Conceiving Success at Elite Prep Schools

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This project explores the ways in which secondary education at elite boarding schools affects its attendees’ sense of meritocracy, privilege and attainment of success. Stemming from primarily Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of capital, as well as Shamus Khan’s work concerning how the elite use meritocracy as a way to ultimately support the social inequality between the socially elite and non-elite, this study sought to explore how prep school attendees perceived their time at prep school, and how they believe it affected their success later on in life. In order to gain an understanding of how attendee’s interpreted their time at boarding schools, I conducted interviews with twelve students from three elite New England boarding schools. The information from these interviews was then used to complicate the previous literature concerning elite boarding schools.

In this paper, I argue that while previous literature has begun to address the issue of elite culture at boarding schools, it fails to account for the conscious experience of the boarding school attendees, in terms of how they acknowledge privilege and account for their own success. By contextualizing each participant’s experience with how they ended up attending boarding school, what they signified as the most important parts of their time at their respective schools, and how they planned to gain opportunities and earn success in the future, this study was able to gain a deeper understanding of the elite culture of prep schools. In particular, the findings of this study demonstrate that majority of prep school students hold awareness of their privilege, but differ in the ways in which they knowingly utilize it.