, all but two of the Matthews 13 focal students are attending institutions ranked as the best in the nation (rated ‘Most Competitive’ by Barron’s), with three enrolled at Ivy League schools (one Princeton, two Harvard).

As noted at the beginning of this article, Kerckhoff (1995) argues that *where* students are located in the structure of educational opportunities at each stage limits their possible locations at the next stage. In so stating, he stresses the importance of adding an institutional/structural dimension to studies of social stratification. Although remarkably little empirical work has been conducted in response to Kerckhoff’s call over 15 years ago, our data largely affirm his point. Data also suggest that we must take into account the ways in which and the extent to which current and future inequalities are produced by the day-to-day actions and activities of parents, teachers, and school personnel as they collectively forge and enact normative practice within specific and differentially located educational institutions.

The above two points speak to the importance of altering our frameworks with regard to issues of education and social mobility, as well as class structural/cultural productions more broadly. In light of a massively altered global context and attendant rearrangement of the post-secondary sector in the United States, we must acknowledge the ways in which and the extent to which highly capitalized groups in the United States now explicitly work to maximize advantage via access to particularly located post-secondary destinations. As it is arguably the case that such destinations are tied to the production of a new brokering professional and managerial upper middle class, we will gain important insight into future class structure and potential individual and collective positions in relation to new class structural forms.²⁴

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Notes

1. This particular form of the ‘political arithmetic’ approach (Heath 2000) also cannot account for the movement of groups in relation to one another, as its focus is on individual social mobility.
2. We explore this point at greater length in our forthcoming book (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014).

3. The specific academic year has been altered so as to further maintain anonymity of participants.
4. The sample at the state school was limited to the top 10% because of the large class size (over 600 students in the grade).
5. All data were coded and analyzed in accordance with standards released by the American Educational Research Association (2006). These standards are guidelines, and do not prescribe detailed movement with regard to coding procedures or structure of argument. Details of coding and so forth will be reported in full in Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins (2014).
6. For further elaboration of critical bifocality, please see Weis and Fine (2012) and Weis and Fine (2013).
7. These insecurities may have begun earlier; Barbara Ehrenreich (1990), for example, called attention to a version of psychic distress associated with such perceived disintegration in the early 1990s. However, the strong economy of the mid-to-late 1990s mitigated this anxiety somewhat until more recently.
8. For classification purposes, we rely on the Barron's (2009) profiles of American Colleges.
9. This argument is fleshed out in full in Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins (2014).
10. All names of schools and participants are pseudonyms.
11. According to the 2010 Census Bureau report on *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010*, households in the lowest quintile had incomes of \$20,000 or less. Those in the second quintile had incomes of \$20,001–38,043; those in the third quintile had incomes of \$38,044–61,735; and those in the fourth quintile had incomes of \$61,736–100,065. Households in the highest quintile had incomes of \$100,066 or more. It is important to note that the top quintile (or top 20%) represents a much greater range in income than the other four quintiles. While the top quintile includes the very wealthy (the 1%), our focus is the professional and managerial upper middle class (Apple 2006).
12. The housing market in the United States is largely tied to geographic location and cost of living (which is also geographically specific). While housing prices in Canalside pale in comparison with prices outside 'tier-one' cities such as New York or Boston, the median prices in Canalside relative to the surrounding metropolitan area demonstrate the extent to which it is indeed affluent.
13. This is a term derived from the Census Bureau and it refers to anyone who is legally able to work – 16 years of age and older.
14. ACT originally stood for 'American College Testing' but the official name is now ACT. The ACT is a college entrance examination similar to the SAT. See act.org for further information.
15. A common critique of Lareau (2003) is that she was too generous with her classification of middle class, including families that would more frequently be referred to as upper middle class.
16. The conception of the 'helicopter parent' must itself be contextualized. Unlike stories in the *New York Times* about the suburbs surrounding New York City in which parents employ a cadre of professionals to manage their children's college entrance process and at times actually do the work associated with application, parents in Canalside are comparatively laid back.
17. A student who is classified as 'twice exceptional' has been identified as capable of advanced level work in both mathematics and English-language arts.
18. Organizational habitus is an extension of Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which can be understood as 'an ensemble of durable and transposable dispositions that

internalize the necessities of the extant social environment, inscribing inside the organism the patterned inertia and constrains of external reality' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Habitus shapes individual actions and aspirations, and sets the terms for what falls within the realm of possibilities and what is appropriate behavior. The organizational habitus of a school 'limits the universe of possible college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations' (McDonough 1997, 10). In other words, schools, through their organizational culture, shape and mediate college aspirations for students.

19. There are of course some quite wealthy families in the private sector, but such 'trust fund' children are few and far between.
20. It is not uncommon for this group of children to apply to 9–16 post-secondary institutions. Students at Canalside generally applied to fewer schools – six being the average.
21. At Canalside, all students meet individually with their counselor for a 'junior review' in which they discuss coursework for the upcoming year as well as post-secondary plans. The counseling department orchestrates several group meetings about college but there is no requirement that students and parents meet with counselors individually (although many students, particularly those in the top 10% do meet with their counselors regularly). During students' senior year, counselors will schedule a 'senior review' to check in with students individually and assess whether they need any assistance planning for post-secondary life.
22. All post-secondary institution names have been changed and have been substituted with equally ranked schools as per Barron's (2009), as have relevant personal details of the parents and students.
23. Once students receive letters from all institutions, generally by 1 April of their senior year, a great deal of work goes into thinking through which schools should remain on their list—in other words, which schools should they visit again, generally staying overnight on campus. Interviews suggest that parents are engaged in this crucial set of 'cuts' every step of the way.
24. We specifically refer to those schools rated as 'Most Competitive' and 'Highly Competitive +' as per Barron's (2009).
25. The long-term outcomes here are, of course, unknown. However, given broader economic constriction in the United States, it is at least plausible that such 'class work' as linked to institutional location will have long-range class structural consequences.

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